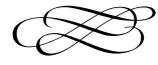




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KINGPIN

PIPER STONE

# THE KINGPIN



# PIPER STONE

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Stone, Piper

The Kingpin

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# PROLOGUE



*B*eautiful. Fragile. Innocent.

That's the way I liked to think of Raven. I'd come to the realization that she didn't belong in my world. She was far too delicate, a budding flower with tender leaves. But it had become impossible to ignore her, or the desire that had never left from the unexpected meeting. Karma had been kind, offering me an olive branch, one I would have been stupid to ignore. She didn't realize the danger she was in or the fact a predator was studying her from afar.

Hungering for her.

Waiting for the perfect moment to strike, infecting her with my venom.

Or did she?

Was she just performing for her master, enticing the ferocious beast?

I chuckled at the thought, remaining hidden in the shadows, leaning against a large oak tree as I allowed myself to be consumed by sadistic hunger. I'd never been the kind of man to hide from anything or anyone before, but I enjoyed watching her go about her daily tasks, pretending that what had occurred between us only weeks before had never happened.

But I sensed her upheaval, a burning desire that kept us tethered. With every glance over her shoulder, every hurried step over the last few weeks, there was no doubt she realized she'd already been captured like a sweet fawn. Only I wasn't

preparing for a slaughter. No, the hunt was all about her requirement to submit to my needs.

And to exact the sweetest revenge on my greatest enemy, a man who'd once been not only my best friend but someone I'd considered a brother.

Until he'd betrayed me.

As she scurried past me barely fifty yards away, completely unaware a monster lurked in the darkness, I could almost gather a hint of her sweet perfume. She had no idea how close I was, how intent I was on staking my claim. She'd become the obsession of a ruthless, corrupt, and very depraved man, a beast who would strip away the remainder of her innocence.

She also had no idea how important she'd become in a war of prowess and intelligence, a diamond in the rough that would soon become my greatest possession.

A queen in a merciless game.

I watched with envy as Raven's roommate stopped in the courtyard, the two young women engaging in a conversation. Then laughter drifted my way, the lilting sound forcing my cock to stir, my balls to harden. As the two girls walked away, I sucked in my breath, the ache in my groin increasing.

Then Raven stopped briefly, pulling away and turning in my direction. She knew I was there.

Waiting.

Watching.

Biding my time.

And there was no fear, only burning need.

I rubbed my jaw, enjoying the light breeze and spectacular view. Only when she disappeared out of sight did I turn away, heading to my vehicle. Once inside, I revved the engine, laughing softly to myself.

“Soon, my princess, you'll be mine forever.”

# CHAPTER 1



*W*eeks before...  
*Raven*

It wasn't midnight yet I felt the pulse of the haunting city humming in my veins. New Orleans was an incredible place, filled with gothic homes and devilish history, acts of debauchery the usual fare.

Sadly, I wasn't here for the festive parties or glorious food. I was here for a single purpose.

Thievery.

“Join a sorority,” the high school guidance counselor had told me. “It'll be fun. The experience will be an excellent addition on your resume.” I'd muttered the ugly whisper, and it wasn't the first time. I'd refused based on the woman's nagging alone.

Until my mother had badgered me, relentless in her words, hiding behind her motherly love. Bullshit. It was called status, requiring her daughter to follow in her illustrious footsteps. Somehow, I'd fallen prey to the constant push, finally reaching out to the president of the high and mighty sorority much later than the typical college student.

Regrets? Oh, I had several, including this moment. Methods of revenge had already crossed my mind.

How I'd been coerced into doing something highly illegal was beyond me. While I hadn't actually broken into the house given the festive by-invitation-only party occurring two floors

below, I'd been forced to be creative in determining how to get inside without being cornered as an intruder.

Which I was.

I had no business being here. In fact, I'd lose my scholarship if anyone from the university found out. Plus, given I was sent to steal something valuable, my ass could land in jail. *Awesome decision, girl.*

At least no one had noticed that I'd disguised myself as one of the catering firm hired for the illustrious event. After gaining entrance, I'd quickly changed into swankier attire inside a closet, the balled-up dress no worse for wear. From what I could tell, the event was an engagement party, which made the situation unseemly in my mind. Who stole from the groom to be? The assignment was nothing but punishment for being who I was.

Infamous.

It had nothing to do with my beauty queen mother. This was all about my father.

And a dare I'd been stupid enough to accept after being forced to chug three shots of tequila.

After getting my bearings, I'd followed my instructions, going up the back stairs to the third floor, finding the bedroom suite noted on the single piece of paper I'd been provided. Once I'd located the mark's private area, I'd used skills gleaned from my father in obtaining access into the man's room.

I had no doubt in my mind the bitch of a sorority president Megan Montgomery had created this assignment given my father's occupation. I'd wanted to refuse but my mother had insisted this be the sorority I pledged, LSU her alma mater. She'd been the sorority president as well. I'd been expected to follow in her footsteps when I was nothing like her. That had been the only reason I'd been granted a chance by the girls who'd taken one look at the criminology nerd and had laughed, making fun of my funky clothes. I certainly didn't fit in with the perfectly coiffed blondes who reminded me of Stepford wives of Baton Rouge.

I took a final deep breath, contemplating running. Right. I was a hundred miles from my dorm room, my roommate away for the weekend. I'd gotten myself in this mess, I had to follow through with the deal I'd made, or I'd be the laughingstock of the university.

Likely disowned.

*You can do this. In and out.*

That was the mantra I'd said to myself over and over again.

Now I stood in the middle of the darkened bedroom of a man I didn't know, searching for something that would prove I'd stolen from the owner of the gorgeous home.

However, the last thing Megan had told me prior to placing the blindfold over my eyes had driven a bundle of nerves into my system. And she'd done so with glee in her voice, trying to scare me. Well, I didn't scare easily given I had a blackbelt in karate and knew my way around weapons. My father had insisted I have respect and knowledge for guns.

*"Just be careful, Raven. The man is a monster. If he catches you, you'll be punished. Or worse."*

In my mind, a monster was only as good as his reputation. If his lavish bedroom with an oversized king bed and ornately carved furniture made out of rich chocolate-colored exotic wood was any indication, he was a man of passion as well as commanding control. Or maybe I'd been reading too many romance novels.

So far, I'd seen an expansive living room bathed in colors of cream and gold, large enough to host lavish parties like the rowdy one going on downstairs. But the remaining rooms were more gothic in nature, dark textured walls in ruby red and deep purple accentuating the art strategically positioned under dazzling LED lights. He enjoyed ensuring his guests noticed his appreciation of all things sadistic and provocative.

Even the sweeping curved wood staircase leading from the massive marble-floored entrance foyer was a clear indication of the man's wealth and his stance on opulence. Yet his

bedroom was warm and inviting, the stone fireplace accentuating the deep burgundy comforter.

I knew nothing else about him, other than he was wealthy beyond anything I could imagine, his tastes in art and photography erotic in nature. I had to wonder whether he'd made any of the selections himself or had hired someone to provide an enviable backdrop of function versus wealth. Every piece of furniture was elegant and beautiful, so much so I was terrified of touching anything.

The mystery man was also an impeccable dresser as evidenced by his stunning and very expensive wardrobe. I'd started in the closet first, admiring his Brioni and Prada suits, his vast array of silk designer ties and crisp linen shirts in various colors.

His entire wardrobe was sensual, the aura powerful, and I craved to see the owner in one of the swanky outfits. I could only imagine his appearance—tall, dark, and all man. Maybe I needed to think about anything but the fact that what I was doing could land me in jail, destroying any hope for a decent future.

Let alone what my father would do to me if he found out about my ridiculous infraction.

Time was ticking, the requirement needing to be fulfilled. What could I take that would be enough to allow my acceptance into the snooty society?

I turned in a full circle, inhaling the mystery man's aftershave lingering in the air. His natural musky scent was infused with hints of citrus and timber, exotic spices and a fragrance that could only be described as passionfruit on steroids. I couldn't help myself, running my fingers across the sleeves of his linen and wool suits, bringing the tips to my nose.

He had at least three dozen pairs of shoes, more than any man I'd ever known, some polished loafers, at least four brand new pairs. Yet there were also running shoes and boots, including two pairs of rattlesnake cowboy boots. The man had fascinating tastes. I could bask in the glory of his wardrobe for a full hour, but I had limited time. Only fifteen minutes left to accomplish my goal. Of course, the two sorority sisters who'd

accompanied me on the hour-plus trip were keeping close track.

They'd even told me they'd leave my ass behind if I was a minute late.

This was a test, a game they used with what they called their most prominent pledges, although the term 'hazing' wasn't far from anyone's minds. They were daughters of the most rich and powerful men in the world, considered the elite students within Louisiana State University, where I hoped to graduate from without having a black mark on my record.

I rolled my eyes; glancing out the closet window to the street below, I could almost make out the car Shelly had driven. I had been blindfolded, and they'd told me nothing other than we were headed out of the city, although I could tell by the architecture of the gorgeous aging mansion that we were in New Orleans.

I'd never seen a walk-in closet so huge, the massive island in the center a piece of decadent furniture with its multiple drawers and solid black marble top. I ran my fingers across it before noticing whoever the man was, he had four different weapon holsters hanging in one section of his closet, which meant he was either law enforcement or a criminal. My bet was on the latter. I doubted the girls were brazen or stupid enough to require me to steal something from an officer of the law.

The mystery man's attire certainly wasn't that of a lawman either. I knew that well enough from the work my father did and the life we'd led as a family. A cold shiver trickled down my spine as the reality of what I was doing birthed additional butterflies in my stomach. I had to get the hell out of here.

I started opening the drawers, finding additional new shirts in packages, underwear and socks in another. There was nothing of real value, which was what the president of the sorority had demanded I find, something with the man's initials. Jewelry was what I had in mind. I moved to the other side, finding nirvana with the third drawer I opened. Nestled inside were a dozen pristine and terribly expensive watches.

There were Hermes and Bulova, Longines and Breitling pieces, every one of them as bold as the man's tie collection. I glanced at the partially open closet door before lifting a Bulova piece into my hand, the significant weight surprising. After looking at one after the other, I was certain none of them were engraved.

When I discovered exactly what I was looking for, I almost squealed with happiness. The watch was the only timepiece protected in a box, which meant it was precious. I turned it over, holding my breath. Yes. Yes! The expensive piece had been engraved as I'd hoped.

*To my beloved Arman*

It was signed with a capital S and nothing more. Oh, what I was about to do was bad, so very bad. Yet I slipped it around my wrist, easing the box back into position then closing the drawer.

As soon as I was ready to get the hell out of the man's bedroom as well as his house, I heard a noise and almost panicked. I was no career criminal. What the hell did I think I was doing? I quickly moved to the door, turning off the closet light, yet was fearful of closing the door. I remained in the shadows, shifting back against a group of the man's suits. Fear crawled over me like a snake slithering into my veins.

*Stupid girl.*

Chastising myself wouldn't do any good now.

There was no doubt someone had entered the room. I heard a voice, the deep baritone creating a series of vibrations. There was something so sensual about the tone that I was forced to place my hand across my lips to keep from issuing an unwanted whimper.

"Fuck. This is ridiculous."

"What's wrong?" A second man's voice was gruff, just as exasperated.

"What's wrong? Betrayal. It needs to be handled tonight, Maddox. The asshole fucked with the wrong man." His harsh words were followed by a loud thud, and I couldn't help but

jump in response. “You shouldn’t have allowed the shit to go down. I thought you were watching. God fucking damn it.”

“I’m sorry, Arman. The dude came in under the radar.” The second man’s voice was raspier, as if he’d smoked too many packs of cigarettes over the last few years. Or as if he was exasperated from Arman’s angry chastisement. Hell, I would be. “We both trusted him,” Maddox continued.

“That man could ruin us. He’s talking to the Feds,” Arman growled.

“We don’t know that for certain.”

I inched closer to the closet door. Against my better judgment, I peered out the crack, trying to control my scattered breathing. At this point my heart was fluttering like a butterfly trapped inside a jar.

“Like hell I don’t, and you mean he fucking used you,” the man named Arman snarled. “Goddamn it! You know who I’m dealing with. What I’m dealing with. This could ruin us. That cannot happen.”

Swallowing hard, I sensed his utter fury. A light was flicked on inside the room and I knew I should dip further into the shadows, but the warm glow allowed me to catch a glimpse of the enraged man and I was certain my heart was ready to cease beating.

The man was a Greek god reincarnated into the body of a GQ model.

Arman was without a doubt the most sinfully gorgeous person I’d ever seen in my life. Maddox wasn’t too bad himself, but I was instantly drawn to the angel who’d fallen from the heavens. Standing in his exquisitely tailored suit, one that matched the contours of his muscular physique perfectly, Arman appeared as if he’d just stepped out of the pages of a men’s fashion magazine. I could imagine the cameras loved him from every angle, especially given the mahogany sheen of his curly locks and a body polished from the finest stone.

Whew. I found myself dragging my tongue across my bottom lip from concentrating on the fullness of his.

His name suited him. Strong and dominant, powerful in every way.

Arman was debonaire, his features aristocratic, but there was a rugged as well as dangerous air about him. Glowering, his jaw and the icy look in his eyes didn't detract from his stunning good looks. With the hint of gray at his temples, I placed him in his early forties, a man completely comfortable in his own skin. I noticed black onyx cufflinks studded with diamonds on his shirt cuffs, something few men wore except with expensive tuxedos for stuffy events. I had a feeling they were the norm, a gesture stealing attention away from every other male in a room.

But when he placed his hands on his hips, shifting both sides of his jacket back by several inches, I knew I'd been right about my assumption that the man whose watch I wore on my small wrist was a criminal. That was easy to tell by the weapon he carried in the shoulder holster. Who the hell was this guy?

Then the handsome man with the chiseled good looks swung a brutal punch, catching Maddox in the jaw. A tiny moan slipped past my lips before I had a chance to slap both hands across my mouth. Then I closed my eyes, praying to God I hadn't been heard.

Arman was no angel, unless he'd become one kicked out of heaven, sent spiraling into the darkness of hell.

"It won't happen again, Arman. I thought Grayson was trustworthy. We vetted him."

"Not enough. You should know better than to trust anyone in this business. Haven't I taught you anything?"

"Yes, sir. You certainly have." There was annoyance in Maddox's voice, but I also heard respect for the man who'd just punched him. Something told me they were friends. "Do I make an example of the son of a bitch or drive a stake through his heart?"

I couldn't help but notice the dusting of stubble covering Arman's strong jawline as he rubbed his hand from one side to

the other, obviously deciding on his answer. When he lifted his head toward the man who worked for him, I was able to catch the coldness lacing his whiskey-colored eyes. The vengeful expression he wore sent a shower of fear down my spine but the power he exuded, the aura of superiority created a spiraling rush of electricity all the way to my passion pink painted toes.

Even his name exuded raw brutality.

“Teach Grayson Alexander a lesson he won’t forget, Maddox. Then dump his mutilated body on the doorstep of the man who thinks he can destroy my family’s business. I want the bastard shitting in his pants.”

“Are you certain you want to do that?”

“Are you questioning me?” Arman snarled.

Maddox exhaled as he paced the floor. “I’ll take care of it, boss. I’d never question your... authority. Do you need anything else?”

“Just a way of escaping my own party.” Now Arman laughed bitterly.

“You can’t leave. You’re the host.”

“Unfortunately so. Edmee would kill me. Call me when it’s done. We’ll need to handle damage control tomorrow for the destroyed product.”

I stood frozen, unable to take my eyes off the scene. A murder had just been ordered, a hit, and I knew the name of the victim. Oh, my God. If I was found here, I’d certainly be killed for what I’d overheard. Horrified, my instinct and everything I’d been taught screamed that I needed to get the hell out of here and head to the police. But if I got involved, that would place my life in danger.

The gorgeous man with the luxurious ebony hair lifted his chin, staring at the closet door. I bit back a scream, moving away from the slight opening.

“Got it, boss. I’ll be here first thing in the morning. I’ll also make certain our merchandise is locked down for the night.”

I realized as Maddox headed to the door that I'd been holding my breath. I slunk further back into the clothes, praying that Arman would leave soon, or I was certain my thudding heart would give my presence away.

There were no other sounds, but I knew Arman had remained in the room. What was he doing? I waited for a few seconds before returning to my perch. He stood with his back to me, staring out the window of his bedroom. Then he turned around abruptly, heading toward the door leading to the hallway, slamming it shut after leaving.

Jesus Christ. Megan had been right. The man was a monster.

Only then did I take a deep and very ragged breath. I waited for almost a full two minutes, ensuring that he wouldn't return before slowly swinging open the closet door. After counting to ten and calming my nerves, I stepped into the bedroom, trembling all over.

Then I sensed a presence behind me and stiffened, ice running through my veins.

“Good evening, princess. It would seem I have a beautiful disaster on my hands. Now, what am I going to do with you?”

## CHAPTER 2



*A* rman

The last thing I'd expected was to find a stunning young woman standing in the middle of my bedroom. Although I wasn't immune to women attempting to seduce their way into my bed in hopes of garnering a hold on both my status and bank account. That had already happened twice during the festive evening.

I'd also partaken in the joys of fucking several beautiful women over the years, but never inside this room. There was no particular reason why other than this was my sanctuary, a private space allowing me to strip away the pomp and circumstance of my position as Don of the most powerful crime syndicate in the south.

That wasn't completely the truth. Why I was continuing to lie to myself I wasn't certain.

When I craved the company of a woman, I used hotels, including the one the family owned, which allowed me privacy as well as additional security. I had no desire to be on someone's Facebook page the next morning. That wouldn't bode well for my reputation or my secure methods of handling business.

Over the past few months, I'd stopped bothering, the act of sin turning into drudgery more than anything. I'd been told time healed wounds. For me, it was the opposite. Nothing had soothed the darkness inside. I'd buried myself in work instead,

doubling the family's wealth. I'd been set to enter into yet another lucrative contract in another state when Grayson had decided to betray me. While Maddox was handling the necessary retribution, it was the aftermath that most concerned me. That's why I couldn't put it past Grayson to hire someone to provide additional ammunition. What I wasn't certain of was whether he'd sold his soul to the FBI or another enemy.

Either way, the appearance of the gorgeous girl couldn't be a coincidence, the party something Grayson had been invited to originally. He would have known the security system would be off, and the number of people inside my house I didn't know prevented me from easily identifying another saboteur.

I was known for being an unforgiving savage, someone who should be feared. Maybe this girl had no clue who I was.

My father had coined the name Kingpin for himself, which I found offensive. Unfortunately, the term had stuck throughout New Orleans, the title falling to the firstborn son when my father had retired only two years before. However, there was no denying I'd turned into a man even more brutal and unforgiving than my father. Therefore, the title would stand.

Even if I was in the process of attempting to clean up the Thibodeaux name and our reputation. We were well known throughout the country, the entire family wealthy beyond our means. However, most of it had been made through illegitimate sources, which consistently placed us in the scrutiny of law enforcement. I'd grown weary of it, my determination to drive us into completely legitimate markets receiving tons of negative feedback from family members and employees alike. Who hadn't enjoyed the extra perks over the years? Myself included.

I'd also grown careful of who I chose to eliminate. Now, the fact she'd overheard my plan could derail the next several months of business. I couldn't allow that to happen.

I chuckled thinking about it as I noticed the look of terror in the girl's large eyes that were the color of emeralds on a sunny day, completely mesmerizing. She was petite, several inches shorter than me, but I'd gathered immediately upon realizing

she was hiding in the closet that she was a force to be reckoned with. And with her long ebony hair falling halfway down her back in soft curls, she was the kind of woman that could take a man's breath away.

No matter her stunning beauty, I couldn't ignore the elephant in the room. She'd overheard me discussing an assassination of a man who'd made the mistake of crossing me. I rarely discussed business in any other location than what my brother had affectionately termed as the war room, a location I'd designed to be soundproof and impenetrable, swept daily to ensure no one had managed to breach my security, planting listening devices. That had happened to my father, his two-year prison term for racketeering a result.

At least that had provided me with a taste of leadership in my twenties, a lifetime ago.

I allowed my heated gaze to fall to the floor, deciphering what I had to deal with. Given her young age, maybe twenty-one if that, she wasn't law enforcement. Although I certainly knew looks could be deceiving. I certainly didn't suspect she was a hired assassin. But it was entirely possible she'd been sent by one of my many enemies to gather information by an act of seduction.

However, if that was the case, the dazzling creature would be wearing couture clothing instead of a lovely, form-fitting dress purchased off the rack of a chain department store. Still, my mouth watered at the thought of peering underneath the crimson attire, her hourglass figure accentuated by the silky material.

Then I noticed the watch she wore on her small wrist. My watch to be exact. Was it possible she was nothing more than a common thief? If so, she'd picked the wrong house to steal from. Growing amused, I headed to my bedroom bar, pouring a generous measure of whiskey. I was surprised she hadn't tried to bolt, instead staring at me with ferocious intensity.

That intrigued me even more. After downing the liquid in a single swallow and returning the glass to the wooden surface, I shoved my hands in my pockets and walked toward her. I was

an observant man, which had kept me out of harm's way more than once. With every step I took, her emotions ratcheted, both anger and terror mixing to create an explosion waiting to happen.

While I preferred my life uncomplicated, it would appear the gods had other things in mind. Even as I closed the distance, she held her ground, lifting her chin in defiance. My cock stirred, which it hadn't done in weeks.

"Now, do you mind telling me who you are?" I asked, curious as to what her answer would be.

"One of your guests. I apologize but the bathroom downstairs continually had a line. I stumbled in here by accident."

The lie wasn't bad and if I wasn't certain I'd locked my door to keep the riffraff from picking through my things, or the fact she'd been in my closet in the dark, I might have believed her. "A wonderful story, princess, but we both know it's a lie."

"I'm not in the habit of lying."

She'd very carefully eased one arm behind her, attempting to hide her theft. I moved closer, taking my time studying her shining irises, almost mesmerized by her lush lips. For a few delicious seconds, I sensed her burning desire as it ebbed and flowed. That allowed me to slip my arm around her waist, caressing the small of her back with gentle strokes.

When I wrapped my fingers around her wrist, yanking her arm up by several inches, she squealed as if I'd caused her pain, but the fire in her eyes forced my balls to tighten.

"Let go of me!" she demanded.

"You might not consider yourself a liar, princess, but you are in the habit of stealing."

The raven-haired beauty had a look of fury on her face, matching the spitfire image of her rolling through my mind. But the evidence was clear. As I removed the single piece of my past I'd kept, a flash of anger rushed through me. No one had dared touch the piece, not once. Even my family knew better. They comprehended my wrath would not be denied had they done something so egregious.

However, with the young woman, I felt admiration for her technique and her balls. I slipped the watch into my pocket, a moment of sadness almost shoving the agitation aside. My mysterious visitor jerked her arm free, rubbing her wrist, giving me an indecent onceover.

When she turned and raced toward the door, I couldn't help but grin. She must truly believe she could get away from me.

"Tsk. Tsk, bad girl. You're not getting away that easily." I sprinted toward the door before she had a chance to wrap her hand around the handle.

She backed away, her chest rising and falling as she pointed her index finger in my direction. "Just stay away from me."

I locked the door, allowing her to see my action. Then I took a single long stride toward her, and she bolted for the French doors leading to the balcony, throwing them open easily and rushing outside.

I trailed behind her, noticing her hesitation from climbing over the iron railing. Then I leaned against the doorjamb, the amusement continuing. "While you won't jump to your death, princess, given the tall foundation and the fact we're on the third floor, it's likely you'll break a bone or two. I would hate for that to happen."

After taking several scattered breaths, she turned around to face me, her anger more tangible. "Let me go. I did no harm to you."

I rubbed my jaw, amused her tone was demanding. "I would be happy to do so except we have two issues to deal with. One is the theft of my favorite watch."

"Which you have back in your possession. No harm, no foul."

"Yes, however, that doesn't mean I can ignore the act itself. For every action there is a consequence. Certainly, you were taught that as a child."

The mysterious beauty glared at me incredulously. "You must be kidding me? You're obviously a very bad man and you're challenging me on my behavior?"

I folded my arms, studying her just as intently. “And what makes you think I’m such a bad man?” Her statement confirmed she not only knew who I was but had overheard the conversation.

She realized what she’d said, the twinkling exterior lights my sister had insisted on having installed for her elegant engagement party highlighting another moment of fear on the girl’s face.

“You punched that guy.”

I laughed softly. “That *guy* deserved it.”

“For disobeying you?”

Maddox was not only my second in command, but he’d been my best friend since high school, replacing a treacherous bastard now considered my enemy in the process. We’d played sports and commiserated over girls. He’d had my back a number of times, even taking a bullet for me on one bloody night of violence. He was someone I trusted, knowing all my secrets as I knew his. He’d also faced my wrath more than any human should. “For not doing his job. Now, it would appear we need to come to an understanding about the indecent incident you were involved in.”

“Indecent?”

“Highly,” I retorted. “You need to be punished.”

“Let me guess. You believe yourself to be judge and jury.” She planted her hands on her hips, giving me a haughty look.

“For someone found inside a man’s locked bedroom, you’re quite bold. I assume you know who I am.”

She rolled her eyes. “No, I don’t. And in truth, I couldn’t care less. I’m sorry about invading your privacy and stealing something from you.”

I was certain she had no clue who I was, which meant she wasn’t from New Orleans. I’d gone from intrigued to feeling a level of hunger that had already thrown me. I wanted not only to tame the little lioness, but to possess her. The question was why she continued to fascinate me. She was far too young,

enough so she could be my daughter. Maybe that forbidden, slightly taboo nature was the reason for my fully aroused cock and blue balls.

“I’m sorry, princess, but your apology isn’t good enough. I don’t think your act was so innocent after all.”

“Meaning what?”

“Who are you? Who are you working for?”

“Who are you?”

“You don’t get to ask the questions, princess. You were the one standing inside my room.”

“I’m nobody’s princess.” She snarled at me after making the statement. God, the woman needed to be dragged over my knees, her bottom turned a bright shade of crimson.

“Then what are you doing in my bedroom?” I couldn’t help myself, inching closer, my desire increasing tenfold.

“Exactly who are you? Why should I tell you anything?”

“Let’s just say I’m a very dangerous man, sweetheart. You broke into the wrong house and the wrong room. Now, you’re going to face the consequences. But first, it’s best if you told me who you were working for. If you provide that information freely, I’ll be lenient in your punishment.”

She offered a sinfully sweet smile, swaggering toward me. “First of all, I’m not working for anyone. Second, you’re not going to lay a hand on me. This is an engagement party. Right? Would you dare want to have your bride to be discovering another woman inside your bedroom? I’m certain I can make a scene that will present a serious problem for your impending marriage. I assure you I’m a damn good actress.”

With a single stride, I was able to wrap my hand around her long throat, using my thumb and pressing it under her chin. She reacted by slamming her fists against my chest several times in a futile attempt to get out of my hold.

I lowered my head, drinking in her sultry perfume. Everything about her was intoxicating including her sensual fragrance. As I took a deep breath, her eyes darted back and forth. She was

doing everything in her power to keep from showing her fear. It was a trait I admired. “You’ll be sorely disappointed to learn that you can scream all you want but it won’t mean anything to my guests.”

“And why is that?” Her voice was breathless, little more than a whisper. I lowered my head until our lips were close, oh-so close. My pulse raced, my cock throbbing. I wanted to feast on every inch of the delicious treat.

“For one thing, I’m not the one getting married, my sister is the lovely bride to be, and this is her engagement party. As far as who I am, my name is Arman Thibodeaux. More important, as the owner of this house and the leader of the Thibodeaux Crime Syndicate, all that would happen if you screamed is that several of my armed soldiers would burst into the room with their weapons drawn. And they’d do exactly what I told them to do, princess. Given what you overheard after breaking into my room, I’m certain you understand how my soldiers handle people who betray me in any way and if I’m to follow my instinct, your robbery was only hiding the real reason you’re here. So you see, it’s best you take your punishment like a good little girl.”

## CHAPTER 3



*R*aven

A good little girl.

The words cut through me like a knife.

His fragrance was overwhelming, his touch creating a wicked blast of heat. And his luscious lips were far too inviting. I continued to press my palms against his chest, but there was no getting out of his firm hold.

Arman was a mafia man? Really?

A violent criminal. I'd been found hiding in the room of a violent, brutal man as I'd been warned.

Maybe it was true, or maybe he was trying to terrify me. What I knew with certainty was that he was an arrogant, insufferable asshole with a God complex. Sadly, the fact he was self-righteous, broody as hell, and dangerously gorgeous all at the same time wasn't lost on me.

Or my body's traitorous reactions.

My nipples were fully aroused, aching much like the intense throbbing between my legs. I'd never had this kind of reaction to any man before.

Had Megan, Shelly, and Amanda known his illustrious status, or had they picked this guy randomly? Oh, hell, no. They knew exactly what they were doing and to me of all people. Oh, I could dig their eyes out with a spoon. Were they trying

to get me killed? No, they'd been pushing my buttons, certain I wouldn't go through with their ridiculous test at the last moment. When I returned, I was going to kick their butts. After that, I'd turn them into the president of the university.

Right. Then I'd implicate myself as well. The girls knew I couldn't do a damn thing about a decision I made on my own.

Unfortunately, I was in a dark hole I might be unable to climb out of. Arman wasn't just dangerous, nor was he merely a monster to avoid. He was pure evil disguised as a sophisticated and very passionate man.

As Arman captured my mouth, I was driven into a complete fog, which was rare for me. I was the kind of girl who could come up with snarky quips easily, which helped mask my nervousness in situations I couldn't control. But this... this moment and this man were completely out of my hands, the passionate kiss so unexpected I was in shock. His ruby red lips were made for kissing during long winter nights, snow lightly falling outside.

*What are you doing?*

He was forceful yet oddly tender in his initial actions, pressing my lips open using his, barely darting his tongue inside. Then when I didn't resist, he wrapped his other arm around me, cupping my bottom and pulled me onto my toes. I felt completely helpless and utterly safe in his muscular arms. Yet the nagging voice inside my head reminded me that he'd threatened not only bodily harm but my life in general.

That made him a very bad man.

And yet the taste of him was spectacular, the hint of whiskey mixed with peppermint assaulting my senses in the most pleasurable way. I was torn between enjoying and fighting him, especially when he took more control, sliding one hand to the back of my neck, his hold possessive. I was instantly lightheaded, blown away by his actions and his taste.

As he explored every inch of my mouth, I realized I was arching my back, pressing my stomach against his hips and his thick, throbbing cock. The man was fully aroused, so much so

I was taken aback by how hard and how huge he seemed to be. It was ridiculous thinking of him in any other way but as a ruthless killer, which is what I knew he was.

The name was vaguely familiar, but I barely paid attention to politics or crime. I'd had enough of that talk around the dinner table growing up.

As the moment of intimacy continued, I started to come back to reality, now fighting to get out of his hold. It was almost useless, the man far too strong. When I managed to maneuver my hips, swishing them back and forth then pushing my body away by a few inches, I almost managed to knee him in the groin. Unfortunately, it was as if he'd anticipated my move, snagging my leg and digging his fingers into my bare skin.

The moment he pushed me against the balcony, his full body weight nearly crushing me, he forced my back into an arc. He had no idea I was terrified of heights, but he'd soon learn as the panic swept through me.

The kiss continued, my mind spiraling out of control, but I did what I could to fight him with everything I had, terrified he'd pitch me over the railing. When he finally pulled our lips apart, I shoved him with enough force he almost stumbled, which allowed me to crack my hand across his face. When he gasped, I used the moment of shock and awe, bolting around him and back through the French doors. I had just enough time to close and lock them before he smashed his hand against the doorframe.

I screeched and backed into the room, thanking God I was able to get away. Without hesitation, I rushed for the door. The hard cracking sound startled me to the point I stopped short, spinning around one more time.

He'd kicked the door in and had stormed inside, his chest heaving. "You shouldn't have done that, princess." There was more of a hard edge to his voice, his face twisted from anger as well as burning desire. There was no escaping the intense vibes I'd felt but this wasn't going to happen. I had to get out. "You're a very bad girl and do you know what happens to naughty women?"

As if I was going to hang around and find out. Ugly images rushed into the back of my mind, but I had to ignore them.

I flew toward the bedroom door, this time able to unlock and throw it open. I made it all the way to the stairs before he yanked me backwards, tossing me over his shoulder like some big he-man Neanderthal. It was another shocking moment, my pulse racing as I tried to claw the wall then the banister, grabbing for every doorknob we passed. It was to no avail. It would seem nothing would stop the man from getting what he wanted.

My punishment.

Arman kicked the door shut, murmuring something in French before heading straight for the king-size bed, dumping me in the center. Then he held out his finger, his expression stern.

“You’re not getting away from me, princess. And you will tell me who you’re working for. Is it Grayson Alexander? Don’t lie to me. I know that’s who’s paying you. He sent you here. It’s not going to work.”

“I’m not your goddamn princess and I don’t work for anyone. Besides, you’re having him killed. Right? Some big bad guy you are, killing innocent people. You’re a terrible man.” Shit. Shit. What was I saying?

“You have no idea.” His deep laugh sent vibrations dancing through every muscle.

“And I don’t want to know. Just leave me alone.”

The way he stared at me was as if I was now the one shocking him. He ripped off his jacket, tossing it aside then immediately yanking at his tie. “You’re in my room, princess. You have zero authority in my world. Now, who the fuck are you? I suggest strongly that you come clean with me.”

There was such a stark coldness about him that my teeth almost started to chatter. I had no recourse but to supply him with at least a portion of the truth. If I wanted to get out of his room alive.

“My name is Raven. I’m a college student from LSU. I’m sorry. I got lost.”

He stopped in mid-action, narrowing his eyes, the smile on his face one of knowing. “Right. And I’m Santa Claus. You did no such thing as get lost, Raven. I suggest you go on, but with truth, not fairytales. Why were you stealing from me? Do you need the cash that badly, princess? Or are you really a spoiled little girl?”

“How dare you. Stop calling me princess! No, I don’t need cash. Don’t you dare insult me.” I moved to climb off the bed and he pushed me gently, tilting his head, his nostrils flaring.

Great. Now I was acting haughty. *Brilliant, Raven. So damn smart of you.*

“Talk. Now. I don’t have all night. As you so aptly mentioned, I do have guests waiting for me downstairs.”

His deep baritone sent a wave of goosebumps dancing down both arms. When he smiled, sensing my discomfort and my arousal, it took everything I had not to gaze at his cock.

Oops. I did it anyway, immediately feeling a warm flush of embarrassment. He was rock hard. Oh, my God.

“I’m pledging this stupid sorority. Okay? That’s why I’m here in your house inside your room. I was driven here from Baton Rouge wearing a blindfold and given short but explicit instructions that I had to get into the party somehow and into your room, locating something of importance.”

I was certain the man was getting furious by the way he glared at me. “A pledge?”

“Yes. I know it’s crazy, but you don’t know these stupid girls who think their shit doesn’t stink. And since my mother wanted me to join this particular sorority, I couldn’t say no. You don’t have any clue how bitchy and difficult she can be.” Was I really rambling in front of this man? Why yes, yes, I was. “I’m not lying to you, as crazy as it sounds.”

The cold chill in the room increased.

“Fascinating, princess.” He’d stopped moving completely for a full twenty seconds. He yanked off his tie, carefully placing it on the end of the bed before unfastening his cufflinks. I could

tell he was doubtful I was telling him the truth. I knew it sounded crazy. I had been nuts to go through with this.

“The truth. I swear it. I was an idiot, but it’s not a story I could make up.”

“Hmmm...” His nostrils flared as he tugged off the shoulder holster, making certain I witnessed what he was doing. He made certain the weapon was out of my reach, placing it on the dresser several feet away. I was quivering all over, goosebumps popping along every inch of skin. Everything was getting out of hand.

I watched in both admiration and horror as he removed the cufflinks, placing both on his nightstand. After inhaling, he unbuttoned his shirt halfway before turning up both cuffs until his forearms and elbows were exposed.

His arms were covered in tattoos. Not the pretty kind like a rose or a heart with a name in it either. No, he had a dagger and a skull with what appeared to be a snake crawling from the empty eye socket. How fitting for a beast of a man.

“Let me get this straight. This is all about fulfilling a hazing attempt by a group of sorority girls?” he asked, his tone changing entirely. The deepness to his voice was like melted chocolate being drizzled over my skin.

“Yes. As I told you, I don’t lie. At least not normally. I just... Just let me go. I don’t care who you are.” *Or who you’re going to kill.*

He shook his head, muttering under his breath in French again.

“What did you say?” I asked, although the tone of my voice was more demanding than I’d intended.

He moved to the edge of the bed, planting both hands on either side of my legs. As he leaned over, I was certain he was going to kiss me again and since I couldn’t lie to myself either, I wished he would. I’d been kissed before but by boys. And he was a real man.

“*Vous êtes une jeune femme difficile, rafraîchissante, stimulante qui demande de la discipline.* In other words, I said

you are a difficult, refreshing, challenging young woman who requires discipline.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Whoever told you that life is fair was a fool, *cherie*. Life is what we make it based on the decisions we determine are absolutely necessary. You made a wrong choice.”

“Raven. Don’t call me princess or *cherie* or anything else.”

“Yes, so you told me. Your last name? I need to know.” My God, the man was pushy.

“Raven Cartier. Yes, like the jeweler. But it’s real.”

He lifted his head, studying my eyes, taking a deep and ragged breath. My God, the man was like a dark god, one with so much anger that I thought for certain he was going to explode. A darkness shadowed his gorgeous features, his jaw clenching as if he didn’t believe me. Or maybe worse.

“What did you say?” he asked, his voice almost unrecognizable.

“My name is Raven Cartier. I’m an idiot for being here. However, I’m not lying. I swear to you. I’m about ready to graduate college, pledging the stupid sorority obviously a terrible decision that I regret.”

He chuckled softly, glancing away for a few seconds. As he stood to his full height of at least six foot four, he slowly unfastened his belt. “Fascinating indeed.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you still need to pay for your sins.”

I watched in horror as stages of disbelief kicked in. “Wait. Hold on. What are you doing?” I was petrified, shaking like a leaf.

“I’ve decided on your punishment, *cherie*. I’m going to spank you like the bad little girl you are.”

“Oh, no, you’re not.”

He moved closer, leaning down as he'd done before, his eyes burning with a dark hunger that both excited and terrified me. Even the way he allowed his eyes to travel down the length of my neck to the bodice of my dress, ever so slowly drifting to my exposed thighs, was entirely different. As if the brutal man had decided to claim me.

“Let’s put this situation into perspective. You were caught red-handed stealing from me. You were wearing the evidence. You lied to me more than once. Now, you’re telling me a ridiculous hazing is the reason for it. Then you decided slapping me and running was in your best interest. Did I miss anything?”

I swallowed the lump in my throat, realizing I was lightheaded from the way my pulse was racing. “My friends will be coming for me.”

“Hmmm... Do you mean the two girls speeding off in a car only minutes ago?”

Was he serious? I was suddenly speechless. In the back of my mind, I knew they’d leave me, refusing to get caught. I had no idea how I’d get back to the university. If I was lucky enough to be allowed to live.

“And what happens if I allow you to spank me?” I lifted my head, trying my best to take some control back. But just staring into his eyes, the color of warm cognac in front of a fire, took my breath away, my skin tingling from the way his heated breath tickling every pore. The sensations were electrifying.

“Then I’ll let you go, princess. You will have paid your penance.”

Could I believe this... beast of a man? I was in no position to argue. I’d have to place some small amount of trust in him that he was telling me the truth. What choice did I have? “Fine. Spank me but get it over with.”

He took a deep breath, holding it for a few seconds, his eyes still piercing mine. As he leaned down, almost nuzzling against the crook of my neck, he nipped my earlobe. Exhaling, he pressed his soft lips against my skin. Tenderly. Lovingly.

“Then you will obey me, sweet Raven. One more attempt to escape will be your last.”

As he pulled back, a cold shiver drifted down my spine. “What now?”

“Now, you undress.”

“I beg your pardon?” He couldn’t be serious.

“I only spank women on their bare asses.” He turned slightly, staring out the window as he unfastened his belt.

I couldn’t blink, couldn’t move for a few seconds. How could I allow something so barbaric to happen? What man spanked a woman for punishment? I knew the answer. I certainly wasn’t naïve to aspects of domestic discipline or acts of BDSM. It was just something I couldn’t stand the thought of.

*Then why is your pussy throbbing?*

My mouth remained parched dry as I tried to find the courage to get to my feet, barely able to rip my gaze from his wretched actions. A warm flush of embarrassment crept over me as I removed my shoes, shaking so badly it took me three times to grab the hem of my dress. When I lifted it to my waist, I sucked in my breath, shaking like a leaf.

And all I could think about was being terribly grateful that I’d worn decent underwear, a cutesy little thong. God. What was wrong with me? I was in a dire situation, and I was glad I had on sexy panties? I was obviously still in a state of shock. I managed to tug the dress over my head, hesitating before placing the thin material near the end of the bed.

Then I threw a look over my shoulder. God, the man was so intense, the way he had his jaw clenched out of frustration accentuating just how sexy he was. I was mortified I found him handsome, but there was no denying he was the poster boy for male perfection.

“Panties as well. Completely. Naked.” He enunciated the words as if I had trouble understanding.

Fuck the man. To hell with this. I would never make a return trip to New Orleans under any circumstances. I turned all the

way around, cognizant that he'd moved from his predatory stance, yanking one of the pillows from under the covers, planting it smack in the middle of the bed. I fumbled, likely on purpose, before slipping my fingers under the thin elastic, taking several deep breaths before managing to tug them down my hips.

After placing them on top of my dress, I crawled onto the bed without being told. Then I positioned my stomach over the pillow, horrified and disgusted.

And very wet.

I folded my arms over my head, still uncertain what to expect. Then I closed my eyes, refusing to give him any additional acknowledgment, although it was impossible not to sense he'd moved right behind me. When he touched my leg, I had to bite back a yelp. He took his time, easing them apart. Then he patted my bottom.

“Good girl. Now, stay in position.” His voice was even more gravelly, the husky tone sweeping through me like a wave of unexpected heat. My mouth remained dry, but I was hot and wet all over.

I hated myself for it and the betrayal my body was showing. How could even the tiniest part of me have this level of desire? It was crazy. Eye candy or not, he was a very reprehensible man with no soul.

I braced myself as if already teetering off the edge of a cliff, the bottom nowhere in sight. Yet the moment he cracked the thick leather strap against something that I couldn't see, the explosive sound forced a yelp.

I sensed I'd amused him. The bastard was enjoying inflicting pain. That's what he did for fun. He bullied then beat people. “Bastard.”

“Watch your mouth, little girl.”

The hard crack of the whip against my bottom dragged me from the imagery and I jerked up with enough force, my back immediately ached.

“Settle down, Raven. We're just beginning.”

I wanted so badly to lash out, to call him every name I could think of. Even as I mentally did so, I knew better than to dare open my mouth again. The kind of suffering he could cause me I'd likely never recover from.

He issued three additional strikes, the ease with which he snapped his wrist just another indication he'd done this before. It was obvious he was a very sadistic man. The pain was terrible, pushing me to the point where stars floated in front of my eyes, but I refused to cry out again. I wasn't going to provide the bastard with a single bit of satisfaction.

The spanking continued, every smack of the belt echoing in my ears, every flash of agony pushing tears to my eyes. But there wasn't a single salty bead that fell, something I could be proud of. I almost laughed from the thought. Proud? Was I out of my mind? Yes. Ten thousand times yes.

When he took a step away, even pacing by the bottom of the bed, I was able to take a decent full breath. Then I studied him, realizing my nipples were hard as tiny pebbles, the throbbing between my legs increasing. And my juice had already stained both my inner thighs. I would spend time admonishing myself later after I managed to get away from the brute.

He turned toward me, his chest rising and falling. It was obvious he was still processing what I'd done and told him. When he returned to his position of authority, I sucked in and held my breath.

His touch gentle, he caressed one side of my bruised bottom then the other, the tenderness so unexpected, a moan escaped. Mortified as before, I bit down on my bottom lip, tasting blood after a few seconds. I couldn't do this. I couldn't allow him to get to me in any way.

"You're so wet, princess. Your pussy lips are glistening. It's obvious discipline is good for you. I'm curious. Do you have a boyfriend?"

I snorted my answer. "Right now, I hate all men."

He laughed in his sultry way, adding a series of vibrations dancing down the backs of my legs, curling my toes. "Then

you haven't experienced a real man in your life."

The statement was as if he would be the one to teach me filthy things. Over my dead body. As he resumed the round of punishment, I did everything I could to force my mind elsewhere, planning the sorority's demise. I was months away from graduating. Why would I bother pledging a freaking sorority now?

Mommy dearest.

I wasn't going to do it any longer. I couldn't.

When he brought the belt down across my thighs, I panted several times, the pain ever more significant. Then he rubbed the rough pads of his fingertips around my buttocks in circles, pushing me to a beautiful moment where the anguish morphed into something else entirely. I pressed my face into the soft comforter, clawing the bedding as I tried to keep my breathing even.

And failed.

Arman suddenly placed the strap only a foot away from my face, leaning over as he'd done before, his rugged face dangerously close to mine. "I want you to hear what I'm telling you, Raven. You entered the lair of a predator, but you already know that. Don't you? I'm not done with you yet, princess. You intrigue me. You frustrate me. And you entice me."

"What does that mean?" The dull throbbing in my pussy drifted into something more intense, the ache building to a precipice. Even my scent of desire had increased, so much so I was lost in a haze that for a few seconds I never wanted to be removed from.

He chuckled and rolled the tip of a single finger down my spine to the crack of my ass. I stiffened, taking gasping breaths from the desire continuing to roar through me. When he dared swirl the tip of his finger around my clit, there was no possible way of stopping the series of whimpers.

"That means that you owe me, sweet Raven. The moment you made the mistake of entering my world, you belonged to me.

And I taste and take what I own.”

## CHAPTER 4



*A* rman

Raven Cartier.

Fuck.

Anger and desire continued to be a dangerous combination. Perhaps karma was sending me a reprehensible message, or a gift that could be used to my benefit.

There was no possible way she was Thomas Cartier's daughter.

Brother.

Best friend.

Confidant.

Fucking treacherous bastard.

I considered the man my greatest enemy, someone I'd enjoy shooting between the eyes, but only after torturing him for days. The fact he'd become the director of the FBI was one of the reasons, but only one. He'd also made it his life's mission to destroy my family piece by piece. He'd attempted to have me arrested twice, almost succeeding given trumped-up charges, but my attorneys had prevailed.

It was a mistake that had yet to be rectified. The what ifs were endless, creating a wave of energy, an increased need for revenge.

However, if this goddess of seduction was indeed his daughter, I would need to play this out very carefully. I would never have had the patience when I was younger. Maybe the fact I was older and wiser allowed me to take a step back, contemplating the risks as well as the rewards.

A decent man would send her packing, but I wasn't that kind of guy. In fact, I was the creature nightmares were made of, which was exactly the thought running through her head. But here I was jumping to conclusions without the benefit of learning the full truth. The name wasn't that unique but my guess was she'd been told to lie about her father's profession if asked.

My thoughts continued to slide further into the darkness as my hunger increased. Taking what didn't belong to me could be the worst decision I'd ever made or the best. I'd take my chances at this point.

Even if I had no business touching the luscious creature. Not only was it opening unwanted doors with regard to her mysterious and sudden appearance in my world, but not knowing her identity could become an issue. However, there was something about Raven's sass and her resolve that continued to draw me into the darkest needs I'd felt in a long time.

Yet I couldn't ignore the events of the evening, nor the possibility that Grayson had used more than one tactic to try to get to me. Annoyance built and I gritted my teeth. I'd made a lifetime of mistakes in the last few months alone, but they'd never come close to the single one made years before.

The one that had destroyed everything on a sunny afternoon because I'd allowed my guard to fall.

I slipped my belt back into position before lowering my sleeves and grabbing the cufflinks from the nightstand.

She jerked into a sitting position, yanking the pillow over her naked body, watching me so intently I was certain her eyes were burning a hole in my flesh. The flush on her face matched the crimson covering her beautiful bottom. How long had it been since I'd spanked a woman? As sadistic as I

considered myself, I hadn't found any desire to share the sinful proclivities with anyone as of the past year or two. I honestly couldn't remember the last time.

Perhaps that was telling. Perhaps her sudden appearance meant it was time to indulge in satisfying my needs.

Whatever the case, I was more fascinated by her than I should be, the longing to fuck her becoming uncontrollable. She was without a doubt the most beautiful woman I'd set my eyes on in a long time, yet her vulnerability and her age weren't lost on me. I had a teenage daughter not much younger than she was.

But I couldn't ignore the danger level and I couldn't allow her to leave my house without an understanding between us.

If at all.

I tried to rip my eyes off her luscious nakedness, but the girl and her lush and very rosy lips made it impossible. The slight whimper when I tugged the holster from the dresser meant I terrified her. Our eyes locked and it seemed as if she was searching for my soul. She wouldn't find one. That had been stripped from me years before, replaced with anger and hatred, an emptiness that only my teenage daughter could soothe.

She refused to blink, watching every move I made as I redressed. Only after I'd thrown on the jacket did she find her voice.

"What are you talking about?" There was her rebellious spirit popping freely from her mouth and intensifying her attitude. She had verve, balls the size of cantaloupes. She'd learned enough about me that she should be terrified, but here she was confronting me.

I walked toward my dresser, still thinking about my intentions with her. First and foremost, I needed to find out more about her identity. While she could be lying to me, I doubted it. I'd seen the moment of fluster on her face and in her eyes. But hazing? If that was the truth, whoever had decided to require this task either had it in for her or there was an alternate reason.

And one that could be damaging.

“You’re going to be my guest for an extended period of time until I learn more about you. After that, we’ll see.”

“Excuse me? Uh, no. That’s not possible. I have a life.”

“You should have thought about that before.”

“So you’re imprisoning me?” Another demanding tone. I should be more irritated than I was.

I pulled out the handcuffs. “That will depend on whether what you told me is the truth. If it is, then I’ll allow you to leave. If you lied to me, and I assure you that my associates will determine that quickly, then the next round of punishment you receive will be much worse.”

It would appear the stunning and very voluptuous woman finally realized what I was telling her. Now her face was ashen, her lower lip quivering. When I grabbed her wrist, yanking her to the top of the bed, she didn’t utter a single sound.

Until I snapped the handcuff in place, securing her to the bed. I bent over, unable to resist another taste of her sweet lips. When she arched her back, I was shocked how enticing the simple move could be. I darted my tongue inside, tasting her sweetness all over again. With a forceful moan, she purposely turned her head to the side, breaking the quiet moment of intimacy.

If she thought that would stop me from getting what I wanted, she was sorely wrong. I brushed my lips across her jaw, slowly shifting downward. She did what she could to keep from making any sound but lost the fight the moment I dusted my lips across one already hardened nipple. Her breasts were perfect, created to fit in a man’s hands.

My hands.

Raven shuddered from the light touch of intimacy, her long, dark eyelashes skimming across her shimmering cheeks adding to the enticement. I pulled away, my gaze falling to her beautifully bare pussy. I wanted nothing more than to drive my cock deep inside, but I found enough restraint to back away.

This could be nothing more than a trap I couldn't afford to fall into.

What I needed to do was ensure that she'd keep her mouth shut no matter who she was. Even though she had no proof of what she'd overheard, given Grayson would soon disappear, any statement or accusation she made would bring far too much scrutiny to my activities at a time when I couldn't afford any additional attention. Let alone her actions would force my hand with the man who could turn out to be her father.

I eased my phone from my pocket, moving to the camera, returning to the bed. As I proceeded to take a few photographs, including one taken with me, she struggled in the tight binding. Even from the angle of the picture, my face was easily recognizable.

And the state of her undress was as well.

"Oh, my God. What are you doing?"

"Let's just call it a method of insurance, princess."

Raven lifted her head, her lips twitching in frustration and anger. "Don't you dare publish those. You don't understand. You can't. You'll ruin me. I'm going to be important one day."

I chuckled and slipped the camera into my jacket. "I assure you that I won't unless you give me no choice. However, leverage is useful in my line of work. What you overheard is none of your business and out of your league. These will prove to be a helpful reminder."

"I'm not stupid. I wouldn't tell anyone. I enjoy breathing."

"If you're telling me the truth, then I doubt you'll want your friends and professors knowing you spent a passionate night with a kingpin. Do you?"

"Bastard. You're a fucking bastard."

I rolled my finger down the bridge of her nose, drinking in her perfume. "You gotta pay to play."

"You can't do this. I'm sorry I invaded your privacy. I'm sorry I tried to steal something from you. That doesn't give you the

right to do this to me.” It was funny that she didn’t sound apologetic at all. In fact, she sounded proud of herself.

“I have all the right in the world, *cherie*. This is my home. My world. My bedroom. As of right now, you are my guest. I suggest you relax and enjoy the rest. After I return, you and I are going to talk.” I grabbed a throw from the plush chair in the corner, placing it gently around her. Her glare was even more heated.

“Where are you going?”

Her resolve had returned, which continued to arouse me. “I do have a family gathering downstairs, a hundred guests waiting for my toast to my beautiful sister. Duty calls.” I moved toward the door. Then I snagged her dress, draping it over my arm.

“You can’t take my things. I’ll scream bloody murder.”

I laughed and waited until the door was open before glancing over my shoulder. “I can do anything I want. My rules.”

“What are you going to do with me?”

The question was one yet to have a decent answer. “If you’re a good girl, I might fingerfuck you when I return. Then I’ll thrust my cock deep inside your tight pussy. Oh, and you can scream all you want. No one will hear you.”

As I closed the door, a smile crossed my face. Her gasp of shock was a sweet reward. I hadn’t been in this good of a mood in a long time. I flexed my fingers, longing to have them wrapped around the leather once again.

The fact she’d refused to cry out had almost brought out the monster in me. It wasn’t that I cared to hurt a woman by any means. There’d been few in my life I’d met who deserved being treated similarly to the way I would a man who betrayed me. My upbringing had prevented me from doing so.

I brought my hand to my nose, drinking in her scent, the smile remaining. When I’d noticed her pussy was glistening from wetness, I’d almost lost it. I dragged my tongue across my lips then pulled out my phone, calling Maddox before heading back to the party.

“Bossman.” He called me that when he was in the middle of a business operation or when in front of any of my other soldiers. While he was my best friend, someone who’d worked for me longer than anyone else, he offered his full respect as an example of how everyone in my employ should act.

“We have another more pleasurable issue.”

“Don’t we always?”

Right now, I needed my second in command’s expertise in garnering information. He was the best at doing so, able to hack into any computer system within a matter of minutes. “Is Landry with you?”

“Of course. What’s up?”

“Let him finish the task tonight but I want Grayson left on ice.”

“Has something changed?”

“Likely. Hell, I don’t know yet. However, I need you for something more important.” Given Raven’s sudden appearance, I was becoming more concerned that the FBI were waiting for the wrong move to be made. Keeping Grayson alive for now might prove more beneficial.

“Saving your sister from that prick she’s marrying?” He laughed while I growled. The fact my sister was marrying a man like Zane Northington wasn’t my idea of a marriage made in heaven, but my father believed it was in the best interest for the family’s business. She’d also fallen in love with the pompous asshole, which had shocked me. At least Zane knew if he wasn’t good to her, I’d take matters into my own hands, business arrangement or not. Maddox was the only person who knew exactly how I felt. I wanted my sister happy and would do anything to ensure that was the case, but my friendship with Maddox had kept me from going off the deep end with regard to my hatred for the entire Northington clan.

“Unfortunately, no, at least not before the wedding. My mother would kill me.” The noise drifting up the stairs was of happiness, the party now in full swing.

“Okay, then what?”

“I have a guest for the evening who was very much unanticipated.”

He hesitated then laughed. “As in a party crasher.”

“Exactly. As in she was hiding in the closet when I gave the orders regarding Grayson.”

“Ah, fuck. That’s not good, Arman. Who is she?”

“You don’t need to tell me that,” I snarled and rubbed my eyes, the dull ache starting to throb. This kind of shit I didn’t need. “She’s a beautiful young woman who made the mistake of trying to steal a watch from me.”

Maddox whistled. “Did she have any idea the house she’d targeted?”

“She appears not to.”

“Uh-huh. But you don’t believe her.”

“The jury is out, my friend. What little I do know is that her name is Raven Cartier. So she told me.” I took a deep breath, furious that this had gotten under my skin so badly.

“Wait a minute. Is that…”

“The FBI director’s daughter? Quite possibly. That’s what I need you to find out. If she isn’t, I still need to learn every detail about her possible. She could be a plant.”

“Jesus Christ. In our world, when it rains, it pours,” he mused. “Do you have anything on her?”

“She’s supposedly a student at LSU. I’m certain you can find out if that’s the truth, including a photograph for further confirmation.”

“That’s an easy system to crack. Anything else? And when do you need the details? I take it tonight.”

I headed down the stairs, noticing my lovely yet rebellious daughter trying to convince a bartender that she should be allowed to drink. “As soon as possible. Absolutely tonight as she is my guest until I determine her identity. Find out what you can and meet me back at the estate. If she’s working with

Grayson, I need to know it. See if you can hack into her bank accounts. I want to know if she was paid off by someone.”

“You got it, my friend. Do you need help containing her?”

I took long strides into the room, my daughter giving me an evil eye. Nights like this, she reminded me of her mother, far too beautiful to let out of a cage. I shook my head from the thought. My daughter would never allow me to keep her as protected as I’d tried to do over the years. She was far too independent, just like her mother.

“No, let’s just say she’s secured in my room.”

Maddox laughed. “You haven’t lost your touch.”

“I’m not sure about that. See what you can find.”

“I’ll get back to you. Just out of curiosity, what watch did this girl attempt to steal?”

“The one Sophia gave me.”

“Shit. I’m surprised she’s breathing.”

Chuckling, I slipped my hand into my pocket, fingering the first Christmas present Sophia had given me. It had been years since I’d found the courage to pull the watch from its box. Maybe it was time to gift it to my daughter. After all, her birthday would be coming up in a couple of months. “Let’s just say the lovely Raven grabbed my attention right away.”

“Oh, brother,” he snarled.

“What does that mean?”

“It means you like her.”

“Not at all. Make certain Landry removes all traces of his... time spent with Grayson. Lock him down in an unusual location in case we’re raided.”

“I know just the place. You’re worried.”

“Let’s just say I’m going to err on the side of caution right now.”

“Understood. I’ll get right on it,” Maddox assured me. At least my second in command knew what set me off and how to

handle the situation. Fuck. Given this was an election year, it would seem everyone wanted notoriety for cleaning up the streets. When that happened, it usually cut into our family's business. Even the legit ones. With Grayson being in place for a long time, that meant someone significant could be going down. Laying low wasn't my style.

"Excellent," I said casually, ending the call and taking a satisfied deep breath while I slipped my phone into my jacket pocket. A few seconds later Zoe walked toward me, acting as if she'd been doing nothing wrong by talking with the dark-haired bartender who'd dared take a liking to the girl.

"Papa. I wondered where you were. I didn't see you when I came in."

"And I can tell you ditched your bodyguard. Didn't you, my mischievous daughter?"

"He's here. I just keep wandering from one room to another. I can't help it if he isn't fast enough. Did you see Edmee? She's beautiful tonight."

"She's always beautiful, just like my daughter." I kissed her on top of the forehead, scanning the room for any signs of trouble. Unfortunately, I'd had limited time to investigate the entire guest list, although the people my sister and her fiancé had invited were the Who's Who of New Orleans society. That didn't mean there couldn't be a hidden danger. "Stay within visible range of your guard or I'll hire a second and a third man to watch your every move if necessary."

"Ugh! Stop worrying so much, Papa. No one is going to ruin the fabulous evening. I'm a grown woman. I can protect myself."

While Zoe was well aware of the dangers of being a member of this family, her sheltered upbringing a result of being born a Thibodeaux, she was a rule breaker just like her mother. She was also at an age when she believed that nothing could hurt her. How wrong she was. I touched the watch again and sighed. "Uh-huh. You growing up is partially what I'm worried about. As far as the dangerous element, I wish your

sentiments were the truth, daughter of mine. Stay out of trouble and no drinking. Do you understand me?"

She gave me a pouty look, which usually worked, but not in this case. "Party pooper."

Laughing, I headed through the crowd, nodding toward several who greeted me, finding both my brothers standing far removed from the glorious couple. Both Edmee and Zane were certainly enjoying the limelight, the couple showered with expensive gifts and congratulations.

"Did you notice a senator from Florida is here?" Francois asked. My brother was only a couple of years younger. There were times we'd been able to pass for twins, although it was something he would deny wholeheartedly. He was also my Capo, taking the position seriously. He was happy with the position, although he handled little of the illegitimate side or the aspects of violence that Maddox did.

It was Francois who'd affectionately started calling Maddox my wise guy just to piss me off. Francois had a way with words, which made him perfect for the position he held. He was damn good at keeping the peace while forming alliances.

"And a couple B-list actors," Louie threw in. He was the stable one of the family, our youngest brother and a surgeon who'd married the love of his life, the woman he'd met in college. With two kids and a busy career, he shied away from most family obligations, which had once been a bone of contention, especially with our father. However, there'd been times I'd envied him, his decisions and his courage to make them. There'd been no question whether I would take over as Don, kingpin of the south.

I hated the moniker.

"Zane thinks of himself as suave when in truth, he's not well liked," I answered. While I'd stated the truth, it wasn't his lack of personality that troubled me as much as the fact he'd lived the rich boy life to an extreme. That made him cocky and in turn, potentially dangerous.

Louie laughed and lifted his drink. “You’re in a surly mood, brother. Perhaps you need a drink. This is a celebration after all.”

“Truth be told, for the first time since the announcement of their engagement I’m in a decent mood. However, a drink is something I do need. Francois, would you care to join me?”

“My cue to allow you two to discuss business. I’ll go see if my wife has finished grilling Zane’s father about a charitable contribution.”

“Which charity of choice?” I teased, knowing his adoring wife was heavily involved in the upper echelon of society.

Louie lifted his gaze, finally chuckling a few seconds later. “Honestly? I have no idea.”

All three of us laughed, both Francois and I watching as our brother walked away. Then we headed to one of the three bars.

“You look like you have something on your mind,” Francois said quietly.

“Grayson Alexander was in the process of stealing from us. Even worse, I believe what he planned on taking would be used to frame us with the FBI.”

“Whew. How did you find out?”

“I had the man followed. It took weeks before he allowed his guard to fall, leading us to a lower-level agent out of Baton Rouge. Their tracks were secured well, which was part of the reason it took me extra time. What I can’t confirm is if Grayson was undercover for the FBI or someone else.”

“Fuck, not good at all,” Francois said under his breath. “Does that mean you suspect it’s been going on for a longer period of time?”

“I don’t know but that’s what we need to find out. I should have known something was up four months ago when Grayson wanted to ride out the detail working with our more unscrupulous businesses instead of taking the promotion I offered him in land development.” I’d wanted to ship him off to our Texas operation to ease Francois of certain duties.

Thank God I hadn't. My thoughts shifted back to the possibility Raven was a plant. Maybe that wasn't her name at all.

"How long has the man worked for you?" he asked.

"Long enough I trusted him completely. I need you to run down the list of known associates. I want to ensure we don't have a larger issue."

Francois nodded, waiting to say anything until we'd both ordered a drink. With the whiskey in our hands, he led us through the set of French doors to one of the patios and away from the majority of guests. "There's something else you're not telling me."

I could never get anything past him, the sixth sense we shared both a blessing and a curse. "I have a guest upstairs, a woman who crashed the party."

"That's interesting. You're certain it's not a friend you didn't know about?"

Sliding my hand into my pocket, I pulled the watch into the shimmering lights. "Not when this was attached to her wrist, ready to leave the fabulous party."

"Wow. Are you having her arrested?"

"No, I have other thoughts in mind. However, I need to be careful. While I learn who she is, I'll need you to ensure the party doesn't get out of hand. Can you do that?"

"Of course, but I know that tone. What do you have in mind with this unwanted guest?"

"I'm playing it by ear at this point." And she was very wanted.

"Do you think the timing has anything to do with Edmee's wedding?"

I rubbed my jaw. "Possibly but right now, I'm not jumping to any conclusions. We'll need to be certain. Speaking of our gorgeous sister." What I also didn't want to do was alarm anyone else in the family. Each one of us had been through enough over the years. I lifted my glass as soon as our beloved sister appeared on the landing, giving us both the kind of look

that could burn most men into the ground. Francois knew how to play the game with her and with Louie when necessary.

“There you are. It’s time for a toast, my brother,” Edmee purred as she sashayed closer. “You promised. Remember?” She rubbed her hand down my open shirt, shaking her head. “What happened to your tie?”

“It was suffocating tonight and of course I’ll make a toast,” I told her.

“A nice one. Don’t you dare make a fool out of the man I love.”

Francois made a grumbling strange sound and took a step away. “I’ll remain in the back of the room.”

“No, you don’t,” she snarled, grabbing his arm and yanking him back into place.

“We’ll be a family unit tonight, Edmee. That much I can promise you.”

“Don’t ruin this for me, boys, or I’ll make your life a living hell.” She spun on her tall heels, laughing as she headed back inside.

Only I knew she wasn’t kidding.

“God love women,” Francois said. “Maybe it’s time to consider settling down, dear brother.”

“I did that once. Remember? That’s not going to happen again.”

“As our mother would say, never say never.”

That’s exactly what I’d said more than once. “Maybe you should take your own advice.”

“One day. I would enjoy a huge family.”

“You would.”

Grinning, he walked ahead of me and I glanced up at the third floor, wondering how my uninvited guest was handling incarceration. Then I rubbed the tip of my index finger across my lips. I could still taste her sweet mouth.

Now I wanted to taste all of her.

Maybe I'd make good on my promise no matter the information discovered. After all, I'd been a very good boy recently. Very good indeed.

## CHAPTER 5



*R*aven

Terror remained, the kind that filled my thoughts with bloody images and would undoubtedly leave me with nightmares.

If I lived to see another day.

At this point, it was debatable, although it seemed as if keeping me as a captive was nothing more than a game to a twisted asshole who likely got everything he wanted. Not me. I'd die before I allowed him to touch me.

The bastard had left me alone for hours. Or at least so it seemed.

I wasn't entirely certain as the man didn't have a clock on either nightstand. Who didn't want to know what time it was when they woke up? Maybe he kept his phone by the bed at all times. After all, he was an important mobster. Right?

Ugh.

I flexed my hand, struggling with the thick steel for the tenth time. There was no way of slipping my small hand through the dense material. I stared up at the ceiling, glaring at the ornate coffered panels that added to the artistry of the room. In the time Arman had been gone, I'd counted them five times, memorizing the locations of the two small cracks I'd found in the plaster.

The horrible truth was I was lying naked in a stranger's bed, a dangerous man who'd spanked me an hour or so before. On top of the quicksand surrounding me, I was positive the girls who'd driven me to the city under some duress had likely left me behind. That meant no one was coming to my rescue. No one at this point knew I was missing given it was a Saturday.

I was in a very bad situation with no recourse unless I could find a way to escape. After taking the tenth scattered and ugly breath, I fought to try to at least sit up on his bed, tossing the itchy throw aside. When the handcuffs got caught on the wood surrounding the thick iron posts, it took me a full two minutes before I was able to yank the shackle up by a few inches.

Exhaling, I swung my legs off the bed, feeling at least a little bit accomplished. Then I stared at the make and model of the handcuffs. They were security grade at minimum, although they appeared to be exactly like the ones my father had trained me to get out of. However, it had been by finding a small piece of metal to use as a key. I doubted he'd left something like that lying around.

I glanced behind me then toward the nightstand. With one hand free, I could at least try to open the drawer. If he didn't have that locked down like Fort Knox as well. I almost laughed out loud when I pulled the single drawer open easily. The damn thing had more inside than mine did. I glanced toward the door then started to remove the various items. There were few items that surprised me, although I was surprised he kept a hardback book with a page dog-eared.

Hmmm... Stephen King. I would have thought he lived with enough horror and bloodshed, he wouldn't need to read about it. Then again, maybe he garnered ideas for how he killed people. The thought formed another lump in my throat. I continued my search, finding a single silver frame shoved under almost everything else.

I couldn't resist pulling it out. The photograph was obviously when Arman was younger, the woman standing by his side peering up at him as if he was her entire world. And she was pregnant. There was no reason for me to feel a moment of

sadness, or experience a cold shiver, but it was obvious whoever this girl was, she was important to him.

Then where was she? There was no evidence of a woman anywhere in his room or in the closet. Divorces could be ugly. Maybe that's why he was so damn angry. *No, he's angry because you invaded his privacy.* He hadn't thought anyone would be going through his things let alone be found hiding in his closet.

God, I'd never felt so stupid in my life.

I shoved the picture back into place, but in doing so, I noticed something at the very back of the drawer. For a few seconds, I was giddy from finding a paperclip. To most people, the small metal object wouldn't mean a single thing. But given the situation I'd found myself in, this was huge. Very carefully I lifted it into my fingers, trying my best to calm my nerves.

Then I used both hands to unfold it. After stealing another glance at the door, I twisted the handcuffs, finding the small keyhole. When I shoved the clip inside, I realized how badly my hands were shaking. I was a nervous wreck. Even if I got out of this, how would I manage to leave the house unnoticed? I could hear a combination of music and muffled sounds, which had to mean dozens of voices. And I had no clothes.

The only possible way was leaving through the kitchen, which was where I came in to pretend I was helping with the party. That's what I would do. Then I'd... Oh, God. I had no wallet. No money. No credit cards. And no phone. Perfect.

I closed my eyes briefly then concentrated my efforts on freeing myself. The rest I'd deal with once I managed to do so. When I heard the tiniest of clicks, I sucked in my breath. Then I spread the cuff, removing my wrist. I'd never thought freedom could feel so amazing.

If I had to bet, I'd say I had a fifty-fifty chance of getting out of the house without being noticed by someone. If what Arman had told me was true, there were men who worked for him crawling all over the house and grounds. Undoubtedly, they'd be looking for me.

I scampered off the bed, not bothering to shove everything else I'd removed into the nightstand drawer. I was surprised he'd left my panties, but snatched them immediately, struggling into them as I raced toward the closet. Then I threw open the door, fighting to find something I could wear. Who hung up tee shirts? The man who was determined to make me pay for my sins.

I was already close to the door to the room when I tugged on the hem. It was long enough to be a dress. Not a pretty one but it worked at this point. I realized I'd almost forgotten my heels. Oh, that would be a fantastic look. With them still in my hand, I said a silent prayer I'd been right and he hadn't locked the bedroom door.

A sigh of relief refused to be denied when I realized my observation skills were still intact. After darting my head out into the hallway, I felt certain the party was contained to the first floor. Hugging the wall, I made my way to the top of the stairs, peering down. The music was loud, the conversations and laughter lively. Now I just had to remember where the kitchen was.

Every step matched my thudding pulse, but I made it down the spiral stairs in only a few seconds. There was no one on the second-floor landing either, no open doors whatsoever.

After taking another deep breath, I eased down the last set of stairs, quickly scanning the area. Then I took a chance and bolted toward what I hoped was the kitchen.

If not, I was doomed.

\* \* \*

*Arman*

The toasts had been made, what I could handle of mingling with guests I couldn't care less about done with for well over an hour. My mother was pleased, which was rare these days, beaming almost as much as Edmee was. I'd done my job

offering my house for the illustrious event given my parents' sprawling estate was in the throes of being renovated after a suspicious fire.

I'd done my good deed for the year. Suffering through the wedding would be my last, especially since I'd been asked to be a groomsman. I rolled my eyes at the thought, closing the door behind me.

I'd retreated to my office, determined to search for the girl's identity myself. If I could find anything about her, then it would help me ascertain what in the hell I was going to do with her.

I yanked the phone into my hand before placing my drink on my desk and sitting down. When I navigated to the pictures I'd taken, my cock twitched immediately. The sight of her shackled to my bed provided an indecent sense of arousal. The filthy things I could do to her lingered in the forefront of my mind.

Including using sadistic implements that would mark her body for a longer period of time than my belt. The thought of defiling her body had kept me on edge the hour and a half I'd been away from her. I couldn't leave her for that much longer.

Exhaling, I tossed the phone onto my desk, taking a swig of my whiskey before pressing the spacebar on my iMac, scrolling to the internet. A knock on the door came seconds before typing Google in the spacebar.

"Come in."

Maddox walked in wearing a grin on his face. He took the time to make himself a drink before plopping down in the chair in front of me. I gave him a stern look when he planted his feet on the corner of my desk, but that usually meant whatever he was going to tell me was worth staring at the soles of his shoes.

Tonight was no exception, except my patience had run out. If Raven was a plant, attraction or not, I'd need to make a difficult decision. "Talk or else." I took a swig of my drink,

ignoring the desire to glance at her picture again. My sudden fetish was ridiculous, especially given the circumstances.

He remained silent, taking a gulp of his drink before pulling one of the pieces of paper from the rest, tossing it my way. The photograph immediately drew my attention, her smile beaming. I was taken aback once again by her youth as well as her beauty.

“The chick’s not lying,” he continued. “She’s a senior at LSU majoring in criminology and law and legal systems. And her last name is Cartier.”

The picture he’d provided had to be taken a couple of years before, the photograph lovely but reminding me of just how young she was. Although I could dare say she wasn’t innocent by any means. I found myself tracing the lines in her face, denoting the sparkle in her eyes as if she was holding a secret even then, determined to take on the world. “Continue.”

“She really overheard our conversation?” he asked, the jovial tone leaving him.

“I’m afraid she did.”

He tossed back almost the entire remainder of his scotch before making a suggestion that was his requirement, and one he knew I wouldn’t like. “I’d ordinarily suggest that you allow me to handle her quietly, but I don’t think you’re going to want me to do that.”

Lifting my gaze, I could tell he was serious. “Why is that, my friend?”

“She is definitely someone of importance, especially given how you found her.”

I tilted my head and laughed. “Well, she certainly wouldn’t want it known that she was fraternizing with a known criminal. What else? I can tell there’s more. I was right in my assumptions.”

“Hold on. She has a checking and savings account, the only deposits made from her parents for tuition, room and board, the almost exact amount going to LSU administration. She has six hundred and ten dollars and change in her bank account,

deposits made from the coffee shop just off campus where she works thirty plus hours a week while taking a full load of classes. She has no boyfriend that I've found and absolutely zero connection to Grayson Alexander or anyone in his league for that matter. I checked on sororities, and one has been warned for their hazing techniques before, placed on temporary suspension last year but given the influential and wealthy parents who donate to the school regularly, the incidents were wiped off the records. Incidentally, her mother was sorority president twenty-five years ago."

So the girl was telling me the truth. How did that come into play with her father? I swirled my drink, thinking about what he was telling me. "Just spit it out, Maddox. My patience is fading rapidly."

"You were correct. She is the first of two daughters born to Thomas Garfield Cartier. Now, I want a raise."

Fuck. I slammed my hand on the desk, hissing under my breath. Then I took a swig of my drink. After studying him for a few seconds, I reached into my desk, yanking my weapon from the holster, pointing it at his chest.

Maddox laughed, his deep voice booming in the room. He knew when I was serious and when I was fucking with him. We'd played this game with certain enemies, which had allowed us to catch them off guard.

"How about this. You get to live," I told him, cocking my head and awaiting his answer.

"Then I guess I'm outta here." He started to stand then leaned forward, sliding the rest of the papers with her information in my direction. "This isn't a coincidence. Is it?"

"No, it's not. Someone put her here." I glanced down at them, uncertain I cared about any additional proof.

"Maybe not, Arman. She's a kid. I doubt Thomas would mention you directly to her or her sister. She really might have stumbled onto the house and the party, but that doesn't mean her misfortunate can't be our good fortune."

He kept a grin on his face as I took my time looking over the other items he'd brought, including her transcripts from the last semester of college. She was highly intelligent, her GPA incredible, especially given the hours she worked. She had scholarships as well, which meant she would need to keep her hands clean. But the information he'd provided meant nothing in comparison to who her father was.

In my world, there were no such things as coincidences. There was another reason she'd been sent to my house, whether she knew it or not. That narrowed my decision of what ultimately to do with her down significantly. "Yes, you're right." I looked away, debating Raven's welfare. "Look after my daughter tonight. Make certain she doesn't cause a scene."

"Absolutely. And what are you going to do?"

I sighed, the sound as bitter and angry as I felt. "I may have no choice but to handle her in a way I'd prefer not to." But not until after I spent some quality time with her.

"But you like her."

"She's my enemy just like her father."

"Maybe I can suggest an alternative?" he asked.

"Why the fuck not." I laid the papers on my desk, waiting to hear his recommendation. Before he had a chance to say anything, there was another knock at the door. I glanced toward it, eager for the party to be over with. "Yes?"

One of my soldiers walked in. "I'm sorry to bother you, sir, but you should check the security cameras."

I immediately jerked up from my desk, heading to the small console located off to the side, my hackles immediately raised. "What am I looking for?"

"There seems to be a young woman trying to find her way out the back. The strange thing is, she's in a tee shirt and nothing else."

A grin popped across my face as I pressed the space bar on the computer system, finding the cameras positioned in the back of my estate. I had them located everywhere, especially given

the house was located further into town than I'd like. Twinkling lights had been installed in the trees, the pool lit up like a festive Christmas decoration.

Maddox moved behind me, glancing over my shoulder. "Let me guess, your mystery guest."

I shifted from one camera to the next, locating Raven easily. When she lifted her head as if noticing one of the cameras, my cock pushed against my trousers. "Exactly. She managed to get out of the handcuffs. Clever girl."

"Interesting. As resourceful as she is beautiful."

"Which is why I need to deal with her."

"Why don't you consider an arrangement?"

"Such as?"

He turned toward me, giving me the same look that I'd wanted to wipe off his face when we were kids and he'd beaten me at basketball. "Marry her."

## CHAPTER 6



*R*aven

Arman's scent crawled all over me, lingering even though the tee shirt had been freshly washed. In my mind, his fragrance had already stained my skin. Or maybe it was wishful thinking.

Ridiculous.

Freedom was just seconds away. Or so I prayed to God.

I had the creepy crawlies and they refused to leave. I'd made it out of the house into the impressive backyard, yet realized immediately that the entire area was surrounded by an eight-foot-tall iron fence with no obvious openings. I'd either need to climb it or find a gate. I opted for the gate. I only prayed I hadn't set off some crazy alarm system.

The foliage was thick, vibrant colors dancing in the shimmer of the tree lights. Even the pool was mesmerizing, the cabana and outdoor kitchen to die for. It reminded me a little of my parents' modest home located outside of DC, the yard always kept pristine. We'd had a pool since vacations had been infrequent, the times spent with my sister memorable. Yet unlike my childhood home, it seemed as if the pool furniture had never been used, the kitchen spotless. I finally noticed what appeared to be a gate nestled close to the cabana building and took cautious steps toward it.

I'd been right, the position of the gate probably to allow for caterers and other workers to come and go as necessary. I was certain Arman had staff that kept everything up to his lofty standards. With my strappy stilettos in my hand, I glanced over my shoulder to ensure I hadn't been followed before opening the gate. There was flashing lights, no beeping sounds, just the dull roar on the continuing party and night crawlers in the shadows.

Maybe that was the reason a shiver continuously drifted up and down my spine. I moved through the gate then took a deep breath before heading away from the house.

Almost instantly, I felt a crack of electricity soaring through my veins, heat unlike anything imaginable tearing through me straight to my core. Unfortunately, I knew exactly what that meant.

He'd found me.

I heard Arman's dark chuckle first, the deep, velvety sound skittering through me like a firestorm. Then a bright light was turned on, flashing in my eyes. I shielded them from the harsh glare, blinking several times, hating that tears had formed in my eyes.

"Going somewhere, princess?" he asked, the question laced with a growl. I heard another voice, another amused laugh.

"Somehow, your shirt looks better on her than it does on you, Arman."

It was the voice of the man I'd also heard inside Arman's room. I backed away, uncertain what I could say. Then I turned and sprinted toward what I prayed to God was the street, dropping my heels in the process.

I was scooped up within seconds, tossed over Arman's shoulder. Now I let off a high-pitched scream, pummeling my fists against his back. "Let me go! Please. Just let me go."

"Now she asks nicely," Arman grumbled. "No more demands, princess?"

When he swatted me on the bottom, I groaned, his touch somehow more intimate than before. "Please." I was out of

pleadings and excuses. I just wanted to live.

“I’ll head back to the party now that you have this under control,” Maddox said, his tone still full of amusement.

“As I said, ensure Zoe is accounted for.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll handle her. Besides, you have your hands full.” He continued chuckling as he walked away.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked as I struggled to see where he was headed.

“Back to my room. For now.”

Instead of dragging me in front of the hired help or the guests, he headed to another door, one that was completely secure. I noticed the pad next to the door seconds before he placed his hand on the surface. Jesus. He had a private entrance. Of course he did.

He started humming as he walked up several sets of stairs, acting as if he had all the time in the world. When he reached a landing, he had two doors to choose from. I had to wonder where the second one led. The first went directly into his bedroom and into the closet. How had I not noticed? Because it was located behind a shelving unit holding several pairs of his shoes. Jesus. If I’d only found it before.

What a shame I wasn’t a career criminal and hadn’t thought of looking for a hidden door.

He popped into his room then tossed me into the center of the bed where he remained standing over me. As he peered down, his expression stern, he shook his head. Then he rubbed his hand across the slight scruff of his beard.

“Are you nervous, princess?”

His tone was menacing, yet still sensual. Nervous couldn’t begin to describe what I was feeling from the surreal night. This was a horrible nightmare that I feared I’d never wake up from.

“Should I be? Is that a warning?”

He did as he'd done before, removing his jacket oh-so carefully. Then his holster, giving me a chastising look when I stared at the weapon longingly.

“Don't even think about it, Raven. I'm not the kind of man who's known for having patience. You've tested me more than once. Although I will give you credit for your ability to free yourself from the handcuffs.”

At that moment, he noticed the items from the nightstand drawer that I'd dumped on top. Then his expression shifted from amusement to fury, the look on his face more terrifying than any he'd given so far. He took a single stride toward it, jerking open the drawer. As soon as he pulled out the picture frame, I sensed his rage only increasing.

Without giving me any warning, he had his hand wrapped around my throat, yanking me to my feet. There was such a coldness in his eyes that I was pulled into a vacuum, certain he was going to put a bullet in my brain. His body was shaking from the increasing anger, his jaw clenched so tightly that I was sick to my stomach even though it was difficult to take my eyes off him.

He lowered his head, his nostrils flaring. “It's vital that we get along, Raven, as you've become very important to me. I will show you decency but there will be rules to follow. You will not go through my things. Is that understood?”

Everything about his statement was strange, as if he planned on keeping me forever. Of course, that was absurd. There was no way he could keep me as a prisoner. I would eventually be missed. While he wasn't choking me, he was using enough pressure and his hand was so large that I had no doubt he could snap my neck if he wanted to. At this point, the only hope I had was playing along to his delusional belief. “Yes, sir.”

The single word of respect seemed to soften the powerful man. His expression changed and he eased the pressure even though his fingers remained wrapped around my throat. “Good girl.”

Flutters formed in my stomach from the praise and that made me want to be sick. “Who is she?”

He was taken aback by my forward question and took a few seconds rubbing his thumb back and forth across my lips. By the time he answered, he was smashing my lower lip from the pressure he used. "Someone special. Someone who didn't deserve the life she was given."

With that, he captured my mouth. This time the kiss was all consuming, full of fire and passion, as if this was the last action he'd ever take. Every nerve ending was on fire, seared from his heated touch, my heart racing from fear and excitement, a dangerous combination. Using his free hand, he glided it over my shoulder, the tingling sensations continuing.

I didn't want to be lost in the moment or the man, but he'd managed to awaken something very dark and sensual inside of me, pushing aside far too many inhibitions. As he continued rolling his hand down my arm, shifting to my back, he pulled me against him. The way he shifted his hips back and forth, pushing me against his thick erection was a clear indication of what he wanted.

I remained completely in awe of his powerful kiss, trembling in his hold yet the wetness and throbbing between my legs was increasing. The ruthless man was precise in his actions, as if he'd calculated exactly what he was going to do to me. When he grabbed a fistful of the shirt I'd taken, I moaned into the kiss. He crushed me against him, cupping my bottom with one hand as he did so.

As the kiss deepened, his tongue continuously drifting from one side of my mouth to the other, I found myself rolling onto my tiptoes without being forced. But when I curled one arm around his shoulder, tangling my fingers in his thick hair, the little voice inside my head chastised me.

That encouraged me to push my palm against his chest, but it was to no avail. He was an immovable force, capable of taking what he wanted. And for some crazy reason, he wanted me. My nerves remained on edge, but the tickling sensations turned into a wave of fiery electricity. There was no denying our attraction or our strong chemistry. I'd never been kissed with such passion, had never been held this way. It was

appealing in all the wrong ways, but I found myself responding to his imploring needs.

The unmistakable scent of my wetness floated between us.

When he finally broke the kiss, his actions were swift. He yanked the tee shirt over my head, pitching it aside. This time, he left no room for doubt, flexing his fingers and running them down my neck to my chest, his chest rising and falling. Then he slipped a single finger under the twisted elastic of my thong.

The single snap of his wrist forced an unwanted moan from my throat, but I found myself panting from desire and anticipation. He narrowed his eyes, laughing softly.

“You want what only I can give you.”

There was no arrogance in his tone, just words made into a statement that seemed entirely too correct. If he expected an answer, there was no way I could provide him with one. I was too hypnotized, uncertain of what to do. He dragged his tongue across his bottom lip, allowing his gaze to fall to my bare feet.

“Fuck. You are far too beautiful.”

I'd never been this paralyzed, uncertain I was even managing to breathe. Yet when he cupped both breasts, flicking his thumbs back and forth across my aching nipples, I floated into a crazy moment of nirvana.

The dazzling sensations continued to crawl through me even as I remained frozen in his hold. I was his captive, taken against my will, but when he lowered his head, pulling my nipple into his mouth, I threw my head back, gasping for air, ecstasy overruling rationality. How could I want this? How could I need his touch as much as I did?

Unable to help myself, I fisted his hair, issuing several scattered whimpers. There were stars floating in front of my eyes, all of them in vivid colors of the rainbow. The torrid moment was explosive, so much so I feared combusting. He was gentle at first, moving from one breast to the other. Then his actions became more aggressive, his need building.

I could no longer feel my legs, the mind-blowing moment ripped with passion.

“Are you wet for me, princess?” he asked as if already knowing the answer.

“Uh-huh.” I cringed from answering him so quickly, but of course he’d already known exactly what he was doing to me.

“Mmm...” He bit down on my hard bud and I had to bite back a scream. The moment he rolled his hand down my back, shifting it between us, I tensed, yet I opened my legs without being commanded. As he shifted to my other nipple, he added another blast of explosive heat before growling. The sound was even darker than before, a wordless explanation of what he had planned for me.

He aimlessly rolled a finger around my clit, every sound he made guttural. Predatory. I bit back a moan then a nervous laugh, fighting the urge to touch him. Yet the moment was drawing me into an even more desperate need. The way he growled like an animal was a telling statement, every desire turning more primal. He pulled away, taking deep, scattered breaths. Then he pushed me onto my knees.

“Touch me, princess. Suck me.”

I stared up at him, shock and awe tearing through me, but I obeyed him without any further hesitation. Where every move he’d made had been practiced, every touch exactly as he wanted, I fumbled, shaking like a leaf.

Finally, I managed to tug at the belt that had initiated me into the world of discipline, stroking the thick leather before fighting with the buckle. When I managed to drag it aside, I didn’t take my eyes off his as I pulled the zipper. His were full of even more darkness. When I peeled away both sides, he yanked the shirt over his head, the expression on his face tinged with evil.

The moment I grabbed my first look at his cock, I was pitched into another frenzy of need. How could a man’s shaft be so beautiful? He already had pre-cum on the tip, which I dared to

lick off, shaking all over from the tangy yet surprisingly sweet taste.

“You can be such a good girl, can’t you?”

My God. Why did his words thrill me? This was pure insanity. I dragged my tongue around his cockhead, fighting all the emotions tearing through me. I wanted this man, yet I already hated him. I closed my eyes and took the tip into my mouth, swirling my tongue back and forth.

“No, princess. Watch me. Don’t take your eyes off me.”

Another tremor of excitement slipped through every muscle as I glanced up at him, never blinking. When he fistfisted my hair, holding me in place, his expression changed to something entirely carnal. I could swear the man was going to ravage me over the course of the night.

I took another inch inside my wet mouth, using my strong jaw muscles to suck. Then I slipped my arms around his muscular thighs, tugging the material of his trousers down so I could grasp his buttocks. His ass was incredible, so firm that I moaned over the thick invasion. Every sound he made was laced with huskiness, the deep vibrations from his continuous growls humming against the rapid beating of my heart.

Arman rolled onto the balls of his feet, his grip on my hair tightening. Then he used it as a tether to keep me in place while he fucked my mouth, taking full control. “I can tell you love sucking my cock, sweet Raven. Don’t you? That’s it, take more of me.”

He shoved the remainder inside, driving the tip against the back of my throat. I thought for certain I would gag but I was able to breathe through my nose, calming the hard kick of nerves. Maybe it was my body’s betrayal controlling all my bodily functions, including the rapid thoughts and images jetting through my mind, but the lust became irresistible.

The intense throbbing between my legs only increased as I dragged my tongue back and forth, fighting to keep some level of control. He was having none of it, his face glistening as

beads of sweat trickled down both sides. Then his teeth caught on his bottom lip, his eyes half closed.

“Fuck, angel. You have one hot mouth.” He continued face-fucking me, every muscle in his body stiffening. The man’s chest was ripped, his abdomens so chiseled that I wanted nothing more than to brush my fingertips across the perfect indentations. He was truly the most handsome man I’d ever set eyes on. No man should be this good looking.

And yet so evil.

Seconds later, he yanked my head away, laughing softly as he rubbed his thumb around my still open mouth. As he shoved the thick digit past his lips, I was breathless, chimes ringing in my ears. Just the sucking sound alone added to the filthy moment.

Then he pulled me to my feet, swallowing hard as he darted his eyes back and forth.

“What are you doing?” I finally asked, still breathless. Still reeling from his touch.

He raked his teeth up the length of my chest, dragging his tongue along the side of my neck, dipping the tip into the shell of my ear before issuing a sharp whisper that would keep me stunned for some time to come.

“First, I’m going to fuck you like you deserve to be fucked and that won’t be inside your mouth. What I am going to do will be hard. Sweaty. Rough. And after that? I’m going to make you mine.”

When he lifted his head, his dark eyes emphasized what he’d just said.

He had no intention of letting me go.

## CHAPTER 7



*R*aven

Shock.

Would it wear off at some point? I wasn't entirely certain. What I did know was that my legs continued to shake as he eased me onto the bed. This time staring up at the ceiling, my thoughts remained muddled.

There was more of an urgency in the man, every sound providing a clear indication. I couldn't force myself to move even as he bent my knees, rolling the rough pads of his fingers along my shins as he pushed my legs against the bed. I was wide open and exposed for him, every single inch of me. Where I'd been utterly embarrassed before, I was strangely quiet now, my heart no longer rapidly beating. However, the sensations crawling over me were more startling, pushing me to an entirely different level of awareness.

He yanked my bottom to the edge of the bed and I fisted the covers, pulling on them out of nervousness. There was no way I could survive this. None. I turned my head to keep from looking at him, biting my lower lip as I stared at the door.

No one was coming to help. There'd be no freedom allowed for a girl in this position, no choice in what he was planning on doing. Maybe this was a prelude to ending my life, a reward for hunting and catching me. I slapped my hand over my mouth a split second before he breathed across my pussy.

Oh. My. God. My pussy muscles clenched and released, pushing me to another place of madness. I was ready to come and he'd yet to... he was going to lick me, to feast on my wetness. I wanted to shut down in my attempt to avoid the inevitable, but instead I curled my toes, arching my back.

"Yes, my little princess is very wet. I bet you're tight. Aren't you?" As if to prove a point, he slipped a single finger inside.

"Oh, God." Another blast of stars filtered over my periphery of vision. This was crazy, so much so that I was drifting further into a place of nirvana.

He added a second finger, flexing the two open as he thrust in slow and even strokes. I bit back cry after cry, fighting the urge to try to bolt with the need to allow myself to enjoy the moment. My entire world had been turned upside down and I was obviously having a nervous breakdown. But the sensations were even more electrifying than before.

When he added a third finger, his actions became rougher. He pumped in rapid actions, my pussy muscles trying to clench around them. I tossed my head back and forth, panting like some animal in heat.

He wrapped his other arm around my thigh, holding me firmly in place, yet I writhed in his hold. Now I was beating my fists against the comforter, no longer recognizing the sounds pushing up from somewhere deeper than my throat. God, the sounds he made were a reminder of the savage he was, someone I didn't even know.

And I was fairly certain I didn't want to know anything else about him. I knew enough to realize that I should run far away. He was a brutal killer, yet he could make me feel as if there was no one else in the world. I was still thrown at the sensations coursing through me like bottle rockets when he lowered his head once again, sucking on my clit. Just the way he took the tender tissue into his mouth was a clear indication of how practiced he was.

Oh, Lord. I had to find a way out of his clutches.

There was no chance of concentrating on a crazy plan. When he grazed his teeth across my sensitive nub, I was brought back into the world of pure sinful ecstasy.

But as he dragged his tongue down the length of my pussy, I jerked up. I was on fire, every inch of skin humming from intense current. As he thrust it inside my swollen channel along with his fingers, I lost what was left of my mind. The ecstasy was unlike anything I'd thought I could experience, his fingers and tongue working in a perfect orchestration.

I reached for him, running my fingers through his hair, my vision so foggy I couldn't make out anything around me. Just basking in the pleasure was a sin but the way he was making me feel reminded me that I was a very bad girl. I pressed the back of my hand across my mouth, trying to hold in the excess moans, but they floated around my hand.

There was no chance of holding back a powerful orgasm. He sensed I was ready to come, growling as he ferociously ate me, feasting as if this was his last meal prior to being walked into a death chamber. The images running through my mind were even more ridiculous and I almost burst out laughing. That was from nervousness, and shame that was accelerating.

"Come for me, princess. I need to taste all of you." He retracted his fingers, yanking my butt completely off the edge of the bed, burying his face in my wetness.

There was no holding back. I jerked up, certain I'd be driven straight to hell, but at this moment I no longer cared. As the powerful climax rushed into me, nothing but strangled sounds slipped past my lips. I licked them furiously, but a near scream bubbled to the surface. Then I floated away into nirvana, my pussy clenching and releasing several times.

I came with such fury that I knew I'd coated his face. How embarrassing. How... amazing.

"Oh. Oh. Oh..." As I finally started to come down from the scintillating moment, I was cognizant that he'd pushed me into the center of the bed. Yet he leaned over, pressing kisses against my still open legs, rolling his lips from one side to the other.

How could such a brutal man become so tender, as if he cared about me? As if this was anything more than what it was, pure filthy sex.

Strange sensations tore through me when he backed away. I curled onto my side, sweeping my hand along the soft comforter, watching him observing me as he moved far enough away to be able to finish undressing. A sentence formed in my mouth, a bold statement to tell him what I'd do if he didn't stop, but I couldn't utter a single word.

All I could do was enjoy the view as removed his clothes. When he stood at his full height, the reality of what was happening sank in. So did the beauty oozing from every pore. He was inked as every bad boy alpha should be, swirling vines weaving a perfect yet indistinguishable tapestry down one side of his chest, licking up to his neck and down one arm. The other arm had a single flame with a red rose. I sensed the beautiful piece of art held an entirely different meaning.

It was personal.

It was passionate.

It was about love.

For the woman in the picture or the girl he'd instructed his soldier to take care of? I sensed I was nothing more than a notch on his belt. The startling realization forced me to close my eyes and turn my head. I was suddenly very sad, so much so that I had difficulty breathing. It was ridiculous what I was thinking and feeling, yet I couldn't help myself.

I was reminded of his typical brutality as well as startled when he jerked my face forward, his fingers digging into my cheek and neck.

“When I give you an order, princess, you follow it. Do I make myself clear?” The anger in his voice startled me, the fear returning. I wasn't even entirely certain what order he was talking about.

“I... Yes. I mean...”

“Keep your eyes on me.”

When I looked down, I realized I'd been right. His face was glistening from my powerful orgasm. I sucked in my breath, blinking in affirmation that I'd heard him. He crawled onto the bed and without thinking, I reached for his cock, my hand almost too small to fit around the thick girth. Holy shit, he was huge. I hadn't realized just how large he was when I was sucking on him.

I darted my eyes back to his, noticing there was almost no light refracting from them. Yet they were full of heat, or so I sensed. The shock had to be in full force because I couldn't believe he was going to impale me with his shaft.

Would it even fit?

The way he was looking at me was more possessive than before. He was objectifying my body, admiring his prize. I hated men like him through and through. At least normally. This time, my heart fluttered like a little bird stuck inside a gilded cage. I was incensed yet entranced. Everything about the rough and dangerous man was hypnotic.

"I'm going to fuck you now." There was no additional pretense. The only thing left was his blatant promise and the energy crackling between us.

Then he pressed the tip of his cock against my entrance, keeping his other arm planted on the comforter, his muscles drawing my attention briefly. How could he be sculpted to such utter perfection? I didn't dare breathe for fear of what he would do, although I risked placing my palm against his chest.

He took a full five seconds to lower his head, studying my reaction before a smile crossed his face. For a man of such darkness, when he smiled it lit up the room. He was entirely too commanding, his presence that of a god instead of a man.

As the corners of his mouth turned up just slightly, I prepared myself for what he was about to do. He thrust the entire length of his cock inside, the force pinning me to the bed, his hips grinding back and forth as he fully seated himself inside.

I expected him to continue his savagery, treating me as nothing more than a rag doll, but his eyes glassed over, his lips

pursing. And the flow of French coming from his mouth struck me as completely opposite of the man who had me pinned down.

Dark and filthy.

Dangerous and rough.

*“Tu vas être le plus grand prix de ma collection, une création d’une beauté absolue, si époustouflante que tout homme tentera de me l’enlever.”*

“What did you say to me? Please tell me.”

He lowered his head, pressing his forehead against mine, his whisper sending a trail of shivers down my legs to my toes. “Gladly, princess. I said that you are going to be the greatest prize in my collection, a creation of utter beauty so breathtaking that every man will attempt to take you from me.”

I was shaking all over, stunned from how scintillating the words made me feel. “What will you do if they try?”

“It’s simple. I’ll kill them.”

\* \* \*

*Arman*

The words were easy to say because I meant them. I’d question myself later but at this moment, I planned on enjoying taking and tasting the rest of her. I could tell she was still basking in the pleasure I’d given her with my mouth and tongue, searching my eyes as if she’d actually find answers.

Memories surfaced that I’d wanted dead. That I’d pushed so far into the darkness of my mind that the hate had been easy to maintain. Now this.

Now her.

Goddamn it.

I eased onto both hands, pumping into her more gently than I wanted. I enjoyed looking at her, the way her eyelashes floated against her skin so innocent. Yet the temptress had been sent here by someone to tease me. It was just a matter of time before I figured out who that was.

And when I did, he would be the first to die. Would her father be so crass? I couldn't put it past him, but it would take some investigation. Maddox's suggestion was a good one, although I wasn't certain I was ready to be tangled with having a wife by my side. I'd considered it once before, a suggestion made by my father, but after tasting the luscious Raven even once, there was no chance I could alter my needs, making our relationship platonic.

No matter the power our union would provide.

I took a deep breath, inhaling her perfume and the continued scent of her desire, my mind racing at all the possibilities. She wrapped one leg around me, still pushing her hand against my chest, still trying her best to push me away. She'd soon learn that was impossible. There was no escape.

Raven barely blinked, her lips twisting from frustration as heat crawled up both sides of her face. She was furious with the way her body had responded to me, trying to ignore the connection we already shared. It was strange and beautiful, rare and disturbing.

I continued fucking her until I needed more control. I needed to be deeper inside, filling her completely. That way she'd know that no other man was allowed to touch her.

When I pulled out, she bit down on her lower lip to keep from exclaiming with enough force I noticed an instant bead of blood. Before rising onto my knees, I captured her mouth all over again, forcing my tongue inside. The taste of her sweetness mixed with the coppery drop of blood was sinfully delicious. She moaned into the kiss as she'd done before, only every sound she made was becoming more aggressive.

I was awakening something inside of her that had been lurking for a long time. She fisted her hand when I pulled my cock out

completely, holding her breath as her eyes darted back and forth.

Given my level of strength, it was easy to tug her up from the bed, tossing her onto her knees then all fours.

“What is happening?” Her question was laced with knowledge, more of a teasing tone than before.

“I’m going to fuck you like a wild animal. That is what you think I am, isn’t that correct, sweet Raven?”

“Yes, you’re a monster.”

I fisted her hair, yanking back her head as I crowded my body over hers. “Tell me exactly what you think of me. Don’t hold anything back.” Before she had a chance to respond, I thrust my full length back into her pussy, marveling in the way her muscles immediately clamped around my thickness.

Just being able to sink into her wetness was almost enough to make me come but I wasn’t ready to lose my load just yet. I wanted her used and sore, barely able to walk for days.

“You’re a fucking killer, a brutal savage beast,” she whispered.

“More. I know you can give me more.” I pulled out until only the tip was inside, slamming into her again. The force almost pushed her face against the bed, but she pushed up with her hands, refusing to allow me to win this round.

“You’re an asshole who thinks he deserves to get whatever he wants, a prick of a man who hides himself behind expensive clothes and a fancy home, pretending to be somebody you’re not.”

“Oh, you’re turning me on, baby.” And she was.

It only fueled the fire blazing between us even more, her laugh returning to the rebelliousness I adored about her.

“You use violence, hiding in the shadows like some cockroach. You’re nothing but a vile creature who deserves to be snuffed out, crushed like the bug you are.” Raven was breathless, her words becoming muddled as her pussy muscles clenched and released several times. Even the glisten on her

skin had changed, tiny beads of perspiration trickling over the top of her lush lips.

“That’s it, princess. Milk my cock.”

She purred then fought to crawl away from me. I slapped my hand on her bottom, smiling from the instant heat coursing through my fingers. There hadn’t been a single woman in as long as I could remember who’d turned me on as much as Raven. She was perfect for me yet imperfect for my life.

And she was right in her descriptions, so much so I had to think about what I was doing right here. Right now.

But there was no stopping what I’d started, the obsessive need for her continuing to build.

“Goddamn. You feel fucking good.” The admittance wasn’t my usual, but nothing about the evening had been.

I sensed she was doing everything she could to shut down her body’s reactions, but as it was with me, there was no possibility of doing so. Perhaps our future and our fates had been cemented the moment she’d dared walk into the wrong room.

I thrust my hips against her, driving in so deep that I knew I’d entered her womb.

She couldn’t hold back her ragged moans any longer, her knuckles white as she fisted the comforter. And in the next few seconds, her entire body tensed as she drifted into another powerful orgasm.

“Oh, my...” Her scream was cut short, her body shaking as she writhed under me.

While I tried to hold back, to keep what little control I’d had over my needs, the impossibilities with her were becoming endless. With several brutal plunges, every muscle tensing, I glanced down, watching as my cock was coated with the sweetness of her white cream.

And the bastard inside of me wanted her to suck it off, taking every drop. Soon I would fill her throat and mouth. Then I’d claim her tight asshole.

That would need to wait until I'd solidified my plan after having a conversation with my father and brothers.

For now, I wanted nothing more than to fill her with my seed. With three additional savage thrusts, I did just that, releasing the load that had kept my cock and balls aching from the moment I saw her. Holding back was no longer an option.

I reached around her, fingering her clit, pinching during my release. Her scream filled my ears, her ragged breathing matching mine. The moment was almost perfect, cathartic.

And just the beginning.

I wrapped my body around hers, my cock still hard and throbbing. She continued to quiver in my arms, her rapture almost as intense as my own. Then I sensed the state of ecstasy had started to crack, reality setting in. Her body tensed, her fingers clamping more tightly around the bedding.

The fact she suddenly attempted to hold her breath, undoubtedly trying to keep from making any sounds of pleasure irritated the fuck out of me. She'd become unraveled from my attention, every stroke of my fingers and every thrust of my cock. That reminded me that the lovely vixen had likely been sent to seduce me, loathing the fact I'd turned the tables.

I continued holding her, nuzzling against the back of her neck. She'd even clenched her jaw, keeping her eyes closed when I'd strictly forbidden her to do so. She truly believed she could ignore me and I'd go away.

After kissing the side of her neck, I eased off the bed, heading for the bar nestled in the corner of my room. I poured two glasses of bourbon, not bothering to ask her what she wanted. Intruders and thieves had no right to a choice. She would soon learn she'd forfeited her ability to make any choices.

Except for the most important one in her life.

I turned to face her and she'd crawled toward the top of the bed, yanking the covers around her naked body. I lowered one of the glasses, eyeing her with distaste.

Raven swallowed then took it from my hand, her entire arm shaking. A split second later, I ripped the cover away, almost

causing her to drop her drink.

“You will cover yourself when I allow you to. Understood?”

She lifted her chin in defiance but nodded.

“I didn’t hear you and make certain when you answer you do so with respect.”

Snorting, she dragged her tongue across her bottom lip. There was an entirely different intensity in her eyes, as if she’d just realized I had two distinct sides and nothing in between. “Why, yes, sir.” She crossed her legs, acting as if she was very comfortable in her surroundings.

I took a sip of my drink, drawn to her porcelain skin and her aristocratic, delicate features. There was no need to rehash what she’d done, only to make her aware that I was now in charge of the rest of her life.

“Here’s what’s going to happen from here, princess. As of now, you belong to me. Not just your time or your body but all of you. I realize that you’re a student at LSU. And yes, I had your background checked to ensure on top of your egregious indiscretions you weren’t lying to me.”

At first, she kept the haughty look on her face, as if she’d won this round. Then something sparked within her, a realization that I’d learned more about her. I inched closer, clearly able to see her fear from what she knew I was capable of. However, it was painfully obvious she had no clue. I needed to ensure that she did.

“What does that mean?” She did what she could to keep the tremor from her voice but failed. I’d never been the kind of man to try to intimidate a woman. Up to this point, I hadn’t needed to, the women in my world understanding who and what I was.

This girl believed in right versus wrong, likely worshipping a father I knew had delved into just as many gray areas as the evil criminals he continually attempted to persecute to fulfill his duties and enhance his holier than thou reputation. I wouldn’t burst her bubble just yet. That would make me more than just a monster.

“That means that I’ll allow you to return to school. You will tell no one what occurred here. You will tell no one what you overheard. Am I clear?”

Raven just glared at me, but her lower lip continued to tremble, her hands remaining tightly clenched. “Fine.”

“Good. You will provide me with your phone number and when I call you, you will come to me in the allotted time. I’m a busy man, Raven, so I assure you that my time is valuable.”

“Of course it is. What if I don’t?”

“If you don’t, you will be punished by way of the photographs being distributed and by use of a clever story I’ll write myself that will be sent to the president of your university, the newspapers, and to your father. As well as to the chief of police of New Orleans, who happens to be a friend of mine. As a matter of fact, he’s in attendance tonight for my sister’s engagement party.” I could tell she was becoming more nervous, her eyes opening wide.

“You’re bluffing.”

“Am I?”

She tried to keep tears from her eyes but when one slipped past her lashes, she wiped it away furiously. “Then you’re a bastard. I said I was sorry. If I’d known who you were, I assure you that I would never have entered your disgusting world.”

“I believe you, Raven, and ordinarily I would allow you to go of your free will. However,” I said as I lifted my finger. “There’s the issue with who your father is and what he means to me.” I waited until she understood what I was saying before continuing. “You see, your father is a direct enemy of my family and our corporation. I can’t have that. I won’t allow his interference in my business life to continue and as you’ve already determined, I’m a man who gets exactly what I want.”

“Oh, my God. Fuck you. I will tell my father and he’ll have you arrested. You sick fuck.”

It would seem our passion had died on the vine. I couldn’t help but smile. Her defiance was a tremendous turn-on.

“Not before he faces not only the loss of his reputation and his job, but he’ll be forced to face a horrific tragedy. It’s entirely up to you, princess. If you follow my rules and my orders, life will go on as you’re used to.” For now. “You have two minutes to decide.”

Raven wanted to spit fire then rip out what was left of my heart. At some point, she would attempt to remove herself from the deal, but that wasn’t going to happen. I turned away, heading toward the French doors, peering out at the crowded street below. “Less than one minute.”

I felt her presence behind me and turned to face her. Before she answered, she tossed the drink in my face. Inwardly, all I could do was smile.

“Fine. I’ll play your game, Arman, but if you dare try and hurt my family, I will kill you myself.”

## CHAPTER 8



*A* rman

Passion.

The notion was something I'd thought dead inside, a caustic effect of living my life in a crackled bubble of success and power. It felt as if at any time the expensive crystal would shatter into dozens of pieces, the jagged edges all slicing through me. I shook my head, laughing inwardly at the images crossing over my mind.

It was difficult not to think about Raven, both her voluptuous body and my reaction to the electricity we shared as well as the threat she'd made. Was she the kind of girl who would follow through with it? I had no doubt she might try if pushed, but she'd been taught to be a good girl as evidenced by how my praise had affected her.

What would her father think about his arch enemy fucking his daughter? The thought was evil, far too delicious and gave me a smile.

"You're deep in thought," Maddox told me from the driver's seat as he headed toward the Southshore Harbor Marina. "Raven again?"

"That obvious?"

"Hell, yes. I haven't seen you this indecisive since I've known you. But there's a warm glow about you, my friend." He laughed, shaking his head while I threw him a nasty glare.

“I have a lot to think about,” I barked, instantly regretting it. He didn’t deserve my building rage. Thomas did. Fuck the man. I rubbed my eyes, trying to shove aside the complexity and bullshit, but it was next to impossible.

I owned a large yacht, one used for corporate events and by family members. However, this was the slip where my personal boat, *Sophia’s Revenge*, remained docked and had for years. I had people to care for her, even ensuring the boat was taken out a couple of times a year. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d stepped foot on her. Too long.

The use of my beloved yet almost never used yacht for something of this nature had never been done before. However, it would appear changes to certain methods of operation as well as to aspects of life were in order. In the list of attributes that I sorely needed to work on, prudence followed patience. I almost chuckled as I tried to think what other ‘p’ word might be possible for the list because passion wasn’t one of them.

God, the stunning woman continued to linger in the back of my mind and had for the almost four days since I’d allowed her to leave my home and my life. Against my better judgment, although I was certain she’d play by the rules.

At least for now.

I’d kept Grayson on ice for far too long, but given he was working for someone else, no matter how deep under cover he was, he’d be required to check in from time to time. If the Feds were gathering information, they were already building a case, which meant they needed to be fed every once in a while. I still couldn’t believe my vetting of the man, as well as the continuous checks for any abnormal activity hadn’t raised a single red flag. The man was damn good at what he did. Even my attempt at discovering who he was through fingerprints had failed. It was as if the man didn’t exist other than inside my organization.

Bull. Fucking. Shit.

The single mistake the man had made was one that would cost him his life.

As it had our friendship. I continued to glower from the thought. I'd never be so stupid again.

I glanced over at the single man I could place my trust in, before rubbing my index finger back and forth across my bottom lip. "Yes, it's inevitable at this point."

"The woman?"

"The woman. She's... difficult to erase."

Maddox chuckled. "Did you give my recommendation some thought? You can't overlook the oddity of her identity." He tugged the cup of Starbucks coffee into his hand, taking a sip. The sun had barely dipped over the horizon, which was my favorite time of day.

Including for dealing with difficult situations. Regret tugged at my insides, but not for the reason some might suspect. I wanted the girl. The feeling and the need were intense, which was unusual for me. I wasn't the kind of man who questioned any decision I made. Granted, I hadn't been prepared for the raven-haired beauty to waltz into my life like a thunderstorm either.

But what I was thinking about doing would alter every aspect of my life.

"I have. However, I don't think Raven will enter into a contractually arranged marriage without further justification. Or without a form of payment. In other words, I want to ensure I'm not destroying her life because of my hatred for her father."

"You have good reason to loathe the man, Arman. So does your father. Shit, if half the crap you told me happened, I'd destroy his entire family. Which is why I'm surprised her welfare is at the front of your mind."

He was one of the few people that understood, but right now the last thing I needed was to hear any shit. I'd never thought I had a decent bone in my body, but the girl hadn't chosen her parents. Still, the anger festered while the diamond carrot was being dangled in front of me, a temptation I couldn't ignore for long. "Maybe because I'm not the monster everyone

believes me to be. And I am well aware the hatred is justified, Maddox. However, we are also talking about the rest of my daughter's life."

"She's seventeen, soon to be thirty. She'll be leaving your protective wings for college soon, which is all she can talk about. Let's face it. Your hesitation is all about the past."

"So the fuck what?" I growled. The tension increased, my need for violence pulling me deeper into the darkness. I'd pounded the punching bag in my home gym for a full hour, but it had managed to fuel the adrenaline instead of the opposite. I had to face it. I liked the mysterious girl too much. Fuck. I pulled my fist to my mouth, unable to get the filthy images of her naked body out of my mind.

"Then what are you going to do?"

"I have no fucking idea, my friend." I laughed, the sound turning bitter by the end.

He chuckled and made the turn into the marina. "You like that girl. More than I originally thought."

"Which no longer has a place in my world. You should know that." Maddox had been my best man for my first wedding. He'd been a pallbearer at Sophia's funeral. And he'd listened to my drunken bouts of guilt and sadness as well as my brutal rants afterwards, my need for violence escalating to the point of being out of control. He'd been the only person capable of getting through to me that I needed to focus on Zoe and her welfare. My little girl had only been four years old when her mother had passed.

He'd also convinced me that revenge wasn't always the best option, but now, I could swear the gods, or the devil himself, were dangling a carrot I couldn't refuse.

I was no longer certain that portion of Maddox's advice had been best served as the old wounds had resurfaced an hour after sending Raven away. They'd become infected in a short period of time, my longing for revenge more potent than before. That's why he'd insisted on providing assistance in dealing with Grayson. He knew I'd go off the rails, bloodying

the already murky waters of the Gulf of Mexico given the time of year.

Here I was being philosophical, also not a strong suit.

“What about love, *mon ami*?”

When he addressed me in French, which wasn't his native language, that meant he was concerned about my mental welfare. “I'm incapable of love, except for Zoe of course.”

“What? No love for *moi*?”

I threw him a look, chuckling under my breath. “You're too much of an asshole. Love isn't in the cards, Maddox. Not any longer. The weakness is too great, too much of a draw for those who are chomping at the bit to drag me kicking and screaming straight into hell. I wouldn't put anyone in that position ever again.”

“That means you'll live a very dark life, my friend. I can tell you that Sophia wouldn't want you to live this way.”

“Sophia is dead because of me, Maddox.”

“Not because of you. Someone else took her life.”

“Yeah, well, tell that to Zoe. Don't you remember how she cried for months, nightmares plaguing her? All she could do was ask for her mommy, something I couldn't provide. Now I'm considering bringing another woman into her world? Not fair.”

“To whom? She's not a child any longer. Give her more credit. She's seen your suffering. She's talked to me about it.”

I turned my head, ready to punch him in the face. And why? Because my daughter had confided in him instead of her own father. “It's just the wrong time.”

“There will never be a right time. Maybe the gods are sending you a message.”

“Or taunting the fuck out of me.”

“Like I said,” Maddox growled. “You're going to live and die a lonely old man in a beautiful house with all the toys in the world. And you will never be happy.”

As he pulled into the parking lot, I finally grabbed the cup of coffee I'd left untouched. I didn't give a shit it was barely after seven in the morning. Adding whiskey to the strong Colombian blend had crossed my mind more than once. Too bad I didn't keep a flask in the SUV. "Then so be it."

"What's the difference in marrying for love versus business?" he asked, easing the bulletproof vehicle into the oversized space. The fact I'd had every vehicle in my stable of eight detailed immediately after the tragedy was a reminder that life was precious, and emotions were targets.

"Everything."

"That's not an answer and you know it." He cut the engine but both of us remained in our seats. I normally didn't give a shit about ending someone's life, but I'd struggled with this one, maybe because I'd allowed Grayson into the first tier of friendship.

That never happened.

With the passenger window rolled down a couple of inches for additional air flow, I was able to gather the stench of the ocean. I'd never appreciated the salty sea even as a child. To me, the water oozed of death and decay. Maybe because I'd witnessed far too many exterminations over the years, which had been my father's coined term for eliminating enemies. This was the first time I'd made the decision to use the ocean as my burial ground, likely because there were already too many dead bodies buried in the darkest depths.

"It's the only answer I have at the moment."

He unfastened his seatbelt, prepared to exit the vehicle when he threw me another look. The man was about to 'handle' me, which he knew I hated. "Are you sure you don't want me to take care of this?"

"Is Grayson here?"

"He's here. I had Landry bring him last night. I don't think you're in the mood to handle business today. Why not take Zoe out to lunch?"

I popped the seatbelt, lifting my eyebrows as I glanced at him. “Number one, she’s in school until two-thirty and her piano lesson is at three-fifteen. And number two, I’d be shitty company for anyone.”

“Including me,” Maddox said, laughing. “Want to grab a drink tonight?”

“Yeah, I do.” It had been a couple of months since we’d shared a drink, other than at a business function, which lately had happened on far too many occasions. I would never have believed that my attempt to turn legit would result in attending humanitarian and political functions. No wonder Dad hadn’t considered it before I’d taken the reins.

Today I was cracking myself up more than usual. As I climbed out of the vehicle, I was forced to take a deep whiff. Even during the dead of winter, the humidity always made the area stink. I heard seagulls squawking a few yards away and buttoned my jacket. I had everything I needed on board if the situation with Grayson should require more brutal tactics to get him to talk.

Maddox flanked my side, his coffee cup in his hand.

“You’re addicted to caffeine. You do know that?” I asked him as we headed for the docks.

“And whiskey, wine, and women. The three W’s, my friend. You should try it some time. Might make you less grumpy.”

“You do have a way with women.”

“It’s an art caring for a beautiful creature.” He took the final swig from the cup, crushing it with his fingers. “Let me know if you need some pointers.”

“Fuckin’ asshole.”

Laughing, he tossed the cup with flair into the nearest trashcan, which was a solid ten feet away, acting as if he was a star basketball player. When he scored, he hooted, fist pumping the air. The guy was a kid at heart. At least on the outside. But I knew the darkness cradling his heart and soul, the pain that he lived with every day.

One reason we got along was because we were made of the same cloth, some of our experiences since childhood the thing nightmares were made of. He'd also taken up a void left by Thomas Cartier, which had been difficult shoes to fill.

"You want to know something funny?" I asked as we stepped foot on the wooden planks.

"Sure. Why the hell not?"

"Raven was irritated as hell that I punched you in the jaw. Not that I'd ordered a man's assassination or that I was mafia. She called me a monster for issuing a hard hit."

He stopped short, shoving his hands into his jacket pockets. "I like this girl and I don't even know her."

"You would, you putz. Touch her and die."

"She's not my type. You know that."

"I'm not sure what your type is. You like 'em all."

"Very funny," he grumbled. "Just haven't found the right woman to settle down with."

"God help us all when you do. Did you check the weather report?"

"Yep. There's a storm rolling in later. It'll take the body further out to sea."

"Excellent. I'd ordinarily want to take time with this, but I have lunch with Pops and Francois. We're finalizing some details for the project in Texas." As we neared the slip where the boat was docked, I found all my muscles were tensing. Lamenting the past wasn't going to do me any good. There was no way to change it, revenge the only option for peace, but too much time had gone by. Too many eyes full of scrutiny. Maybe I should take both Edmee's and Maddox's advice and move the fuck on with my life.

There I went again, lamenting over the past and a future I couldn't allow myself to have.

"Beautiful morning for a boat ride," he told me as the glimmer of sun sparkled against the water. I was almost grateful the

nice weather would be short lived. I wasn't in the mood for sunshine and rainbows.

As if I ever was.

We headed onto the boat, and I decided to suck up whatever angry emotions I had left. With Landry on board, I hadn't needed to worry about whether Grayson would attempt to get away. Among other things, like being a qualified boat captain, Landry had skills in explosives and Shibari, a form of rope play that had come in handy more than once.

Finding him lounging with a cup of coffee and making stock trades wasn't a surprise either. The man had parlayed his earnings into a small fortune given his second most loved hobby.

Slicing and dicing his first.

"How much have you made since breakfast?" I asked by way of entrance.

He grinned but gave me a nod of respect, Maddox as well. The former Marine had turned out to be an excellent soldier, hand-picked by Maddox. Nothing fazed the guy.

"A cool twenty G's today, but we'll see how the market closes," Landry said and closed the laptop lid. "I'll head to the bridge."

"You got the coordinates I sent?" Maddox asked.

"Of course. This is a full-service resort operation," Landry teased as he rose to his feet.

"Any trouble?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"Nah. The guy was good as gold. I think he's worn out."

That was one of my reasons for leaving him in sick anticipation of what might happen to him. That usually helped in the interrogations. Even the most trained operators, those who'd been provided with months of harsh conditions to prepare them for a long-term undercover operation broke after a few days had passed.

Nodding, I headed into the likely location where Landry had kept him, the single window in the small stateroom allowing for limited access and no peeking eyes. It was also soundproof, something that had come with the boat when I'd purchased it. At the time, it hadn't dawned on me to ask the salesman why.

I rubbed my jaw as I walked in. Grayson immediately lifted his head. His lips were thin from lack of water, provided with only enough to keep him from completely dehydrating.

"Arman," he managed, although his voice cracked. Then he coughed, the thick sound rattling.

With Maddox trailing behind me, I was aware he'd headed toward the locked cabinet, sliding one of only two keys in existence into the lock and retrieving the special toolbox. While it was mostly used for small repairs in the various cabins, certain tools came in handy like vise grips and screwdrivers. They were usually the only tools needed.

I was a master of interrogation after all, techniques learned from my father and grandfather.

"Grayson," I said as I pulled one of the chairs closer to the one he remained tied in. "Is that even your name?"

"Middle name."

"Ah." That much at least I believed.

After placing the box on the table and opening it for me, Maddox proceeded to untie Grayson's hands. The routine was one we'd grown accustomed to, something that felt familiar, like a pair of tennis shoes broken in over time.

Grayson studied me with little or no interest. He'd witnessed his share of interrogations, although fortunately, he'd never been a part of finishing and dumping the bodies. That had been left to one of my other foot soldiers, the kind of person who could easily disappear with no questions asked. I had methods to how I handled my business, which had kept me from seeing the inside of a jail cell.

It was a record I planned on keeping.

I selected a hammer, which would provide assistance should I need it. He watched my actions, taking a scattered breath, but not out of fear. I certainly didn't need to tell him what was about to happen.

The one thing I knew about undercover work better than anyone was that the long timers grew used to the lifestyle, finding it difficult to re-enter mainstream society where they played by the rules of common sense and logic. Some returned to the criminal life of their own volition, destroying relationships in the process.

If they still had one after their return. Grayson was a player, enjoying the perks of his position as Maddox and Landry had. He enjoyed tasting women, partying as hard as he'd worked.

"I'm curious. Do you have a significant other wherever home is?"

He snorted then coughed again. "You shittin' me? With this life? Not a chance."

"Understood. It's tough on a marriage, the constant danger and worry. I'm glad to hear it. I do hate creating widows. That's messy."

There was a spark in his eyes, as if accepting the fact that he would die on this day. Now, I ordinarily wouldn't yank away hope from an enemy. That was the incentive. That I might possibly allow them to live. Grayson knew better. Why bother? The only leverage I had was the fact he was fully aware I'd make the hours prior to death as painful as possible if he ignored my questions. It was a gamble but one worth taking. At this point of being undercover, sometimes the players had little or no loyalty left to the law enforcement agencies they worked for.

That's what I hoped I'd be able to tap into today. I'd been good to the man over the eighteen months of close employment. He'd been to my house for family events. That alone pissed me the fuck off. He'd had access to my daughter. My fucking daughter. I'd thought nothing of it. Hell, in a pinch I'd had him guard her on a single occasion. The thought burned me.

“You know the drill, Grayson. You talk, you experience less pain. That’s all I can offer you.”

“You do realize at some point you’ll be questioned about my disappearance.” His voice was stronger than before.

“By whom?” I wanted that much confirmed.

He stared at me with glazed over eyes, his expression one of relief when Maddox finally got him untied. As he rubbed his hands from the obvious ache of the ropes being in position for so long, I scrutinized him, trying to find a moment of patience. The more information I gleaned the better, even if my anger was building to an intolerable level.

“DEA,” he said quietly.

I tipped my head toward Maddox. My days of dealing with arms were almost complete, drugs in our ancient history. The score wouldn’t bring enough of a prison sentence to matter if they found the last supply of weapons I intended on selling overseas. Grayson knew that.

Leaning forward, I folded my hands together, trying to keep my voice as low as possible, devoid of the anger I felt. “Why?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“Humor me.”

“It won’t matter, Arman. They’ll use someone else. You’re a smart man. You know that.”

There was something about the way he made the statement that brought up another red flag. “Does that mean there’s another agent attempting to slide into my organization?”

“Not an agent. I don’t know who. I don’t think the handler has thought it through yet.”

Bullshit. I’d watched the tape of him meeting with his contact. He’d been furious at one point. The obvious argument hadn’t needed sound to show he’d been unhappy with what he’d learned. “I think you do, or at least you have an inkling. Who?”

“I don’t. My contact refused to tell me shit. I was supposedly in too deep. There were concerns I was too close to you.”

That much I believed, and he had been too close, something I should never have allowed. I hadn’t been wrong about the man shifting loyalties. Only too little, too late. “Guess.”

“I don’t fucking know who.”

I certainly didn’t think Raven was being used, especially given who her father was. “Let’s go back to an earlier question. Why is the DEA involved?”

Grayson was as drained as Landry had suggested, but it had but only so much to do with his recent incarceration. When he remained quiet, I knew I was reaching my level of patience with the man. I backhanded him and even from a sitting position, managed to toss him off the chair to the decking floor. The entire situation felt far too much like a game, which reminded me of how Thomas had handled the loss of our friendship.

Fuck. He’d nearly undermined my entire family.

Then I jerked up, realizing Landry had already made it out of the marina, heading for open waters. I moved toward the bar. Fuck it for being seven-thirty in the morning. I grabbed a bottle of whiskey from the cabinet and a single shot glass. Then I snagged a second, pouring both. By the time I’d brought them to the table, positioning one in front of Grayson, he’d been righted in his chair.

I walked toward the window, studying the ocean. “I’d appreciate your candor, Grayson. For your attempt at providing me with as much information as possible, I will allow your death to be handled with grace given the work you’ve done for me. If not, the sharks will enjoy a feast of blood and intestines. It’s entirely up to you.”

After tossing back the entire shot, I waited for a few seconds before turning around. He hadn’t touched his drink but was alternating his stare between the shot glass and the hammer. When he didn’t say anything, I gave Maddox a nod and shook my head. It would appear he still had some sense of loyalty to

his other employer. While I didn't blame him, I was already weary of the game. In truth, I suspected they had believed he'd slipped too far under to be reliable. Why would the DEA become involved unless it was personal? Hmm... I rubbed my jaw, surprised at the sharpness of Grayson's scream after Maddox had used the hammer.

The single brutal pound should be enough, the pain likely excruciating. There was little else I could do after this. If he didn't want to talk, then fine. By the time I faced him again, he was panting from the agony. There was nothing like the anguish of having finger bones broken.

Now he used his left hand to grip the glass, tossing the shot with ease. His arm was shaking as he placed it on the table, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "You pissed in somebody's Wheaties, Arman. If I had to guess, I'd say it was the administrator of the DEA himself."

"Anne Fulghim?" I knew nothing about her, had never talked to her a day in my life.

"No," he struggled to say. "There's been a change. Travis Ramsey. He ramrodded himself into the position. He's a fucking bastard if you ask me."

Narrowing my eyes, I glanced at my second in command. Maddox shrugged. However, the name stuck in the back of my mind, but from where? "Okay. When did the change occur?"

"Two weeks ago. A huge fucking deal. It changed everything. Suddenly, there was a lot of interest in your family."

The timing coincided with the meeting he'd had with his contact, which was also why I hadn't heard about the change. What in the fuck was going on? "Who was he before?"

"My boss who got me involved, pushing the Feds into getting in the middle of their case. The fucker has more influence than you do. No offense, Arman. What he wants, he gets."

"None taken." At least in this regard. Sighing, I studied the man for a few seconds. "Anything else you can tell me?"

"Other than he's buddies with the director of the FBI, no."

Bingo.

Too many pieces of the glass puzzle had just fallen into place.

Grayson's information was worth its weight in gold. It also changed everything. I shifted from feeling sorry for myself to the edge of requiring revenge in that very moment. Maybe this was indeed a sign, but not from God. From the devil himself.

I nodded and Maddox grinned from the other side of the room. I grabbed the shot glass, taking a few seconds to refill it. When I positioned it directly in front of Grayson again, I kept my fingers around the edges. "You've earned the right to die with dignity, which is rare for anyone who betrays me. Enjoy your drink. Maddox will be happy to get you another. The end will come soon. I have additional business to attend to."

I finally looked into his eyes, and I sensed the man had no fear of dying. He also had no remorse, which was typical. Guilt, remorse, and anything resembling raw emotion other than anger was akin to a death warrant. There were few exceptions, children being one of them.

After another quick glance toward Maddox, I headed for the deck. Maybe a little fresh air would do me some good.

"For what it's worth, Arman, I considered you a good friend, a mentor. I learned more from you in the time we spent together than I did during all my years in law enforcement."

Stopping short, I glanced over my shoulder. "That means quite a bit coming from you. Thank you, Grayson. May you rest in peace." With that, I headed outside the cabin, taking the steps slowly.

I didn't need to coach Maddox what to do.

Grayson would be given a burial at sea, but at least he'd be dead before he hit the water, not forced to endure shark attacks. There was a chance I had at least one decent bone left in my body after all.

As I moved toward the railing, I allowed my thoughts to drift to the lovely young woman once again. I'd have a long discussion with my father. Then I'd inform my brothers of my decision.

Raven Cartier had entered the lair of the wrong predator. I've given her a couple of weeks of peace, allowing her to think I'd forgotten all about her. Then I'd strike when she least expected it, additional pieces to win this war put into place before I took her permanently.

Within weeks, I would be a married man. For better, for worse.

There would be one change from the time before. This time, until death do us part wouldn't involve my heart.

Or a single moment of guilt because of my actions.

## CHAPTER 9



*F*our weeks later...  
*Raven*

In the almost five weeks since I'd been set free of the monster's control, I'd looked over my shoulder at least a hundred times, maybe more. I'd half expected to see Arman in the shadows, ready to snatch me away from my life at any time. Of course, that was ridiculous if for no other reason than he was far too powerful and busy. Abducting a woman was probably assigned to one of his soldiers.

There was no doubt I'd seen the man at least twice. My mouth watered even now thinking about how his infrequent visits had made me feel.

Like a princess.

In a cage.

I hated myself for falling prey to the man and his needs, yet even now, I could swear his scent lingered on my skin. As if it had been permanently stained as a reminder I was now owned by the devil reincarnated. Maybe I was being slightly dramatic, but I couldn't shake the trickle of fear that remained with me.

At least I didn't have classes the next day, only work in the morning, then I could try to regroup somehow. A whole three days mostly to myself. I had a feeling my roommate would be sucking face with her boyfriend, which was fine with me. It

was beautiful this time of year, the early April day providing a lovely backdrop of color to the university grounds.

This was my favorite time, or it would be if I didn't constantly have a sick feeling rushing into the back of my mind, a need furrowing in the ugly depths of my being. As if I missed Arman's touch. It was crazy, but the insanity refused to go away. I remained shocked I hadn't heard from him, but my sixth sense told me any day the phone would ring and his number would pop up, the screen reading exactly what I thought about him.

The devil.

The threat he'd issued had been so perfect, the words stated with no emotion whatsoever. I'd heard the best serial killers, the ones who used very creative methods in their kills and rarely got caught were those with zero emotion about their crimes. That was Arman Thibodeaux to the letter.

Ruthless plus emotionless equaled the most dangerous creature alive.

Plus, he had a number of people working for him, a powerful family backing him. Of course I'd spent some time on the computer, which was what I was doing right now, learning as much as I could about the man. My father had always told me that everyone, good or bad, had a weakness. I needed to find his and figure out a plan to use it.

I'd taken the man at his word. He would kill my father if necessary. In doing so, would he make my baby sister and my mother collateral damage? I couldn't take the chance. The fact I'd jumped every time my cell phone rang wasn't any way to live, but maybe he'd leave me alone permanently.

And maybe I was dreaming.

Seconds later, I heard a hard thump against the dorm room door and jerked up, knocking the chair over in the process. Then my roommate and best friend bounded in, laughing as she stood in the doorway, looking the other way.

"I know, Jason. I'll see you tomorrow. Now, I need to study tonight."

Exhaling, I raked my hand through my hair. I watched as he grabbed her around the waist, pulling her into the hallway for another kiss. I'd envied their relationship for far too long. They'd known each other since junior high, planning to attend the same college since tenth grade. They'd made it work, even though he was a football star and she was a computer geek.

Sighing, I moved toward the refrigerator, grabbing a soda from inside. What I really wanted was a drink, a big, tall one. Maybe I'd indulge in opening the bottle of wine my mother had brought during her only visit to campus.

Paisley cocked her head, blowing him kisses before closing the door.

"Why don't you just get an apartment together?" I asked.

Paisley spun around, pressing her back against the door. "You know why. My parents would kick my butt. And why are you in such a crappy mood lately?"

"I have my reasons." I took a swig of the diet beverage and groaned. Cabernet it would be. At least even with my muddled brain I'd been able to pass the two exams with ease. I deserved a drink or five. Or ten. Hell, at this point, I needed an entire case of wine if I wanted to get Arman out of my mind.

His hot body.

Sexy kisses.

The savage fucking.

Damn it. Why did I continuously have to think about him?

"So you've said without saying a damn thing. Open that wine, girl."

"Are we celebrating?"

"Hell, yes." She tumbled forward, lifting her hand. The flashy ring sparkled in the dim lighting. Her squeal of happiness could light up the entire campus with electricity. "Can you believe it?"

"Are you kidding me? It's about time he popped the question. You're like the perfect couple, destined for happiness."

“Aren’t you going to congratulate me or are you going to remain too grumpy?”

I had been grumpy. More so than normal. Being threatened by a bad man could do that to you. Instead of teasing her as I usually would, I raced forward, wrapping my arms around her. “I am happy for you, baby girl. I know this is what you wanted.”

“For as long as I can remember. Isn’t it beautiful?” She pulled away, offering a pouty look while flashing her huge rock. Jason’s parents had money, which was the only reason the diamond was so huge given he didn’t work. Paisley didn’t need to either, her parents richer than God. That hadn’t stopped us from becoming fast friends the first day of our freshman year.

“It’s gorgeous. Let me open that wine and we will celebrate.” I was happy for her, but I was also jealous. I had no idea if I’d ever find the right guy.

*What about Arman?*

I rolled my eyes as I searched for the wine opener. “So when is the wedding?”

“Maybe June.”

“Really? Just after graduation?”

“We don’t want to wait. Besides, Jason is being scouted by the NFL. We’ll need to move to whatever city he’s drafted by as soon as possible. And my parents would kill me if we didn’t hold the wedding in Kansas.”

*Toto, this isn’t Kansas anymore.*

I didn’t know why I was thinking that other than I didn’t know anyone else whose life was so picture perfect. Granted, I also realized no one was without secrets. What went on often behind closed doors was horrific in comparison to real life, but I’d been to her parents’ home in the summer, to countless parties with the girl, and had taken most of her advice over the years. Except I hadn’t heeded her warning to stay away from the sorority. If only I had. “Wow. You have everything planned out.”

“You’ll find the man of your dreams, as long as you actually agree to go on a date. You know, with a boy?” She laughed and bounded closer, her long auburn hair swishing back and forth in the ponytail. She was the kind of girl who looked good in anything she put on with or without makeup. Meanwhile, I needed all the help I could get.

“You know I’m busy with school, work, and everything else.”

“All work and no play makes for a very dull and hugely grumpy, pain in the ass roommate.”

I popped the cork and made a face at her. “That’s not very nice.”

“That’s what I was saying to you. At least you quit that fucking sorority. I really wish you’d tell me what they asked you to do.”

“I signed a nondisclosure. I refused to be sued by those... bitches.” At least I could laugh. I grabbed our two favorite wineglasses, our only wineglasses, filling them to the brim.

“What? They made you sign a nondisclosure?”

“Yeah. Can you believe it?”

“I can believe almost anything,” Paisley said. Then she whistled.

“What is it?” I turned to hand her the wine, realizing I’d forgotten to exit the internet page I’d been on. Uh-oh. While I adored everything about the girl, when she latched onto something, she was like a bulldog in heat with a bone.

“You mean who is that? Wow. He’s gorgeous.” She inched closer, running her finger down the track pad of my MacBook. “Wait a minute. I know that name. Why are you searching for the most notorious family in the crime world?” She snatched the glass from me, almost spilling her wine. Then she gathered a more serious look on her face. “I’m not kidding. Why are you looking this guy up?”

I shrugged and moved toward the window, flopping down in the huge circular rattan chair, the one she’d insisted we have in the small dorm room. “No particular reason.”

“He’s from New Orleans. I know that’s where you went on this hazing event. Did you run into him? Are there things you didn’t tell me?”

I hated lying to her but at this point, I feared if I told her, she’d go ballistic, which could place her life in danger. Whatever I said, I had to be crafty with my words. “Let’s just say a party was involved with the ridiculous task they tried to put me up to. I met him, although I had no clue who he was.”

Before she had a chance to say anything, my cell phone rang and this time I was the one who almost dumped the wine, a splash trickling down my legs.

“Jesus, girl. You’re so jumpy.” She moved back to the desk, staring down at my phone. “It’s your mom. Do you want it?”

I shook my head, already wiping the wine from my skin. Why did it tingle more than it should? Was it possible Arman’s rough touches had left some crazy kind of memory in the pores or nerve endings of my skin? Now I was just getting ridiculous. “No. She’s going to remind me to send in my resume to the HR department of the FBI. I don’t want to work with my dad.”

“I don’t blame you.” She moved closer, sitting down and folding her legs under her. “What is going on? You’ve been so jumpy you make me terrified. You even look over your shoulder when we’re walking on campus. Did something terrible happen to you?”

My eyes seemed to close on their own and I wanted to sink further into the cushion of the chair. “Not terrible. Just weird.”

“How weird?”

“Arman kissed me.”

“Excuse me?” I thought for certain she was starting to choke given she spit out her sip of wine.

At least I could tell her something with enough truth and shock value to keep her from grilling me too much further. It sounded like a good plan anyway. “We talked. We danced. He stood out in the moonlight and he kissed me.” Her stare remained incredulous. So did my thoughts.

“And you had no idea who he was.”

“None. Now, I do.”

“Please do not tell me that he asked for your phone number. Please do *not* tell me you’re seeing him.”

“Nope and if he had, I wouldn’t have given it to him. He was a stranger, a very tall, dark, and handsome stranger with the sexiest voice I’ve ever heard.” In trying to draw her back to the playful side that I was used to, it shocked me that she continued to stare at me as if I’d lost my mind.

“He’s a predator, Raven. I know you’re from DC, far enough away from his reign of terror, but your father should have told you about him.”

“Talking shop isn’t allowed in my household or on the phone. My mother’s orders.”

Paisley bit her lip and looked away. “Well, his entire family is bad news. I’ll just leave it at that.”

“Do you have any idea what tragedy happened to him years ago or who Zoe is?”

She cocked her head, a scowl appearing on her face. “I don’t keep up with his life but it’s apparent that you do. Stop. I’m just going to tell you to stop. I care about you, girl. He’s supposedly killed like twenty people or something. Why he’s not in prison, I don’t know. Ask your father about him.”

“You know my dad. He refuses to talk about anything he’s working on. He’s more secretive than a special agent.” Which was the truth. I knew it had been to protect my sister and me from the horrors of the world when we were younger, but I was an adult. I could handle hearing about vicious criminals. Then again, my father was extremely secretive, never talking about his life in general, including his past.

“Yeah, I know what you’ve told me, but this is different. Why did those stupid girls take you to that house? There must be a reason.”

That was a good point. Maybe I’d ask Megan if she had any idea. Of course she did. Maybe she’d simply selected the most

notorious criminal in close proximity. Given the open party, it had been easy for me to get inside. Maybe I was reading too much into it. “I don’t know but I’m not going to worry about it.”

“Just do me a favor,” Paisley said in her over the top concerned voice. “Stay away from him. I even heard that he killed an informant recently. The man is hyper dangerous. Unfortunately, they can’t pin the vicious crime on him because the body disappeared.”

“What? What are you talking about? Where do you get these things?” Icy fingers gripped my spine, ripping at it, trying to get to my insides. Was it possible the passionate man could do something so reprehensible? Oh, this was a terrible predicament to be in. I’d made a deal with the devil and at some point, he would come to collect.

“It was all over the news today when I was at the commons with Jason. Some guy supposedly worked undercover for Mr. Arrogance himself had disappeared. Some reporter got a scoop, which isn’t what the DEA wanted. It’s a big deal. My guess is the reporter might get fired over this. All kinds of stink are being raised and the DEA has no comment. That usually means they’re hiding something.” She flicked her fingers through her hair, in her dramatic way. I’d learned I had to take her stories with a grain of salt.

“Whoa. Hold on. Tell me exactly what you heard. Don’t embellish.”

She shrugged and moved toward the computer, shifting away from the page I was looking at. “Fine. Some guy named Grayson Alexander supposedly disappeared from the face of the earth. He worked undercover for the DEA, although this reporter couldn’t get a confirmation on it. No one can confirm he worked for Arman Thibodeaux either, but there’s a huge investigation. A big mess. Somebody provided the reporter with classified information. Supposedly.”

“They found a body?” I wasn’t certain I wanted to know the answer. My mouth was suddenly dry, the world around me

spinning out of control. I should have gone to the police. I should have tried to save the man's life.

“That’s just it. They haven’t, at least according to the report. There’s no sign of him or any struggle or anything where he lived. But it’s too coincidental. That’s why I’m telling you to stay away from the man. Arman has too much power and influence, the New Orleans police chief in his back pocket. If he wants someone to disappear, they will. I don’t want it to be you the next time.”

Jesus. This was crazy. I’d dropped into the middle of a nightmare.

I sucked in my breath and held it for a few seconds. How I managed to keep the smile on my face although a knot of fear slipped into my stomach I would never know. There was no chance I’d heard the wrong name when stuck inside Arman’s closet. None. I’d memorized it, the syllables leaving a bad taste in my mouth. I’d thought of it, had dreamt about what I’d overheard a half dozen times, waking up in a cold sweat. I’d considered talking with my father, but knew he’d drag me out of college, insisting my safety had been compromised.

Maybe I needed to figure out a way to tell my father without saying anything. Right now, it was time for damage control, or my bestie just might take matters into her own hands. If she contacted my father or something worse, all hell would break loose.

Somehow, I also had a feeling if Arman learned she’d been told anything, she’d be the one to conveniently disappear. Oh, this was bad, so very bad.

“Stop worrying, baby girl,” I teased then gave her a look that always made her laugh. “I was curious about the stranger who’d kissed me under the stars. Nothing more. I have zero intentions of talking with him and New Orleans is far enough away, I won’t run into the dangerous man on the street.”

“You better not be lying to me.” She pointed her index finger at me, wagging it back and forth.

“*Moi*, lie? Never.” We both laughed but the trickle of terror remained. Was it possible? I knew the answer. Maybe I could have saved the man’s life had I gone to the police. Or maybe I’d be a crispy corpse six feet under by now.

“Okay. Good. I don’t want anything to happen to my... maid of honor? Please tell me you’ll accept. I don’t want anyone else.”

It took me a few seconds to realize what she’d just said. Then I jumped to my feet, holding the wineglass out before I spilled it all over me, managing to get it to the small table we used for almost everything. Then I rushed toward her again. “Of course, I’ll accept. I’m honored.”

We hugged again and she returned to her bubbly self. “Thank goodness. One task off my list. Now, let’s party. Neither one of us has a class tomorrow. We might as well have a little fun. Let me turn on the music.”

I spun in a full circle, swaying my hips even in the silence, allowing myself to be happy for her. Then I glanced out the window after grabbing my wine.

That’s when I knew for certain I was being watched. As if the time for making good on his... promise was near. He stood across the street from the dorm, standing under a light. And he was staring at me. While I couldn’t see a face or make out anything about the man, I knew it for certain.

I slunk away, pressing my fingers across my mouth. Then I realized instead of feeling icy fingers crawling down my spine, I felt heated ones. The realization was more terrifying than the actuality.

The stranger with the deep voice, the dark angel who’d awakened something blissfully sinful within had captured more than just my obedience with his threat.

He’d also managed to capture my full attention, and my desire burned like a raging fire.

At some point, that fire would become all consuming.

## CHAPTER 10



*A* rman

Time.

It was a luxury that I'd allowed myself, especially given certain decisions. Up to now, I hadn't needed to hurry with regard to what I wanted or would do with Raven. She was under watch twenty-four hours a day, her dorm room under surveillance. At first, I'd enjoyed spending time watching her from afar, enjoying her daily routine, including remaining behind the camera as she slipped under the covers.

Then I'd visited the campus on three occasions, lurking in the shadows, still awed by her beauty. That had included the night before. I'd stood outside her dorm room, almost breaking the promise made to myself and visiting her inside her room. Then her roommate had returned.

It had taken everything I had not to take then what rightfully belonged to me. However, I'd wanted to learn as much as I could about Travis Ramsey. The man was a rising star, but the fact he'd been provided with so many promotions in such a short period of time meant he had friends in high places.

I knew exactly who that was.

Thomas Cartier.

When I took his daughter from under his nose, I wanted it to break the man.

Perhaps that made me a sadistic fuck, but I'd certainly never considered myself a good man. I wasn't wired that way. I also hadn't been born into any kind of normalcy. At least up until now, the beautiful girl had held up her end of the bargain, what few contacts she'd had with her parents seemingly normal. Not only did I have her room bugged but Thomas had gone about his normal activity, faced with two other crises bigger than taking down his old nemesis.

Still, what stalking the beautiful woman had done was both entice and aggravate me. She was a reminder that two major and very separate divisions of law enforcement were determined to bring down my family.

My father was an easy target, but so were my brothers. After receiving some additional disparaging news, a likely attempt to derail Louie's career, I'd called a short family meeting.

What I'd come to realize was that time was no longer on my side. Neither was being patient, something I could consider a virtue. Pops had all but laughed at me weeks before when I'd mentioned my thoughts with regard to Raven. He'd told me in no uncertain terms that the kind of fire I was playing with would eventually turn into a raging firestorm that couldn't be controlled. I'd listened to his reasoning, as well as his suggestions for other powerful alliances that could be made through my subsequent marriage.

Now I was ready to shuck them all. I was Don of the family, the kingpin who would bring us out of the dark ages. Laughing, I yanked my jacket from the back of the chair, adjusting my cuffs before sliding into it.

While I was still on the fence regarding what to do with Raven, it was obvious marrying her had become a necessity. Would that calm the waters, forcing her father to pull back from his misguided attempt at imprisoning my family at all costs? Likely only for a period of time given Travis Ramsey's recent promotion within the DEA. Forced promotion, I should add.

I'd spent as much time as I could while handling aspects of business gleaning information about Mr. Ramsey and Mr.

Cartier. They'd been friends for years. Since their college days together. Hell, through Maddox's intense searches, I'd learned the two of them and their families had taken vacations together. There was even a single article that made it appear as if Raven and Carter Ramsey had once been romantically involved.

That union would have created a powerhouse.

Maybe putting the beautiful student under lock and key within my domain was only a stopgap method of stopping the bloodshed, but it was worth the effort.

Besides, there would be fringe benefits.

I glanced at the laptop one last time. The picture of Raven sitting in a rattan chair, her hair piled on her head, her legs curled under her, wearing only festive pink pajamas was as breathtaking as seeing her in the stunning dress the night we'd met.

The night we'd first fucked.

Why was it that every time I thought about kissing her soft lips, my cock rose to full attention?

Hearing a noise, I glanced at the doorway. Maddox stood with his hands in his pockets, his legs crossed at the ankles and a slight sneer on his face. The body language was a clear indication he'd discovered something that I both would and wouldn't like to hear.

"What is it?" I asked before heading to the small safe in my office, pressing my fingers on the keypad until the lock clicked. Then I yanked one of my three weapons from inside into my hand, checking the ammunition before sliding it into my shoulder holster. I didn't like leaving guns lying around, always concerned Zoe would find one and become concerned.

I'd managed to keep who and what her daddy was from her until she was ten. Then she'd rolled her eyes when I'd called myself a regular businessman, planting her hands on her hips and giving me attitude when she made a statement that I'd never forget.

*“Daddy. Please. I know you’re a big, bad mafia dude. I’m a big girl now. I can handle the truth. All the kids in school talk about you. Their mothers talk about you too. Evidently, you’re cute. Yuck.”*

Then she’d asked if we could go for ice cream.

“You went AWOL last night,” Maddox said.

“You checking up on me again?”

“It’s apparent someone needs to. Why didn’t you call me to take care of Zoe while you were gone?”

I threw him a look. “You were busy. I made a quick trip to Baton Rouge and back. Nothing more.”

“Christ. Why don’t you just claim this woman and be done with it?”

“Because it’s not the right time.”

“I don’t know about that. Have you seen the news?” Maddox finally asked.

“I try to avoid it lately. Cut to the chase.”

“Grayson’s disappearance was leaked to the press. Or I should say a rather tenacious reporter was determined to grab his fifteen minutes of fame. My sources tell me the DEA isn’t happy.”

“They were attempting to squelch his disappearance.”

“Just like you predicted.” He finally strode further into the room.

I glanced at him, noticing the look of amusement on his face. “What else? I called a meeting with Pops and the family unit given Louie was threatened.”

“Shit. By whom?”

“Want to take a guess?”

“Ramsey or Cartier?”

Grinning, I grabbed my weapon. “They’re buddies. Remember? I’m venturing a guess they believe I had something to do with Grayson’s disappearance.”

“It’s funny how rumors get started,” Maddox said, chuckling under his breath. “And it would appear your bride was privy to the newscast last night and remembered the name she overheard.”

The hair instantly stood up on the back of my neck. “Meaning what?”

He pulled out his phone, sliding his finger across the screen as he walked closer. “There’s something you need to hear. The girl has all but ignored what happened a few weeks ago until now. As you’ve often reminded me, there are no such things as coincidences in our savage world.”

When he held out his phone, I glanced into his eyes before tugging it from his hand. He’d installed the recording device inside her dorm, the voice-activated system capturing mostly useless information, with a couple of exceptions. She’d mentioned me to her roommate but had passed it off fairly well. Then she’d returned to her studies, my name mentioned one additional time while she’d been alone.

I hit play, shifting to stare out the window at my back yard.

*“Hey, Dad. It’s your favorite daughter. I was just wondering... So, I saw a news broadcast on some guy who worked with the DEA. Grayson something? Wasn’t he one of Carter’s friends? Not a big deal. I just wanted to offer my condolences. Talk to you later.”*

Very slowly I lowered his phone, her lilting voice echoing in my ear. She was fishing, trying not to draw too much attention to her out of the blue and very strange question. I had to give the girl credit. She could turn into an excellent liar, something I’d need to be cautious of.

Maddox walked to the edge of my desk, peering at me with a raised eyebrow. “I thought you’d want to hear that.”

“Yeah, I did. First a threat to Louie. Now, the gloves will be removed. Thomas is no fool.” I slid his phone across the desk,

taking a deep breath as I rolled my fingers back and forth across my jaw.

“Does this change anything?”

“Not necessarily, but it does solidify the decision I made over coffee this morning.”

“Should I have the housekeeper prepare for a guest this weekend?”

I chuckled seeing his grin more than from his words. “Zoe is staying with a friend for a couple days. It’s the perfect time to introduce my soon to be fiancée to what will be her new life.”

“You’re certain Raven won’t run to Daddy dearest now that she suspects Grayson is dead?”

“No. Make certain Landry keeps an eye on her until I’m able to claim my prize. What I can’t do is trust her any longer. In fact, I think I’ll make a trip to Baton Rouge this afternoon. There’s no time like the present.”

“I’ll change my schedule around.”

“This is something I want to do myself.”

He gave me a hard look then nodded. “I look forward to seeing her again.”

I thought about what the night would bring and smiled. “So do I, my friend. So do I.”

## CHAPTER 11



*A* rman

My father was still attempting to conduct business from his home during the middle of the renovation, his office off limits to the dozens of construction workers. There was no chance our conversation could be heard given the man's insistence on soundproofing. After walking in, I closed the door behind me, finding the two men already engaged in a lively conversation.

Meanwhile, I couldn't get the ugly scenario out of my mind.

"No, I disagree with you, Pops," Francois insisted as he flopped down on the couch, a cup of coffee in his hand. "The Saints will win this year. Hands down. They're primed and ready."

Football.

The two of them had that in common, a love of the game that provided endless hours of cheering or grumbling in front of one of their big screen televisions. I couldn't care less, but the banter between them always brought a smile to my face, a reminder that we were a family after all.

"*Ils n'ont pas de jeu*," Father's voice boomed and all I could do was smile. The term 'they have no game' was one he used far too often when he disagreed. How many times had I been told that as a child? It was meant to be derogatory, but I'd found it more of a term of endearment.

“Hogwash, Pops. Open your eyes. You ready to put your money where your mouth is?” Francois pushed.

“How much?”

“A cool two G’s.” My brother grinned after making the suggestion.

My mother would have a fit if Pops so much as dared bet that much on a single game. I remained where I was and all I could do was shake my head.

“Three,” Pops said, upping the ante. In his hand was a Bloody Mary. He always had one to start the day, telling me that the hair of the dog was good for every man.

Francois lifted his eyebrows then nodded just once. “You’re on.”

I whistled, making my presence known for a second time. “Maybe I should purchase the Saints instead of the baseball team I’m looking at.”

“You’re still considering purchasing an entire freaking team?” Francois chastised, snorting after asking the question.

“Why not? Remember Pops has always told us to diversify.”

“They’re losers.”

“You’re late,” Pops said without looking at me, ignoring our banter.

“By five minutes, Pops.” I moved to one of the massive leather chairs, taking my usual seat. “And the odds are in the Saints’ favor but four to one, Pops. Careful what you bet on.”

“Don’t tell your mother,” he said, although it was more of a snarl. “And you know I can’t stand tardiness.”

It was one of his many rules, one that I’d always had difficulty following, which had resulted in being on the receiving end of his harsh punishment many times.

I winked at my brother. “Understood. However, I’m an adult and certain aspects of my life interfere. Now that you two have had your daily sparring incident, let’s get down to business. I have a full day planned. First things first. Has there been any

development with Louie and the threat made? Any idea who did it?"

Francois shook his head. "I talked to him earlier. It was a single phone call made."

"This wasn't his first threat, gentlemen," Pops said more in passing.

"No, but his daughter answered the phone." Francois narrowed his eyes.

"Nothing was said to her, was it?" I snarled. Anyone who allowed children to be put in the middle of their warring business deserved a fate worse than death.

Francois shook his head. "Fortunately not, but it rattled Louie. The caller disguised his voice, the duration too short to trace, which in turn has made him angry all over again, insisting he doesn't want a part of our life. But the threat was meant for you, Arman. Tell your brother he'll be the first to die. Then you'll be next."

"Fuck." I rubbed my eyes, the ache behind them increasing. "I'll double the number of soldiers on his family. Quietly."

"He doesn't want that," Pops snapped.

"He doesn't get a choice. He gave that up when he walked away from his duties." What bothered me more than the threat itself was that it was beneath Thomas. He truly believed in walking the right side of the law. "Does the name Travis Ramsey ring a bell?"

Francois narrowed his eyes. "I've seen his name appear recently on a warrant issued by the DEA."

I gave him my full attention. My brother had a fabulous way of keeping secrets. "You'll need to explain. Another threat?"

"Ramsey is a lowlife, a man who has secrets of his own, but he's now in a position to become dangerous to us and every other crime syndicate," Pops said.

If I had to guess, I'd say our not so illustrious past with Thomas was crowding into the present. I was more than curious what Ramsey had to do with it.

“I think you both need to explain what in the fuck you’re talking about.” I knew instantly my heightened anger and arrogance had driven my father into a bad mood by the harsh expression on his face as he looked at me.

“Let’s start by saying it would appear Devin Carlos could become a problem. That’s of course in addition to what we will end up handling regarding the FBI.”

It seemed as if my father was eager to exact revenge.

“Go on.” Exhaling, I eased onto the edge of my seat. Carlos, the brutal dictator was considered the Don of the southwest, his regime located in the heart of Texas. He thought of himself as an honest rancher, the twenty thousand acres he owned in part forcibly taken from neighboring families. His bread and butter remained the drug industry, but he was moving into other, even more lucrative operations, stepping on our territory. That included real estate.

Long before he’d become a man of power, we’d held control of certain aspects of Texas. He’d resented our presence as well as our influence, issuing threats from time to time. We’d never taken them seriously. The man knew better than to start a war. Or so I’d thought. “The fucker threatened Louie.”

Francois glanced at our father. “Yeah, but there’s more.”

“What is going on?” I glanced from one to the other.

Francois shifted in his seat. “It would appear he’s making good on threats made almost six months ago. I would definitely place him on the top of the list for issuing one to Louie.”

“What did he do?” I asked, my anger increasing. Although I could certainly make an educated guess. We had a development company headquartered in Dallas, properties being built in several states. We’d outbid Carlos on several pieces of property, which had created additional bad blood. His threat to burn down one of our establishments was the most egregious to date.

“The construction office was torched; thousands of dollars of materials stored in the shed as well. While it was labeled an accident, I can guarantee you Carlos is responsible.” My

father's voice was even but I could tell by white-knuckled hold on his glass that he was furious, seeking revenge.

Fuck. It was the latest business opportunity, one that would help us branch out even further into the west.

"But he's yet to claim responsibility?" I asked.

"Correct. The fire burned so hot it destroyed a truck and the load of construction material recently brought in." Francois glanced in my direction.

"Anyone hurt?" My question was laced with rage of my own.

Pops took another gulp of his drink. "The foreman who tried to put out the fire, but just second-degree burns. He'll be fine."

I leaned back, rubbing my finger across my bottom lip. "I think Don Carlos should be paid a visit." When I lifted my gaze toward Francois, he nodded in agreement. "He needs to understand we will not tolerate methods of extortion or threats made to anyone inside this family." The timing was interesting. Was there a chance Carlos was working with Ramsey and Cartier?

"Today?" he asked.

"Not today. I have something important to do. Early next week. I want to look the man in the eyes. Then we'll explain to him our control will not be challenged."

Father turned his head, narrowing his eyes. "You have something personal, son?"

"Something very personal." I planted my elbows on the arms of the chair, steepling my fingers. "I've decided to get married to Raven Cartier. I understand it's a risk, but it's one I think is necessary given all the circumstances." I'd come to accept my decision, even if I remained concerned about Raven's welfare.

For some reason given the original conversation I'd had with my father regarding Raven Cartier, I'd expected him to initiate a tirade, forbidding me to taint our future legacy with the blood of an enemy. He knew how I felt about Thomas given our history, the hatred we'd developed for each other over the

years. But that was also somewhat personal, a portion of his life my father never wanted to discuss.

And it appeared today there was to be a noted exception given the resolve softening his expression.

He lifted his glass instead. “Good decision, son. Especially now. I know what I said before, but you’re right in that we should have handled Thomas a long time ago.”

I had a feeling there was something more behind the sudden dullness in his eyes. The fallout with Thomas had taken a brutal toll for a long time, his recovery pushing him into an even more savage man. I hated Thomas almost as much for that alone. Sadly, Pops appeared much older as of late, as if retirement and memories of the past had taken a significant toll.

“About time, brother. Congratulations. I can’t wait to meet this woman who managed to capture your attention through the most notorious methods. When is the glorious wedding day?” My brother was gloating, but I sensed my decision was nothing but an aggravation. What wasn’t at this point? “You enjoy taking risks. Tell me, is she as fucked up as her father?”

“I don’t know about the wedding but she’s completely different.” So much so it was difficult to believe she was his daughter, although I knew it for certain. I’d followed him closely enough over the years, keeping track of him required given our background and the harm he was capable of bringing.

“Well, that will add a complexity into this game we’re playing.”

I shifted my gaze toward my father, ignoring Francois altogether. “What do the DEA and Travis Ramsey have to do with the possible arson? If you don’t know, you suspect, and your gut is usually right.”

Francois was responsible for the work being done in Texas, controlling the entire development end of our corporation. He enjoyed spending time in the state, owning a small ranch in addition to the house he owned in New Orleans. I visited the

sprawling, hot as Hades area as infrequently as possible. “The DEA was on the site less than three hours after the fire was reported.”

“They were tipped off,” I snarled. There was nothing worse than being played, treated as if our empire could be squashed beneath the greedy fingers of men who’d described themselves as having the pulse on the life of so many Americans. It was an insult to our French-Canadian ancestry, a reminder that our father had yet to become a citizen of the only country my brothers, sister, and I had lived in. Our mother was American through and through, considered royalty in the same regards as members of various influential political families had been through the generations. Yet it had never been good enough.

“Yes, dear brother. They closed the site. I just got back into town. It’s been a long night of dealing with paperwork and accusations.”

“But the site is clean. Yes?” My question was more of a demand. I’d forbidden drugs of any kind to be associated with our legitimate businesses, phasing them out altogether within the year.

His glower was followed by a deep exhale. “I’m not a fool, Arman. I have no desire to spend several years in a maximum-security prison.”

His willingness to play by my rules wasn’t about his adoration for me or my leadership, only the act of self-preservation. It would remain a bone of contention between us.

“Why didn’t you call me?” I bristled and my father threw out his hand. The patriarch knew all about the situation and I’d been left in the dark. Because of my impending relationship with Raven. Did they think I’d suddenly become disloyal to the family?

Francois always preferred handling business his way. I couldn’t blame him, but I held the title, the reins of the family, another bone of contention for my Capo. He’d told me more than once that if he were in charge, he’d handle the business in a significantly different way. That’s one reason I’d given him

the portion he preferred: the constant ebb and flow of danger in handling illegal drugs and weaponry.

The thought of being challenged by my own flesh and blood was unacceptable.

“It was handled, Arman. That’s all that’s important.” Now my brother stood with a jerk, taking long strides toward the bar, remaining tense as he made himself a breakfast cocktail.

“Handled? Ramsey, who happens to be best buddies with Thomas Cartier, director of the FBI, has suddenly positioned himself to be in the top position of the DEA just in time for a blaze to occur out of the blue in the state where a pompous jackass has issued threats. If you think any of this is coincidental, you’re both wrong.”

“It’s no coincidence, son, but the situation is something we need to handle very carefully,” Pops said.

“Would you like a drink, Arman? It would appear you could use one.” my brother asked without turning around.

“No.” Fuck, no. What I wanted was to smash someone’s head in. But Pops was right. I had to maintain a cool head until I determined what we were dealing with. “I’m headed to Baton Rouge after this meeting. Obviously, the timing of claiming my bride is fascinating, but why not put the bastards on edge. However, we need to talk about Texas, Francois. I want the full details of what occurred and what was said.” I could tell Pops was watching our interaction carefully. He’d warned us a long time ago he’d never interfere with our relationship, but strongly encouraged us to remain close.

Francois tipped his head over his shoulder. “Fine. You’ll have them in a couple hours. Taking your possession, oh dear brother of mine?”

“Yes. It would seem I have no other choice.” None whatsoever. Someone was playing us or goading perhaps, trying to force our hand. It would take prudence and patience to deal with the situation without causing undue bloodshed, which we definitely didn’t need.

“Bring her to dinner tomorrow night,” Pops instructed. “There will be no better time to introduce her to the pack. Then she’ll understand what her father is doing is atrocious.”

The pack. My father had no idea how accurate he was. While we could hide behind sophistication, we were nothing but wild animals. “I’m not ready to tell her about the past. Not yet.”

He glanced at me. “Understood.”

Exhaling, I stared at both him and my brother harshly before trying to soften not only my expression but the anger residing because of Thomas. “Where is this dinner being held?” Both the kitchen and dining room in my parents’ house had yet to be completed. “Not here. Please tell me not here.”

He gave me a stern look. “No, son, although given your sister’s wedding in barely one month, your mother is becoming... difficult to appease. At the hotel.”

They’d taken residence on an entire floor of the hotel we owned, enjoying what Pops had called a fifth honeymoon. It was good to see they were still very much in love after all they’d been through.

I had a feeling the solidarity requirement was a necessary but possibly knee-jerk reaction to the DEA expanding their investigation. They wanted to be a thorn in our side.

“Fine. I’ll bring her, Pops, but not one word about who her father is. Especially since Louie will be there.”

“What if she brings it up?” Francois asked.

“She won’t. Period. Now, is there anything else we need to discuss?” I asked, getting to my feet.

“You didn’t answer the question, brother. When will you be exchanging vows?”

“I’m not certain. Soon. Perhaps sooner than I originally planned.”

“Be mindful of Edmee. She deserves our full attention for her special event. I will not allow Thomas to ruin it for her,” Pops warned.

Thank God, she'd been a small child when the shit had gone down, although Edmee remembered him fondly. It was a conversation not allowed to be had in my father's house, which is why she continued to grill me on what happened from time to time.

"Don't worry, dear Father. I'll attempt to keep from distressing our beautiful sister during her time of celebration." I headed for the door, still furious that Francois hadn't confided in me.

"Does your bride to be know who we are?" Francois asked almost too casually.

"She's done her homework."

"Has she agreed to this?"

"It's not up to her."

"So this isn't about love."

I laughed in his face. "This is about a deal made and nothing more, a business arrangement."

"You say that now. Be careful, brother. Women have a way of taking control, refusing to let go. But I recommend you don't fall in love with her. She will use that against you."

He'd once found the love of his life much like I had, only he'd been burned by betrayal instead of death. It had been a hard lesson, turning him into a darker version of myself.

If that was possible. "Warning noted, brother." He was right to warn me because he'd fallen deep and hard for the daughter of someone who'd not only come close to crushing a solid portion of our empire but had ripped out his heart with ease.

That wasn't going to happen to me. In fact, once I had Raven in my possession, it would be much easier to shut down my feelings.

"Your brother is right, Arman. Be careful. We're being watched. Falling in love with this woman isn't in our best interest." Father's words rang loud and clear.

*Tacenda.*

It was a word I'd heard once from an old friend and former professor of mine, a man schooled in several disciplines including Latin. He'd heard the word in response to the agony I'd experienced after Sophia's death. It was only later he'd explained that the kind of love I'd felt for her, the expression of love that had come easily should be silenced, best left unsaid.

That's what I intended to do with Raven.

After all, she was nothing but a business arrangement.

\* \* \*

The knock was more hesitant than I was used to, when I even knocked at all. However, I'd learned with my hardheaded daughter that she valued her privacy as much as I did mine, perhaps even more so. So I honored her wishes, respecting her closed door.

There was a single rule. No boys in the house.

Not that she would dare bring them home at this point. She'd already figured out I'd grill them after Maddox had gotten through with the poor kid, who by then would have regretted being eager to date my daughter at all.

Her music was loud as usual, but she was so much like her mother, a sixth sense about my presence. When she opened the door, I immediately noticed the small suitcase. It had taken me years for me to allow her to live like a normal kid, going to parties and having friends over. She'd begged me to go to a regular school, as she'd called it, instead of the private schools both here and abroad that I'd found that would suit her musical talent. That had provided her with the kind of friends that made me a nervous daddy constantly.

I'd been surprised that the parents of her friends had allowed them to come over, although at first I was certain it was out of curiosity, grilling the poor kids once they'd returned. Through my years of protectiveness, requiring either Maddox or another soldier to remain with her pretty much at all times, she'd turned out a normal kid.

How that happened, I'd never know, but it was my greatest achievement to date.

"Yes, Daddy dearest?" As she so frequently liked to call me.

"I need to talk to you."

"Okay, but I gotta leave for Molly's in fifteen minutes."

"This won't take that long."

In her typical teenager style, she stood in her holey jeans, the ones that had cost a fortune for something that looked like it had been dragged out of the bottom of an acid barrel, lifting her eyebrows as if expecting a conversation on the birds and bees. I'd had Edmee do that years before at my sister's encouragement.

The heady blast of whatever metal band she'd decided was better than her love of boy bands was already grating my nerves. The kid was growing up way too fast. "Can you turn that down?"

"Sure. I forgot how old you were." She laughed, the fact I was in my forties something else she liked tease me about. Continuously.

I walked further into her room, marveling at how clean it was. At least my girl wasn't messy. "You know how much I love your mother, right?"

"Is this about a girl?"

My daughter had the ability to weed through any line of bullshit she heard. I couldn't help but laugh. The girl was hell on wheels. I could only imagine what eighteen would look like. "A young woman. Yes."

She huffed, cocking her head then planting her hand on her hip. Just like I'd seen Raven do. God. I was so fucked given I was hungering for a woman barely older than my daughter. Well, that wasn't entirely accurate, but close enough I should be furious with myself.

"Dad. It's about time. I know you think you're protecting me and my memories, but I don't remember much about Mommy

any longer. I wish I did but as the years go by, I can't really see her face like I used to."

My heart clenched in my chest, so much so I realized I was part of the problem. I'd removed us from the first house she'd lived in, later having it torn down because I couldn't stand the memories. Then I'd taken every picture of Sophia except for the one in my nightstand and the few scattered around Zoe's room, dumping them in a box.

My daughter had even stopped asking me to tell her stories of when she was a small child because it had pained me so much. "I'm sorry, baby girl. That's my fault. I should never have stopped talking about her."

"Nothing is your fault, Dad. You need to move on. I'm almost fully grown now. I'll be going to college and meeting boys."

I pressed my hand over my heart. "Over my dead body."

She shook her head, rolling her eyes at me a second time. "Come on, daddy dearest. You can't keep me your little girl any longer. You deserve to go on dates, to fall in love again. I'm happy for you. Hopefully, I'll get to meet her one day."

"Oh, you will, sooner than you think."

"Meaning?"

This was harder than I'd thought it would be. "I'm getting married."

As I'd thought, there was shock in her eyes but there was no anger, at least at first. "And you never told me you were dating? You are a horrible father."

Thank God, her voice held a teasing tone. "Sorry, baby girl. It caught me by surprise."

"How long have you known her?"

"Just a few weeks."

She clapped her hands together. "A whirlwind romance. That is so incredibly romantic. I hope it happens like that for me one day."

"Not until you're thirty."

“Very funny. I can’t wait to meet her.”

“Are you really okay with this?”

“Dad. As long as she loves you with all her heart then I’m fine with it.”

I’d kept Zoe away from as much business as I’d been able to over the years, although she knew what her extended family did, and that her uncle Franny, as she liked to call him, was as dangerous as I was. She adored her Uncle Louie, although she didn’t understand why he rarely attended family gatherings. Yet she was smart as a whip, asking far too many questions at an early age. Keeping her sheltered had been lost as an option a long time ago.

But the girl was also the epitome of her mother in that she believed in fairytales, especially when romance was involved. She had the perfect champion prince in mind and by God, I had a feeling she’d hunt him down one day.

“That’s why I’m marrying her.”

“What’s her name?”

“Raven.”

“That’s beautiful.” She glanced at the phone nestled in her hand, the chime of a text drawing her attention. “I gotta run, Dad. Molly is waiting for me. I can’t wait to tell her!” She took a long stride closer, kissing me on the cheek.

“There’s just one more thing. She’s closer to your age than mine.”

“Oh, my God. Age gap romances are all the rage. Wait until I tell my friends my father has a sexy young thang.”

“Zoe. Don’t you dare.”

She giggled and spun in several circles before reaching for her things.

Love.

If only I could fully explain the real world to her. But I wasn’t ready to crush her spirit.

Like I was about ready to do to Raven.

## CHAPTER 12



*R*aven

I was almost grateful my father had yet to call back. I continued to wish I could erase the message from his phone, although what I'd said wasn't inaccurate. While I could contact Carter with the same question, given our last conversation had ended with me tossing nasty barbs his way, I had a feeling he wouldn't want to talk to me.

Or he'd take it as a sign I wanted to get back together. Not a chance in hell.

The fact our fathers had attempted to push us together a few years ago continued to rile the hell out of me. Carter was older, set in his ways, and determined to make more out of himself than his father. He was the second most arrogant ass I'd ever met in my life.

Arman Thibodeaux the first.

Just mentioning the man's name both riled and aroused me, a dangerous combination. I tossed the trash into the can, glancing out the window of the coffee shop. The morning rush was completed, my shift over in less than two hours. Then I had the entire weekend. Maybe I'd go see a movie or grab a saucy little book from the library.

And pine away for my fantasy man?

I'd considered going home for a few days, but I didn't fear Arman, only the feelings I had for the man. When he came for

me, and he would, I had plans on telling him exactly what I thought about him. And he wouldn't like what I had to say. That was if I found the courage. Geez. I was marshmallow fluff and nothing more.

While my little voice laughed at me as she'd done far too many times, I grabbed a rag, cleaning off a couple of tables. I hadn't been able to shake the sickening feeling of knowing that Arman had been responsible for Grayson's disappearance. Even with the DEA providing no comment, I was certain the man was dead, likely dismembered, his body parts tossed in a swamp or two. Gator food.

The visions had already warped my mind, keeping me from getting a good night's sleep. I threw another cup in the trash then headed to the back to grab a few minutes to myself.

"Are you okay?" Amy asked from behind me. She was the manager and owner of the cozy establishment, hiring me on the spot just seconds after I'd begged her for a job. I'd been determined not to take more of my parents' money. That would mean I'd owe my father. I couldn't stand the thought of working for the FBI. I never had. I was no longer certain why I'd majored in criminology other than it had been expected of me.

"I'm fine. Just didn't get much sleep."

"It's slow right now. Do you want to take off early?"

This was Amy's administrative day. I admired the woman. She was a single mother of two, a business owner, and was active in the community. She was also worn out from working so hard. The last thing I would do was place a burden on her. "Not necessary. I have the weekend off. Unless you need me."

She laughed. "Don't worry. I have the weekend off as well. All the shifts are covered."

"You know I'll work extra shifts if you need." I grabbed a few additional cookies fresh from the oven for one of the cases.

"That's why I love you. You're dependable, but I think we both need a weekend off."

I grinned at her then heard the jingle of the bell over the door. "Duty calls." I headed out the door, trying to resist grabbing one of the thick chocolate chip treats. When I lifted my head, plastering on a smile, it was short lived.

A larger-than-life man had walked in through the glass door. Arman. He was a tower of explosive heat, turning the coffee shop into Dante's Inferno. The thought matched the way the sun added a vivid glow of orange around him, an aura of the fire and brimstone bursting from deep inside. I held my breath, fearful I'd be caught in an instant cataclysm. I'd wondered where I'd be the next time he waltzed into my life, accepting the fact there would be no advance warning.

I hadn't anticipated so much desire or the anger that was almost impossible to control. I wanted to lunge toward him like a Ninja ranger, tearing him apart limb for limb. It wouldn't matter the consequences or if he tossed me into a cage. It would be well worth it. And here I was frozen to the spot.

Arman was scanning the small shop as he removed his sunglasses. He looked incredible with his windswept hair cresting against his broad shoulders, devoid of the confining jacket and tie, the casual dress a surprise.

Other than the rapid flutters of my heart as I stared at him like some lovestruck high school girl.

I'd been expecting him. Somehow I knew he'd discover my attempt at treachery.

Meanwhile, I was frozen in place, a mixture of anger and utter terror languishing in my system. All while awe and desire ripped apart my core. As he slowly turned his head, my breath caught in my throat. His eyes were a mixture of intrigue and passion, the darkness ebbing through him like a constant live wire.

His every step was methodical as he walked closer, and I began to quiver, yet I refused to allow him to see even a glimmer of fear. Predators won the moment they gathered the stench. I eased the tray of cookies to the counter, giving him

the same hard onceover. But within seconds, the coldness of his eyes turned into something even more dangerous.

An obsession.

As if he'd been waiting, biding his time. Watching and craving. Now there was no doubt the predator had emerged from his lair, prepared to strike.

And there was nothing I could do but watch the horror unfold.

He said nothing for a few seconds, closing the distance to the counter and lifting that beautiful head of his to stare at the menu. The aura around him was so vibrant I was caught in a web, incapable of doing anything but waiting for whatever he had to say to me.

I dragged my tongue across my lips, my throat already closing off from the lack of steady breaths. Forcing myself to return to reality took a few seconds longer, but I managed to place my palms on the counter, spreading out my fingers. Allowing the anger to take hold drove away some of the fear. "Would you like something from our menu?"

Goddamn it, when he smirked, I wanted to wipe the expression off his face with an acid-soaked rag.

"I'll have a large black coffee, the darkest bean you have." Why was it that everything out of his mouth sounded sultry, sexual? Or maybe my mind had already dropped into the gutter given his omnipotent presence. In my mind I want to see him as nothing but a miscreant, but for the briefest of time I'd seen something inside of him, qualities that I couldn't quite put my finger on.

As if he was a little lost, haunted by the memory of the woman it was obvious he once loved. There was nothing on the woman with the initial of S that I could find. While there was no gate around his house, not a single reporter or photographer had caught him with a telephoto lens. That meant he had his guards keep watch on his property. Was he hiding or protecting something?

When I didn't respond right away, he leaned over the counter, his sizzling breath instantly skipping across my jaw. It made

me shiver.

“Are you alright, princess? You seem flushed.”

I swallowed hard and spun around toward the coffee machines with enough force I was pitched into the sharp metal edge. Wincing, I yanked a cup from the stack of them, hating myself for trembling in his presence. If only I could loathe the man, then reacting to his sudden appearance would be much easier.

Sensing his continued stare brought butterflies into my stomach, but by the time I placed the lid on the top of his scalding coffee, I was almost able to get control over my emotions. There was even a tiny part of me that almost left the lid ajar. That would allow me to innocently trip, spilling the brutally hot contents all over his fine linen trousers. Ouch.

But the professional inside of me couldn't do it. Or maybe I knew I'd place Amy in harm's way, the brutal bastard destroying her business as punishment. “Here you are. That will be four-fifty-five.” I pushed it across the counter, making a point of concentrating on ringing the purchase in the register.

“Cheap for such a delicious brew.” As he pulled out his wallet, I did what I could to ignore it. He tugged a bill from in front of several others, all hundreds. If he thought he could impress me with money, he was sorely wrong. He finally lifted his gaze as he slid a single hundred-dollar bill across the counter. “Keep the change.”

It was my turn to smirk. “No tips needed. I'm just a lowly server.” I pushed it back across the counter; of course he ignored my actions, already taking a step away. But his eyes pierced mine. He wasn't just undressing me with them. He was slathering every inch of my nakedness with chocolate syrup.

He opened the lid, taking a deep whiff. “You're not a lowly anything, princess. Far from it.” When he turned around, I was curious as to his next move. Would he pull out his weapon, although I wasn't certain if he had it on him.

“You think you know me, Arman, but far from it.”

“I do know you, princess, because you’re exactly like me with a single exception. You care about the people around you, which makes you soft inside, vulnerable to the sadistic desires of a very bad man like me. And I can’t wait to be the man who peels away every layer, exposing the tender innocence inside, which is exactly what I plan on doing. That’s the moment you’ll belong to me.”

The man was nuts if he thought I’d give him the time of day let alone allow myself to surrender. “Fuck you.”

“I assure you that will happen, sweet and luscious princess. But only after you beg me to.”

## CHAPTER 13



*R*aven

Arman's stark, matter-of-fact words lingered in the forefront of my mind, his eyes shimmering as if he'd caught me in another lie.

I laughed, the sound shriller than I'd intended. "You must be joking. I would never beg you for anything. Are you always such an arrogant prick, so certain of yourself?"

"Such harsh words."

"Necessary ones." No matter my bravado, the powerful man still made me quiver with fear and rage at the desire skittering through my system. It took everything I had not to crack my palm across his handsome face.

"Why don't you tell me all of them, princess?" he tossed back into my face. "Besides, I know you're dying to provide me with a full dossier on what you've learned about me since our adventure together. Prove me wrong that you don't want me and that you haven't come to the conclusion I'm the only man who can satisfy you."

I was momentarily so shocked by his outlandish arrogance that no words came to mind, no barbs of any kind. I sensed at least a couple of the customers watching my interaction, curious as to what we were discussing with such vehemence. "God. I can't stand you."

“All evidence to the contrary. However, keep in mind that I’m likely much worse than any man you’ve ever encountered. But go for it. I’m all ears.”

“There is no doubt that you’ve always been vile, brutal, and uncaring. I doubt you have any clue what love or caring for someone means.” For a few seconds, a flash of anger shadowed the amusement he was getting from my discomfort.

Arman’s jaw clenched and he tilted his head, highlighting his aristocratic features. “Concerned you won’t be right, princess?”

“Concerned you can’t handle the truth.”

The way he sipped his coffee was far too sexy, the man making me crazy. “I’m up for the task. Give me your best shot.”

He was even more arrogant than I remembered. “You choose to use your good looks as a weapon, whether in your legitimate or illegitimate businesses, claiming the center of attention simply by walking into a room. You’re anal retentive, which is denoted by the attention you pay to your wardrobe. The fact your curly hair isn’t coiffed and perfect given the warm, humid breeze is probably driving you crazy. My guess is that you shower twice daily, spend the exact amount of time inside your precious gym to the minute, and have never once dared to try anything remotely spectacular in your plain. Black. Boring. Coffee.” As a split second of fury rushed into his eyes like shimmers of glass shattered on a marble floor, I smiled.

And went in for the kill.

“How am I doing so far, big boy? Do my words sting to the point you long to shut me up, which is what you do to anyone who gets in your way or challenges you? Yes?” I moved from behind the counter, folding my arms. For all my bravado, my legs continued to shake, but not enough to give away the terror skipping through every muscle and vein.

When he said nothing, I gave myself a mental high five.

“You’re certain of yourself,” he said as he lifted a single eyebrow and I sensed I’d ruffled his feathers.

“I know your type, Mr. Thibodeaux. Whatever you’re hiding has stripped you of everything but rage and hatred. How sad because that split second I was allowed inside I almost enjoyed what I found. Almost.” I knew I’d pushed my limit and was far too lightheaded to continue.

“You might be surprised at my type.”

“Do you ever have fun? Do you ever let go and act carefree or are the only things allowed in your world bloodshed and violence?” While I kept my voice low to ensure none of the other guests or Amy heard me, I couldn’t seem to help myself. His gaze became more pointed, angry in a way that I sensed I would pay for.

He took a deep breath, holding it as he dared to walk closer, so much so he crowded my space completely, sparking an overwhelming desire to reach out and brush my fingers down the side of his face. It seemed he’d purposely gone without shaving, the incredible stubble covering his jaw accentuating his stunning good looks. He was even more handsome in the bright rays of sun, his skin lightly bronzed, but it was his thick luxurious hair that I wanted to run my fingers through the most.

Pulling at it while he fucked me like a wild animal.

Since I was wearing tennis shoes, he towered over me, his presence reminding of that he was a chiseled god.

“Why don’t you share with me what you believe to be fun.”

“In Baton Rouge?”

“In general, lovely Raven. I’m more than curious.”

A lump formed in my throat, the hard pulse on the side of my neck drawing his attention. Why did I have the feeling he wanted to bite into my vein, sucking my blood? I shuddered from the thought, so drawn to the rich intensity of his whiskey eyes that I almost forgot what he’d asked.

“Taking a walk by a river’s edge or on the shores of an ocean in my bare feet. Grabbing an ice cream cone and heading to a dog park, laughing at the antics of the pups as they play with each other. Crashing a wedding just to grab a glass of champagne and signing the registry book. Taking off all my clothes and frolicking in a fountain on a night where the moon is bright in the sky. Staring at Christmas tree lights for hours, drinking hot cocoa while singing holiday tunes to strangers. Enjoying a lazy Sunday watching old movies while drinking mimosas.” I found myself chuckling after telling such silly thoughts, but they were all true.

And I’d never told anyone else that in my entire life. Why him?

I expected him to make fun of me, chiding every idea as if they were dumbest things he’d ever heard in the world. He was rich. He likely preferred jetting off to Paris or maybe Sicily versus doing something so banal.

“Every one of those suggestions sounds wonderful, Raven. I would love to share them with someone special.”

Damn it! How could he be so charming?

He dared come even closer, lifting his arm as if he was going to stroke the side of my face. I purposely took a step away, trying to avoid making additional eye contact. He rattled me more than I wanted to admit even to myself.

“Have a good day, Mr. Thibodeaux. In case you haven’t noticed, I’m working. Some of us prefer to make our own way, not living on our parents’ money. Some of us enjoy the simple things, including working hard to be able to enjoy our days off. It’s not always about fine wines and five-hundred-dollar bottles of champagne. While I would love to visit some of the exotic cities you have, ones that I’m positive you take for granted, I’d be perfectly happy taking a walk around campus or going to a park with an aging paperback in my hand, enjoying a glass of lemonade in the hot sun. I’m certain you wouldn’t enjoy a single aspect of what I call life and that’s a real shame. You’re missing out on so many precious moments. Maybe you should try it sometime.”

The glare in his eyes remained but the amusement I'd seen the night I'd met him had returned. "I might surprise you, Ms. Cartier."

"No, Mr. Thibodeaux, no one surprises me any longer."

I somehow managed to turn around, taking long and purposeful strides toward the back. I didn't make it very far before being pulled into the small corridor leading to the bathroom, shoved against the wall. With one hand wrapped around my throat, the other palming the wall, Arman hovered over me, his scent so intoxicating I couldn't breathe.

"God, I want you, Raven. And I will take and taste everything that rightfully belongs to me."

The second I reacted, almost managing to slap him across the face, he caught my hand. I expected a rush of blinding pain as he snapped my wrist for my terrible insolence. But instead, he intertwined our fingers, clamping our hands together as if we were no longer strangers, lovers in every sense of the word.

Even as his hold on my throat tightened, my longing for his touch and the feel of his lips against mine was too much to withstand. I did something I knew I'd regret. I rose onto my toes, capturing his mouth. The heat had built to an explosive level, the hunger burning so intently that I couldn't care less about all the promises I'd made to myself, doing what I could to forget about him.

He was the air I needed to breathe, the only food that would satiate me, and the single person who'd managed to awaken such excitement that I was left breathless, in agony when I wasn't with him. His touch seared my skin, the taste of him filling my empty senses, driving me to the point of madness. I fell into the sweet release where everything else was blocked out. There was only our rapid hearts beating. Only the corrosive toxins jetting through our systems.

As he took full control of my mouth as well as my needs, I arched my back, surrendering the smallest part of myself to him, the deep intensity of exploration all I could think about. The kiss was ripped through with passion, the deep ache between my legs turning into a full throbbing. I was as wet and

hot as he was hard, incapable of deciphering between right and wrong.

As he swept his tongue from one side of my mouth to the other, I moaned into the kiss, the sound captured immediately. The crush of his body wasn't enough. I needed to be writhing under him as he plunged his cock deep inside my pussy. I tore at his clothes, shifting my hips back and forth to grasp the full feel of his thick cock pressing into me. The urgency was so abrupt and so powerful that I was no longer the girl from before, turning into some wanton vixen with desperate needs.

He refused to allow me any room, his needs as strong as mine. I didn't object when he pulled me into the small women's bathroom, not bothering to take the time to lock the door. We were both crazed with need, so much so I immediately reached for his belt, ignoring all the reasons why I should push him away.

My frantic need wasn't lost on him. He tugged at the apron, immediately untying it and yanking it over my head. He was breathless, the lust in his eyes threatening to consume me. As he tugged at my button and zipper, I finally managed to unfasten his belt buckle, laughing nervously as I unzipped his trousers. The moment I was able to wrap my fingers around his shaft, I issued a strangled moan. We were on fire, so much so I knew this moment would burn hot enough to cause permanent scars, but I didn't care.

He'd become the drug I didn't want to live without, the man I'd dreamt of far too often. The beast I should stay away from. Oh, God. What was I doing with him, with this monster who was made of brawn and brutality?

He wrangled my jeans past my knees, sliding his hand between my thighs and massaging my wetness. I was soaked, the scent of my hunger wafting between us.

"Oh, yes. Touch me. Fuck me," I moaned, gyrating my hips. My eyes were glassy, the fog surrounding them not enough to block out the possessiveness in his eyes. There was no going back, no erasing the past between us. There was only this

moment and the future he had planned for us. I was fearful but excited.

When he drove a single finger around the lace, flicking the tip back and forth across my clit, I lolled my head, gasping for air. I stroked his cock, squeezing and twisting my hand, adding pressure and friction.

“That’s it, Raven. Hurt me. Take from me what you want. What you need. I want you to hunger for me always, to feel a desperate desire burning inside of you that only I can satisfy. I will be your only lover, the man who’ll bring you to new heights of pleasure always. Always.”

“I do want you. It’s twisted and sick and I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Don’t think, my sweet princess. Just feel and experience. Take what you need. Be free like you seem to want so badly.”

I wasn’t certain if he was giving me permission or fueling the fire unfurling from deep within. Either way, I couldn’t think or breathe, the need so overwhelming.

“Never forget I own you, princess. You are mine. All mine.” His heated breath skipped across my face as he ripped down my panties, immediately driving his fingers into my pussy.

Gasping, I threw my head back, stars floating in front of my eyes. “Yes. Yes. More.”

He continued thrusting them savagely, the force pushing me onto my toes. “Soon, I’m going to hold you down and fuck your mouth, driving the tip of my cock against the back of your throat. Then I’ll push you to your knees, taking you from behind, fucking that sweet pussy until you cry out my name. Do it for me, Raven. Do it.”

There was no getting away from the man, no escaping the mental and emotional hold he had on me. “Arman. Oh, God, Arman.”

“That’s it. My very good girl.” He flexed his fingers open, pumping wildly, pushing me to the point of no return. “Come for me. Soak my fingers.”

I could no longer feel my legs, was uncertain I wasn't in a daze of some kind, drugged out of my mind. As I dragged my tongue across my lips, I tasted his, so sweet and enticing. I wanted more.

"I can't wait to fuck your sweet asshole, using you until you beg me to stop."

"I'll never... beg you to... stop."

"Mmm... I adore that about you, Raven. You're as famished as I am." His fingers worked magic, and within a few seconds I was pushed beyond imagining, the madness I'd experienced before encasing both of us, snarling us in a thick web.

The man's cock was hot, so fucking hot that I laughed, my legs like jelly. I had to be causing pain, but I couldn't stop myself, pulling all the way to the tip, squeezing. When I felt drops of pre-cum, it was all I could do not to beg him to allow me to drop to my knees just like he wanted, sucking him dry.

"Please fuck me. I can't take it. This is maddening." I tossed my head back and forth.

"Are you a good girl? Will you obey your master?"

"Yes, God, yes." I gave his cock another few rough tugs, the swirl of lights in front of my face preventing me from seeing his expression. But he was tense, spun tightly. I could hear it in his deep voice, and in his dark commands. My pussy muscles clenched and released, dragging me closer and closer to sweet nirvana.

"Oh. Oh. Oh. Oh." My pants were ragged and I tried desperately not to scream out his name. The excitement of what we were doing, easily found by anyone walking in, added to the moment of raw ecstasy.

As an orgasm swept through me, he lowered his head, allowing his savage whispers to float into the sinful part of my brain. I felt every delicious contraction as if it were my first, the pleasure so powerful I was pulled into a vacuum where neither time nor space existed.

"Good girl. Such a good girl."

His praise suddenly meant everything, my heart thudding in my chest from the excitement and rush of adrenaline tearing through me.

“I’m going to tie you down very soon, my sweet Raven. And I’m going to lick every inch of your body. Imagine when I cover you with my cum, rubbing it into your skin.”

“Uh-huh.” The climax turned into a wave, one so hot and needy that I bucked against him.

“I’ll tease you with my tongue, refusing to allow you to come until you bend to my will. Consider this a gift, Raven, one that won’t come again so easily.” He rolled his thumb around my clit, pinching the tender flesh and I would have fallen if the weight of his body against mine wasn’t holding me up.

His filthy words hooked into the deepest part of me, drawing out the increasing sense of desperation. How could I allow myself to fall so hard for this man? I slumped against him, rolling my hand between his legs and fingering his testicles. They were full of seed. Now my mouth watered. “Yes.” The single word was all I could say.

He jerked his fingers from my wetness, holding his arm into the air before spinning me around to face the mirror. “Now, I fuck you.”

His statement was far too exciting, the darkness inside of me hungering for more. Something filthy and sinful. Breathtaking. And utterly terrifying. Which is exactly what he had planned to provide.

This was his claiming of not only my body but also of my soul. This went against all morals and ethics, everything I’d been taught, yet I still didn’t care.

“Yes,” I managed.

“Isn’t that what you want, Raven, for me to take full control over you? To use you. To fuck you. To own you?”

“Yes.” Why did the word come so easily? Even though I was staring into the reflected eyes of the most gorgeous man on the face of the earth, this wasn’t by any means a fairytale. There never would be in this life or in his universe.

He drove the entire length of his cock into my pussy, issuing a deep growl. The way he wrapped his hand around my throat was even more possessive, but it was the look in his eyes that should scare me for all eternity. He was the devil reincarnated and he'd just pulled me forever from the light of my world, consuming the goodness as if he'd always owned it.

As he fucked me, he never blinked. Not once. He plunged with such ferocity I could swear he was a dying man and this was his last act. His hold only tightened, his fingers digging into me. I should feel suffocated because I knew exactly what he was capable of, but this was exactly what I'd wanted.

Maybe the brutal beast was attempting to find his soul. The sounds we made were animalistic, the savage thrusts knocking the air from my lungs. I slammed my hand against the mirror with enough force I was certain it would crack, pushing back against him with desperate need to have him deeper,

When I arched my back, he jammed his slickened fingers into my dark hole, finger fucking my asshole. The moment of filth increased, the sin nothing I could walk away from. This man had become all I hated.

And everything I wanted.

My face was shimmering, but nothing like the beads of sweat trickling down both sides of his chiseled jaw. But it wasn't from exertion, only a strangled yearning that had taken away a part of him as it had done to me. I used the leverage, pushing back against him, meeting every brutal thrust.

Within seconds, his entire body tensed, his jaw more clenched than before.

"I'm coming inside of you, filling you. Fuck, you're mine. Forever mine."

I finally closed my eyes, breaking the hypnotic state, trying to force the gears of my mind to process what was happening.

And the nightmare that continued to unfold.

As his body spasmed, I clenched my pussy muscles, drawing his cock in even deeper. Yet at that beautiful, tender moment I felt a single tear slipping past my lashes.

Maybe he did have the ability to break me after all.

## CHAPTER 14



*R*aven

The aftermath.

Some people would call it an afterglow, but I was stunned by what I'd done, begging the horrible man to fuck me. I continued to tingle all over even in my disgust, doing what I could to grasp onto the bits of sanity that were floating around like molecules unable to attach themselves to each other.

Arman stared at me in the mirror, the look on his face carnal and addictive. I forced myself to close my eyes, unable yet to get out of his tight grasp.

"You still hate me, princess," he whispered before nipping my ear.

"I don't hate you as much as I loathe myself." Which was the truth.

Everything about him was so powerful, enigmatic, and a draw unlike anything I'd ever felt.

"Look at me," he commanded.

And I did, trying to hold the impassive expression I'd managed to snag.

"This is just the beginning."

He squeezed his fingers around my neck before finally releasing his hold, backing away and keeping an unreadable

glint in his eyes.

I gripped the edge of the counter with enough force my fingers ached, now unable to take my eyes off him. Watching the way he slipped his cock back into the very same fine linen trousers that had rubbed up against me only moments before was enough to stop my heart from beating for a few seconds.

Then I looked down, realizing that I would carry the scent of him with me for the entire day. There was no way to erase it. Now my pulse managed to awaken, my mind slowly ceasing to spin out of control. I struggled with my torn panties and jeans, yanking paper towels from the holder and doing my best to clean up the mess we'd made. That he'd made inside of me.

What had I done? What was wrong with me?

What struck me as I trembled trying to make myself presentable was that I continued to hunger for the savage. There was something different about him today, just as insatiable yet the aura surrounding him even more powerful.

He was regal even in his more casual state.

Noble.

Kinglike.

That's what he reminded me of, a king. The thought was ridiculous but so right for him that it was as if I should bow to his power and prowess.

I tugged loose strands of hair into my ponytail, finally able to turn around and face him.

"You're so damn beautiful, Raven. Just think about it. Now, you're all mine."

His words drew me in as they'd done before, perhaps more so. I would never have thought of him as being heroic, but I had a sense he would fight any dragon to protect me, swim the deepest shark-infested waters to rescue the floating raft I was on. The images pooling in my mind were silly but my instinct told me they were accurate.

He lifted my chin with a single finger, searching more than just my eyes.

“Yes, all mine indeed.”

In those amazing seconds where all time had stopped, all rationality ceasing to exist, there was no one else in the world but the two of us.

Until there wasn't, the raucous laughter as someone entered the small space abrupt and jarring, breaking the hypnotic hold. I smashed my head against the wall in my effort to pull away, pressing my lips together to keep him from kissing me any further.

After taking a deep breath, he growled in a low intensity, slowly turning his head toward the girl who'd already slapped her hands across her mouth, backing away.

“I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.” Her body was jerking in motion as she clamored to get out.

He rubbed his thumb back and forth across my jaw as he studied me while I did everything I could to turn my head. His chuckle brought me fully back to reality, disgust with myself roaring through me. “What's wrong, princess? Cat got your tongue? Can't handle the sweltering heat?”

The lovely spell was broken, shattering into a million pieces.

“As usual, Arman. Your destructive, divisive personality shines through.” I shoved both hands against him and he let me go, backing away with a smile on his face.

I hurriedly left the bathroom, making it as far as the end of the hallway, the evil man right on my heels.

“Get ready, princess. Your new life is about to begin. You are all mine after all. And this destructive man will enjoy breaking all your defenses.” With that he returned to the front, leaving me almost shattered from the experience.

I took several deep breaths, fighting the hatred and nerves as I smoothed my hands against the ponytail before taking quick steps back into the light. Without finding out where the vulture was hovering, I bolted for the back room. When I'd crossed the threshold, I pushed myself against the wall, taking gasping but silent breaths.

“What’s going on?” Amy asked, instantly moving closer.

I shook my head, still trying to catch my breath. Then I pressed my fingers across my lips. The kiss had been perfect, so exciting that I couldn’t stop tingling. I hated myself for my body’s reaction, my nipples aching to the point my bra was painful. “Just an arrogant ass for a customer.”

*One who kissed me and I fucked in the bathroom.* Oh, God. That was the truth. What the hell was wrong with me?

“You’re flushed. Did this person do something to you? Do you need me to go after him?”

She’d been protective of me from day one. “No. Of course not. It was just a disagreement. Nothing more.”

“Uh-huh.” She moved around me to the door, folding her arms and standing defiantly. I wanted to pull her away, to tell her to stay away from him but I was rooted to the spot, fearful if I saw him again, I’d lose it, falling to my knees and begging him to let me suck his thick, delicious cock. Oh, God. Oh... God.

“Handsome but dangerous. I know the type. I was married to one. Asshole. Don’t you dare let him fool you.” She wagged her finger at me. “They’ll spoil you at first, showering you with passion and gifts, acting as if you’re the only person in the world who can heal them. That’s bullshit. They’re far too broken to fix. Take it from an old broad. I know what I’m saying.”

“You’re not old, Amy.” At least I could breathe easier.

“I spent a lifetime with a man in five years. It made me very old. I don’t wish that on anyone.”

Her simple action had a way of breaking the spell I’d fallen under. I stood taller, allowing the hatred for him to return. “Don’t worry. I told him to get out and that his kind wasn’t wanted here.”

“Good for you. You put him in his place. Another trait I adore about you.” Amy glared out the door again before shifting toward me. Any other boss would admonish my behavior. Not her. Not after what little she’d told me she’d been through.

Smiling, I tried to keep from hyperventilating. I knew the man would never allow me to end a conversation without tossing in his two cents. Nor was he here for the glorious taste of the coffee.

When I heard the jingle of the bell, I gritted my teeth but found the courage to return to the front.

Just in time to watch him walking out the door. I was so happy. I was sad. I was terrified. The vast array of emotions was ridiculous.

My exhale was scattered, my heart racing so hard I pressed my hand over it. Of course, he'd left the money on the counter in addition to stealing a kiss, the fucking bastard.

Only I couldn't lie to myself. I'd been the one kissing him.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Hate. Hate. Hate.

That's what I had to concentrate on or I'd lose what was left of my mind. I grabbed two of the coffee filters at the same time, emptying both into the trash can with a savage thud, slamming them back into position. Then I felt better. Stronger.

The fucker wouldn't break me in any way, including my resolve.

Five minutes went by. Another ten.

I was still in the same place. Finally, I broke the spell, getting back to work.

When the store had only had one customer left, I could finally breathe normally, snagging another rag and heading toward their table. Something shiny caught my eye. Jesus Christ. He'd driven a bright red Ferrari. I was certain it was his. Only a pompous asshole would purchase something like that.

If he thought he could impress me, he was sorely wrong.

I refused to allow the man to get to me.

Or to take me away from my life.

If I was a smart girl, I'd call the police. And tell them what? I laughed as I scanned the street, unable to locate him but I knew he was waiting like the vulture he was.

Images of our time together floated into my mind and every time I moved, I gathered the scent of spicy citrus and sandalwood. The combination was irresistible.

As I spun around, refusing to fall into whatever game he was playing, I knew in my gut I wouldn't contact anyone, including my father. The man had some kind of crazy control over me, a web that I couldn't break free from, but not from fear. From longing.

God, I hated myself for it.

An hour passed and I continuously moved toward the window, peering outside. He was nowhere in sight, but the car hadn't moved. I wasn't certain whether to breathe a sigh of relief, allowing myself to believe I'd been wrong in my assumptions, or to race out the back door, returning for my car later when it was dark outside. I could walk back to school. It was only... five miles. No big deal.

I was determined to get as far away from him as possible.

When I dared look out the window again, the Ferrari was gone.

Maybe he'd given up. Maybe I could breathe easy.

Maybe I needed a CAT scan.

\* \* \*

*Arman*

Arguing with Raven was exhilarating.

Craving her divine.

Kissing her as close to salvation as a man like me would ever achieve.

Fucking her... Out of control.

Needing her was something else entirely, my mind barely able to think of anything else, including the fact someone was out to seek revenge or destroy my family.

Taking her was truly my only option.

I didn't like the undercurrent that currently existed in the family. Francois' constant push, his need for independence was a possible problem. But that was the least of my worries.

By the time I'd made it to Baton Rouge, he'd sent the required information, although the details on the fire weren't very helpful. Neither was the warrant. It had been quickly thrown together, likely grabbing some judge off the golf course to sign. I was certain of it. There was an old boys' way of handling business that was entirely different in Texas. Perhaps that's why I could barely tolerate traveling there. Nothing was straightforward, always someone obliging another.

Okay, well, it was methods used by every powerful individual, but I preferred straight out blackmail to greasing someone's palm. That had never been my style. A smile crossed my face. Taking Raven was the perfect ace in the hole. I'd need to figure out how best to share the joyful news with Mr. FBI director.

God, I did love being an evil bastard.

Raven had pushed me more than any other woman had before, so much so that for a few seconds, I'd almost found myself tongue tied. It was rare that someone who barely knew me had pegged my personality so well. I'd never done any of those things she'd talked about, preferring to follow in my father's footsteps of enjoying the finer things in life.

It had been drilled into me that certain things were beneath our regime. I could see Raven in her bare feet, skipping along the water's edge, laughing as the sun began to set, a dripping ice cream cone or glass of champagne in her hand. Loving life. That was her personality, even though she'd yet to blossom into the stunning rose I knew existed within her.

The kiss had been an explosive reminder that we were toxic together, so much so that remaining aloof could be more than an insignificant problem. Fucking her in the bathroom of a shitty little coffee shop had been beneath me.

But so fucking hot my skin continued to tingle. The woman was more than just a problem. She was a disaster waiting to happen.

At least with my daughter living in the house, we could more easily keep our distance.

Maybe it would allow my bride to be the opportunity to develop a plan to slit my throat in the middle of the night.

Chuckling, I rubbed my jaw, staring at the front of the coffee shop, wondering why I'd remained outside for well over an hour. Respect? I had very little for anyone else, long ago realizing that I garnered the respect, not the other way around. But for some reason, I'd wanted her to finish out her working day. I adjusted my sunglasses, noticing she'd crossed in front of the oversized plate glass window for the fifth time. She was obviously looking for me.

Was she hungering for another round of passion? Was she longing for my touch? Another stolen kiss? Or was she trying to determine how best to rid herself of me? If I had to guess, I'd say a little of all three. There was no chance of denying the crackling electricity nearly consuming us when we were in the same room. It wasn't in my best interest to fall prey to the dark and rather sadistic cravings that had remained in the back of my mind for weeks, control necessary.

Especially since handling her father would be a challenge, but one I looked forward to. She would become my greatest asset in a war of testosterone and influence, fueled by greed. There wasn't any doubt Thomas Cartier held secrets like everyone else. The key was finding and exploiting them, which I would do.

Maybe through Raven's former flame Carter Ramsey. That was an avenue yet to be tapped into, but one I couldn't ignore. The fact he was Ramsey's son was even more fascinating. They could be building an empire of their own, but for what

purpose? I highly doubted it was about enforcing the law. There was more to it. If I had to guess, I'd say they were developing a regime, one built on the hunger for power and wealth.

Like my family had achieved. The kind they'd never experienced. With a single exception.

It was the best answer I'd come up with so far.

I felt the slight vibration of my phone and sighed. It was still a typical business day. The call from Maddox was one I'd expected. I'd asked him to quietly make inquiries as to Don Carlos.

"What did you find?"

"Carlos is laying low. He's recently back from vacationing in Cayman, flying in two days ago, one day after the suspicious fire. He took his entire family there with him."

"He didn't want to have any possibility of a connection and he had a built-in alibi."

"Exactly," Maddox said. "So you're aware, the official report is that the fire was an accident."

"And the DEA? Have they pushed any harder?"

"No. From what I learned, their appearance was more of a breeze by than a full investigation just like you suspected. You were also right about the judge who signed off on it. He's a business associate of Devin Carlos."

"A tangled web of lies and deceit. Oh, my," I said, more amused than annoyed. An important aspect about arrogance and greed, relying on friends for an increase of power, was one wrong move or piece pulled from the intricate web and the entire interlocked puzzle fell apart. That's what I hoped to do in my effort to destroy several enemies at once. "I can tell there's more."

"You bet there is. From what I was told by a guy who owes us a favor at the police department, an anonymous call was made insisting the recent shipments to the construction site were

drugs, not equipment. Whether that's true or not, your guess is as good as mine."

"Would the guy lie to you?"

"Not if he wants to live."

The sun had risen to the point a glare appeared on the coffee shop's window. That made me even more uncomfortable. "It was a warning of a different nature. The invasion of our business operations was meant as an intrusion and nothing more. A warning. And someone is enjoying fucking with us." Especially given the loss of inventory and time was minimal, they hadn't intended on doing any extensive damage. However, I suspected their actions were just the beginning. What would they do next?

My thoughts briefly returned to Raven. While I was certain Thomas wouldn't dare allow his daughter to be caught in a crossfire, I'd need to be careful being seen with anyone. Unless I used our impending wedding as a lure. The one thing I wouldn't do was risk her life. Not only was her appearance in my life far too valuable, but I also couldn't tolerate the thought of a single injury.

If anyone tried, I would erase them from this earth. I realized my anger had risen in direct correlation to my cock as I became aroused at the thought of her. I had it bad for the girl. She'd already become a weakness.

I moved away from my vehicle, pacing the sidewalk. Out of the corner of my eye, something caught my attention. Stopping short, I quickly scanned the area across the street. What the hell? There was someone else watching the coffee shop.

"Are you planning a trip to Texas?" Maddox asked, breaking me out of my lust-filled haze.

"Not yet. The project and the issue are both Francois' babies. I won't interfere unless absolutely necessary, although he's being encouraged to handle the situation forcefully. I'll be heading back to N'awlins in an hour or so. We'll have a meeting on Monday morning. Just keep an eye on every

business activity. If there is a single warning or issue, I want to be told.”

“Someone is trying to push every button.” Maddox laughed. “Perhaps they don’t know who they’re toying with.”

I moved to the edge of the sidewalk, studying the guy, the distance just far enough away I could make out little about him except he was watching the store. My gut told me that he was waiting for Raven to leave.

Returning to the car, I grabbed my jacket, struggling to get into it. The last thing I needed was to be brandishing a weapon in broad daylight, but I refused to be caught off guard.

“Perhaps not. They also have no clue I have an ace up my sleeve. Find out everything you can about Carter Ramsey. He might be a wildcard in all of this, but it’s better to know if he has any direct connection to Devin Carlos. Also check when the last confirmed time that was Raven was seen with him.”

“The last request might be tough, but I’ll see what I can do.”

“You might be surprised. If I had to guess, I’d say Thomas and Travis were planning on making a huge deal out of their children being involved. Maybe it backfired.” I waited for traffic, moving across the street.

“Maybe Raven has a mind of her own.”

“Oh, she does,” I said, trying to remain stealthy as I approached. “I’ll call you tomorrow. Don’t interrupt me tonight unless an entire project burns down.”

“Understood. Enjoy the diversion.”

Diversion was an appropriate term. Handful another. Removing Raven from her life wouldn’t be without its difficulties. And once my enemies discovered she was in my life, we’d both become fair game.

“By the way, you were right about Zoe,” I said in passing.

“Whoa. You’re sharing with me that I’m right about something. What am I so right about?” Maddox asked, still laughing.

“She was thrilled to hear I was getting married.”

His advice had often not been well received over the years, but I was glad I’d listened to him. “That’s good, Arman. It will make things somewhat easier. When are you going to tell Raven about Zoe?”

“When we return to the house.”

“I’ll be curious how it goes.”

“Yeah, me too. I gotta run. There might be an issue.”

“Meaning what?”

“I think the cat is out of the bag as far as Raven and my involvement with her.”

“There’s no way,” Maddox snarled.

I continued my approach. Then the mystery guest lifted his head, staring right at me. We were only fifty feet apart. “It is if I was followed, which makes me think the entire family is being watched. Fuck. I’ll call you later. Make certain we don’t have any additional breaches of security.”

“Yeah, I’ll handle it. Don’t do anything stupid.”

“I don’t plan on it.” When the asshole took off running, I ended the call, bolting after him.

The possible assailant was fast, but not as fast as I was. Yet when he rounded a corner, weaving his way through traffic to get to the other side, I was forced to stop for a passing truck. However, I’d caught a glimpse of a weapon.

“Come on.” I ran further down the sidewalk, barely waiting until the truck passed to race into the middle of the street. And directly into the path of an oncoming car.

Horns blasted.

Tires squealed.

Metal flashed in the sun, the driver of the quickly advancing vehicle forced to slam on his brakes, jerking to a stop two inches from me.

He was hanging out the window seconds later. “What the fuck is wrong with you, asshole?”

I slammed my palm on the hood, gasping for air, barely avoiding another collision before making it to the other side of the street, hissing as I glanced down one side of the sidewalk then the other.

The perpetrator had disappeared.

“Fuck. Fuck.” I threw my hands on my hips, pacing all over again. Who the fuck was watching me? Devin Carlos? One of Ramsey’s men? Or had Thomas purposely put his daughter in harm’s way hoping I would take the bait?

Goddamn it.

After returning to the other side of the street, I took long strides toward the coffee shop.

Raven had confounded me but even more than that, she made me crave to take all of her. To take her as mine, a possession that no other man would ever dare touch again lest they face my harsh punishment. I pushed away from my Lamborghini, glancing at my watch after doing so. She was due to finish her shift in five minutes.

I’d waited long enough. I’d provided her with a gift that she’d never appreciate. Patience. It was rarer than pink diamonds. Now it was time to explain what was happening between us. The danger was real. Now she was directly in the crosshairs.

But no one would take away what already belonged to me.

## CHAPTER 15



*A* rman

Whoever said possession was nine tenths of the law was obviously a part of a dangerous syndicate. I chuckled from the thought as I strode across the street, moving toward the door. As of this moment, whether or not my beautiful bride to be understood, Raven Cartier had just become mine.

My submissive.

My lover.

My possession.

Soon, she would fully understand what it meant making a deal with the devil.

As soon as the bell jingled, Raven stiffened as if knowing I'd returned. Then she shook her head. When she shifted around to face me, she took a deep breath. If she'd been in any other location, I wouldn't have put it past her to have a weapon in her hand. In a way she did, her brazen attitude and voluptuous curves giving her a distinct advantage with a monstrous man like me.

I wanted her more than ever.

"It's time," I told her. While I hadn't intended for my voice to sound so gruff, the stark reality of the danger we both face coupled with the desire lurking in the shadows prevented me from being anything but on the edge.

“I refuse to go with you.”

More defiance. My fingers itched to pull her over my knee, spanking her rounded bottom until it was the color of blossoming pink roses in the spring. “You don’t understand, princess. Why are you bothering to deny what we have together, the electric passion we share?” I made certain I had adequate view of the street. She noticed, narrowing her eyes, but her laugh was full of contempt.

“We have nothing but animal magnetism. That’s not what builds a life together. I’m not going with you and that’s final.”

It was time she completely understood she had no choice. I crowded her space, drinking in the combined scents of our sex, taking a deep whiff, which made her blush. She was adorable when she did so. “I’m going to say this as quietly as possible. You have no choice.”

“To hell with you.”

The woman made my balls tighten.

“Perhaps I wasn’t clear enough with you. You made a deal. I’ve come to collect. Besides, you won’t like the consequences if you don’t, or what I’ll do in order to ensure your cooperation. Now, do you understand me?”

She glanced over her shoulder. I’d learned enough about her boss to use the information in damaging ways if necessary, although I had no intentions of harming a single mother. However, Raven had no idea what I was capable of. That could prove to be useful. “Why?”

“Isn’t that obvious? A man like me gets what I want.” Explaining the dangers of what we could be facing would likely only scare her away. I couldn’t risk her running, especially to her father.

“By taking it.”

“If necessary.”

I inched even closer, keeping my eyes locked on hers. When she darted her gaze down the length of me, my sixth sense told me she was searching for a weapon. I moved as far as the

counter, cocking my head. There was no reason to raise my voice. “Do I need a weapon to be able to engage in a conversation with the woman who made a deal for her life weeks ago?”

“You’re such a bastard.” Her whisper was harsh. Her voice was strangled, but the pulse on the side of her neck was a clear indication I’d excited her. She was a born submissive, still struggling with the realization.

“So you’ve told me more than once. So be it. Get your things. Now.” I kept an eye on the street, giving her a stern look.

She rubbed her hands down the apron she was wearing, the one I’d ripped off of her before, untying the knot and shaking her head. As she jerked it off, she quickly disappeared into the small kitchen. It was possible she would decide to head out the back door, but I believed otherwise. She was a smart girl. She knew I’d hunt her down.

I heard voices, some laughter. Then she appeared again with a small purse slung over her shoulder. Wearing jeans and a tight tee shirt, she looked every bit the college student, not the femme fatale that had arrived at my party. The rustic look, including her scuffed tennis shoes and the threadbare knees on the faded denim worked. It also highlighted her vulnerability and youth, such sweet innocence.

Or so she wanted everyone to believe.

Behind her intense eyes and quiet demeanor was a lioness who could strike at any moment. Instead of being wary, I remained intrigued and highly aroused. Given I was an evil man, perhaps I’d force her to deep throat me on the return to my home. Our home.

She held a hate-filled look in her eyes as she moved from around the counter, yanking the ponytail holder from her hair and shoving it into the pocket of her jeans. As she swung her hair, she purposely walked several feet around me, taking long strides toward the door. When she stopped at the edge of the sidewalk, only then did I move to join her, flanking her side once I was outside.

“What now?” she asked, more nervous than before.

“Now, we pack up some of your things, but you’re going to need to do that quickly.”

“Why the urgency?”

“Because my family is currently under duress, threats being made. It’s better to get you safely locked behind closed doors where I can protect you. Do you understand?”

She threw a look toward the plate glass window then nodded.

“Fine but there will be questions. I can’t just leave school.”

“Different arrangements will be made so you’re allowed to graduate.” At least I hoped I could accommodate her. At this point, the game plan might need to be changed.

Her laugh was bitter yet sent a jolt of electricity slamming into my system. “A daily chauffeur?”

“If that’s what it takes. Come on.” I heard the coldness in my tone and it surprised me. When I placed my arm around her, she jerked away from me. Then I grabbed her elbow, keeping her close. “Make no mistake, Raven. We’re going to spend some quality time together.”

“I don’t know why you think you’ll be able to get away with this.”

I said nothing as we crossed the street, cognizant of people around us. She seemed surprised by the vehicle I’d driven, her eyes lighting up when I unlocked the door to the bright yellow Lamborghini. After I eased her into the passenger seat, I leaned over, indulging in another whiff of her perfume. “Because, sweet princess, the business arrangement you entered into will make you a very powerful and wealthy woman.”

“And all I need to do is belong to you?”

“We’re getting married and you’re going to ensure that everyone you tell is convinced we’re madly in love.”

“You’re joking.”

“I never joke about the affairs of business or the heart.”

She stared at me incredulously, holding a hateful gaze as I headed around the front of the vehicle, climbing inside and immediately starting the engine. When I pulled my weapon from my jacket, placing it between my legs, she sucked in her breath.

“What happened?” she asked.

“You were being watched.”

“By whom?”

I chuckled as I roared away from the parking spot against the curb. Then I felt the heat of her glare seconds later. “Unfortunately, he didn’t wait around long enough for me to ask.”

“Jesus. If he had, he’d be dead.”

“If he was threatening you, he’d get what was coming to him. Make no mistake. I protect what belongs to me.” I glanced in the rearview mirror, ensuring at this point we weren’t being followed.

“What’s in it for me, this deal we made?” she asked. “What kind of wealth are we talking about? It must be worth my while to create such an egregious lie.”

“Thieves are in no position to try and negotiate a deal.”

“Yet you’re a businessman. Right? That’s what you do for a living, or so you’d like the world to believe. You negotiate contracts. Yes?”

She had been doing her research. “True. What do you want?” I threw her a glance and realized I’d caught her off guard.

But I was even more surprised when she rallied, her smile one of mischief. “Ten million dollars.”

“Done.”

She laughed, the sound full of giddiness. “You would pay me that much money to be your fake wife? Can’t you find one on your own?”

I leaned over then placed my hand on her leg. She shivered at my touch but didn’t try to pull away. Her indignation and the

question she'd asked was a clear indication Thomas had never told her about his past, or his connection to the Thibodeaux family. It would seem Thomas would do anything in his power to forget about the people who'd cared for him.

“First, we already had a deal. Remember? Given who your father is, our alliance will be an important business decision. Second, I don't want or need any complications in my life. I have far too many responsibilities. We will have an arrangement and nothing else. Is that clear?” I had to keep my tone terse, or she wouldn't take the situation seriously enough. My instinct was telling me not bringing a coterie of soldiers with me was more dangerous than I'd realized.

I sensed her continued hatred and was fine with it. She needed to be afraid of me to obey. Fuck. What the hell had I walked into?

“Every girl's fantasy. A fake, brutal, and aggravating bastard of a husband. But I'm to bow to your physical needs at a moment's notice. Correct?”

Now it was my turn to smile. “It would seem we have no problems with our physical interactions. Call it a perk of the alliance.” After making a few turns, I felt positive we weren't being followed. It was still risky to allow her to gather a few things, but I doubted whoever the fucker was wanted to tangle with me, especially in the middle of a school full of people. What I didn't like was that the connection had been made between us.

Danger was looming all around us. Fuck. I hadn't thought this out very well.

“What we share will never be an alliance. I don't share alliances with assholes and liars.”

“What else would you call it?” The girl knew how to throw barbs with the best of them. That made my cock stay hard as a rock.

“Blackmail.”

I chuckled and continued with my original plan, heading toward the university, pulling up in the parking lot of her dorm

a couple of minutes later. When she stared out the window, horrified that I knew so much about her, I craved her as much as before. “I know everything about you and your family, Raven. Every detail. No one can truly hide who and what they are.”

“From insidious predators like you.”

“You’re in danger, Raven. That’s a simple fact.”

“Because I’m with you.”

“Yes, but also because of your father’s position.”

“Which is why you’re using it. That will likely land you in prison for the rest of your life. It is a federal crime to abduct an agent’s child.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to explain to her the full reason why she’d become my possession. No, it wasn’t time yet.

“We’ll gather a few things. I’ll purchase the rest. Whatever you need. You’ll be provided with a credit card with no spending limit. You’ll also have run of my house. We’ll talk later. But make no mistake. You will obey me.” I gave her a stern enough look she seemed to shrink back, fear returning.

“You really think someone is following us?” Her voice was entirely different, some of the fire vanishing.

“I don’t know for certain but I’m not hanging around to find out. I have enemies in every state, every city.”

“And I’m a weakness. Jesus,” she said as if still trying to process she was no longer just a university student. She shifted as far against the passenger seat as possible, her nerves obviously kicking in. “You really are a horrible man.”

“You have no idea.”

“I can’t believe you’d pay me that much money for a lie. There must be more to this. I will find out. I’m very resourceful.” She continued to search my eyes. She certainly wouldn’t like or understand the answers. Plus, the truth could destroy her. Ordinarily, that wouldn’t bother me. However, with her, there was something about her innocence that continued to reel me in.

“I would have paid you more because you’re very special, Raven. That’s what you’re worth to me.” I glanced out the windshield, trying to remain patient. Her ragged breathing continued.

“Let me guess. I’m required to sleep in your bed, pretending I give a shit about a man who obviously wants to destroy me.”

“I have no desire to destroy you, Raven.” But someone else certainly would.

Her look was suddenly far away, sadness creeping into her seafaring eyes. “You already have.”

The comment was said in passing, but it struck me as the reality of what I was doing. To her. My life as well. I could never love her, not the way she’d dreamt about over the years. And she would hate me until the day I took my last breath. Our relationship was no Camelot. There would be no happy ever after.

“Answer the question. Am I moving into your bedroom, sharing your closet?”

Jesus Christ. How was I going to get through to her that our time was running out?

“Yes. That goes without saying. You will act as if the sun rises and sets around our brilliantly short and beautiful love affair. That includes with your entire family, Raven. Anything else will breach the terms of what will be a formal contract.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning the terms of the original verbal contract will stand. I’ll have your family assassinated if you try and escape or if you break the terms in another way. Now, let’s go.”

“Hold on. As usual, you’re trying to ensure that there’s nothing I can feel for you but hatred. That saddens me, Arman. Underneath the façade is a good man.”

“Don’t fool yourself, Raven. Your first assessment of my character was accurate. And as usual, you forget that what we’ve already shared was mutual. You will be my wife. You will surrender to my needs.” What I found even more

surprising than the awakening of my soul from her touch was the fact I wanted to be a good man. For my daughter. And for the woman who'd be my wife.

“You must have terrible parents to allow you to believe that.”

I laughed. “You’ll be the judge of that. What I can tell you is that my father loves my mother deeply and she adores him.” I wasn’t certain why I was bothering telling her, but it felt right. “They’re still sweethearts. As far as what they taught their children, my father ensured that his three sons and his only daughter could handle almost anything.” That didn’t mean my father hadn’t been a brutal taskmaster, but there had been love and laughter in my family.

Including during one of the darkest times in our family’s lives.

“That’s beautiful. If only I’d been closer with my parents.” The sadness in her voice was evident and she looked out the passenger window. “At least I had my baby sister. She was my best friend, my dad refusing to allow me to live like a normal kid.” She sighed. “Why am I telling you that? You don’t care.”

“I do care, Raven.” Perhaps that was the problem. I cared too much.

“I wish I could believe you.”

There was a wall between us that I’d built, one that I was uncertain of how to remove. There was also a part of me that believed she’d have been better off if it wasn’t. Sighing, I realized my grip on the steering wheel was tighter than normal. She did that to me, unnerving the fuck out of me. I laughed inwardly, wondering if she had any clue the kind of effect she’d had in such a short period of time. I was almost forty-two years old and I’d been dead for so long, I had no clue how to live like a normal man.

“And my life? Will I be allowed to have a job or friends?” she asked after a few minutes of silence had passed. “Or will you keep me in a glass container, fearful I’ll spill my guts to the world?”

Now she was purposely goading me. “You’ll be allowed to have a life of your own. Within parameters of course. You will

play the part of my companion as I will yours. You'll want for nothing. You'll be a treasured member of my family." With the car idling in front of her dorm, I slowly turned my head. She was truly the most beautiful creature I'd ever laid my eyes on. I was instantly aroused, the longing to have her all to myself intensifying.

Raven sensed it, her cheeks flushing. As she touched the side of her face, I could tell she was processing how she felt about me. There were more emotions in those few seconds than I'd had for a full decade.

"A new world. A new family. Sisters. Brothers. In turn my family lives." The spark in her eyes was ferocious, the little lioness sharpening her claws. Tonight, I would claim her. "Nothing I want."

"Correct, princess, but it doesn't matter if you want it or not. I will have the papers drawn up for you to sign. I keep my promises."

She unfastened her seatbelt, turning her head slowly. "I will never be your princess. A word of advice. Be careful what you ask for, Arman. I just might become your greatest nightmare. You have no idea what I'm capable of."

"Duly noted. Allow me to offer you a piece of advice as well. Some aspects of your life are sequestered in shadows, the dark realms meant you utilize for protection, but there are dangers lurking in them, creatures who are hell bent on taking control. There are times you need to learn to trust even those considered your enemy. They could be the only ones capable of keeping you alive."

The moment of tension between us was more palpable than ever before, her glare full of intense emotion as well as questions that she refused to ask. It was at that moment I realized she had no idea about her father or his past. Ripping away the veil Thomas had tightly woven around his family might help her understand my motives, but the truth would also destroy what was left of her innocence. Her goodness.

And God help me, but I didn't want to be the man responsible for doing so. But there was no other choice.

Not just because of her father.

As she eased from the vehicle, I sucked in my breath, grabbing and sliding the weapon into my jacket. Little did she know she already had become my princess and my nightmare.

The lovely girl with hair the color of the darkest chocolate, eyes the shade of the greenest ocean waters had become my greatest weakness.

And not just because of my enemies. She'd managed to crack a portion of my armor, unearthing the man I'd once been so long before. Now what the hell was I going to do?

\* \* \*

"You keep looking in the rearview mirror," Raven said quietly.

"That's because I'm making certain we're not being followed." I'd taken the back roads, now close enough to New Orleans I knew better than to let my guard down.

She twisted in her seat, her chest rising and falling as she did.

"Just relax, princess. The car has some special features."

"Let me guess. It's bulletproof."

Chuckling, I threw her a glance. "Something like that."

When she settled back against the leather, she locked her eyes on the weapon positioned between my legs. "You always carry a gun with you everywhere you go?"

"It's the nature of the business, sweetheart."

"I hate your world already."

"It's not so bad. You get used to it."

"I never will. Never."

I had no words of comfort. I wasn't that kind of man. Still using the back roads made it a hell of a lot easier to notice when another vehicle popped into my rearview mirror. A dark SUV to be exact. "Fuck." I hadn't intended on saying the word out loud, but Raven heard, stiffening instantly.

“What is it?”

“Maybe nothing.” I pressed my foot down on the accelerator, continuing with my next move. Seconds later, I made a sharp turn onto another road only used by those who knew the area. When the prick behind us made the same turn, I stiffened. “I’m going to tell you this once. Do not move from your seat. Do not try and interfere.”

“What’s happening?”

“Trouble. You get an up close and personal look at my world.” One she’d hate even more after this.

Fortunately, she slunk down in the seat as far as possible without me commanding her to do so, her breath already raspy. I maneuvered the car, taking the curve at a high rate of speed. She yelped once but said nothing as I hit the gas pedal again.

The fucker sped up, coming way too close for comfort, but it allowed me to catch a glimpse of the occupants. There were at least two men, the glint of a weapon evident only a few seconds later. I spun around another corner, the backend fishtailing. Then I tooled down the straightaway. I had to get us to some cover. Unfortunately, there was nothing around, the rural area leading into New Orleans full of a hell of a lot of nature but little else.

I knew it like the back of my hand, but that didn’t give me much of an advantage. And I was beginning to think outrunning them wasn’t a possibility given the driver continued gunning the vehicle. If I was lucky enough to make it to the next set of curves, I might be able to make some headway. Just before the road shifted, shots were fired from a high-power rifle.

The fucker had thought himself to be prepared, ready to shoot out the windows. Little did he know they wouldn’t shatter. I’d made certain they were bulletproof, the body of the vehicle as well, as I had with every one in my possession. I placed my hand on her leg, squeezing just as the first bullets slammed into the back window, the savage cracking sound pulling a sharp scream from her throat.

“Oh, God.”

“We’re okay. Just hold on.” I concentrated on driving, making headway as I navigated the curves with ease, the car handling beautifully. I knew her well, the sports car having saved my life more than once. “Whatever happens, stay inside this vehicle.”

“What does that mean? What are you planning?”

“I’m going to handle a situation, princess.” While I was able to buy us a few seconds, making another turn, I knew it would be short lived. The tires would likely be their next target. That would put us in a precarious position that I refused to face. “Lock the door.”

I slammed on the brakes, the car skidding from one side of the road to the other but I was able to maintain control. Her scream was short lived. Then she gripped my leg, digging her fingers in.

“Do what I say and you’ll live.” I had no time to waste, jumping out and slamming the door. The second I managed to point the gun toward the crossing road, the driver swung around the curve, nearly slamming into a tree in his effort to catch me. I stood with both hands on my weapon.

And I kept firing, pinging noises echoing, smoke rising almost instantly. Then the tires blew, and the driver lost control, coming too close for comfort as the driver overcorrected, the heavy piece of steel flying into the air from the momentum. I swiftly spun around, firing off additional rounds, slowly lowering the weapon the moment the front grille slammed into a tree.

With dark smoke billowing, I raced toward it, quickly peering inside. At least one of the assholes was still alive. I managed to jerk open the door, firing off four shots in a row. Then I backed away as soon as I witnessed flames. As I headed for the car, I could see the terror on Raven’s face as she peered through the window, both palms pressed against the glass.

*Boom!*

## CHAPTER 16



*R*aven

My scream was cut short by the fact I could no longer breathe. Hysteria rolled through me and I fought to get free from the tight confines of the seatbelt. Smoke was everywhere, flames licking up to the sky and I watched in horror as pieces of steel floated down from the heavens next to hot embers and ashes. I couldn't breathe, couldn't think. I knew shit like this happened, but I'd never seen a dead body or a tragedy except on television. My life had been completely sheltered, so much so that I couldn't think.

Except I was terrified that Arman was dead. The thought ravaged me as the smoke raced toward the goddamn sports car. Another scream rushed up from my throat and I struggled to get the door open, tears running down my cheeks when I finally managed. Stumbling out, I hit the pavement hard, yet I had to get away. I had to run. No, I had to know whether he was still alive. I just...

Everything seemed to be in slow motion as I took my first steps, almost falling again, acrid smoke stinging my eyes.

Somehow, I managed to lunge forward and away from the fire, struggling to see where I was going. "Oh. Oh. Oh. Oh." I had to get away. When I was jerked backward and into someone's arms, I let off a bloodcurdling scream.

"Shush. It's me, baby girl. I got you. It's okay. You're safe."

“Oh, God. Oh...”

“It’s okay,” Arman assured me.

“No! It’s not okay. I thought they’d killed you. I heard shots then the fire and...”

“I’m fine. We’re both fine.”

Nothing would ever be fine again. How could it be?

Gasping, I was still crazed with fear and worry, fighting to get out of his hold, managing to do so until he spun me around, gripping my jaw with one hand, wrapping his other arm around my waist and holding me closer.

“No. No. No. No!”

“We’re okay. I have you. I’m not letting you go. I would walk through flames to keep you safe.” His voice was soothing but there was no stopping the rush of adrenaline keeping my pulse skipping or the way my heart thudded against my chest. He lowered his head, capturing my mouth and I was as stunned by the swell of emotions as I was from the constant rush of terror.

Yet I yielded to him, his kiss giving me strength. As he swept his tongue inside, I realized he was okay, unhurt by the horrific blast.

So I clung to him, fighting with the anger and uncertainty inside. He pulled me against his body, his crushing weight everything I needed at this moment. The fire raged but he was protecting me, and it felt as if I was floating.

When he finally backed away, he pulled me into a hug. “It’s okay. You’re safe now.”

“Safe. I’ll never be safe.”

“As long as you’re with me, you will be. You’ll need to trust me, princess.”

As we stood watching the flames, I felt sick inside. This man would have stopped at nothing to save my life.

What the hell was I supposed to do with that?

\* \* \*

*Trust me...*

The words remained lingering in the back of my mind as he drove away from the horrific scene, making a single phone call to the man I knew as Maddox.

“Yeah, state route fifty-seven. You’ll find it. Just get a cleanup crew here as soon as possible.” He growled the orders, although he was trying to keep anger from his voice. “No, Maddox. I have no clue who the motherfuckers were. But I will find out. See what the hell you hear on the streets.”

I tuned out the rest of the conversation, staring out the window as the city of New Orleans came into view. I wasn’t entirely certain how I felt, other than brutally cold inside. I folded my arms, shivering violently.

“Are you okay?” Arman asked at some point a few minutes later.

“Sure.”

“Do you want me to turn the heat on?”

I glanced over my shoulder. “I’ll be okay. You don’t know who they were?”

“I have suspicions, but I didn’t have a chance to confirm them.”

“Because they’re dead.”

“It was a necessity, Raven. They wouldn’t have hesitated to end our lives.”

“Because of me or you?”

“That remains to be seen. Just rest. We’ll be at my house behind secure doors soon.”

Take a leap of faith.

That’s what it felt like Arman was saying to me. No, what he was demanding I do, given I had no other choice whatsoever.

He also had the audacity to believe I could trust him. Could I?

Perhaps that's what I was doing after all, which was ridiculous. My mother had told me more than once that it was okay to take a giant leap, grabbing a hold of whatever brass ring caught my attention. That's what she'd attempted to do with my father, learning later than his aspirations weren't what she'd believed them to be. She'd wanted him to run for office, eventually becoming the leader of the free world.

Thomas Cartier had wanted no part of it.

Maybe there was an underlying reason that I hadn't been told. I was no fool. There was a personal reason there was such hatred between my father and Arman. I could sense it a mile away. What would happen if I placed some trust in my captor? I remained in a fog, uncertain how I was supposed to feel.

Here I was, positioned in the passenger seat of a two-hundred-thousand-dollar sports car with bulletproof glass after being involved in a shooting, a chase, and a fire. I was being taken away from the comfort zone of my fabulous little life. Or maybe I'd been living in a bubble for far too long. I still couldn't believe this was happening. All because of the worst decision I'd made in my life.

Or had the fates brought us together for some ungodly reason? The craziest aspect about what was happening was the connection we shared, brilliantly bright and amazing, which had already snagged a portion of my heart. God. How was that possible? Maybe I was fooling myself, but it seemed I brought out a softer side to Arman, one that confused the hell out of him as well.

I could sense in the very depth of my being that he was keeping something from me, an ugly truth about my world, although for the life of me I had no clue what that could possibly be. Maybe I didn't want to know.

For a few precious seconds, I closed my eyes, involuntarily brushing my fingers across my lips. The kiss lingered like a stray strand of hair whisked back and forth across my cheek, a constant reminder. His scent remained as well. I'd been right before. His touch had permanently stained my skin.

Here I was because of a dare I'd accepted, a task that most intelligent women wouldn't have agreed to.

I hated the sorority and would make it my life's mission to shut it down. Hell, I should be able to do that with ten million dollars in my bank account. A payoff for... sleeping with and marrying the sexiest enemy alive. Wasn't there a movie of that name from the distant past? I could remember a famous actress playing the heroine's part, facing her terror of swimming to be able to get away from an abusive monster.

Ha. I could swim but I had no doubt if I tried, whatever waters I selected would be shark, piranha, and crocodile infested. I rolled my eyes, realizing he was slowing down as he drove through the gorgeous tree-lined streets. That left altering my name and stealing his fabulous car. The thought almost brought a smile to my face. It was obvious I was still in shock.

"Would you really have walked through fire to save me?" I asked out of the blue.

"Without hesitation."

"Wow. We were brought together on purpose. Weren't we?" I asked absently, uncertain an answer mattered.

"There are no such things as coincidences."

"The girls at the sorority. That's why they left me there."

He threw a look in my direction and there wasn't a molecule in my system that didn't shake from the heat sparking behind his eyes. "That infuriates me. They put you in harm's way."

"Isn't that what you are doing?"

His exhale was long and ragged. "You're right. I am. However, I have the ability to keep you safe."

"From yourself as well?"

The way he half laughed had such a bitter sound. "That I can't answer."

"Who are you really, Arman? I mean it's obvious you're dangerous, very capable of using whatever weapon you have. I

doubt you have a conscience given you seem to have no remorse for taking two lives.”

“Remorse had no place in my world.”

“I don’t know how you take it.”

I studied him as he thought about my question, the uncertainty in his eyes easy to see even from where I was sitting. It was as if he’d asked himself the same things countless times, concerned that his answer was as contrived as what it appeared his life had become. Who was I to try to fit the pieces together? I didn’t know him. I’d told myself I wouldn’t care if I did.

“Because I have no other choice. And who I am might scare you.”

“Try me. Right now, I’m not certain anything else can terrify more than what just happened.” God, the stench of smoke lingered, strong enough I felt nauseous.

“Fine. I’m someone who no longer believes in myths or legends, that our lives are planned prior to our births, fate laughing at us while we attempt to pull away.”

“I don’t know what that means.” What I did know was that it was perhaps one of the most haunting things anyone had ever said.

He took a deep breath, holding it for a few seconds. “It means life is what you can wrestle from the ashes.”

I had no idea what to say and concentrated on the view out the passenger window instead. “I never believed in fairytales or fantasies. Maybe that’s because my father refused to allow me to read them as a child. I had plenty of books, stories about creatures and dinosaurs, but never once did I own one about knights in shining armor or princesses locked in a castle, rescued by their handsome prince. Isn’t that crazy?” What was crazy was that the memory was so private there wasn’t a single person I’d ever told. Why him? Maybe because I’d almost died. Maybe because he’d killed two people in order to save me.

And because I felt closer to him than I had to anyone in my life. Wasn't that warped, toxic?

"That's why you hate when I call you princess."

Dropping my head, I noticed I was fiddling with my hands, which I did when I was overwrought with anxiety. "Let's face it, Arman. You're no prince. Although you certainly look like one." I laughed more out of nervousness than anything. "And you're right. We're very attracted to each other. If only this was a normal relationship."

"Is there such a thing?"

"Maybe not. But I admit to you that I thought I'd fall in love at least once in my life." The words seemed strange to him, but as soon as I said them, a sharp pain rushed into my core. I'd been terrified he'd died. I'd been worried that I'd lost him. What did that say about me? That I was falling in love with him? That was nuts. Wacko. Not this girl. No way. He was my captor.

And everything all my dreams had been made of.

When he said nothing at first, I stole a glance, unable to read his expression, but his eyes remained haunted. Maybe we were actually two very broken people. What did that matter in the least?

"No, princess. I'm no prince."

"What happened to you years ago? I sense such utter sadness that it almost crowds out the anger boiling your blood. That's why you were so angry those men were following us."

"I was angry because they were trying to take you away from me."

"You won't tell me, will you? You want me to trust you, but you can't offer that in return."

"Trust is difficult for me. And don't ask questions you don't want to hear the answers to. Besides, what does it matter?"

"I'm not certain, Arman, but I do want to know. Isn't that ridiculous? I long to learn everything about you. What your favorite cookie is and what tropical island is your favorite.

What was the last book you read and have you ever binge watched a television show. I want to learn your favorite candy and wine. Stupid crap that means nothing in your world of priceless art and vehicles that cost more than I'll ever make in a lifetime." I laughed at myself. Maybe the biggest lie of all was that I did want the whole fairytale.

The knight slaying every dragon. Why should he bother gracing me with an answer?

"Whew. Those are tough questions, ones I need to think about," he said. There was an entirely different lilt to his voice and almost instantly, another series of shivers jolted my system. My God, the brooding man even smiled.

"Chocolate chip hands down. But the cookie needs to be hot so the chips melt in your mouth. The Cayman Islands. It's absolutely beautiful and more natural than so many destination spots. It's been a long time since I've been there but the snorkeling is out of this world. The last book was a Clive Cussler adventure, I believe it was *The Chase*. If you haven't read his works, you'd love them. Very unfortunate about his death."

I wasn't certain my mouth hadn't dropped open.

There was a reflective look in his eyes, as if no one had ever taken the time to bother asking him his favorite anything.

"As far as binge watching, that would be a toss-up between *The Last of Us* and *The Walking Dead*. I can't say I appreciated why zombies are so popular until I did." He laughed, obviously remembering something very personal.

Now there was no doubt my mouth was hanging open. Thank God, I was in the confines of a vehicle, or I'd be fearful an insect would buzz in.

"What was the last part? Oh, yes, candy and wine. To be honest with you, I can't remember the last piece of candy I had. Maybe a piece of dark chocolate. Wine. I prefer a fine merlot with hints of raspberries and citrus. There are several vintages that come to mind. I'm certain I have an absolute favorite."

Almost as soon as he'd opened up, I sensed him shutting down. And I didn't want him to. My reaction was to reach over, placing my hand on his thigh. His nostrils flared, the thick bulge between his legs growing. "That's the man I could see myself marrying. Someone maybe I could fall in love with."

As always, his thick steel armor returned.

"It's better off if you don't, Raven. You'll only get hurt."

Why bother trying to get through to him? I knew the answer as certainly as I did the sky would be blue come next morning.

His spirit had been crushed by someone. 'S.' He'd loved her with all his heart. When he placed his hand on mine, using our combined fingers to squeeze his leg, I was grateful he'd allowed me to slide past the coat of armor.

If only for a few minutes.

Then he eased my hand to the seat, returning his to the steering wheel. He was terrified of caring about me. My heart went pitter patter. Why hadn't I allowed my defenses to fall enough to see his pain? Because he was damn good at guarding it.

"Why did you take me today as opposed to a week or a month ago?" I asked maybe two minutes later. There had to be a reason, including whatever danger he said we were both in. I stared down at my ring finger, as if a diamond would magically appear. I was certain there'd be one glued on my finger soon enough to fuel the charade.

"Because you contacted your father, leaving a rather interesting message. Because you needed a reminder of the deal you entered into."

I opened my eyes, lifting my head away from the headrest, trying not to allow my mouth to stay open from shock.

"Oh, my God. You bugged my phone." He'd made the statement so matter-of-factly, his voice so controlled that I sensed he was enjoying terrifying me. But that wasn't it. This was his usual method of operation, a daily activity if necessary. That was more jarring than almost anything else. He was truly the most powerful man I'd ever met.

After tossing me a heated glance, he chuckled and rolled down a side street, the once quaint homes replaced by mansions. This must be the section of town where all the rich people live, although I was surprised the neighborhood wasn't that far outside of town.

"I didn't have the opportunity, Raven. But your dorm room was fair game. Given you are under my protection, I had to ensure no one would touch you."

"Was my roommate involved? Did she betray me? She asked me to be in her wedding."

"No, Paisley is very much your friend. I wouldn't involve her as that wouldn't be fair to either one of you."

"Please don't try and disguise your activities as noble. You've been following me. Haven't you? You were there more than once, watching me. I felt you."

"Mostly, I've had a soldier check on you from time to time. As I said, your security is now a priority, and yes, I visited your dorm to ensure you were safe and because I wanted to see you."

"Jesus Christ. You're..."

"Horrible? Isn't that what you were going to say, Raven? It's fine. Whatever you think of me is just fine."

"Stop!" I snapped. "You want me to hate you because you can't allow anyone to get close. Jesus. I don't know what you went through in your life, but I can't live in the shadow of anger and fear, or whoever you cared for so much that it broke you into pieces."

The air in the car was sucked almost completely out, the feeling of being suffocated clawing at my nerves. And my aching heart.

"I will do everything in my power to keep you safe and to make you happy."

"Practiced words, Arman. Fine. Have it your way. I won't bother trying to get to know you any further." The tension disgusted me. If only we could both allow our guards to fall.

“A soldier watched me? You mean he was guarding me. You make it sound like you’re in the middle of a war.” I fisted both hands, the anticipation of the next few hours, days, weeks so daunting I couldn’t breathe.

He slowed the vehicle down even more, finally making a turn down a short driveway. While I’d only seen his house in the dark, the palatial grounds gave it away. There were at least four people working on the beautiful landscaping, tending to the shrubs, and watering plants and flowers. The entire scene was surreal. This was where I was going to live.

Visions of a fairytale ending floated into the back of my mind. I was an idiot to think this would end well.

“Make no mistake, Raven. My entire family has been embroiled in the middle of battles and wars for several generations. I have countless enemies who will stop at nothing to burn our empire to the ground.”

“And I’m a weakness.”

“Yes. You are. But you will be safe.”

Well, at least he didn’t sugarcoat the reality.

“Why do you want to continue living that way? Always looking over your shoulder, worrying about being killed. That’s why you can’t enjoy something off the cuff. How sad. Why not alter your lifestyle, become a financier or a software developer? Maybe own a baseball team or concentrate on your land development business in Texas? Become a restaurateur.”

The way his upper lip curled was entirely too sexy, which forced me to look away. When the entire house came into view, I was stunned. It was a cross between a gothic Victorian and a sweeping Mediterranean. If there was such a thing. But with the arched windows and doors, the tile roof, it didn’t exactly fit a true Victorian even with the ornate iron railing surrounding the triple-decker porches.

“You already know about my real estate ventures and that includes owning a hotel and fabulous bistro in New Orleans. I have no desire to become embroiled in computers as I’m not into that kind of technology. I pay people to handle the

technological aspects of my lucrative businesses including a handful of accountants and stockbrokers. However, I am in discussions to purchase the New Orleans Panthers. If my brother had anything to do with decisions I made, he'd approve of me attempting to purchase the Saints franchise as well."

It seemed every word out of the man's mouth was incredulous. Flippant. And sexy as hell. Everything about him was also infuriating.

"You can't possibly be telling me the truth, Arman."

"And why would that be? I own or partially own several businesses, have investments in a half dozen others, Raven. My father might be considered a brutal man, but he was an astute businessman, teaching his three sons and my sister as well that power isn't about what you own but about what you gain in doing so."

"Profound." And it was actually, a flash beneath his armor, something private that he told no one else. As much as I'd told myself after the nefarious deal I'd made that I wanted no part of learning any more than necessary, that had been nothing more than a lie. Just like the one I'd told myself that I could contain my lust. That wasn't the case at all, at least not around him. There was too much fire between us, his eyes burning with licking flames every time he looked at me.

And I felt the same. God help me, I almost liked him. At least a part of him.

"A truthful statement yet one I didn't understand for far too long," he said quietly.

"Let me guess. Your net worth is somewhere in the billions."

He tipped his head and pulled the car in front of a six-bay garage, pressing a button for the automatic opener. "Somewhere in that neighborhood a few times over. I'll let you in on a little secret. Money no longer means anything to me."

"Then give it away to charity."

“Not allowed in my family. I have trusts and contracts, wills mandated from an early age. There are too many complications. I have a family to think about.”

“How very sad. I bet you’ve never considered jumping into a fountain in your bare feet.”

The same shadow of sadness crossed his face like a dark cloud threatening to erupt with hail and violent lightning. Then it passed just as quickly, his masked resolve returning. “You might not believe this, but once when I was a kid, I jumped into a fountain because of all the shiny change. I was maybe six. My parents were mortified but they didn’t try to stop me. However, perhaps you’ll need to show me why that would be considered fun.”

There he went again, making me fall hard for him. Damn it. Just when I thought I could hate him until the end of time.

“Perhaps I would. I’d like that. If you’ll allow me.”

“Maybe I will.”

“Maybe then I can place my trust in you.”

There was something entirely different in the way he was looking at me, even more all-consuming, his eyes turning so dark that I was certain shadows had fallen all around me. For the second time in one day, all time and movement had ceased to exist around us.

Only this time, my heart wasn’t thudding because of desire but something deeper, more classically romantic.

And the most terrifying feeling of all.

I was falling hopelessly, madly in love.

With a beautiful, toxic, heroic man I’d once called a monster.

## CHAPTER 17



*R*aven

The intense vibrations of the engine rumbling underneath me were no match for the throbbing between my legs. As the powerful moment continued, all I could do was hold my breath for fear that the beautiful few seconds he was allowing would be shattered.

When Arman lifted his hand, cupping my jaw, I nuzzled against the warmth, closing my eyes briefly.

*“Si seulement je pouvais être ton prince.”*

His husky whisper, his heated breath cascaded across my face and neck, and I didn't need to be fluent in French to know what he'd said.

If only I could be your prince.

He pressed his lips against mine, brushing them back and forth ever so lightly. I found myself clutching his shirt, clinging to him as if he was the only lifeline I needed, keeping me from drowning in a sea of dangerous creatures. As the kiss deepened, I allowed myself to be swept up in the moment of passion, longing for so much more. He darted his tongue inside, savoring the sweetness.

I struggled to get to him, still trapped by the tight confines of the seatbelt, arching my back as much as possible. His hold remained firm, just as possessive as before, yet more tender. When he finally backed away, he offered a smile.

There was so much to say but nothing coherent came to mind. He had the ability to block out everything else but the intensity of our shared feelings.

How wonderful.

How petrifying.

As he pulled into the garage, I glanced across the massive structure, the size deceiving from the front. There were at least eight gorgeous, polished to perfection vehicles in his collection, some of them considered classics. They didn't include the giant SUVs parked out front.

Jesus. His family had more money than God. No wonder they were considered one of the ten most influential families in the world. Not just the United States but the world. Both he and his brother Francois had been on the most eligible bachelor list several times. I understood that my father's position meant he was at odds with the illegitimate side of Arman's businesses but why go to this extreme? There had to be a more personal reason.

I couldn't wrap my head around the situation whatsoever but there was no denying my feelings for him were deepening.

"These all belong to you?" I asked as he cut the engine.

"They do, one of my few hobbies. I tinker with their engines, sometimes bodywork when I have the time. One day I hope to restore a perfectly amazing piece of junk into something special."

"I'd be curious as to your other hobbies and I've love to see what you came up with for a special car."

"First things first, Raven. We'll get you settled. If you want to take a shower or change clothes, feel free." He unfastened his seatbelt, immediately opening the door.

"And then?"

"We'll have a drink." As he climbed out, I noticed immediately that he was scanning the garage as if looking for enemies lurking in the shadows.

The thought was as unreal as everything else. I'd noticed a couple of guards, anticipating I'd see more. I took a deep breath before easing onto the polished floor, still marveling at the incredible beauty of the vehicles, all shiny, all lined up waiting to be driven. As soon as I closed the door, I noticed he was watching, smiling as if amused I seemed so taken aback.

"So you're aware. I have a couple of additional phone calls to make. Then I'm shutting down business for the majority of the weekend."

"What about the big, bad wolves?"

He laughed, his reaction another tender moment as he eased a strand of hair from my face, taking a few seconds to brush my cheek. The simple action made me shiver all the way to my toes. "They wouldn't dare attack me inside my own home for fear of starting a war. But yes, I'm beefing up security."

"What if that doesn't stop them?"

"Don't underestimate me, princess. I might surprise you."

"You already have," I said absently, which was the truth.

"Tomorrow night we have dinner with my family. They will enjoy getting to know you." He grabbed the two small bags I'd thrown together, although I couldn't remember if I'd even packed clean underwear in my frazzled state.

He'd stood in the middle of my dorm room, watching me like a hawk, constantly looking out the window. He'd known we were going to be attacked. I'd asked him stupid questions, grilling him and an attack on us had been imminent. God. I was a stupid girl.

He'd remained inches away when I'd left a message for Paisley, lying to her that I was headed home for a few days, which she hadn't questioned. Then he'd taken my phone, worried about who I'd call. I had a feeling whether or not it was permanent depended on my behavior.

Everything was such a muddled mess that the plans he'd already made didn't seem out of place. Or maybe I'd just resigned myself to what would be. For now. Images of the fire remained in my mind. He had a cleanup crew of all things. Of

course he did. He was a big, bad kingpin. He had dozens, maybe hundreds of men carrying guns and God knows what else with them.

There was a certain level of fatalism pooling in the back of my mind as he led me into his house. His world was teetering between fiction and fact, greed and power. I had no idea why I was thinking that way. I was a college student, a girl who should be talking to her best friend about boys and my upcoming career, not holding profound conversations about the philosophy of life.

But he'd touched me with his honesty.

He'd saved my life.

And he was making me queen to his king.

It was all a girl could ask for.

Another laugh bubbled to the surface. I was practically losing my mind.

“You have full run of my house, Raven, except you are not allowed into rooms where the doors are closed or locked. I do handle business from the house, and there are others who maintain quarters here.” He placed the suitcases on the floor, not bothering to turn around.

Others. He meant staff.

His deep voice was methodical, relaying instructions and orders as if I was being led into the bowels of a convent, forced to follow in his shadow. Never speaking unless spoken to. I couldn't think that way. I had to find a middle ground where this was tolerable.

Until I figured out what to do. If there was any recourse. I swallowed hard, feeling more out of place than ever.

“Do you understand?” he asked a few seconds later.

“Yes.”

“Also feel free to roam the grounds, enjoying the pool as I always have several guards keeping watch, but make no

attempt to leave without my permission and an escort. I have a gym and an extensive library, a media room as well.”

The crux of my imprisonment.

“A beautiful estate,” I said absently.

“It’s comfortable.”

That was a word.

I wasn’t certain if I expected to be greeted by a dozen servants or guards, meeting them as if I truly was a princess awaiting my ascension to Thibodeaux throne, but the quiet when I stepped inside was unnerving. As we moved in through the side entrance, passing by a massive laundry and mud room, as well as a corridor of closed doors into a glistening kitchen, the late afternoon sunlight beaming in through the windows, I realized I’d been holding my breath.

“And if I make an attempt to escape?” I dared to ask.

Arman finally turned to face me, his infamous smirk followed by a deep furrow in his brow. Then he pulled a beer from the refrigerator, and a bottle of water for me, holding it out. I grabbed the beer instead, twisting the top easily. At least I was rewarded with a smile. When he did, the entire room lit up. God, the man had unbelievable power.

I took a gulp, as he studied me for a few seconds before returning the water to the fridge, grabbing a second beer for himself.

“Then you will be punished,” he stated with no emotion, but his eyes sparked with desire as they’d done before.

“Those people will try to kill us again. Won’t they? They’ll try and use me against you.”

“Unfortunately, yes, on both counts. I assure you I won’t allow that to happen.” He took a long pull, never blinking. I wasn’t certain he was breathing. “Recent threats have been made to my brother, who has nothing to do with the business. In addition, one of the developments under construction was set on fire. Whoever they are, they’re escalating. That means I

need to be very careful with certain decisions that need to be made.”

“What about my father? Are you trying to insinuate that he might be involved?”

He took a deep breath. “If by that you mean responsible for almost having you killed? I doubt it.”

“He’s not who he says he is.”

“Are you asking or telling me?” Arman narrowed his eyes.

“I’m not certain. He never talks about his past. I stopped asking if I had a bigger family. Is he a bad man?”

There was a flash of pain in his eyes that I hadn’t expected, but it was quickly replaced with another mask. He was so good at that it made me crazy. “We’ll talk later.”

“Why won’t you tell me, Arman? Remember that trust you were talking about?”

“I need to secure the premises and ensure my family is safe. I’m not trying to keep anything from you. I’m trying to protect you.”

“The best way you can protect me is by being honest. I don’t know why I’m telling you this, but I care about you. It makes me sick inside but that’s the way I feel. When I thought you died on that road, I was devastated. Isn’t that insane? You took me from my life and I have feelings for you. I must be crazy.”

For a few seconds, I could tell the armor had fallen, the man inside excited as if he was a high school boy with a crush. But as with every moment he provided me with a glimpse inside, he yanked it away. “You’re not crazy, princess, but caring about me isn’t in your best interest.”

“Of course not,” I choked out, shaking my head. “A man of steel. You’ll need to remind me where your room is so I can drop my things off. Maybe I’ll stay out of your hair; you can lock me inside to be sure.”

His eyes sparked with amusement. “I’m surprised you don’t remember and I’m not locking you inside a room.”

“Just the house.”

“You’re not my prisoner.”

“I’m not?” Lashing out at him was based on my own continued fear. I couldn’t look directly in his heated gaze for fear I’d lose another part of myself in it. “I’ve done my best to forget about that entire night. I’m sorry I snapped at you.”

“You’ve been through a lot today. Try and relax. I’ll have one of my staff drop the bags off as well as unpack them for you.”

“I can do it, Arman. You may consider me a princess, but I want to do things for myself by myself. I can’t believe you have someone to do that.”

His chuckle was dark and dangerously alluring. “I employ hundreds of people, Raven, only some work inside my estate. That includes a chef as you wouldn’t like what little I can prepare in the kitchen. And I assure you that the few employed inside this household won’t bother you and for tonight, we’ll be completely alone, my housekeeper leaving soon.”

“Oh. Okay. Then who will cook?”

He stopped short, as if he hadn’t thought about that. “Maybe we’ll order in.”

“I can cook. Some. I make a delicious cheeseburger and fries from scratch and can waltz my way around a mean lasagna.”

I’d caught him off guard again. “Perhaps we’ll consider it. Whatever you’d like is fine with me. As I said, make yourself at home. I’ll only be a few minutes. Our bedroom is on the third floor, last door down the hall.” He backed away, leaving me with a quick nod, walking out a corridor, his heavy footsteps echoing on the cold tile for a few seconds.

How was it possible the man took my breath away?

*Because he saved your life. Because he’s gorgeous. Because you...* Nope. I did not love the man. He wasn’t lovable.

I turned in a full circle, finding myself a nervous wreck, rooted to the spot.

There were dozens of ways to attempt to escape but he was certain I'd choose not to do so at this point in time.

And he was right.

Our bedroom. Butterflies continued to swarm inside, another moment of lightheadedness forming. Marriage. God.

The realization was somehow already eroding what was left of my resolve. I took another sip of beer, so uncertain of my surroundings I had no idea what to do. The draw to the outside world pulled at my attention first. I headed toward the window, able to catch a glimpse of the pool and outdoor kitchen that I'd escaped from what now seemed like a lifetime before. Somehow, it looked entirely different in the waning sun.

The orange glow was spectacular, the beauty of the landscaping all too perfect.

I had a hand on the doorknob to head onto the trellis-covered patio, but another sickening sense of dread washed through me. There was a ticking timebomb waiting to go off and both Arman and I were stuck in the blast zone. His warnings of danger and enemies had obviously gotten to me.

Turning abruptly, I headed for the hallway, realizing his home was even more beautiful than I'd remembered, inviting in every way. I milled about the surroundings, finding myself smiling as I moved from room to room, finding the library he'd mentioned. He was right; his collection of books was extensive. What I found curious was there as a section that could only be described as young adult novels. There was even a pristine collection of Nancy Drew mysteries. I laughed, glancing over my shoulder as if I was still intruding. Wow. I knew nothing about his brothers really, including the third one he'd mentioned.

Maybe he had a niece.

After touching a few of them, admiring his tastes for at least ten minutes, I returned to the hallway.

The staircase was suddenly in front of me. I had no idea where he'd gone but had obeyed his rule to not enter rooms where

the doors were closed.

I caught a glimpse of the housekeeper he'd mentioned, her quick glance in my direction followed by moving into the kitchen without saying anything. No doubt to gather my bags as directed. Whew. His beautiful home was completely out of my comfort zone.

The staircase continued to loom in front of me. There was no reason to be frightened of exploring the second and third floors. As I headed up the stairs, my grip on the railing remained firm, the one around the bottle almost painful. The lack of noise was terrible. It was also unnerving, so much so when the glass bottle accidentally hit the ornate wood, I jumped, nearly tumbling down the stairs.

This was ridiculous.

Remaining on the second floor, I debated finding the bedroom upstairs and decided against it, peering down the long hallway. There was no oddness in the shadows, light coming from almost every room given the open doors. As I passed by, I noticed guest bedrooms and a small sitting room, a partially closed door catching my attention. It was open by a few inches, more than I'd considered just a crack. I couldn't help myself, pushing it open with a single finger.

The beautiful room was decorated as an office, yet decidedly girlie with shades of violet and turquoise, including the iMac. I glanced around the room, noticing the bookshelf nestled near the front window. Three shelves were filled with textbooks and novels I'd read in high school. Confusion settled in.

When I noticed an entrance into another room without a door, I moved through it, straight into the bedroom of a young woman. Immediately stiffening, I wasn't certain if the area had been made a shrine. Something was off. Then my curiosity kicked in and I moved to the closet, glancing over my shoulder before opening the door.

It was similar to the one in Arman's bedroom, only filled with clothes meant for a young woman, many with tags still on them. There were tennis shoes and boots, purses, and a few pairs of low heels. Was this from the past or the present?

I backed away, furious with myself for invading, even though I hadn't intended to.

When I hit something solid as a rock, I closed my eyes.

Arman.

“What the fuck are you doing in here?”

## CHAPTER 18



*A* rman

Anger had never been my friend.

When I allowed the dark emotion to tear through my soul, bad things happened, the kind that usually took an entire cleanup crew to handle. While I'd tempered it over the years, my reaction at seeing her inside my daughter's closet had been unacceptable.

The beautiful vixen who'd worried I'd died while trying to save her had rattled me more than anyone had in a very long time. The thought of almost losing her had driven me into a moment of madness, an entirely different level of rage. Now this; my emotions were raging on a scale that she didn't deserve. She was trying to find her way, ignoring what was between us. But what I'd seen in her eyes would keep me awake for the entire night.

I took several deep breaths, reminding myself that I'd planned on telling Raven about Zoe tonight. Now, with what had occurred, there could be few secrets between us. It was vital Raven fully understood what was at stake.

I'd made a quick call to Landry, ensuring there were no breaches in security. Thankfully, there'd been no additional warnings, nothing to be concerned about, yet the edge remained.

I'd make a call to Francois and my pops as well. They were ensuring that Louie had additional men posted at his work, with the kids at all times and at his house. Whether he liked it or not. Maddox had yet to hear anything, not that I expected the responsible party to announce who he was and what he was planning. Maybe I'd hoped stopping the madness would be easier. I was a fool. That had to stop.

Finding her in Zoe's room had completely unnerved me, the last straw in a long day and difficult few weeks. But I knew what I felt about her, and it had crossed over from being a game, into something else entirely.

Tonight, I wouldn't be able to fight it.

I'd opened up to her. I'd shared a portion of me only my daughter knew. I'd make a mistake by not telling Raven about her, yet I sensed the woman was continuing to push my buttons on purpose. Hell, I would too, given my mysterious actions, not telling her details of what was going on. I had to admit I continued to admire her spunk.

However, she would need to learn that rules had been established for a reason. Her boundaries would need to be established right now. Even though I knew in the back of my mind she'd eventually shatter every one of them.

"I asked you a question, princess. I was explicit in my instructions. You were not to enter into rooms where the door was closed." I jerked her around to face me, enjoying the flush of embarrassment crawling up both sides of her luscious face.

Raven yanked her arm free, rubbing it as if I'd used too much pressure. "I didn't disobey you. The door was open. I thought I was walking into an office."

"You're inside a closet, princess. You seem to have a need to snoop in them."

Her eyes flashed with anger from the reminder. "How dare you. You know what happened. Who is this? Is this a mistress you have on the side? Are we living here together? If you expect me to do something like that, you're insane." The goading was her method of discovering information.

I glared at her, the mixture of fury and amusement setting a fire deep within. “This is my daughter’s suite. It’s her closet that you’re standing in. She is my world right now, Raven. You had no right to invade her space. But I should have told you about her.”

“Daughter,” she repeated, her eyes opening wide. “You have a daughter. Oh, wow. The Nancy Drew books. What’s her name?”

“Zoe.”

“Then S was your wife.”

Another wave of anger swept through me, enough so I grabbed both her forearms, yanking her onto her toes. “You listen to me. Sophia is off limits to you. Period. I don’t want to hear her name. Zoe doesn’t need to go through that again.” I shook her with enough vehemence, her eyes opened wide, her shock at my actions, not my statement. “You are my possession and nothing more. That’s it. Nothing else. You made a deal, now you’re going to live with it my way. My rules. My house. This isn’t about love. Now, I’m going to punish you for this.”

Raven managed to pull away from me, her reaction quicker than my own. She cracked her hand across my face, her entire body shaking from anger and righteous hatred.

What the fuck was wrong with me?

“I hate you. I thought for a microsecond you would be different after everything that had occurred and the confidences you allowed me to hear. You shared part of yourself, but it was to continue luring me into submitting to you and nothing more. Even after you risked your own life. I just can’t handle this.”

“Stop, Raven. Just stop. Now.”

“I can’t. Just let me go.” She rushed around me and I allowed her to, confused and furious at my response and my actions. “Don’t worry, Arman. You’re not the kind of man I could fall in love with because you refuse to allow yourself to be loved. And you’re not punishing me. I did nothing wrong. I’m sorry about Sophia. I’m sorry it hurts Zoe. I’m sorry you can’t feel

anything any longer. Maybe Sophia left you because of your personality. Maybe she grew tired of being afraid all the time and the brutal lifestyle you forced her to endure. I don't know but I feel sorry for you. So very sorry."

She stormed away and I knew in the back of my mind I should allow time for us both to cool down. Unfortunately, she'd opened Pandora's Box and all I could think about was fucking her in my bed all over again. Only this time would be different.

Because I'd taken her as mine.

I jerked around, racing after her. She sensed my presence and shrieked, running toward the stairs. She was too quick, easily getting away from me and onto the first-floor landing.

I lunged forward, catching her by the arm, spinning her around in a circle. I snapped my hand around hers before she could connect her palm to my face once again, our combined heavy and heated breathing already creating a fog around us.

"Not so fast, sweetheart. I'm the one in charge. Remember. My house. My rules."

"The hostility is beneath you, especially after today."

"Soon, you'll be beneath me, begging me to fuck you just like you did only hours before."

"I'm not playing by your rules and I can't care about you. I refuse to."

"You can tell yourself as many lies as you want but I know the truth."

Raven's eyes lit up with the same fire of passion I'd seen in the bathroom, the longing in her eyes even more explosive.

"You know nothing."

"I know you're wet, *cherie*, because you smell so sweet, like a blossoming rose on a spring day or a drop of honey mixed with brown sugar."

"You are a reprehensible man." The words dripped from her mouth, her lower lip quivering. I had the sudden urge to bite

down on the tender flesh until I tasted her blood. I was nothing but a carnivorous beast because she brought it out in me.

“That’s not what you said before.” I yanked her even closer, marveling in the way her scent intoxicated me.

“Do you always believe everything you hear?”

“Are you calling yourself a liar?”

Her laugh was like sweet music, so much so I was ready to toss her against the wall, fucking her like an animal all over again. But she deserved better. Hell, we both did.

“No, I’m calling you a horrible man. You’re the liar.”

“I’m many things, sweetheart. You’re about to get a crash course. But you will heed the need for punishment.”

“Not a chance.”

She yelped again when I pushed her against the banister, bringing my hand down on her bottom. My hand instantly stung, but I craved to strip her of the dense material, providing a round of discipline on her bare bottom. My cock was already standing at full attention, the combativeness we shared driving the beast from deep inside to the surface.

This woman had sparked such a series of raw emotions in me that I was thrown off my game. I wanted to dominate her, to have her body writhing under me to the point I was ready to go mad. Fucking her in the bathroom had done nothing more than whet my appetite, awakening the sadistic side of me. I cracked my hand several times as she continued to try to get out of my hold.

The filthy things I could do with her rattled the forefront of my mind. I was thankful I’d sent everyone away. My staff had certainly never seen me this way.

It would seem her refusal to obey my rules added fuel to the fire. She managed somehow to slip through my fingers again, shoving me hard enough it gave her an advantage. I stumbled from the force she used, which gave her the opportunity to get away.

Maybe I enjoyed the chase far more than I should.

“I will find you, princess. Then imagine what I will do.”

“Fuck you!”

Her shrieks of laughter dissipated as she bolted down the hallway, disappearing before I had an opportunity to know which room she'd headed into. I stood to my full height, rubbing my hand across my jaw. The girl packed a mean slap. All I could do was grin before adjusting my cock from the building agony. So the beautiful woman wanted to play cat and mouse with me. That made my balls tighten.

But the game was one I would win. There was no way for her to escape, no ability to hide for long. I was an expert at hunting.

I raked both hands through my hair, taking a deep breath before moving toward the first room, holding my breath as I stepped inside. There were few places for her to hide, but I moved from one couch to the other, half expecting she'd found a weapon of some kind, one of my art pieces to knock against my head.

The thought kept the grin on my face. When I was satisfied she wasn't hiding in the room, I moved to another, remaining as quiet as possible. There was no sign of her. Returning to the hallway, I realized I'd left my office door cracked, which made it fair game for her to enter. Using a single finger, I eased it open, peering inside. Her scent gave her away, but I moved toward my desk with as much stealth as possible.

“Imagine what I'll do when I find you, my sweet princess.”

“You'll need to try harder.”

She wasn't hiding under the desk, but behind the door, bolting out with a screech. I issued a growl, barreling down the hallway. Her long hair flew behind her as she ran, bounding up the stairs two at a time.

But I was too quick for her, yanking her into my arms, lifting her against me and trudging down the stairs where I returned her to my office, not bothering to close the door behind me.

The way she was wrapping her long fingers around my shirt wasn't an attempt to get away, but to pull me even closer.

There was lust in her eyes, the electricity crackling between us. We were both breathless, the need becoming unbearable.

“You are getting a spanking.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Oh, yes, I would.” I was completely aroused, so much so the round of discipline would be minimal, my hunger too significant. I lowered her onto her feet and she immediately backed away, hitting her bottom against the edge of my desk.

We stared at each other.

We hungered for each other.

We were fucking perfect for each other.

“Where is your daughter? Won’t she be wondering why a strange woman is in the house?” She shifted back and forth from foot to foot, dragging her tongue across her bottom lip, even more playful than before.

“She’s staying with a friend. All. Weekend.”

“Oh. But your housekeeper is still here.” She threw a look at the door, her lower lip quivering from anticipation. “How terrible for her to accidentally walk in on something so... egregious.”

I shook my head, inching closer. “Nice try, princess. Ginger is already gone. She’s very efficient. We’re all alone. Just you and I here in this big house.” I took another deep breath, giving her the kind of heated gaze that could burn down a house. She shuddered in response, a slight nervous tic appearing under one of her shimmering eyes.

“What about your soldiers? They’re on high alert.” She planted her hands on her hips, lifting her head high.

“Yes they are, princess, determined to protect what’s mine with their lives if necessary. However, they’ll only attack under my orders or if a bomb goes off. They won’t enter my home otherwise without explicit permission.”

“Don’t tempt me with the bomb idea.”

Laughing, I inched closer. “My wild vixen. I’d like to see you try. Now, I suggest you undress and lean over the edge of my desk while I get my paddle.”

“What? A paddle? You’re not serious.”

“Very. You heard me. I have just the thing for naughty girls who refuse to obey. Big. Dense. Perfection.” Unable to resist, I touched the tips of my fingers of one hand together, pressing them against my lips as I exaggerated the sound of kissing them. Her hard swallow sent a rush of adrenaline down my spine.

“What good is a spanking going to do?”

“You need a firm hand. You’ll thrive under my tutelage.” Tossing barbs back and forth was continuing to electrify both of us. My cock was rock hard and throbbing.

She laughed, glancing away as if preparing to distract me. “I don’t know what to say.”

“There’s no need. Just obey.” Now I was pushing her buttons, seeing how far she’d go, even more surprised when she didn’t fight me any longer, yanking off her shoes then lowering her head as she unfastened her jeans. When she spun around to face my desk in an action of modesty, I raked my hand through my hair.

Fuck.

She was everything that I shouldn’t want yet exactly what I needed. The reality hit me hard, like a sledgehammer in the gut.

I wasn’t entirely certain when I’d last been in the locked drawer that held what few implements of discipline I’d purchased over the years. A grin remained on my face as I headed for it, the cabinet one that only I had the key to. I found myself fumbling with the small set of keys, fighting to get the slender metal piece into the lock. When I opened the drawer, a sense of dominance rushed into my system. This was exactly as it should be.

The paddle was made of exotic wood, dense enough the sound when it was connected against skin was scintillating. Oddly, it

had only been used once years before.

I pulled it into my hand, twirling it several times before taking a deep whiff. The slight scent was invigorating, but not nearly as much as Raven's perfume lingering on my skin. I heard the beautiful woman grumbling under her breath, the rustling sound keeping the smile on my face.

When I turned around, my breath was caught in my chest for a few seconds. Seeing her completely compliant, leaning over the edge of my desk with her arms pressed against her sides was utterly breathtaking.

And I was so far removed from my comfort zone, I was shocked. Which almost never happened. It took me a few seconds to regroup. Then I advanced, taking my time to position her legs just so before running two fingers all the way down her spine. Goosebumps immediately appeared on her skin, her breathing becoming more ragged.

She'd pressed her cheek against the cool wood of the desk. I placed the paddle only inches away so she could gaze at the implement that would provide her needed discipline. Then I proceeded to lift one arm over her head then the other.

"Grip the edge of the desk for me, princess."

Raven made a point of exaggerating her moves, flexing her fingers open and lifting them before curling one hand then the other around the edge. I tapped my hand on her rounded bottom, taking a few seconds to caress her smooth skin. Then I pressed my hand against the small of her back.

"Stay in position, my beautiful creature, or we'll need to start again."

She sucked in her breath, holding it when I took my time wrapping my fingers around the handle of the paddle, slowly tracing her arm to her back, then moving it ever so slowly along her spine to her bottom. By then every muscle in her body had tensed, her breath skipping and her skin glistening from tiny beads of perspiration.

The anticipation was killing her.

As it was me.

But my needs would only be sated by fucking her like a wild animal.

I tapped the flat of the paddle against one side of her bottom then the other. She yelped in response, lifting her head and twisting.

“None of that. Be my good girl.”

I didn't need to be staring into her face directly to know she'd rolled her eyes. She would attempt to be anything else at this point. Which was another reason I craved her so intently. I twirled the paddle three more times for her to see.

Then I issued the first hard crack, the sound louder given the type of wood used. She remained tense, kicking out her legs but to her credit she was able to maintain her position.

Then I delivered three more in rapid succession and she rolled, gasping for air.

I pushed my hand against the small of her back, making tsking sounds. “I guess we need to start over again. I think it's best if you count them off. Let's say today I'll give you twenty-five.”

“Why not a hundred.”

“Deal.”

“No!”

Chuckling, I allowed the sound to be dark and filled with as ominous a tone as possible. She moaned in response, licking her luscious lips, her scent of desire more potent than ever.

“Ready?”

“No,” she whimpered, scrunching her entire face as she lifted her head.

I showed her my index finger then brushed it down the bridge of her nose. “This is exactly what you need and you know it.”

“To hell with you.”

“If you don't start behaving, I'll wash your mouth out with soap as well.”

Her venomous eyes slanted in my direction and it was impossible not to feel another strong urge to fuck her.

I took a step away on purpose, once again tapping the paddle against her right ass cheek. Then I gave her two strikes, lifting the paddle and waiting for her response.

“One. Two.”

“Not bad. But you’ll need to say ‘thank you, sir’ after counting each one.”

“Are you... fine.”

Grinning, I waited a few seconds then issued two more.

“Three and four, thank you, *sir*.”

Oh, the arrogance and irritation were only increasing much like my raging libido. “Much better. I think you have the hang of it.”

After cracking the paddle down four times, I took a step back, admiring her long legs and the curve of her hips.

“Five, six, seven, eight and thank you with all my heart. Sir.”

I opened her legs wider, my mouth watering at the sight of her glistening pussy lips. “You’re completely aroused by this, my sweet.”

“You’re out of your mind.” She was completely breathless, her voice raspy.

“Are you so certain about that?” I pressed my hand between her legs, fingering her tender clit until she moaned. “You’re very wet.”

She wiggled from my touch, shifting her hips back and forth. When I pulled my hand completely free, she shuddered visibly.

“We begin again.” As I resumed the spanking, taking my time to enjoy the moment, I realized that this felt right. It was confounding and incredible. Her counts became whispers, my thudding heart drowning out some of the syllables.

“You’re so... mean,” she said in passing.

I teased her again, sliding my fingers past her swollen folds, pumping several times as she did everything that she could to meet the brutal thrusts. I was on fire and in need, the cords on the side of my neck thickening just like my cock, which couldn't be harder at this point. "You're right, my beautiful creature."

When I removed my hand, her sweet nectar covering my long digits, I pulled my fingers to my face then stepped closer so she could see what I was doing. "Delicious. Now, open your mouth for me, baby girl. You need to see how hungry you really are."

She did so without hesitation, and I shoved all four fingers inside, plunging them deep into her mouth.

"Lick them clean for me, princess." As I peered down at her, I thought about all the filthy and insanely possessive things I wanted and would do to her. She would soon be in my bed, soon to be my wife. And after that, she'd become my reason for living.

And for dying if necessary.

## CHAPTER 19



*“Love me or hate me, both are in my favor... If you love me, I’ll always be in your heart... If you hate me, I’ll always be in your mind.”*

*—William Shakespeare*

*Raven*

Love and hate. There really was a fine line, one so thin that a breath of wind could snap it forever. That’s what had occurred in the treachery of our time spent together over the last few hours. What few understood was how few steps there were to go through prior to jumping from one to the other.

I’d hated him with a passion, longing to gouge out his eyes with a serrated spoon.

Then I’d hungered for him with so much intensity I hadn’t been able to think straight.

That had been followed by regret and embarrassment, fury with myself for allowing my guard to fall.

Sadness had overwhelmed the deep emotions, fear and worry that I’d never see the powerful, brutal man outweighing everything else.

The moments where he’d allowed his guard to fall had stripped the rest of mine away. Now the combination of need,

desire, attraction, passion, and budding love left me breathless, the hatred dissipating into the floating breeze.

He'd spanked me like a bad little girl yet pleased me with his utter dominance, praising me in such a way I wanted to see admiration and approval in his eyes. That was confusing and thrilling, tantalizing and chilling. I laughed at the rhyme as it floated through my mind, wiggling on the desk as my pussy juice trickled down the insides of both legs, the burn of the paddle being used insanely delicious.

The pain was real, jolting in a way that left me unable to breathe easily, but the need for him, the longing to feel his thick cock buried deep inside of me couldn't be forgotten or shoved aside. God, I wanted the man. Perhaps that made me a bad person or silly in my desires, but I didn't care.

As I sucked on his fingers, the taste of my heady longing lingering in my throat, I was entranced by the continuing emotions tearing through my core, filling it with additional heat. I would readily drop to my knees to suck him off, but I longed for his big, fat cock to be driven into my pussy.

"Such a good girl. Aren't you?" He kept up the brutal pumping for a full ten additional seconds then removed his fingers, holding them into the waning light. "Perfect."

I licked my lips, thrilled I'd pleased him. The realization was strange, keeping me on the very precipice of a cliff dropping into the abyss. I knew it. I felt it. Yet there was nothing I could do about it.

"Four more. Then we're done, baby girl."

Every word from his mouth was dripping with darkness, a promise of things to come.

"Yes, sir."

I said the words proudly, boldly and I had no fear of what was to come.

When he brought the paddle down each time, I was forced to take deep breaths, the agony blinding yet freeing in a way that couldn't be explained.

“Twenty-two... Twenty-three... Twenty-four. And... Twenty-five. Thank you very much, sir.”

I no longer jumped when he thudded the paddle next to me on the desk, concentrating more on the sound of his ragged breathing. The man was in dire need to taste me.

Take me.

Fuck me.

There was no other sound like the rustle of clothes as he unfastened his trousers, sliding the material down his chiseled hips and massive thighs. I licked my lips in anticipation, excitement building. The crazy chemistry between us couldn't be denied.

The man didn't waste any time, yanking me down further until my toes hit the floor. Then he drove the entire length of his cock inside, filling me completely. I pushed up from the desk, managing to dig my fingernails into the expensive wood while moaning at the same time.

I found it funny that only now did stars float in front of my eyes. Not when I'd been receiving harsh smacks with a wooden plank. There was something deliciously sinful about being fucked on the ruthless man's desk while he remained almost fully clothed.

With the exception of his thick shaft.

I bit back another cry as he pulled almost all the way out, driving into me again.

“I'm going to fuck every tight little hole of yours,” Arman muttered, his husky voice sending a wave of vibrations dancing through me, the wildfire crackling with electricity. I closed my eyes, opening my legs even wider.

“Do it.”

He chuckled and yanked me closer to a standing position, cupping one of my breasts. When he pinched the tender bud of my nipple, a blast of whimpers escaped my mouth. I was thrown into a moment of pure ecstasy, so much so that my legs

were quaking. Somehow, I knew that he was just getting started.

Although I had no plans on surrendering that easily. He'd have to work for more.

When he shifted his hand to my other breast, caressing before twisting my nipple, plucking it until the ache increased tenfold, my pussy clenched and released. I could sense an orgasm was close, the need for satisfaction almost dire in nature.

“Does my princess need more?” Why was it that his lurid whispers were such a turn-on?

“Yes. Please. Much more.”

He thrust into me with such ferocity that I was pitched against the edge, but I couldn't care less about the discomfort. I was on a significant high, my mind already driven into utter rapture.

“This is just the beginning. We have all night.”

All night. It was as if inside his home was a protected zone, where no enemies or monsters could get through to us. While I remained rattled, uncertain of my future, what I knew was that in allowing the magnificent man into my life, everything had changed. Danger and passion were wrapped together in an unforgiving level of need that we couldn't ignore.

Arman was relentless, driving into me with deep, powerful strokes. While my mind was foggy, I stared out the window at the glistening pool, lights already highlighting the beautiful setting with a warm glow. Seconds later, I was unable to hold back the swell of vibrations, a ravaging climax sweeping through me. I opened my mouth to scream, the strangled silence surprising me.

“That's it, baby girl. Come for me. Come like a good girl.”

As if he needed to encourage me. I was lost in the moment, a single orgasm becoming something much stronger. I pushed hard against him, biting my lower lip until I tasted blood. Only when I was finished shaking did he drop his hands, cradling me with the warmth and weight of his carved chest and

sculpted arms. He planted his hands on mine, wrapping our index fingers together.

The move was even more intimate than the hard fucking, tender in an entirely different way. There were so many things that surprised me about the man, including his ability to know exactly what I needed, his level of intimacy as much of an attraction as the man himself.

He kept his cock buried inside as he tugged me away from the desk, his arm crossing over my chest. As he nuzzled into my ear, his hot breath skipping across my skin, I swooned in his hold. The deep rumbling sound of his animalistic growl was a reminder of just how possessive the man could be, his need to control me something he couldn't contain.

I shivered, trying to keep some level of rationality, still drawn by the outside beauty presenting itself, colorful hues as the sun began to make its descent into twilight difficult to ignore.

“Would you like a drink?” he asked a few seconds later.

“I think I need one.”

He chuckled, nipping my earlobe before releasing his hold, taking a few seconds to fix his trousers. “Stay right where you are.”

“Yes, sir.”

I glanced over my shoulder after he moved away, taking deep whiffs of our moment of passion along with the exotic fragrance of his aftershave. I didn't need any alcohol to slide deeper into intoxication. After taking another gaze outside, I couldn't help myself, the mischief inside of me needing an outlet. Besides, the man needed to know that he couldn't control me completely.

So what did I do?

I disappeared, knowing he would follow, knowing he would hunt me like the predator he was. And that's exactly what I wanted him to do.

\* \* \*

*Arman*

There was no sound, only a sudden tingling sensation given a light breeze. I continued pouring the already opened bottle of wine, unable to keep a grin from my face. The little vixen thought she would continue teasing me? Or was there a tiny part of her that still believed she could manage to get away from the man who owned her?

After placing the bottle on the credenza, I shook my head then turned around. As suspected, she'd rushed through the French doors leading to the stone porch, the pool only feet away. There were plenty of places for her to hide as evidenced from her near escape from the party weeks before. It was impossible not to feel lighter than I'd felt in a long time around her, the girl's youth and verve both entertaining and enlightening, keeping me invigorated.

I headed outside, scanning the area. While she had no intentions of leaving the premises, I was still cautious after what we'd experienced. Even with guards in strategic locations, it was still possible for a sniper's bullet to get through. That wasn't going to happen.

Unable to see her immediately, a moment of aggravation settled in. I moved closer to the pool, realizing shadows had already formed, creating a void in a few locations. "Come out, bad girl, or I might need to punish you again." I listened for any sounds, a rustle of bushes or a sultry laugh.

There were none.

I walked toward the deep end, still scanning the area. It was possible someone had breached the security, although I'd be hard pressed to figure out how. I'd locked it down tight. Aggravation and worry hit me hard. "Raven. Where are you? I'm not playing games."

There was still nothing. No sound. No movement. I was ready to call in the soldier when a noise dragged my attention, a shimmer of water then a huge splash. And in a move so unexpected, I was pulled into a slight vacuum as someone lunged from the water like a sea creature from the depths of the ocean and I was dragged from the edge of the pool.

As I hit the surface hard, the breath was knocked out of me and I was dragged completely under. I'd been attacked in a half dozen ways, almost killed as many times as possible, but nothing could have shocked me anymore than what had just happened.

And as I fought by instinct to claw my way to the surface, arms and legs wrapped around me, keeping me under, bubbles floating all around me. By the shimmer of the lights in the pool, I managed to focus noticing the glee in Raven's eyes from managing to shock the hell out of me. She spun us around in several circles and even under water, the sheer look of amusement was easy to catch.

She wrapped both legs around mine so tightly I had no maneuverability, still fighting to get to the surface. When he finally broke through, she laughed, not even a little bit out of breath.

"What... the... fuck?" I was exasperated, weighted down by the unwanted clothes. "I thought something had happened to you. You are a very bad girl." My growl was short lived when she captured my mouth, immediately plunging her tongue inside. While I adored her playfulness, there was no chance I'd allowed her to keep control.

I wrapped one hand around the back of her neck, managing to release one leg, tangling hers with mine. The moment of rapture was ripped with passion and within seconds she was fighting to remove my clothes. The fact she was still so hungry caused the most incredible moment of arousal I'd experienced in a long time.

If ever.

The taste of her was sweet yet tangy, and the way she swept her tongue back and forth was telling regarding the explosive

chemistry between us. We wrangled the shirt over my ears, forcing the kiss to break.

She laughed again, the lilting sound sending a wave of vibrations jetting through me. “I almost called my men into action. Imagine what would have occurred.”

“But you didn’t.”

“You need to learn,” I told her.

“Never.” She raked her hands down my chest, fumbling with my buckle and zipper, dropping under the water to remove my pants and underwear. They were weighted with water, and she struggled to bring them to the surface, barely tossing everything aside. Then she wrapped one arm around my neck, tangling her fingers in my hair.

My cock slipped easily into her pussy, the feeling of having her muscles clenching around it one of the most powerful feelings I’d ever had. I spun her around in the water, taking in the moment of utter freedom. It had been so long since my heart felt this light, since I’d allowed true joy to drive away the guilt and rage. I had a feeling Sophia was finally smiling down from heaven, giving me the gift of her approval.

Raven didn’t blink, her eyes boring into mine. As she’d done so many times, she was searching for something that she needed. Only this time, I sensed she was finding it, the moment providing a level of comfort and trust. At least I hoped it had because my instinct told me things were about to get rocky.

As delicious as the sensations were, I wanted her. I needed to claim her tight ass. I pulled completely out and she gasped.

“What are you doing?”

“Taking what I want.” Chuckling, I pushed her against the edge of the pool, immediately pressing the tip of my cock against her dark hole.

“Oh, God.” She clawed the edge of the pool, trying to keep herself buoyant in the deep end. She should know better. I’d burn my way through miles of forest to hunt her down, to bring her to safety.

“Breathe, princess. Just breathe.”

“You breathe, asshole. You’re fucking me in the…” As I pushed in another two inches, she threw her head back, gasping for air but the smile on her face was genuine. “Oh, my.”

I took my time sliding the rest inside, waiting as her oh-so tight muscles got used to the thick invasion. When I wrapped my hand around her throat, she offered no resistance, keeping the now sly smile on her face.

“My God. That is... amazing.”

“I’m going to fuck you like you deserve to be fucked every day, my princess.”

“You’ll chain me to your bed?” she purred.

“Absolutely.”

When she wiggled her hips, the electricity crackling between us was intensified, or maybe the water was adding to the level of enticement. Whatever the case, I would do this for hours if it wasn’t for the fact my balls were ready to explode.

Raven pushed against me, drawing me even deeper inside. When she clenched and released her muscles, I sensed I was losing control.

“Only if you can catch me,” she said in a husky whisper.

“Trust me, princess. I will catch you. I’ve already done so. Every inch of that luscious body belongs to me.”

“You might be surprised.”

“Everything about you surprises me.”

She rubbed her hands down the sides of my legs, taking scattered breaths. “Be careful. I could fall hard for you and that scares me.”

“I assure you, princess. That scares me too.”

I thrust more brutally, finally pulling her away from the wall and into the deepest part of the pool. As the heated moment

became explosive, I closed my eyes, throwing my head back and issuing a strangled bellow.

And I erupted deep inside.

She trembled in my arms, keeping her eyes closed. My cock remained throbbing, still hard, the ache continuing. I couldn't seem to get enough of her. As I held her close, taking several deep breaths, my thoughts drifted once again to business. Answers needed to be found. Soon.

It was easy to handle someone who betrayed me, and I'd done so more than once. Fortunately, I'd been lucky in my reign, only a couple of men daring to challenge my authority. I valued loyalty, rewarding it well and my men knew that. All those in my employ did. I couldn't get over the feeling someone had tipped off the watcher from earlier. Unfortunately, I might never be certain. I also couldn't help but get the feeling I was missing something significant, blinded by my continued need for answers.

Who the hell was I kidding? I'd tried to stop the need for revenge but bringing Raven into my life had spurred the same anger and resentment, the need for blood more powerful than it had been in a long time. That wouldn't bode well for handling the next few days, including if I needed to head to Texas prior to having a conversation with Thomas. It was long overdue; the element of surprise was like harboring a grenade, ready to pull the pin.

When she pulled away, I wasn't surprised. She'd obviously sensed my tension. My ability to relax only for so long was something I'd fought for years. She dunked under the water, popping up once again, raking her fingers through her wet strands of hair.

"You're so beautiful," I told her.

"And you're so sad."

"I have my reasons."

"Sophia is the reason. Don't be angry with me. I'm not trying to hurt you."

I eased my hand to her face, tracing a few beads of water as they trickled down her cheek. “I’m not angry, Raven. I’ve been closed off for so long that letting anyone inside is almost impossible.”

“What happened? Did she grow weary of the life?”

Glancing away, another stab of pain was a reminder that once again, I had everything to lose since I’d allowed someone else into my life. Maybe there was a code of honor amongst the vilest men to allow the children to remain free of harm, but all bets were off with Raven. There was nothing in any rule book against destroying marriages by the use of any means possible.

“No, princess. She was taken from me.”

Her eyes opened wide. Then she pressed her hand across her mouth, nodding once. “She was killed?”

“Yes.” I pulled away, doing the backstroke toward the set of wide acrylic stairs. She remained where she was for a few seconds, treading water as she waited to see what I was going to do.

When she swam toward me, I knew I’d need to find some level of courage to tell her what happened. I hadn’t spoken of it in years, not to anyone. But I knew it was necessary not only to allow the building trust to continue, but also for her to understand what we would likely be facing.

Was there a part of me attempting to push her away? Maybe. She swam between my legs, remaining on her stomach and peering up at me. Her level of maturity and patience rivaled someone much older. She simply placed her hand on my knee. That was the courage I needed.

“I know you’ll find this hard to believe but Sophia and I were madly in love. It wasn’t an arranged marriage or something I forced. We met in college. She knew who I was. She understood what I was. It didn’t matter to her. Sophia insisted there was good inside of me and through her eyes, I was able to allow that to happen.

“We shared a couple amazing years alone. Then she got pregnant. She was terrified I’d be angry. I was thrilled beyond

measure. Zoe was born with no complications, the moment one of the most incredible in my life. And for four more years, we lived in bliss.” I took a deep breath, gazing up at the moon cresting over the horizon. It would be full tonight, the time in a city like New Orleans when crime was at its highest.

Raven squeezed my knee, pulling me back to the moment. “You don’t have to go on.”

“I need to for both of us. She never asked much from me. She was a middle school teacher. I never brought work home. While I had her shadowed by a bodyguard, I did my best never to allow her to know that. All she asked was that we have a date night once a month. That was it. She knew I worked long hours and that was fine with her. I made and kept the promise. I usually did so without having a soldier with me. It was always fine.”

“Until it wasn’t.”

“No,” I answered, taking Raven’s hand and kissing her palm before leaning back against the stairs. “Business had taken a rough turn, an unexpected enemy creating problems, including setting a fire to one of our warehouses, which almost prevented me from being able to make our date. I was lucky, my brother stepping in because he knew how important it was. Anyway. It was a Wednesday. My sister was keeping Zoe, and we went to a dinner and a movie. She was a little feisty that night and when we went to the car, we spent some time kissing.” I laughed at the thought.

Raven swam closer, finally easing beside me on the stairs, still quiet.

“The shot came from nowhere. A single bullet catching her between the eyes. I didn’t have time to tell her goodbye or that I loved her. She was gone in a split second.”

“Oh, my God,” she choked. “I’m so sorry.”

“I was torn, wanting desperately to chase after the assassin and but needing to stay with her. The asshole got away.”

“Did the authorities ever find him?”

“My father wouldn’t allow the police to be called. He was the Don of the family at the time. What he said was what happened. He sent men to find out who was responsible.”

“But the person wasn’t found.”

“No, even though everyone in the family had our suspicions, it could never be proven. I held it against my father for years, but he did try. His reactions were based on the old ways, methods my grandfather had taught him. When I took over the helm, I vowed that things would be different. They have been but I became a shell of a man, trying to be the best single father I could be. I don’t know any longer. I wanted revenge for so long that it was almost all I could think about. But there was Zoe who wanted me to read to her, take her shopping and to amusement parks. Zoe was always there, her big eyes exactly like her mother’s. And she told me every night she loved me. Eventually, I put the need for revenge in a dark place, concentrating on raising my beautiful daughter. Without her in my life, I don’t know what would have happened. But I won’t let you be hurt because of greed or the need for retaliation.”

“I have a feeling you raised a beautiful, perfectly normal daughter who adores you. While I understand the need to shut yourself off, refusing to feel that kind of pain again, you refused to allow your enemy to take everything from you. That took courage and love. That shows me what kind of a man you are. Maybe I was wrong about you after all.”

I rose to my feet, immediately scooping her into my arms. As I cradled her against my chest, she nuzzled her head in my neck. “No, princess. You weren’t wrong about me. I’m exactly like you described. A monster.”

## CHAPTER 20



*R*aven

Danger lurked in the shadows, waiting with sharp teeth, famished for the taste of flesh and blood. As I stood staring out the window, I could almost see the boogeyman in the darkness.

Or maybe I was sleeping next to one.

We both knew an unknown enemy was waiting for the perfect opportunity. While Arman had told me only a little of what had been going on with his business, I sensed he was in distress, even checking on his daughter twice since he'd carried me inside and up to his room.

Even though I'd sensed a weight being pulled off him with his admittance of what had occurred with Sophia, he was still hiding something that was eating him alive. I could feel it thick and heavy in the air and when he held me.

When he looked into my eyes, his were pools of sadness, haunted. If only he would trust me. If only I could implicitly trust him. There was so much bad blood, so much anger that I continued to wonder what the underlying source could be. I was very observant, excellent at reading people, and whatever he was continuing to hide from me would alter my life even more than marrying my father's enemy. I was certain of it.

The yin and yang of my feelings kept butterflies in my stomach. Love and hate. I continued to dwell on that fine line

enough that my mind couldn't rest. We were toxic together, combustible but the passion lingered long after the act was over. Was that normal? Was there any such thing in his world? I thought about what he'd said. My life had been anything but atypical. Who was I to judge what families were supposed to be like? My father wasn't a warm man, always pushing his two children to excel in everything, determined I would be an officer of the law.

Mother was a beautiful fake. There was love for her kids and in her relationship with my father, but it was as if both had been looking from the outside in their entire lives. As if they were taking an easy road out. Maybe I was wrong. God knew I wasn't the best judge of character at this point. I bit back a laugh, giddy with happiness on one side and delirious with anxiety on the other. I was a complete mess. At least the night had been unexpectedly amazing.

He'd brought wine and cheese, French bread and pâté. And we'd enjoyed a picnic on the bed while talking about hopes and dreams. Correction, my hopes and dreams.

Arman and I had made love again, the man taking me in front of the window then keeping our fingers entwined as he pressed his full weight on top of me. It had felt glorious, as if the truth and his enemy could be kept at bay.

Only I wasn't a princess, he wasn't a true prince, and this certainly wasn't a castle made of gold. However, it didn't change the way I felt about him. In sharing with me what had happened with Sophia, I should be even more terrified, but strangely enough, I wasn't. Maybe it was because I'd always had the belief that when it was your time to go, there was no chance of stopping it. That allowed me to enjoy my life without fear of facing some unknown criminal like my father had worked so hard to lock up.

Or maybe it was because I knew Arman would do everything in his power to protect me.

My father had tried so hard to keep me close, terrified that I'd become a victim of his world, just like what Arman was experiencing. Yet, here I was, the fiancée of the very kind of

man my father had warned me about. What struck me as the oddest aspect of all was that with Arman, I was beginning to feel as if this had been my place all along, not sheltered in the way my father had done.

I also couldn't help but to erase the notion that Arman knew him more than he was willing to let on. What did it matter, other than my husband-to-be's intent on marrying me was fueled by the very revenge that had plagued him since his wife's murder. I pressed my hand against the glass, hearing him stir behind me. He'd fallen asleep and I'd watched him for almost thirty minutes, the few peaceful moments rare. I knew that by instinct.

If I had to guess, I'd say the man rarely slept and did so with one eye open.

"What do you see out there, princess?" he asked, yawning.

I was able to see a hint of his reflection in the bright light of the moon shimmering in through the thick pane of glass. I had no doubt it was bulletproof, just like the hot sports car. "Darkness."

"Unsettled?"

"I'm fine."

"Uh-huh. Come back to bed."

I raked my fingers down the glass, issuing a single puff and giggling when I noticed I left a slight fog. For some ridiculous reason, I drew a heart in it, even fingering our initials like I'd done once in grade school. Then I backed away, admiring my work. "Was Sophia your only love?"

"The only girl I cared about. Until you."

When I sat down next to him, I immediately grabbed the covers, pulling my legs underneath and yanking the sheet all the way to my neck. "You care about me?"

"I do."

"They aren't just words, Arman. I already told you that I don't believe in fairytales."

“Another lie. Maybe one day you’ll stop feeling like you need to continue using them around me,” he said as he pulled hair away from my face.

“We live in the real world. What I hoped for as a child isn’t the same as what I know to be the truth today.”

“How did your world get as jaded as mine?”

I hadn’t thought about something like that, but he was right. “Maybe because my father discouraged me from dating. I brought two boys to the house over the years, and he grilled both for thirty minutes if not longer. I assure you they never came back.”

“That sounds like something he’d do.”

Turning my head, I stared at him. “How would you know? I didn’t think you were friends. Enemies from the start.”

He chuckled. “I have few friends, my lovely bride to be. As a man of the law, it’s your father’s responsibility to ensure that no criminal elements come close to touching his daughter. That’s no different than how I am with Zoe.”

“Mmm... And my guess is she hates you for it. Just do your daughter a favor. Don’t find her husband to be for her to boost business or whatever the real reason kingpins do that.”

“In the movies, princess. I don’t believe in arranged marriages.”

“Ah, but I’m special.”

He opened his eyes wide then laughed. “You’re very special. You’re right. But I’m not marrying you to increase business.”

“Just to keep it going.”

He cocked his head in such a way I knew there was more to the story that he wasn’t ready to tell me. “Not necessarily. But your advice is duly noted. I’m sorry this arrangement is not to your liking.”

“I’m not talking about us. This union, our relationship, whatever you want to call it is amazing and terrifying and just about every other emotion I can think of. It’s not the first.”

“Meaning what?” Arman reached for his wineglass, taking a sip.

“Meaning my father was certain Carter Ramsey and I were the perfect match. He was the perfectly aristocratic, holier-than-thou only son of my father’s best friend. It was all arranged, and I had no part of it. When Carter was presented to me at my eighteenth birthday like a present, I was mortified. Then I had to go on a date with the kid.”

The way he was studying me was almost chilling. “You didn’t get along?”

“Oh, God, no. I couldn’t stand him and I think the feeling was mutual. He was arrogant, vile, and had a mouth on him like a sailor. Even though he was very handsome, there was something off about him. I don’t know how to put it. It was like he was playing the perfect role of a straight A, scholarship winning football star when there was something lurking underneath, waiting to spring free like the creature in the *Alien* movie.”

He laughed at my representation. “How did your father take it?”

“Not well, at least at first. It put a serious rift in our relationship. He settled down after that, refusing to talk about him, which shocked me. However, his initial attitude was why and how I ended up at LSU. I’d applied to various schools and he refused to pay for it if I left the DC area. So, I accepted the small scholarship on my own and moved out when my parents were off with friends. That really set him off. Fortunately, and with my mother’s help, he came around about school as well. Still, I fear he’ll do the same thing with my sister.”

He rubbed my arms. “Let’s get some sleep. Tomorrow we’ll talk further.”

“Okay.” I allowed him to pull me down, surprised when he pulled me close. I placed my hand on his heart and hearing the heady thumping, I knew I’d once again lost him to the dangerous place he’d allowed his mind to travel. “You said a fire.”

“What?”

“You were dealing with a fire before your last date with Sophia.” I rose onto my elbow, peering down at him.

“Yeah, at a warehouse the family owns. Why?”

“Didn’t you tell me you just had a fire at some housing development you own?”

“It’s a condo we’re building, but yes.” He eased onto his elbow as well, our faces close. “What are you thinking?”

“Didn’t you tell me there’s no such thing as a coincidence in your world?”

He grinned, nodding a couple of times. “I did. Go on. I’m curious where that beautiful brain of yours is going with this.”

“I don’t know exactly. When did you receive the threats?”

Arman glanced down. “The first one was a week ago.”

“Weeks after the engagement party where we met. And after you made the decision that I was to be your fiancée, right?”

“True.” He took a deep breath.

“Maybe the person who’s out to get you is closer than you think.”

“It’s possible, my beautiful bride to be.”

“Or maybe the person from the past is exacting revenge for something you did a long time ago.”

A strange light popped in his eyes. I was certain of it. Then he rolled over, reaching for his phone. As he sent a text message, I huddled under the covers. Danger. I’d been right before. It was all around us, a cold-blooded assassin waiting to finish what he started.

Destroying the family and the man I... loved.

\* \* \*

*Come out, come out, wherever you are. I’ll find you and when I do, I will hurt you...*

My eyes popped open and I jerked up, gasping for air. “Oh. Oh. Oh.” Blinking, I was disoriented, certain the words I’d just heard had just been whispered by a demon. When I realized light was streaming in through the windows, I was finally able to take a normal breath. There was no one in the room.

No boogeymen.

No monsters.

And as I turned my head, brushing my palm across the cool sheets, I grimaced realizing neither was Arman. Just then, I remembered he had no clock in his room, and I tried to laugh it off. But the dream lingered. It was as if someone was following me. Leering at me. Huffing, I got out of bed, hopeful I’d find him in the bathroom. No such luck. It couldn’t be that late. The sun wasn’t very high in the sky.

I noticed he had a huge fluffy white robe, the kind that would swallow me, but the thick terrycloth was oh-so comfy. I slid into it, not surprised in the least that all my makeup items had been placed on a lovely mirrored tray, my toothbrush already located next to Arman’s in a holder.

Ginger had been efficient indeed.

After brushing my teeth and combing my hair, I knew coffee was next on the list or I’d never make it through a shower. Maybe I could find some crumbs of bread that weren’t stale like I knew the French baguette would be.

I headed for the door, hesitating, half expecting to find he’d lied and locked me in. When the door opened, I smiled, then was greeted by the sound of silence.

If I was going to live in this big ole house, there would be music. Lots of music. There had to be some when Zoe was here.

Oh, God. It just dawned on me that not only was I gaining a husband, but I was also suddenly tossed into the world of being a stepmother. Wait. Hold on. The girl was how old? He hadn’t said but she had to be a teenager. Oh, God. A few years younger. The girl would hate me. Oh, this wasn’t good.

I slapped my forehead and bounded down the stairs, listening for the sound of anyone in the house when I reached the bottom. At least I knew where the kitchen was. When I made my way into the room, I was shocked and embarrassed that the slight mess we'd created the night before had been cleaned up. In the place of fruit left on the counter, there was a plate of something that looked delicious.

Pastries. And they'd been freshly made, still warm from the oven. Okay, so maybe having someone who could cook around the house would be amazing. I noticed a basket of various Keurig coffee pods and was astounded at the variety. There had to be at least twenty to choose from.

After selecting hazelnut and popping it into the machine, I searched the refrigerator for milk. There was cream. Of course there was. Only the best for a mafia prince. No, he was really the king now since he'd taken over for his father. I was obviously still asleep.

There was one mug on the counter, one in the sink with drops of coffee still inside. Did that mean Arman had left the house? I made mine, grabbing a pastry, determined to find him. As I'd done before, I noticed at least two staff members who scuttled away as soon as they saw me. Maybe they'd been given explicit instructions not to talk to me. That would suck. How would I find out all the things about Arman that I could use to blackmail him without their help?

Maybe all I was trying to do was make light of a strange situation, heaviness weighing on my mind. I wasn't entirely certain there would ever be full trust with Arman if he continued to hang the life of my parents over my head. It was surreal in a way that few people could tolerate for long.

I was close to falling even harder for the man, the love something I still wanted to deny. I finished the pastry and made my way into the library, fingering the books as I'd done before. Maybe I'd grab one later, enjoying some time to myself. Then dinner tonight. That would be interesting.

My thoughts continued to run fast and furious as I made it past his closed office door, certain I heard his strong, masculine

voice behind it. Then I headed to the back section of the house to an area I hadn't made it to the night before.

There was a lovely sunroom positioned off another set of French doors, another guest suite and one last room. The door was open so it was fair game. When I walked inside, I was taken back to my days of piano and ballet lessons, both of which my mother had insisted on.

The gorgeous Steinway was positioned near a floor-to-ceiling window, music already waiting to be played. There were bookshelves covering one wall, books of piano music positioned just so in them. There were also music textbooks but from years before. Some compilations of piano music were so worn the spines were broken.

And as was expected in a music room, there was a gorgeous loveseat and two chairs, all directed toward the piano, a coffee table in the middle for guests and their listening pleasure. And to finish off the room, there was a bar on the other wall, this one glistening in a deep ebony finish matching the sheen of the baby grand.

I ran my finger across several books of music, selecting one of my favorite classical musicians. It had been a couple of years since I'd played, but it had to be like everyone said. Just like riding a bike, only one with a little rust on it.

After throwing a glance at the door, I placed the coffee mug on the table and scooted across the bench. I found my favorite concerto and began to play. Rusty? Hell, I was falling apart. I laughed and kept up with practicing until finally my fingers were moving with ease, floating across the keys.

How long had it been since I'd truly enjoyed playing? Not because my father had instructed me to keep up with my lessons or my mother had chided me that my sister was a better piano player than I was? Suddenly, the joy was resurrected, the music soothing something deep inside of me. The uncertainty and the fear. Maybe it would be short lived, but that was just fine with me.

I continued, getting lost in the music, feeling freer than I had in a long time. When I was close to the end, I took a deep

breath. I was actually feeling the music, living it through my fingers. The moment the piece ended, I held my fingers in place, finally opening my eyes.

To the sound of applause.

I jerked around, fearful that I'd broken some new rule. While the spanking had been enticing the night before, I'd felt it every time I'd rolled over on the sheets. Even this morning, heat remained crossing both sides of my bottom.

"That was beautiful," Arman said. "I didn't know you could play."

"I'm sorry. The door was open."

He walked inside, close enough I was able to gather a whiff of what had to be shower gel. His hair was still slightly damp, the short-sleeved cobalt blue shirt dazzling against his skin. He lifted my chin with a single finger, taking a deep breath as if ready to consume me all over again. "You did nothing wrong. Perhaps you'll be an inspiration for Zoe. She often forgets to practice. May I join you?"

"You play?"

"My mother's influence. She wanted her three rough and tumble boys to be able to converse about music and the opera, ballet and the classics."

"Please don't tell me you were required to take ballet lessons. If you tell me yes, you will dance for me." I found it easier to laugh with him this morning.

His eyes sparkled, a mischievous curve of lips pulling me into the lurid aura of the man. He'd yet to shave, the now three-day stubble sexier than ever. I wanted to slide my fingers back and forth across his jaw.

"I would have put my foot down, my brothers as well. She settled for a couple years of piano lessons for me, drama class for Francois, and Louie was made to join the debate club, which he excelled at." He cracked his knuckles and I could tell he was trying to figure out a song.

When he started playing, I was no longer surprised at anything he did or excelled at. While he wasn't a concert pianist by any means, he did pretty well. When I placed my hands on the bottom keys, he grinned without looking at me. As I started playing a duet, he slowly turned his head, studying me intently.

It was as if he was an entirely different man in twenty-four hours. The song was short and by the time I was finished, there wasn't a part of my body not trembling from the nearness and the heavy set of emotions, the desire that had yet to run its course. I folded my fingers, finally taking a long look at him. It was closer than we'd been when not... fucking. His irises were flecked in shades of luminescent gold, the fresh shower and patches of gray at his temples highlighting that soon his glorious thick hair would be considered salt and pepper.

Gloriously sexy.

Indulgently so.

And the man still managed to take my breath away. The way he was staring at me was even different this morning, as if the game of revenge had taken a back seat to something else, something much more carnal.

"What is it?" I asked, no longer recognizing my voice.

"I'm hungry. Famished actually."

"There are pastries in the kitchen and they are delicious."

He wrinkled his nose. "I need something different, something sweeter. I know exactly what I want." When he suddenly yanked me up from the bench, pushing me down onto the top of the piano, I gasped, trying to claw him.

"What are you doing?" I frantically reached for him, turning my head toward the open door.

"What does it look like, princess? Feasting."

"Oh, you wouldn't dare. Not here. Not now."

"You should know better than to challenge me, Raven." He lifted my legs, bending them at the knee and spreading them

wide open on the piano's surface.

I was so flustered that I pressed one hand with flexed fingers over as much of my face as possible, trying to hold closed the bottom of the robe with the other. But of course, the brutal man was in full control as usual, ripping the material open. There was no pretense, no foreplay. He simply spread my pussy lips wide open and swirled his tongue around my clit three times before burying his face in my wetness.

“Oh, my God. You're so bad. So very bad.” I was already shaking and he'd just started. I wiggled on top of the piano as he moved his head from side to side. I was wet, the heat building across my face first then sliding down both sides of my neck, grabbing at what was left of my breath as well as my sanity.

I felt myself pointing my toes as he pushed his fingers against the inside of my thighs, caressing my skin. A feeling as if I was floating forced me to gasp for air, staring up at the ceiling as I laughed nervously.

He issued several throaty growls, obviously enjoying making me so terribly uncomfortable. I was back to wanting to gouge out his eyes, only this time more playfully. The moment he sucked on my clit, pulling the tender tissue between his teeth, I almost lost it. Everything was tingling, his touch searing my skin and I fell into a beautiful haze of lust.

“So sweet,” he muttered, dragging his tongue all the way down the length of my pussy. “So delicious. A perfect breakfast.”

I couldn't help but laugh nervously, trying to keep my composure. The man was masterful with his mouth and tongue, bringing me to the height of pleasure and the throes of ecstasy before pulling back. I was teetering on the edge, my mind blown at the number of raw sensations and the way my skin seemed to vibrate.

Arman adjusted the seat, taking his time to lap at my cream. I finally lifted my head. The way his eyes were hooded, his long eyelashes whisking across his rugged cheeks was far too sexy.

The man was a powerhouse of sin, pulling me into a level of darkness I'd never escape from.

And of course, he knew it.

When he scooted my bottom closer to the edge, I issued a series of moans. I was in a sweet place of nirvana, my mind blown by how incredible his actions felt.

Arman chuckled, his hot breath tickling my skin. "You're glistening, baby. So wet for your master."

"Uh-huh."

He drove several fingers into my tight channel and I had to slap my hand across my mouth to keep from screaming. "Does that feel good, princess?"

"Oh, God, yes."

"Do you want to come for me?"

"Yes, please." It wasn't just stars floating in front of my eyes. This time it was rainbows and drifting comets, strings of lights in vibrant colors.

"You'll be a good girl for me?"

"Yes. Yes. Yes!" I resisted the urge to scream and beg, shocked when he brought his fingers down against my pussy lips. The pain was strangely inviting, pulling on every nerve ending. He cracked his fingers twice more then he soothed the ache, growling as he licked me furiously. "Oh, God. I can't hold it. I can't."

He thrust his fingers hard and fast deep inside then smacked my pussy four more times. The combination of pain and pleasure was incredible, and I moaned as I tossed my head back and forth. As he languished over licking me, I fisted one hand, pushing it into my mouth.

It was exhilarating, the rapture becoming uncontrollable. As a climax rolled up from my toes, I jerked up from the piano, forced to clap my hand over my mouth to keep from shouting out to the world that we were engaged in such filthy actions.

The orgasm was powerful, so much so that I was lost in a beautiful haze, my body trembling in his hold.

He dug his fingers into me, holding me in place as I jerked uncontrollably. Every growl only fueled more of the raging fire, every lick of his skilled tongue making my pussy even more sensitive. He thrust his tongue past my swollen folds at the same time he plunged his thumb into my asshole and that was it. Another powerful orgasm skittered up from my toes, slamming into me in an earth-shattering round of vibrations.

“Oh. Oh. Oh. Oh. Yes...”

He chuckled in his dark and demonic way, still licking me furiously, lapping up every drop of my cream.

I had no idea how long I remained quivering, my heart thudding in irregular beats against my chest. I lolled my head to the side, blinking several times as I tried to relearn how to focus. A flash of something occurred out of the corner of my eye and I gasped, every muscle immediately stiffening.

The hard knock on the door forced his head up slowly yet he took his time to cover my nakedness.

“What is it, Charlie?”

“I’m sorry, sir, but Mr. Cormier is here to see you.”

“Show him into my office. I’ll be right there.” Annoyance played out in Arman’s voice and he rose to his feet, leaning over. “You should get dressed, sweet princess. We have some things to do today.”

With that, my prince disguised as a ruthless predator walked out.

And I’d never felt so alone.

## CHAPTER 21



*A* rman

As I returned to my office, the taste of Raven lingering, I could instantly tell that Maddox had something important on his mind. He was pacing, acting as if I'd taken too long. I moved to the coffeepot, prepared for a second cup.

"You're up early."

"Your late text had me awake the rest of the night, Arman," Maddox said. "And yes, I'll have coffee." He pointed to my desk, waiting until I noticed a file.

I poured his, sliding the mug in his direction. We usually both drank black, as I stared at the liquid brew, I smiled in reverence to the lovely woman just a couple of doors away. Raven had shocked me with her piano playing, raising more than just an eyebrow when I'd heard it from my office. Seeing her in my robe had been a perfect vision after spending a couple of hours going through various past records, attempting to remember who I might have eliminated years before. Her thought that the motive had been retaliation had fascinated me, which had in turn pushed me into texting Maddox in the middle of the night.

Opening the fridge, I was pleased to find cream. I could tell Maddox was watching me. Then he laughed.

"Now you're taking cream in your coffee? Let me guess. That's based on influence from your new fiancée."

“She did encourage me to try the crazy things in life. Have you ever jumped into a fountain in your bare feet?” I wasn’t even certain how much cream to add but I poured just enough to turn it white. Then I brought it to my lips, taking a deep whiff.

“I can’t say I have, buddy. If that’s something you start doing on a regular basis, I might begin to worry about you.”

“Very funny.” I took a sip and was pleasantly surprised. “What was so urgent you interrupted my breakfast?” I shot him a certain look and he grumbled under his breath.

“I think I liked you better when you were a surly SOB.”

“Out with it. I have a full day planned.”

“It would appear Raven is onto something with her thoughts. Take a look.” He nodded to the file and I headed toward my desk, opening it.

There were several pictures inside, some of them grainy. “What am I looking at?”

“Do you recognize that guy?”

I did but I couldn’t tell where it was from. “Vaguely. Enlighten me.”

“His name is Kyle Ramsey. He was a New Orleans cop fourteen years ago.”

“Was?”

“Yeah, ‘was’ is the word. He died in a fire. He happened to be Travis Ramsey’s firstborn son.”

I glanced at him. Then I remembered an incident from several years before, the reason that I’d insisted we get out of the arms business. A fire had torched a building given an explosive set off by a cop who’d come to investigate. “Hold on. This was the cop who died in the warehouse fire?”

“Yeah. And remember, Travis Ramsey blamed you.”

Fuck.

Motive and not just for what was happening now.

“Find out where Mr. Ramsey is.”

“I already have. And you’re not going to believe it.”

“Try me.”

“Texas.”

I took a deep breath, holding it for a few seconds. After letting it out, I shook my head. “Get the jet ready. Francois and I will head out for the Lone Star state tomorrow whether my brother is in the mood for traveling or not.” It was time to turn the tides. After all, I had a new family to think about. “Buckle up, Maddox. Things are about to get messy. Real messy.”

Now I was bringing my daughter back home. There was one thing my father had taught me that had stuck through the years. Power was in numbers and the strength of family.

As I walked out of my office, I allowed my thoughts to drift to Thomas Cartier. Did he ever think about what he’d forsaken? Did he enjoy hiding his past from his own daughters? One thing was certain. If he was working with Ramsey and Devin Carlos, I would bury him once and for all.

Just like I should have done the day he attacked my wife.

\* \* \*

“This is incredible.” The look on my bride-to-be’s face reminded me of the very first time I’d taken Zoe to Disney World. She’d been like a kid at Christmas for the entire four hours we’d spent at the park, her eyes lighting up like firecrackers.

At that moment, as Raven twirled to catch the view of the boutique hotel the family had purchased over ten years before, the dress I’d bought her spun with her. The flowy crimson material followed her, fanning out around her luscious curves, and her hair flowed behind her like a model from a commercial.

And there wasn’t a single man, young or old, within close proximity who hadn’t stopped what they were doing, craving what belonged to me. A hard knot of jealousy grew in the pit of my stomach, enough so I fisted my hand, wrapping the

fingers of my other around her arm and dragging her against my chest.

She laughed, the sound like the sweetest music in the world, palming my chest at the force I used. Then she lifted her eyebrows, purposely dragging her long tongue across her bottom lip, the tinted lip gloss she'd selected drawing my attention. It smelled of strawberries, which made me want to devour her even more. Maybe I'd pull out the whipped cream and fresh fruit later, using her body as a canvas for a dessert of a man's proportion.

Chuckling, I cupped the side of her face, lifting her chin with my thumb. "Don't you dare go too far away from me, my princess."

"Not even one foot?"

I lowered my head, drinking in her perfume. "That's one foot too many." I lightly captured her mouth, sliding my arm around her waist and forcing her back into a slight arc, allowing her to understand exactly what she did to me, the excitement that was always just below the surface. Then again, if she continuously lured the beast from his lair, I might fuck her in the middle of the restaurant's bathroom.

The thought brought my cock to full attention.

Raven darted her tongue inside, tasting my mouth as if for the first time. While the moment of intimacy was full of passion as usual, I sensed we were both being slightly reserved given we were being watched. Why did I have the feeling someone from Ramsey's world had been sent to keep an eye on the entire family?

When I pulled away, I took a deep breath, taking a few additional seconds to admire the lovely flush on her face. She was nervous to meet the family, uncertain of their reaction or her place in my world. She would soon learn that the Thibodeaux family was tight, so much so every one of them would die in order to keep her safe.

I glanced around the hotel lobby, finding almost every man suspicious at this point, although I was certainly being

chauvinistic. I wouldn't put it past Ramsey to use a woman.

"What's wrong?" she asked, darting a look from side to side.

"Nothing. Just doublechecking to ensure my soldiers are in place."

"What aren't you telling me?"

"Would I keep anything from you?"

"Yes, you would. You know who is behind the danger, don't you?"

Shrugging, I started walking us toward the restaurant, keeping my hand on the small of her back. "Possibly. Which means I'm leaving for Texas first thing in the morning."

"Am I going with you?"

"Absolutely not. You're staying at the house fully protected."

"That's why you're bringing Zoe back home for the weekend. You think the end is near."

"You're far too intelligent for your own good."

"I'm just starting to understand you and your sordid world much more."

I laughed and stopped one last time, checking the area before heading into the entrance to the restaurant. "That should terrify you, my princess."

She lifted her head, peering at me with amusement in her eyes. "Not in the least. Truthfully, just the opposite."

There was something entirely different about her over the last few hours. It was as if instead of being resigned to the life I'd forced on her, she was finally taking pleasure in the possibilities for the future. As we walked inside, the reactions from staff working in the facility as well as the customers inside was similar to what we'd experienced merely walking into the hotel.

There wasn't a single person who wasn't watching, curious as to the woman on my arm. I enjoyed the restaurant at least once every two weeks, but never with anyone but my family,

including my daughter. I knew exactly where the family would be, nodding to the hostess as she smiled.

We were the last to arrive, Edmee having picked up my daughter given her friend lived close to the house where Edmee currently lived. I studied her fiancé, Zane only having eyes for my sister.

Maybe he would make it to the wedding after all.

“Here we go,” Raven said under her breath.

“They don’t bite.”

“Are you so certain about that?”

Zoe noticed us first, jumping up from the table where she was having a lively conversation with Francois. “Daddy! This must be Raven.”

My daughter didn’t bother greeting me more than that, immediately throwing her arms around Raven. There was a certain vibe with the family that either I hadn’t paid attention to before or hadn’t cared about. As I stood on the outskirts of the private room, I realized just how lucky I’d been to have a family remaining close through so many battles and bloodshed, tragedies and triumphs.

I’d taken them for granted for the most part, including my older brother. He seemed genuinely happy for me, immediately pushing back his chair and heading in my direction. But there wasn’t a single member sitting around the oversized table who hadn’t risen to their feet. They all knew it was a big deal for me to marry someone else, whether for business or not. They’d seen the bouts of rage and intolerance, supportive yet coming close to several interventions over the years.

And I’d pushed every one of them away with few exceptions.

“Brother. I am so thrilled for you,” Louie said as he grabbed my hand. Then in an uncharacteristic move, he pulled me into a bearhug. “I’m proud of you, dude. You finally slithered out of your shell.”

His admiration meant dear ole Dad hadn't told anyone that the marriage to Raven had initially been all about business. Or who she was. "It was time."

When he pulled back, he clapped my arms. "You know when it's the right girl. I certainly did." He glanced at Sara, the petite blonde already hugging Raven in a welcome to the family.

"Maybe you're right, brother."

"Don't sound so forlorn. She's beautiful. Young. Jesus Christ. Young."

"Age is just a number. Right?"

Louie laughed. "What does Zoe think?"

"She acted happy when I told her."

Francois pushed his way from around the girls, including my mother, who was scrutinizing Raven exactly as I knew she would. Some things never changed within a family. When Raven tipped her head in my direction, my mother offered a single nod of approval, which at least allowed me to relax for now.

"I must admit," Francois said as he closed the distance, "she's lovely. Polished even for her age."

"Are the two of you really going to push me about the age difference?" I challenged.

They glanced at each other, the conversation they were having not needing words. "Yeah, I think we are," Francois answered for both of them. As they laughed, a waiter brought me a whiskey, the young man knowing what I liked.

And perhaps what I needed to get through the evening.

As Father approached, the women headed for the bar, my daughter jabbering as she always did when she was excited. At least Raven's appearance hadn't alienated her completely. Thankfully, Zane knew better than to attempt to get in the middle of a family conversation.

"Business talk at the last celebration of our sister being a single woman?" Louie asked.

“You need to hear this too, Louie. You were threatened,” I told him.

“Fine. But keep Sara out of it.” He lifted his gaze, a certain level of pain in his eyes. They’d been through rocky times in their marriage, even if they appeared as if nothing could ever interfere with their true love. He’d shut down being a part of the business aspect of our family after she’d walked out with the kids two years before. That had been the last time we’d asked him to provide medical attention to a soldier who’d taken a hit.

Even still, he hadn’t been the same since.

“Sara is the least of our worries. I had a visit from the Feds today,” Pops said.

“As ordered by Thomas Cartier?” I asked.

“No, at least from what I can tell. The representatives from the local office were still trying to make a connection to the weapons.”

“Long gone. I had that taken care of right away,” I told him.

“I thought the family was going legit,” Louie snapped a little too forcefully.

“Mostly, brother. It takes time. It would have taken less time had you stayed within the family.”

“Enough,” Pops said. “I handled them. And I made a few phone calls. They won’t be bothering us again.”

Even in retirement, my father was a powerhouse.

I nodded, glancing over Pops’ shoulder before speaking. “Good. Now, the interesting news. Travis Ramsey had an older son.”

“Are we talking about the new administrator of the DEA?” Francois asked.

“Yes. Kyle Ramsey was a cop who died in the warehouse fire we had years ago, the one that consumed a million dollars’ worth of firepower.”

“Yeah, I remember the cop dying,” Pops said. “The police tried to pin his death on us.”

“They did,” I said. “But the young man entered the property on his own and without a warrant, although it was in the works if I remember correctly. He was a rookie, trying to make his dad proud. Barely nineteen years old. Stupid kid.”

“Why are you telling us this?” Louie asked, keeping his voice low.

“Because from what Maddox has been able to ascertain, it could be the motive for the recent threats, which is something I need to have checked. I also have reason to believe it’s entirely possible Ramsey was responsible for Sophia’s death in an act of revenge. He blamed me. Remember?” I’d spent hours searching through the information I’d collected years before, the conclusion easy to ascertain. Oddly enough, I felt nothing like what I would have anticipated feeling. Maybe time had healed some of the wounds.

“That’s true. Ramsey was insistent, calling in as many favors as possible. Thank God, we were more powerful.” Pops shook his head.

“Fuck,” Francois hissed. “I’d forgotten all about that.”

“So had I.” Maybe being consumed with rage had done that to me.

My father exhaled. “Travis wasn’t in charge of the DEA then. I am curious who he paid off to snag the position out of the blue.”

“No, but he had control of the southern district, including New Orleans. And if I had to answer your question, I’d say he had powerful friends in the right places.”

“Meaning Thomas. They met in New Orleans,” Francois said in passing.

“Yeah. That’s also when they became friends.” I glanced at my father then to Francois. The name would forever remain a bitter one with my family, especially for my father. When Thomas had started drifting away from our friendship, Travis had obviously stepped in.

Our father shifted his attention to Raven for a few seconds, obviously uncertain what to say. We'd made a pact never to talk about the man at a single family event, but this was different.

This was the beginning of the unsettling end, one that was far too long in coming.

"Given the uncertainty of what we're facing, Francois, we need to head to Texas tomorrow," I said in passing, taking another sip of my drink. Hearing laughter coming from the women on the other side of the room allowed me to continue relaxing to a point. But only to a point. I couldn't get over the feeling of being watched. There were soldiers positioned in several clandestine locations surrounding the restaurant. I almost wanted someone to make a move on the family inside the hotel, even if that wouldn't be good for business or for the full house of guests.

"Isn't Ramsey now in DC?" he asked.

"Not currently. In fact, he was recently spotted by one of our soldiers with a buddy of his. Come to find it out, another close associate who turned friend." I lifted my glass, glancing from one of my brothers to the other, then back to Raven. She seemed to sense I was looking at her, darting a look in my direction. The feelings I had were growing stronger every hour. That made me nervous as hell.

"Devin Carlos," Pops growled. "What a crock of shit. Why didn't we see this coming?"

"Because I've been embroiled in acts of revenge for far too long, Pops. It's time to start thinking clearly."

"You're fuckin' kidding me?" Francois exclaimed. "It's time for you to get your head out of your ass or this family is going to lose everything."

I glanced at Francois, my jaw clenching at his accusatory tone. However, I understood his discontent. "If my sources are correct, Ramsey has been dirty for years if not all along, working with Devin under the radar. I have some solid information to corroborate that."

“But you want to rattle his chain,” Pops said, giving me a sly smile.

“To act on revenge in an entirely different manner,” Louie offered.

“Exactly. It would seem Ramsey wanted to corrode the business from inside out as well. That’s why Grayson was really involved. And why he was basically thrown to the wolves. The guy knew what was happening and couldn’t stop it.”

“A necessary casualty of war.” Francois continued to glare at me.

“I have no remorse about what happened to Grayson. It was necessary to send a message to our men if nothing else. However, this must be played carefully.”

“I’m curious, brother. What role do you believe Thomas has in all of this? From your tone, it almost seems as if you’re going soft on the man. After what he did to your family, I’m surprised,” Francois asked.

“Knock it the fuck off, gentlemen,” Pops sneered. “We need this bullshit to end. While I believe you’ve thought this through with regard to marrying Thomas’ daughter, be careful. It could blow up in your face.”

I took a deep breath. “I’m well aware of that, Pops, but hopefully we’ll find out the bottom line of what we’re dealing with after we pay a visit to Devin. If I’m right about Ramsey, then they’re planning the last few stages of the coup they started together.”

Francois shook his head. “A part of me hopes you’re not right about this.”

“Why? Finding out who’s threatening our family and who killed Sophia will ease my conscience.”

“Because you’ll go off the rails if Ramsey is behind Sophia’s death,” Francois answered, eyeing me carefully.

“Which you doubt.”

Shrugging, he glanced over his shoulder at Raven. “Thomas was always the number one suspect. If he couldn’t have her, no one could.”

I took a deep breath. “Yeah, I know. I plan on paying him a visit as well.”

“You’re playing with fire, son. But you know that already,” Pops said in passing.

“What am I missing here?” Louie demanded. “And why do I have the feeling Raven isn’t just a girl you met somewhere?”

Both Francois and my father gave me looks indicating they wanted no part of the explanation, Francois even backing away.

“Raven is Thomas’ daughter.” I locked eyes with my brother, daring him to challenge me. He had no right at this point.

There was a moment where I knew Louie was more incensed than I’d ever seen him before. “Hold on. Wait a fucking minute. Let me get this straight. The woman you’re marrying is Thomas’ daughter? You’re not just playing with fire, brother. You’re trying to burn our world down piece by piece.” He’d raised his voice, which almost immediately drew my sister’s attention.

“She is his daughter and what I’m doing is keeping our billion-dollar business alive. Maybe you can consider providing assistance in doing that sometime.”

“Stop it,” Pops growled, and I shook my head. I should have known this would be a disaster.

“Does she have any understanding why you’re marrying her?” He bristled, more so than I’d seen him do in years.

“Leave him alone, son. It’s a business decision, a decent one. Whether or not Thomas is involved in our recent grievances with the Feds, the alliance will ensure he will keep that from happening so severely in the future.” Father’s insistence brought a round of venom to Louie’s eyes.

“You’re nuts,” Louie hissed.

I sensed my mother becoming edgy, Raven constantly trying to figure out what was going on.

“What are you talking about?” Edmee asked as she came closer. “I thought you weren’t going to discuss business. Not tonight.”

“This asshole is marrying Raven to get back at Thomas,” Louie huffed. “You know the fucker’s daughter? Are you certain you can trust her? Like father, like daughter.”

“What?” Edmee narrowed her eyes. “What are you talking about?”

“Hold on. Edmee is right. We don’t need to talk about this now.” Francois pushed his hand against Louie’s chest. “We have guests who have nothing to do with the family business.”

His attempt at soothing the anger failed.

I reacted instantly, wrapping my hand around my brother’s throat. “Don’t you dare talk about my fiancée that way. She’s innocent in all of this.”

“Innocent?” he snarled. Then my surgeon brother, the one who had more goodness inside of him than almost anyone I’d ever met, made a surprising move and a mistake by throwing a punch.

I tumbled backward into the chair, shocked from the force he used.

“No!” Sara screamed, racing forward.

“What in the hell is going on?” my mother barked as she approached. “This is a family event. No arguments. You’re acting like children!”

Raven cocked her head, purposely heading in our direction. I had a feeling she’d overheard far too much by the look of hurt slowly creeping up her face.

Francois tried to get in front of me, but I was having none of it, lunging toward my brother. I issued a series of brutal punches, my anger getting out of control. Then hands grabbed my arms, yanking me backward.

“No!” Pops yelled, throwing out both his arms. “This is not going to happen. We are a fucking family!” He threw a hateful look at both of us.

“Daddy. What’s going on? Is this about Uncle Thomas?”

“He was never your fucking uncle,” I said, instantly regretting barking at my beautiful daughter.

Raven pushed her way closer, her chest rising and falling and her shimmering eyes filled with uncertainty and pain. “What do you mean uncle? I don’t understand.”

“Not here,” I told her.

“Tell me!”

“It’s not what you think, Raven,” my father said, using a soothing tone of voice that we rarely heard any longer.

“Raven. Come with me,” Edmee said, trying to smooth over the wretched fucking situation.

Raven dropped her head, shaking it after a few seconds. “No, Edmee. I’m not some helpless child. I need the truth and I’m not going to be kept in the dark any longer. I know my father has caused you issues being the director of the FBI. I’m no fool. The marriage is really a sham, an arrangement out of contempt and the need for revenge. I made a deal with your son, your brother because of a stupid decision I made.” She looked everyone in the eyes, her courage and tenacity exactly the reason I was falling hard for the girl.

“You don’t need to go through this, Raven,” my mother tried to say in comfort.

“Thank you, Mrs. Thibodeaux, but I do.” Raven turned toward me, shaking her head. “I understood the score and maybe I was stupid enough to find your possessiveness exciting. My father forced me to live a sheltered life and you were like a dangerous alpha male refusing to take no for an answer. But stupid little ole me thought you’d developed feelings, especially after last night.”

“I do have feelings for you,” I told her.

“Bullshit,” Louie snarled, and I threw him a hateful glare.

When she lifted her gaze, she had tears in her eyes. “No, it’s apparent you don’t. Fine. Who is my father to you? This entire charade was personal. The fact you’re determined to marry me is very personal. Well, guess what? It is to me as well. Me, a human being and the girl I thought you were falling in love with. God, I was such a fool. Wasn’t I? *Wasn’t I?*”

The quiet in the room was heartbreaking. Then Louie huffed again. “You need to tell her. She deserves to know the truth.”

“What truth? What?” Raven demanded again.

I took a deep breath. It was past time to tell her, but I wasn’t given the chance. Zoe did it for me.

“Thomas was once considered my daddy’s brother,” Zoe stated with pride in her voice.

The words coming from my bright and amazing daughter rang clear in the room. And for a few minutes, it was as if all time stopped and our family had been transported back to when Thomas had indeed been a part of our family, my best friend and the kid who’d shared a room with me at first, taken me under his wing at school.

The one who’d taught me how to play basketball. The one who’d beaten a kid for bullying me since he’d been taller than me. And the one who’d blamed my father for keeping the truth about his real family from him.

“Jesus,” Edmee said. “What the hell is going on?”

Raven moved closer, staring me in the eyes, never blinking. Then she cracked her hand across my face before fleeing the room.

For the first time in my life, I hated being a Thibodeaux.

## CHAPTER 22



*R*aven

Truth from the mouth of babes.

The thought continued to linger in the forefront of my mind.

Running as far away as possible from the man I loved seemed like the only thing I could do. I didn't want to be a part of the sick, disgusting game of revenge that had been in the works for years. Why had karma hated me so much that she'd insisted on using me as the explosives for the final detonation?

An angry laugh bubbled to the surface.

Arman had proven how superior he was, hunting me down easily just outside the hotel. Of course I wouldn't have made it anywhere considering I had no money, no phone, and his soldiers would immediately swarm in so they could protect me and keep me from going anywhere.

Now I learned that the person I thought I'd been had been a partial lie.

I wasn't entirely certain what to believe any longer. Now I stood inside the living room, determined to hate the man all over again. Yet he was the source of answers, which I obviously needed desperately.

Zoe had been sequestered in her room. I'd barely had time to talk to her at the dinner, although she'd tried to comfort me on the ride home. That had been an impossibility. I stood staring

out the window, trying to determine what to say to him. I bristled as soon as he walked close, but the same sensations that had been overwhelming since meeting him applied. I was tingling all over.

The craziest aspect about everything that had happened was that I liked him. I adored his family, even though I'd had only a few minutes to talk with them. They'd been exactly as described, full of life and eager to talk with me. Zoe was a delight, so much so I remained eager to hear her play, to spend time learning about her life.

It was obvious how much she adored and admired her father.

Edmee had even asked me to be a bridesmaid, which had been overwhelming at the time. I could see enjoying them as a family. Except there wasn't just an elephant in the room. There was an entire herd.

Arman approached with stealth and ease, remaining quiet as he eased a glass of wine over my shoulder, the offer his idea of an olive branch. Oddly enough, I accepted it without question or tossing the liquid in his face. What good would it do at this point?

He continued to say nothing, flanking my side and staring out at the darkness just like I was.

I hated the tension between us. After a full minute had passed, I couldn't take it any longer. "Zoe is amazing."

"She has spunk."

"From what I could tell, she's just like you. You did an amazing job raising her all alone." My stomach was in knots, and I was giving him compliments. I was crazy.

"Well, I did have help. My sister has been a godsend, my mother providing guidance when I was clueless about what to do." He laughed almost bitterly as he lifted his glass. I couldn't help but notice how distraught he was, the man staring into the dark abyss of cabernet as if able to find whatever answers he was seeking. "She likes you."

"I'm glad." I pulled away from the window, determined to keep my distance but finding it impossible. "Why am I saying

that? Now I realize how much of a sham this entire wedding is. When were you going to tell me the truth?"

"After the dinner."

I laughed. "Too little, too late."

He turned his head, taking his sweet time. I expected to see anger or indignation, but noticing just how haunted the man was pushed every button, my desire for him refusing to diminish.

"I'm sorry, Raven. I've spent years perfecting how to shut myself down."

"Not with Zoe at least. I know that innately from the way she acts around you."

"She's my daughter. That's different."

"Is it really?" I took a sip of wine, hating the fact my hand was shaking. "That means you're allowed to care about her. Is there some rule book on this?"

He walked away from the window, the distance between us creating a series of chills. "It's all about staying alive."

"You weren't responsible for Sophia's death. Another man was. A real monster."

"Are you so certain about that?"

Even after everything that had happened, the answer was easy. "Yes. Please, Arman. Trust me enough to tell me the truth. It's all I ask of you."

"The truth will hurt you and I never wanted that to happen," he said, his voice soft and unnerving, filling me full of hope as well as another tingling vibration of lust.

"Not knowing is much worse. Remember, trust is a two-way street."

"Oddly enough, I trust you more than almost anyone. What I'm going to tell you is difficult not only for me but for my father most of all."

"Understood."

He took a few deep breaths before beginning.

“When I was a kid, my father had a man working for him as an accountant that ended up being his best friend. He was the kind of guy that could light up a room when he walked in, happy in life. He’d been a foster kid and had made good through Pops’ help. He had complete loyalty to the family and was always around. Holidays. Birthdays. So much so that Louie, Francois, and I called him Uncle Tim. He got married and had a kid about the same time I was born. We played together. That much I remember even though I was four or so.”

I took a sip of my wine, wondering why I’d never met my grandfather.

“Anyway, I don’t know all the details except for Uncle Tim and his wife dropped Thomas off one day and he stayed the night. I learned later that his parents were going to a special dinner given it was their anniversary and asked my mom to babysit.” He had a faraway look in his eyes. “They never made it back alive.”

“Oh, Jesus. What happened?”

“The long and short of it was that Pops had one of the soldiers drive them to the restaurant so they could enjoy themselves even more. From what my father believes, one of our enemies thought Pops was in the car.”

“Oh, no.”

“Yeah. As you might imagine, Pops was crushed. Tim had left guardian papers, asking my father and mother to raise Thomas as their own, which they did without hesitation. The kid was destroyed, Thomas retreating inside himself. It took a few years for him to come out of his shell. He was our brother in almost every way, but there was always a darkness in him. He never talked about his parents. I don’t remember a single time. That is until he was much older.”

“What happened?” Why wouldn’t Daddy tell his daughters about a family who’d raised him? I couldn’t understand.

“You need to understand that for as brutal as my father is, he loves deeply. He treated Thomas no differently than he did his other four kids. But as time went on, Thomas grew angrier, no longer joining in family gatherings. He was broken by the death of his parents, more so than we initially realized. We were in college by then, Thomas determined to live out of the house. Out of the blue, he started acting out more and getting into drugs. He almost landed in jail, but Pops made certain he didn’t have a record. That’s when Pops tried to get him some help and Thomas turned on him, accusing him of having his parents killed. I wasn’t there, but Louie was and from what I heard, it was ugly. In a fit of anger, Pops told Thomas he never wanted to see him again. He even cut off his trust fund, although he had access to the money his parents had left him. It was a blow Thomas couldn’t recover from.”

I moved closer, the darkness in him nearly destroying me. “I’m so sorry.”

“My father was crushed by what he’d said to his fourth son, my mother blaming him. It was a dark time in my family. Louie managed to track him down, but as you might imagine, it didn’t go well.”

“That’s why Louie turned away from the family business.”

He turned to face me finally, a strange expression on his face. “My beautiful and smart princess. Yes, the final straw that pushed him into applying for medical school. It just compounded everything. But that wasn’t the worst of it.”

“Sophia.”

The way he nodded was terrifying. “Before all this blew up, when we were still friends, Thomas and I met a girl at the same time. She walked into the library and both of us were smitten.”

“You argued over her.”

“Not at first. She was dating him, but he was starting to become angrier, so much so she broke it off with him. Then she came to talk to me because she really loved him. So, I confronted him.”

“Because you loved her too.”

His laugh nearly broke my heart. “You have no idea how fucked up the situation was. He was furious I intervened, accusing me of sleeping with her. I wasn’t at the time. I’d actually believed they were getting back together and I’d kept my distance. A month went by then she came by late one night, crying her eyes out. He’d lost his cool and it had scared her. That night is when I crossed the line.”

I moved closer, placing my hand on his arm. “You were a boy.”

“I was an idiot, but God, I loved her. Anyway, things got muddy after that. A month later, he disappeared. When Louie found him somewhere in Virginia, evidently, he was not in good shape. Louie never told us what happened or what was said but that was it. My father forbid us to talk about him again.”

“And you married Sophia and had a child.”

“I did.”

I thought about what he’d just told me, trying to find the right words. “He never talked about you. I had no idea. I’m not sure my mother does. No wonder you thought he was to blame.”

“I did what I could using my sources to keep track of him, shocked as hell when he joined the police force. When Sophia was killed, it took everything I had not to hunt him down, but there was no evidence Thomas had anything to do with her death.”

“But you believed it.”

“Yes. It was too similar to what happened, his anger toward Sophia so strong that I believed the threat he’d made from all those years ago. He’d told me if he couldn’t have her, no one could.”

“My father is many things, Arman, but he’s not a murderer.”

He reached out, touching the side of my face, bristling then pulling his arm away, fisting his hand. “I believe you’re right, but I need to make certain. I must find the answers and

discover who's responsible for the threats and damage. That's why I still need to go to Dallas tomorrow."

"I don't want you to go."

"Are you worried about me, princess?"

"Yes, I am. For all your bravado, you're hurting inside from the past, from the present. You still won't face your emotions head on, preferring to live behind the anger that still threatens to consume you. Someone wants you dead. Maybe both of us. I don't know what to say any longer, Arman. I need a chance to talk to my father. I need to know his side of the story."

When he pinched my chin, holding me in place as he inched closer, I could tell he didn't want me to try to escape as I'd done before. "He lost everything. His parents, the life he thought he knew, the woman he loved with all his heart. All he could concentrate on was revenge. It's still entirely possible he manipulated Travis Ramsey into doing his bidding. That's what I need to find out."

"You don't know my father any longer. He's a good man. Isn't it entirely possible Ramsey manipulated him? Using their friendship? I hated that man and his deranged son. I swear to God, the two of them were evil."

"You might be right, at least about Travis. He's been living two lives for far too long."

"I don't understand the politics of your world, but I do know that you've been feeding off the need for revenge for years while harboring guilt for what happened with Sophia. Maybe you're the one who needs to let it go, to forgive. I can't live like this, Arman. I care about you and the feelings are growing stronger, but I refuse to live as if I'm walking on eggshells. Can't you understand that? You will allow me to talk to my father."

He lifted his hand to my cheek again, only he didn't touch me, keeping his fingers a few centimeters away, his eyes piercing mine. He backed away completely, leaving me aching inside, the longing indescribable yet deep. As he headed for the door, I wasn't certain what to think or say or even how to feel.

The moment he stopped short in the doorway, I could sense he was debating the same thing himself. “The dangers are real, Raven. Someone is using the personal tragedies of my family against us. That puts you directly in harm’s way. I can’t and won’t allow the part I can control to continue any longer. You will stay here in this house where you and Zoe will be protected until I handle this. Make no mistake, I will return. Then I’ll deliver you to your father myself, letting you out of your contact.”

“Why? I know you too well. This rash decision isn’t just about my safety.” I was shocked, so much so I couldn’t think clearly.

“Because you’re right. You don’t deserve to live your life with someone you can’t care about, and I can’t continue hiding behind my need for revenge. Both you and my daughter deserve better.”

“What are you going to do?”

The way he laughed was entirely different, as if he no longer cared what happened to him. “What’s necessary to protect my family.” As he turned away, taking another step, I heard the last words. “Even if it means losing my life.”

\* \* \*

*Arman*

“She’s exactly the kind of woman you need in your life,” Francois said from across the aisle of the jet. We’d remained mostly quiet since leaving for Texas. We were about to land and would be heading to check our construction sites prior to visiting Devin.

We were still awaiting confirmation on whether Ramsey was with the man, Maddox coordinating efforts with soldiers already in Dallas to hunt him down then track him. Until then, we’d bide our time, although my patience was close to running out.

“I let her out of the contract, the blasphemous agreement I forced her to make.”

“What?” My brother sat up in his seat then moved to the one in front of me.

“It was the right thing to do.”

“Since when have you ever done the right thing?” He laughed then leaned forward, placing his forearms on his thighs, fisting his hands together. “Look. I know we’ve been at odds lately, but even a stubborn asshole like me knows that you’ve increased the business while lowering the danger level over the past few years. We’re wealthy beyond our means and can do anything we want.”

“I’m not certain what you’re getting at.”

“I couldn’t be happier. So is Pops. Hell, even though Louie won’t admit it, he doesn’t mind having his bank account boosted given our excessive profits. Edmee gets to play the socialite, marrying the man of her dreams, even though she’s nuts with her choice, but what they’ll admit is that it’s all because of you.”

“I don’t need my ego stroked right now, Francois.”

“God knows you’ve never wanted a single compliment in your life, or so you like the world to believe. Don’t worry. That’s not what I’m doing here.”

“Then get to the fucking point.”

“You’re a fucking miserable human being. You have been since Sophia died. The only time you are not when you’re with Zoe. Until I watched you last night.”

I lifted my gaze, trying to figure out why he was bothering. I’d thought about nothing else but Raven during the last few hours, longing to touch her, to taste her sweet lips. Instead, I remained in my office, staring out at the night sky, incapable of feeling much of anything except regret about far too many things in my life. As the plane began its descent, I noticed Maddox was watching us, something close to a sneer on his face.

We'd brought a half dozen soldiers with us on the flight to ensure we wouldn't have any issues, Landry left in charge of security for my estate. Even though I'd made certain there was no chance Raven could leave the residence, I wouldn't put it past her to try.

"Get to the fucking point. We have business to handle," I snapped.

"That's the problem. It's all about business with you. Last night though, I witnessed the man I'd seen when you were married and happy with Sophia. You were alive again."

I finished off my coffee, tired of the nasty taste in my mouth. "Your point?"

"My point is that you need Raven in your life and if the tears streaming down her face were any indication, she is madly in love with you. Now, I can't say I understand why, but it was obvious to me anyway."

"She deserves better."

"Then fucking give her better," he growled. "You love her. I can tell you do."

"What about it?"

"Because loving her will make you less of a miserable fuck of a human being." Francois laughed, but he wasn't teasing in the least.

And he was right.

Which I'd never admit to him.

"My choice."

"Yeah," he said, "but here's the thing. You're not getting any younger, bro. Zoe will be gone soon, enjoying her life and you'll come home to an empty house with little or no food in the refrigerator, lamenting over what was and what could have been. Then you'll die all alone, making certain you remain a cranky SOB who is determined to make the lives of your brothers and sister miserable."

Maddox almost choked and I slowly turned my head, giving him the same hard glare I had to Francois. Somehow, I had a feeling my second in command would remind me he'd said something similar only a couple of days before.

I glanced out the window of the jet, images of the beautiful girl floating into my mind as they'd done far too often. So many aspects of the ugly situation troubled me, including the fact she'd been lured to my house. Maybe Ramsey had something on the sorority president's father, but that had yet to be discovered.

"We handle the situation in Texas. That's why we're here," I told him.

"And what if Ramsey refuses to cooperate, telling us what's going on?"

I pulled back my jacket, showing my weapon. "Then he'll be provided with the means necessary to do so."

"Why do I have a feeling much of this is about protecting the woman you love?"

"I will protect her until I die, but she's free to live her life as she wants. That's it. Period."

Before he had a chance to argue, Maddox received a call.

"What you got?" he asked. Seconds later he lifted his gaze. "Excellent work, Rock. I'll let Arman know. Stay there. If anything changes, call me." He grinned as he leaned forward in his seat. "Good news, gentlemen. Apparently, there is a charity event today at a ranch outside of Dallas. All the fashionable people are going to be there. Guess who's on the guest list?"

"Would that be Mr. Ramsey and Mr. Carlos?" I couldn't help but grin. That would make things easier. They wouldn't dare create a scene in front of folks attending a charity event.

That wouldn't stop me. I'd do whatever it took to ensure they both understood fucking with the Thibodeaux family was not in their best interest.

"Exactly."

As the city came into view, I realized just how right my brother was for once.

Letting her go was going to be the most difficult decision I'd made in my life.

## CHAPTER 23



*R*aven

Love.

Fickle.

Unabashed.

Often crazy and unexpected.

It was insane to feel the way I did after everything I'd learned, but in waking up in Arman's bed, knowing he'd purposely stayed away, it had instantly struck me how much in love with him I truly was.

I'd remained in my room until late morning, taking a long hot shower as I allowed my brain to try to process everything I'd heard. The worst thing about the story Arman had relayed was that it all made sense. My father's refusal to talk about his past or whether I had grandparents, the need to keep his two children sheltered. Even the way he and Mother acted around each other indicated my assessment of them had been right.

Now I sat in the music room, uncertain of my feelings. I didn't care that it was only two in the afternoon or that I had no sense of the future. Alcohol seemed to be an excellent choice. I tickled the ivories, not playing anything that made sense, just runs and chords that came to mind. The ache was so large inside that I had no understanding of what to do with it.

There were so many questions without answers, so many aspects about what I'd heard that didn't make sense, yet I had no way of finding out anything useful.

"Daddy said you could play."

Hearing Zoe's voice, I stiffened. "I was forced to take lessons as a child. I thought sitting here would bring some comfort. I'm sorry if I invaded your space." As soon as I moved to get up, she walked further into the room.

"I'm not in the mood to play. I do so most of the time because my mother was an amazing pianist. I know it soothes my father."

"I thought you were going to be a concert pianist or something." I took a sip of wine, wishing the liquor would do something to my mood. It seemed nothing would at this point.

"I think my father would like me to be, but I want to become a nurse. Help people." She leaned on the piano. "You're in love with him. Aren't you?"

I almost choked on the wine, fighting to keep from spitting out a sip. "You know how we got together."

"I heard. But I'm also not blind." Zoe rolled her eyes. "You two were meant for each other."

"He told me he didn't want to be with me any longer."

"Did he really?"

"In certain terms."

"I know I'm only almost eighteen and all, but can I give you a piece of advice?"

There was so much spunk in the girl that she reminded me of who I was at her age. What was I saying? I was still that girl. Maybe a little battered and bruised, but I usually fought for what I wanted. "Absolutely."

"My dad is a softie underneath that crusty thing he has going on. But I know better. He doesn't want you to feel trapped and that's why he won't tell you what he's really feeling. But I know him better than anyone. He lights up when you're

around. I can tell how happy he is. You too. You were meant for each other. Like the most elegant fairy princess in the world waiting for her Prince Charming.”

I wanted to laugh and tell her not to believe, but I couldn't destroy her hopes and dreams. “I do care about your father.”

“Then why aren't you putting up a fight for him? And against whatever this is. I might not know much about his business, but I'm not blind either. Or deaf. He's not the best of men according to some people, but to me he's my dad. He's been here through everything. You know? Fight for him.”

“I'm not sure how.”

“My guess is that you do know exactly what you need to do but you're afraid.”

I chuckled. “That's part of it.” If I tried on my own to find out what was going on, maybe I could help free us from this nightmare. “The other part is that I have no means of doing what I'd like to do, which was tracking down information of my own. I don't have my phone with me.” An idea popped into my head, one that was a little devilish, but I couldn't help myself. Had her father told her not to allow me to use her phone? And there wasn't a teenage girl who didn't have one, even considering who her father was.

“That's easy to fix.” She pulled her phone from her jeans pocket, placing it on the piano. “My code is all sixes. Feel free. I'm going to see if Ginger can prepare us some lunch.”

I held my breath as she left, trying not to jump up and down. Once she'd left, I rose to my feet, staring at the iPhone as if it was a sign from God. Then I grabbed it, playing over the last few weeks in my brain.

If I could find out who'd sent me to the party in the first place, that would lead me down the trail of whether my father had any responsibility for the threats being made. There was only one person I could get it from who had the ability to find out anything in the world.

So I made a call, uncertain whether the phone would be answered given the odd number. I continued holding my

breath, my heart racing in my throat.

When I heard a voice, I waited for a couple of seconds. “I need your help and I’m not taking no for an answer.”

\* \* \*

*Arman*

The developments were back on track, no additional issues at this point. It would appear Ramsey had shifted his concentration to my immediate family and not the businesses just as I’d surmised. Now it was time to lay down the cards in such a way that Ramsey and his partner Devin Carlos knew I was deadly serious.

They either weren’t too bright or that concerned about what my capabilities were, information about their families easy to find. I had men poised to act on my verbal warnings should it become necessary.

They would either be smart men today or face my wrath. The choice was entirely up to them.

“Nice place,” Francois said as we exited the second SUV. Maddox had gotten our names on the list of guests by way of a sizable donation to the foundation in the limelight on this beautiful yet stiflingly sunny afternoon. “Incidentally, it’s owned by Carlos.”

“Of course it is,” I said as I put on my sunglasses, able to see the oversized tent set up near the massive stables and shiny new barn. I’d learned everything I could about both men in a short duration, including their holdings. Ramsey had been clever, hiding his wealth in offshore accounts under a fictitious name. It would appear he’d been on the take for a long time.

I’d had the information photographed and emailed to my buddy, the police chief of New Orleans. He would know exactly what to do with it if Ramsey didn’t play by my rules.

“Let’s go, gentlemen. I want to get back to the house tonight.”

“Does that mean you’re going to take my advice?” Francois asked as he flanked my side. “About Raven?”

“Being taken under advisement,” I told him.

“Don’t bother, Francois. He’s not really listening to anyone’s advice these days. Are you, bossman?”

Maddox could crack me up. “I am the kingpin. Remember?”

“Oh, God. There he goes again thinking he’s all that and a bag of chips.” Francois took off ahead of us, still grumbling under his breath.

“He’s right. We’re both right,” Maddox said more in passing.

“Don’t go there.”

“I’m not saying anything else except if you are stupid enough to allow Raven to get away, you’re going to regret it for the rest of your life.”

“Did you ever stop to think that maybe letting her go will allow some of the demons to disappear?”

Just before we made it to the tent, he stopped, turned, and faced me. “Then ask yourself this. Is that what Sophia would want?” As Francois had done seconds before, he left me standing by myself.

To contemplate.

And I still didn’t know what the hell I was going to do with the woman I loved.

Fuck me.

I knew what love felt like and there was no doubt how I felt. Now I was really furious with the asshole who continued to try to destroy my life.

After buttoning my jacket, I knew I was ready to finish the issue my way.

I enjoyed the scenery as I shifted through the gates leading to the impressive backyard of the ranch. It was well over five thousand acres, one of the smaller ones that Devin owned, but it was obvious he’d used threats and extortions to purchase

several others, which would lead to the man owning a significant chunk of the cattle industry, which was still big business.

It was interesting that while the man had attempted to hide his actions, as with Ramsey, his greed and inflated belief in his level of power had made both him and his attorney careless. I'd found enough of a trail to use against him if necessary. That allowed me to feel confident that I wouldn't need to resort to extreme violence to get my point across.

But if I did, so the fuck what? I was in the mood to enjoy my blood lust. A few fleeting, comical images floated into the back of my mind of having both men fight with hungry bulls, while my men and I engaged in target practice. Maybe it would come to that.

Grinning, I raked my hands through my hair to ensure I was presentable then walked into the tent, drinking in the atmosphere of smoked barbeque food. Then I headed for the bar, completely aware at least a few pairs of eyes were on me. Both Maddox and Francois had already beaten me to the line, both prepared to grab their drinks.

Once they did, Francois moved beside me. "Interesting group of people. I wonder if they realize the charity is simply a method of laundering money."

"Let's not burst their bubbles. They live in glass houses. If we shatter one, we shatter them all." Given our plans on expanding in Texas, the last thing I wanted to do was create unnecessary rifts at this point. Although I'd do everything necessary to provide safety and wealth to my family.

I ordered a Kentucky bourbon. Neat. Then I scanned the glorious event, searching for any sign of the two men I'd come here to see.

"What are your plans?" my brother asked.

"Why don't you and I take a walk, see the sights? We'll allow Maddox to mingle with the illustrious guests. My guess is we'll find our boys holed up smoking cigars, the host prepared to make an entrance only when necessary." It was obvious

women were running the auction event, fussing with the final details, visiting table to table.

It was interesting that Devin had required his four children to be at the event, likely in a moment of solidarity. He was pulling out all the stops to elevate his status in the upper echelon of society. His behavior mirrored mine from a few years prior. While the family still provided money to three charities of choice, I had no desire to pretend I cared about participating in the events or obtaining a higher platform in the wealth and opulence of New Orleans.

Why bother?

We owned half the city anyway.

I headed toward Maddox, the two of us standing in opposite directions. “Keep an eye on the crowd. If anything suspicious occurs, text me. We’re going hunting.”

“Will do, boss.”

Francois and I took our time weeding through the crowd, heading toward the main house. There were several structures seen in the distance, including additional barns and what had to be ranchers’ quarters. It was a typical setup with modern amenities. The man had spared no expense in his renovations over the years.

We meandered to the house, noticing that guests were coming and going from inside. That provided an open invitation. The sunroom gave way to a stunning kitchen, which led to a series of hallways. We said nothing as we admired the rustic art on the walls, passing several well-known guests in both the entertainment and political arenas. With every step, I became more amused with the situation, the two men believing I’d be so caught up in their game of cat and mouse that I wouldn’t figure out what they were attempting to do.

Shame on them.

I wasn’t easily fooled.

Francois chuckled as we headed down another hallway, noticing a partially closed door at the end. If our luck would hold, we might find what we were looking for.

My brother pushed open the door with a single finger. Inside we found four men including a state senator and another rancher who'd turned his good fortune into a multibillion-dollar operation. And as expected, Travis Ramsey stood with a pool cue in his hand, prepared to take a shot, a cigar sticking from his mouth.

It was all too perfect, as if they had no cares in the world. I shoved one hand into my trouser pocket, waiting to see how long it would take until they noticed our arrival. The only aspect of what I was seeing that troubled me was that the mogul had invested a significant sum of money into the venture that had been torched.

That pissed me off.

It was the senator who noticed us first, his gregarious laughter ceasing as he stared at us for a full three seconds. Then he nodded toward his good buddy, Devin Carlos.

Devin lifted his head, the other two men finally taking notice as well. Then he took a long pull of whatever amber liquid was in his thick tumbler before acknowledging us. "What an unexpected pleasure. I didn't know members of the Thibodeaux family were such philanthropists."

"I would call us men of wealth who enjoy providing comfort and hope to those in need, Devin. However, my family doesn't hide behind charity events in hopes of improving our social status. Travis Ramsey. I must admit, I was surprised to hear your name was on the guest list."

In my line of work, making accurate observations was a requirement, as much as always keeping a weapon on one's person. What I noticed about Travis' reaction was that he was genuinely shocked we'd made an appearance. He had to know I would eventually figure out what the hell he was involved in and who was his partner in crime.

Amusement bubbled up in my throat.

Then Travis acted as if he was finished playing the game, moving away from the table slowly.

“What do you want, Arman? I have a house full of guests, an auction ready to start in less than an hour. I don’t have time for your bullshit,” Devin said, attempting to keep the anger from his voice.

“What I have to say to you might be best served without the presence of your... gaming buddies. Travis. It’s best if you hang around.”

Devin seemed surprised, throwing Travis a questioning look.

Exhaling, Francois moved toward the window overlooking the grounds. Taking another vantage point in these situations was always in our best interest. He acted bored, doing nothing more than admiring the scenery when I knew he was poised and ready to take a shot if necessary. My brother was one of the best marksmen I’d ever worked with.

Both Travis and Devin glanced in his direction before Devin cleared his throat. “Mark. Chase. Why don’t you guys go and refresh your drinks. This won’t take very long.”

“You sure about that?” asked Chase, the mogul I had a meeting with in less than two weeks.

“Positive.” Devin never took his eyes off me.

The two men left, even being considerate enough to close the door after them.

“This isn’t my fight either,” Travis grumbled, heading for the door.

I stopped him, shaking my head. “As I said. You’re staying. You’re a part of this, the two of you forming an alliance.”

“I was invited here for a charity event, something the DEA has participated in for years,” Travis insisted, anger creeping up in his tone, but there was more trepidation.

“That’s right. I hear congratulations are in order. I assume that your rise to power was mentored by your good buddy, Thomas Cartier. What I don’t need to assume because the three of you left a trail a mile wide is that you’ve been in business together for a long time. That includes using methods of extortion, blackmail, and good ole Texas strong-arming to obtain various

plots of land for future developments. In addition, you've managed to manipulate the cattle prices, which is a huge no-no and would likely get your sorry asses run out of town on a rail full of rusty nails. How am I doing, gentlemen?"

Travis paled.

Devin smiled.

"That's bullshit and you can't prove anything," Devin said more calmly than I would have anticipated.

"Oh, I assure you that I have some fascinating documentation, including statements from several ranchers, who will remain nameless. I took my time gathering the information, ensuring that I had all my t's crossed and i's dotted prior to sending copies to my attorney and my good friend, the police chief of New Orleans, who happens to have powerful influence on certain members of law enforcement as well as various senators in congress who take this type of white-collar crime seriously." I moved to the pool table, placing my drink on the smooth felt surface before planting my palms down. "In other words, gentlemen. You don't want to continue fucking with my family."

The two men looked at each other and Travis took a purposeful step away from his good buddy, as if attempting to convince me he had nothing to do with the venture I'd described. Granted, I'd embellished various aspects, providing more of a scare tactic than I had in my possession, but they didn't need to know that.

I was not only a consummate businessman. I was a damn good poker player, taught by an old friend of mine. How ironic. I remained where I was, first locking eyes with Devin then Travis, waiting until both looked away, conceding the point in our dark, vicious game.

"What do you want?" Devin hissed.

"For you to cease with your childish threats made to my family members. And for you to begin taking a backstep or ten in your methods of buying up pieces of land. If you don't, I'll also provide the information to the press. Your stocks will

plummet, Devin. And for you, Travis. You'll be ruined, out of the job you crushed other people to obtain. I couldn't figure out why you wanted to be a part of this. Then it dawned on me. Kyle, your firstborn son died in a fire at one of my warehouses. You joined in the foray for revenge, which I assume was the exact reason Thomas did as well."

Travis glanced at me again then shook his head. "My son didn't deserve to die."

"No, he didn't. And he wouldn't have lost his life had he followed the orders of his superiors. I am many things, Mr. Ramsey, but I take no joy or pride in eliminating innocent lives. Believe it or not."

"We're not taking this crap. You have nothing on me. You're nothing in Texas."

Francois issued an exaggerated sigh. It was time to pull out the usual big guns, which I'd honestly hoped to avoid. Maybe after my effort to go more legitimate with our businesses, threatening to kill families was now beneath me.

Or maybe Raven's insistence that I was a good man deep inside had rubbed off on me. I'd give that some thought later.

When she was safe.

"Well, then I have no other choice but to provide this for both of you." I pulled two envelopes from my jacket, placing them down in front of the men. Then I backed away, allowing them to realize that I knew every location of their family members, including their usual schedules. The photographs provided additional leverage that I would make good on my threat to eliminate their families if necessary.

I wouldn't.

But again, they didn't need to know I was anything other than a vicious, vile man.

"You leave my family out of this." I heard anger as well as terror in Travis' voice.

"Then you will cease to do business together, leave my fiancée out of your need for revenge, and stop making threats. And

Travis, you will drop your investigation into my finances, my land development, and every other aspect of my corporation. The business arrangements we can work out later. Did I miss anything, bro?" I turned my head toward Francois who moved closer to the table, unbuttoning his jacket so both men could catch a glimpse of his weapon.

"That about covers it. Other than to stay the fuck out of New Orleans."

"Fiancée? Who the fuck are you talking about?" Travis asked.

If I didn't know better, I'd say he honestly had no clue.

I leaned further over the table, cocking my head. "The very girl you were insistent that your brilliant son would marry, forming an entirely different alliance with Thomas Cartier. I'm curious. Does your good buddy here know that was your original plan?"

Travis was thoroughly confused, but Devin was furious. It would seem the two men would have something to discuss after our departure. What I found intriguing was that Travis was absolutely floored. Was it due to what I'd learned, or had he really had no clue about Raven, including the fact she was in my possession?

The nagging that too many pieces were still missing continued. There was another player in this game. I was almost certain of it. Who?

"You won't get away with this," Devin said as if he was certain that would be the case.

"It's up to you to push the envelope or not. However, I caution you, Devin. You're no fool. You know exactly what I'm capable of, and what my brothers and father are capable of. If you don't heed my strong recommendation, I will enjoy ruining you then destroying your entire family, starting with your children."

"You fucker."

"Yes, that's a word. I'll leave you to your guests and your party now." I headed for the door, stopping long enough to throw in another slight barb. "Incidentally, I left a sizable

contribution to your charity in my family's name." I threw open the door, not bothering to grab my drink. I had no intention of staying long.

Francois laughed under his breath as he followed me into the corridor. "I'm curious, brother. How much of what you threatened him do you intend on doing?"

"Depends."

"Maybe I should ask, were you bluffing?"

I grinned and tipped my head in his direction. "A good poker player never shows his cards."

He clapped me on the back. "You are one cunning son of a bitch."

We were already out the door when I heard a voice from behind. "Arman. Wait."

I had hoped Travis would provide some additional information of his own. I didn't bother turning around, instead moving to another area where guests hadn't converged. "What is it? Make it quick. I have a plane to catch."

"You're wrong. There is no investigation involving your family." His voice was edgy as if fearful he'd be caught by one of Devin's men talking to me.

Exhaling, I shook my head as I shifted to face him. "What about the construction site located only a few miles from here?"

He glanced over his shoulder. "We were tipped that Mr. Carlos had something to do with it."

"Interesting. And the man you sent in undercover?"

"That had nothing to do with me. In fact, I tried to pull him out."

Poor Grayson had been caught in the middle of a very dangerous game.

"Why?" I glanced at Francois. "That doesn't make any sense and is contrary to the information especially since you railroaded your way into the position."

“I was highly recommended, pushed by Thomas and the people he knows, who are just as influential as you are. He strongly convinced me to stay out of your world.”

By the way he was talking, he meant he'd been coerced with tactics only my former brother would understand. “Interesting. Then why the fuck was Raven Cartier targeted?”

“I don't know. I swear to God, I had nothing to do with that. Yes, I wanted revenge, but I'm not getting any younger and Thomas helped me see the light regarding Kyle's death. If you get what I'm saying.”

I found it almost impossible to believe Thomas would push his friend into ceasing all intentions of destroying my family, but there was continued fear in his eyes. I just had to determine who he was more terrified of facing. Before I had a chance to grill him any further, my phone rang. A text from Maddox.

When I read the short passage, I was shocked. “Tell me about your son. Raven mentioned he was cruel, even violent.”

“What do you mean?” Ramsey asked, searching my eyes.

“Who is he working for?”

“I don't get what you're saying.”

“Maybe I should ask, who is he involved with?” My patience was running out.

“Um. Some girl from LSU, Megan Montgomery, I think is her name, although he doesn't tell me much about his life any longer. But what I gathered is that her father is considering a run for president.”

“Let me guess. Megan is president of a sorority.”

“Yeah, why?”

I shoved him against the wall. “Where is he?”

“I don't know. He and I haven't talked in a long time,” Ramsey huffed, throwing up his hands. “The kid went off the deep end. He even told me if he couldn't have Raven, no one could. I told him in no uncertain terms he wasn't going to

touch her. Ending their relationship the way I did had put a rift in my relationship with Thomas.”

Fuck me. I’d been blind and stupid.

“Where is your son now?” I snapped.

“Why should that matter?”

I jammed my hand into his throat. “If you want to live, you’re going to tell me.”

“He’s in New Orleans. Why?”

“What’s wrong?” Francois barked.

“We need to get to the plane. Now. Raven and Zoe are in danger.” And I was to blame.

## CHAPTER 24



*R*aven

A glass of wine in my hand, my feet dangling in the warm water of the pool, I glanced at the afternoon sun and exhaled, hoping that Arman would be home soon.

Home.

The single word was something that continued to surprise me. He'd given me my walking papers, if I wanted them, release from a contract I'd entered into willingly.

And it was the last thing I wanted to do.

Arman had shared with me the horrible things that had happened, more of the story about my father and how close they were, my dad being a mentor to him and his biological brothers.

"What are you doing to do?" Zoe asked, kicking her feet in the water. "About my father?"

"We have a lot to discuss but I love him. I know it's crazy. I know I shouldn't. I know he's no prince, but he's my prince."

When she didn't say anything, I glanced at her, laughing seeing her wrinkled nose.

"If you tell me he's a good kisser, I think I'll puke."

It was my turn to laugh. She'd done her best to make me comfortable and I'd found myself relaxing to a point. "Do you

have a boyfriend?”

Now Zoe rolled her eyes. “Are you kidding me? My father would kill me. Or he’d kill the guy. Until I move away and go to college far away from here, I won’t be able to have a life. He’s far too... possessive.”

“Because he loves you and worries about you.”

“Enemies. He has too many enemies.”

I thought about my father and how rough he’d been on me. “You know I didn’t realize until now? My father was tough and will never understand why I care about Arman. I realize that. But he’s always wanted the best for me. I can tell that’s how your father is. He adored your mother and wants you to have that kind of love.”

She rested her head on her knee as she looked at me, taking several shallow breaths. “I know. And all I’ve ever wanted is to see my dad happy. Maybe then he’ll get off my back. I think you can help make that happen.”

We giggled together and I pushed her playfully, tingling all over as I thought about him. If only it were that easy. I’d gotten no answers, the man’s promises uncertain. However, I was determined to discover whether my father was indeed trying to hurt the man I loved.

And I did love Arman.

How had that happened?

I’d wrestled with my thoughts, concerned I was still out of my mind. I’d also been hesitant to accept my strong feelings, thinking maybe I was doing nothing more than pushing against my father and his controlling hold. But during the hours of reflection, I’d finally realized that I was my own person, ready to not only take hold of my life and my future, but willing to face the consequences for my actions.

Even if it damaged the relationship with my father.

It was a heavy weight to bear, but in my heart, I knew I’d compare every other man with Arman for the rest of my life if

I didn't take a leap of faith. Maybe my mother had been right after all. Who knew?

"But you must have a boy you have a crush on." Hearing a strange sound, I realized it was a melodic ring tone from Zoe's phone.

She groaned. "No doubt it's Dad. He's called four times. And yes, he asked about you all slyly like I couldn't figure out what he was doing." Her laughter continued as she scampered to her feet, moving to her phone. "Hello? Hey, Dad. We were just talking about you."

I leaned back, eager to see him to the point I was more restless than before. There were so many things to say to Arman, so much that I needed to convey. But first, I'd throw my arms around him.

"Yeah, she's right here. What's wrong?"

Hearing the change in her voice, I shifted so I could see her. Zoe threw her head up, darting her eyes back and forth as she walked closer.

"Okay. Yeah, hold on." She held out the phone. "Dad wants to talk to you."

I took the phone from her and as soon as I did, she backed away, folding her arms. "Hiya. Are you on your way back?"

"I need you to listen to me and try not to make it apparent what I'm telling you."

"O-kay. What is it?" I tried to fake putting a smile on my face, but Zoe was watching me carefully.

"Where are you?"

"We're out by the pool."

"Fuck," he hissed. "I need you to get inside and lock the doors. Now."

Hearing the shake in his voice shocked me more than the words. My fingers were almost numb as I struggled to stand, moving quickly toward Zoe. "We need to go inside. Okay?"

While I was usually pretty good at disguising fear in my tone, I could sense she was able to read me like a freaking book.

She jerked her arm away. “What’s going on?”

“That’s what I’m going to find out. Let’s go inside.”

She nodded, numbness already settling in. I hurried us into the kitchen, closing and locking the door immediately. Then I realized we’d gone out through the living room doors.

“Raven. What is happening?” Zoe asked.

“Just stay here,” I told her, immediately heading out of the kitchen toward the living room. “You’re scaring me and terrifying your daughter. What is going on, Arman?”

“I think I’ve been compromised.”

“What does that mean?” I moved more quickly, heading into the room and hissing when I noticed the cracked door. After closing and locking it, I tried to think about what to do. The security system. I had no idea how to operate it.

“It means I can’t get in contact with my men who are guarding you.” I was stunned, trying to figure out what in God’s name I should do.

“What? Who?” I moved toward the hallway, determined to get the entire house secured.

“Carter Ramsey.”

Blinking several times, I was stopped in my tracks. “What? Oh, God. I called him. I asked for his help.”

“How? When?” He was furious. “The man is dangerous. Deranged.”

“I don’t know. A few hours ago. I wanted him to help me find answers. I used Zoe’s phone.”

“Fuck. Lock the doors! Secure the system. I’m going to tell you how to get into a safe. Do you know how to use a weapon?”

Oh, my God. “Carter knows I’m here.” The dream. It was Carter chasing me, just like he told me he’d do when I told

him it was over. What was wrong with me?

“Yeah, my guess is he tracked her phone somehow. It doesn’t matter. I’m on my way. Just stay behind closed doors.”

I moved to the foyer, glancing at one of the almost transparent sidelights. What the hell? I could swear there was someone lying on the front porch, the body covered in blood. Oh, no, no. That was crazy. My hand shaking, I did what I could to figure out the system. “Yes, I can shoot. Daddy made certain I could.”

“Raven. There’s smoke!” Zoe raced into the foyer, her entire body shaking.

“What? Where?” I pulled the phone away, taking a deep whiff. Jesus. She was right.

“What the hell is going on?” Arman demanded.

“There’s smoke coming from somewhere. We need to get out of here.”

“No. Don’t go outside. Not yet.”

I could barely keep the phone in my hand as I raced after Zoe. Smoke was billowing in from under the kitchen door leading to the garage. I knew better than to open it. “The garage is on fire. We need to get out. I need to call 911,” I told him.

“No. I’ll call 911, Raven. Listen to me and follow my directions. Go into my office. You need to protect yourself.”

“The smoke is bad. Where are the men? I have to get someone. We need to get out of here.” Zoe bolted from the kitchen.

“Shit. Zoe’s trying to get out.” I was frantic, barely able to move. But somehow, I found a way to fly through the house. Unfortunately, she had her hand on the door, ready to open it when I screamed. “No!”

She threw it open as if in slow motion, racing outside. Then I heard her scream.

“Zoe!”

“What is happening?” Arman hissed. “Talk to me.”

I heard voices and almost panicked, refusing to allow anything to happen to her. As soon as I bolted outside, I tripped, flying into the air.

And straight into the arms of a masked man. Zoe screamed, flailing her arms.

“Zoe! Zoe!” As the phone slipped from my fingers and I was shoved inside the back of an SUV, I could still hear Arman’s anguished cry.

“Ra-ven!”

\* \* \*

*Arman*

Dead. They were all fucking dead.

Eight men with weapons. I stood with my hands on my hips, watching the firefighters putting out the fire in the garage. The cars were totaled, along with the other contents and a good portion of the building itself, but it would never have made it into the house even as hot as the fire had obviously burned.

I’d had a thick firewall installed because I knew the garage could be a target.

“We’ll find them, Arman,” Francois said, his tone as exasperated as I felt. We’d dragged Ramsey onto the plane, Devin not bothering to fight us. I had no doubt at that point he’d realized that he’d been under investigation, although by now I wasn’t certain I could trust anything that came out of Ramsey’s mouth.

“I didn’t get a chance to tell her she’d be safe, that the fire couldn’t get to her.”

He gripped my shoulder, squeezing. “We’re going to find them.”

“Yeah, and the motherfucker is going to help us or so fucking help me God, I will kill every member of his family.”

Maddox jogged toward us. He'd already removed his jacket and tie, rolling up his sleeves like I had. Soot covered his face from forcing himself into the destroyed space to try to obtain answers. "There is no doubt it was purposely set. No one was injured. There's no one inside."

"We need to get to the surveillance cameras," I told him, already headed for the house.

"The firefighters don't want anyone inside," Maddox stated, as if that was going to stop me.

"Make certain the motherfucker stays on ice. Then we will find them." I burst in through the front door, taking long strides toward my office, Francois trailing behind me.

"I made a call to Pops and to Louie. They're all on their way."

I stopped long enough to glance in his direction. "What the fuck is Louie going to do?"

"Anything he can. As he told me. No one from our family was going to get hurt. At minimum, he'll handle the investigation."

Huffing, I shook my head. Maybe it wasn't too little, too late. I shifted to the camera equipment, pulling up the one close to the front door. In less than five minutes, I was able to see the SUV that had driven up, coming to a screeching halt. While the men were masked, it was obvious they'd purposely targeted the girls.

Raven. Why had she made contact with Carter? Because she'd thought she could help. Because she didn't understand the level of danger. Because I hadn't been honest with her. Fuck. I slammed my fist on the desk before raking half the items onto the floor. "This can't be happening. I can't lose them over revenge."

In the hour plus on the plane, Ramsey had mentioned that Carter had taken his brother's death the hardest, the big brother able to spend more time with the kid for several years. Then he'd been in love with Raven, her refusal to care about him altering his personality.

However, Travis Ramsey had denied that his kid was capable of turning against everything he'd been taught. Revenge was a

dangerous emotion, one that had destroyed so many lives.

It had almost been too late for me to figure that out before shit got out of hand.

“What now?” Francois asked.

“We use Ramsey to lure the kid out of his lair. There’s no other choice.”

“And if he won’t give up his own son?”

I thought about all the methods I could use on the man to ensure he helped us all we needed. “Trust me, brother. He will. He. Will.”

## CHAPTER 25



*R*aven

Where we were being kept wasn't a basement since there was no such thing in New Orleans. However, the space was disgusting nonetheless, the stench inside pushing visions of dead bodies and dried blood into the back of my mind. It was a storeroom of some kind, boxes of crap and garbage, leftover cans of paint and other chemicals stored inside. While there were windows, they'd been blocked off, which continued to fuel the nightmare that this was some kind of torture chamber.

God. Maybe I'd seen too many horror movies in the past few years.

"We're never getting out of here," Zoe said. We'd both committed to searching the room after being dumped and locked inside. I'd tried the handle, beating on the door but no one had given a shit. Since bags had been shoved over our heads, I had no clear understanding of where we were other than whoever was driving had spent at least twenty minutes on the road. I'd heard the rumble, had felt the acceleration, which in my mind meant we'd been taken on the highway.

Did that mean my timing was off and we'd been removed from the city? There was no way of knowing and no chance that we'd been found on a whim.

If Carter was behind this, he'd yet to show his face. If he did, I would fucking kill him with my bare hands. To abduct me was one thing. To take an underage girl was another. And I knew

exactly what Arman would do to him or whoever was behind this.

They would die a horrible, bloody death and at this moment, I would stand by cheering.

“Like hell we aren’t. We keep looking for something that can help us.” I was just as exasperated as she was, the heat in the small space oppressive. Sweat was running down my back, sticking to the shirt. Neither one of us had shoes on, which would make escaping a bit more treacherous, but by God, I would not let her die here.

“Okay. I can do that. It’s better than waiting for the inevitable.” I returned to the door, studying the lock. If I could find something to use, it was possible I could pick it. However, there was no way of knowing how many guards were on the outside. I’d seen two in masks but had heard at least two more when we’d been dragged from the SUV to our prison. How long had we been trapped inside?

An hour? No, it had to be longer. That meant it was getting dark outside, making it more difficult for Arman to be able to find us.

If he’d be able to. Maybe it was just wishful thinking.

“Do you know who did this?” Zoe asked.

“I think so. He was someone who said he loved me, but I broke it off.” I turned to face her, rubbing perspiration from my face.

She stopped what she was doing, turning her head slowly. “This is all about some guy who loves you?”

“I think there’s more to it, Zoe. I’m not certain I know all the pieces, so your dad will need to explain... That is if he finds us.”

“Don’t underestimate my father and what he can do. That man will hunt us down if it’s the last thing he does on this earth. My father loves me, and I know in my heart how he feels about you. You’re everything to him.” She tossed a couple of the items she’d found on a shelf to the floor. We were both running out of patience.

We both suddenly heard a sound and for a few seconds, I was hopeful. Then as the door began to open, I moved instinctively in front of Zoe, pushing her back by several feet and ensuring that she wouldn't be hurt. I would protect her with my life.

When Carter walked in, I immediately lunged for him, more enraged than I'd been in a long time. He merely backhanded me, sending me reeling backward. But I refused to stop, jumping toward him again.

Then he pointed a weapon toward Zoe.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, sweetheart. I will kill her."

Exhaling, I threw out my arms, shielding her the best I could.

"No, you will not, you fuck. You used me. You lied to me."

"Trust me, Raven. I will do what's necessary," he said. He wore a demonic smile and I was sick inside, but the anger was enough I almost did something stupid.

"Why are you doing this?" I hissed. "Money? Power?"

"Both are already in my grasp. However, I already told you, Raven. If I can't have you then nobody can." He walked closer and I pushed Zoe back even further.

"That's not the only reason. It can't be."

"Well, let's just say that when I realized you were Arman's love interest, I knew serendipity had stepped in. Now, I get to kill two birds with one stone." He glanced behind him at the shelf full of chemicals and nodded. "And I know exactly how to accomplish my brilliant feat."

What in the hell was he planning? "What are you going to do?" The man was half crazy.

"It's a shame you both need to die but this is a war between powerful families. Soon, I'll be king of the world."

"You are out of your mind. Arman will hunt you down. Your father will disown you." I tossed a glance toward the door and he smiled.

"You won't be able to run, sweetheart. I couldn't care less about my father. By this time next tomorrow, he'll be in jail."

As far as the man who thinks he owns you, this will certainly push him over the edge. First his wife. Then his fiancée and daughter. Any normal man would lose their mind.”

“Oh, my God. You killed Sophia?” As soon as I asked the question I already knew the answer to, Zoe roared from behind me, lunging toward him as I’d done. He was too quick, pressing the barrel of the weapon against her forehead, stopping her in her tracks.

He just laughed.

“Why?”

Carter seemed confused at first. “Oh, he doesn’t share the sordid details of his past. Try the fact he locked my brother into a warehouse then set fire to it. My brother burned to death and Arman didn’t give a shit. I’m just giving him a taste of his own medicine.”

“What?” I was shocked, trying not to tear up. “That’s not possible.” Carter was deranged, more so than I’d believed before. This was crazy. “Arman isn’t a monster.”

“You really think Arman is a good man? Don’t you think he’s killed dozens of people? Slaughtered them? Ruined families.”

“Don’t you dare talk about my father that way. You killed my mother. You fucking bastard,” Zoe screeched.

I touched her arm, willing her to stop moving. The asshole was crazy enough to pull the trigger. “He wouldn’t have done that!”

“Oh, yeah? My brother was a cop, an enemy. Arman couldn’t care less that he had a beautiful fiancée waiting for him when he got off work or that he was getting married in two weeks. Two. Fucking. Weeks. He didn’t care.”

Now he was screaming.

“I hate you. My father isn’t like that!” Zoe insisted, becoming almost hysterical.

“Shut up. Shut the fuck up, you little tramp!”

“Leave. Her. Alone. She’s an innocent girl. You want me. Isn’t that the real reason? You’re pissed because I fell in love with a real man who can actually take care of me.” My insult was risky as hell, but I had no doubt given the crazed look in his eye and the way he was sweating profusely that he’d pull the trigger without warning.

“You threatened my family!” Zoe screamed.

Carter took several ragged breaths, his face turning bright red. The second he reared back, I tackled Zoe, pulling us both to the floor just seconds before he fired off several shots.

“Oh. Oh. Oh. Oh,” Zoe moaned and I covered her with my body, praying to God that she hadn’t been hit.

When I heard nothing, I lifted my head. Carter was swaying back and forth. He lowered his head, glaring at me before stomping to the door. “Killing you would be too easy. Knowing you lost your life in a horrific fire like my brother will leave me with delicious thoughts for years to come. Goodbye, Raven. Take it from me. There is no such thing as innocence in this fucked-up world.”

With that, he slammed and locked the door.

“Jesus Christ. Zoe. Are you okay?”

When she moaned, I eased off her, still praying.

“He’s going to... kill us,” she gulped, finally lifting her head. Tears were streaming down her face.

“Not if I can help it and as you told me, don’t you dare lose faith or underestimate your father. He will walk through the fires of hell to get to us. Thank God the freak was a bad shot.”

She nodded, offering a smile. We both noticed a stronger stench, her face scrunching up. “What the hell is that smell?”

“Are you okay? Can you stand?”

“I’m fine. Just shaken. This is crazy. What is wrong with him?”

“Greed and revenge.”

I helped Zoe to her, immediately realizing the son of a bitch wasn't a bad shot. He'd purposely driven holes into several of the chemicals. Glugs of liquid were pooling on the floor. Only seconds later, I knew exactly what the asshole had done.

We were in some kind of warehouse. If what he'd told me was remotely true, then he was re-enacting the situation with his brother. He really was killing two birds with one stone.

"We're going to die," she insisted. "We're going to die!"

I pulled away, turning and grabbing her arms as she started to sob even harder. "Listen to me. We are not going to die. I will get us out of here. I need to find something to pick the lock. Okay. Something sharp. Long. Can you help me?"

She took several gulping breaths and I thought she wouldn't manage to find the strength or courage, but she was her father's daughter. Within seconds, she shored up her shoulders and gave me a solid nod. "Yes, I can."

"Excellent. Let's get the fuck out of here and go home." I moved closer to the chemicals, trying not to react. What I wouldn't mention was how combustible they were. Whatever happened, if the fire found its way into the room, there would be no chance we'd survive.

\* \* \*

*Arman*

*Wham!*

I issued the fourth brutal punch to Ramsey's face. He grunted and started to slide down the brick wall. "Talk to me. Tell me where your fucking son has gone."

"I don't know!" The words were the same thing he'd said for the last ten minutes. Time was wasting.

I jerked him nearly off his feet, slamming him against the wall. I'd forced Maddox to stop in a location where we wouldn't be

bothered, but this was getting ridiculous. “You have one last chance. The fucker took Raven and my daughter for a reason.”

“Let me have a few minutes with him,” Francois said.

I snapped my head in my brother’s direction, backing away a few seconds later. Maybe I did need to cool off so I could think clearly.

“Why would Carter do this?” Maddox asked. “There has to be a reason.”

Exhaling, I turned away, trying to process what little we knew about Carter. He’d taken the death of his brother hard, had likely blamed his father. Was it possible that he’d killed Sophia? “The fact he purposely sought Megan out is the key here. But why?”

“Maybe he kept track of Raven and when he realized she was pledging, he swooped in.”

“Farfetched. Why now?”

“Thomas has to be involved with this somehow.”

While Francois had hit him twice more, I was finished with playing games. I pulled out my weapon, pressing it under Ramsey’s chin. “You have thirty seconds to confess your sins. What prompted your son to suddenly develop a plan that included luring Raven into my world?”

Ramsey’s one eye was swollen shut, his mouth bloody, but tears were streaming down his cheeks and it had nothing to do with agony. “Because... we had an argument two months ago. He was angry that Thomas decided he wasn’t good enough for Raven. I hadn’t known until that point that she’d already dumped him. He was already acting crazy, bragging that he would kill Thomas and take Raven for himself just like he’d done to Sophia. He was waving a gun around. I told him to get the fuck out, that he was disowned. He accused me of taking sides with Thomas, forsaking his only living son. I was far too angry to realize he needed help.”

“Why didn’t his admittance make you happy? He told you that he’d gotten justified revenge destroying my life.” It was still

unfathomable, the ugliness of everything that had occurred. Kyle had wanted to please his father so badly.

Ramsey seemed suddenly like a broken man. “You don’t understand. Thomas and I stopped being friends a long time ago. Part of the reason why was that when Carter applied for the FBI, Thomas turned him down. My buddy told me then that Carter failed his psychological test. I was incensed, certain I could count on the man.”

“That ended your friendship?”

“That was the last straw. I told him that maybe Carter could actually bring you down for the crime you committed. We got into a fist fight. You see, I might have been the person responsible for encouraging him to leave aside his life of crime, but he had no intentions of ever allowing anything to happen to you or any member of your family. He made certain I knew at that moment that he’d come after me and my family personally if I attempted find a way to destroy you.”

Even though it sounded farfetched, I could tell he wasn’t lying. “You didn’t have a change of heart about Kyle’s death from the warehouse fire. You never dropped your need for revenge. You simply didn’t want to lose everything you’d worked for.”

“I wanted to save my family but you’re right. I didn’t want to lose what I’d built over the years, the new ventures I’d undertaken. Tell me what you’d do.”

I lowered the weapon, sliding it into my holster. “Much worse, Ramsey. Then what? This argument with Carter. What happened?”

“Then I told my son that he was forbidden to touch you or anyone inside your family and why. He stormed out of my house and I thought that was the end of it. I was wrong.”

“Why were you at that charity event?”

“You were right in that I’ve been working with Devin Carlos for years. We grew up in the same neighborhood and kept in touch. He made me an offer and when it had to do with

destroying your empire in an entirely different way, I couldn't pass it up."

"Carter found that out. He was the one who tipped off the DEA. Not you."

He laughed and closed his one eye. "That's what I've suspected. I tried to talk to him, but he refused. I also wanted to warn Devin of what was going on and to lay low for a little while. You don't know this, but he torched one of Devin's buildings, killing several horses. My son will kill your fiancée and daughter. He's not the little boy I raised."

The puzzle was ugly, but it fit together. Except for what Carter intended on doing. He might be obsessed with the woman I loved, but the desire to exact revenge held even more appeal. I glanced from Francois to Maddox. Suddenly, I knew in my gut what he had planned. "He's going to kill them in a fire. That will complete the circle of revenge. But he will come after you."

"I know," Ramsey said.

"He needs an opportune place. Does he own a warehouse or have access to one?"

"I have no idea."

I cocked my head, trying to keep my patience. He was as much a victim as anyone else. "Yes, you do. Think, Ramsey. Fuckin' think."

He shook his head several times. "I own a warehouse still. It's a piece of property I held onto with plans of having it renovated. I even talked to Devin about it since it's in New Orleans. I knew he wouldn't mind stepping foot into your territory."

"Where. Is. It?"

"It's on Fordham Street. It's the perfect place. There's no one else around."

"You better hope we're not too late. Or you'll beg me to die."

## CHAPTER 26



*R*aven

The smoke was getting thicker, acrid and the heat was explosive. I could hear crackling noises coming from the other side of the door. We were running out of time.

“I can’t find anything.” Exasperation and sadness rolled into me. I wiped sweat from my face and sagged against the exterior wall. “If only I could find a paperclip, I could get us out of here.”

Zoe had sagged to the floor, all but giving up trying to escape. Then she snapped her head up, ripping at the holder keeping her hair in a bun. Excitement rushed to her face as she stumbled to get up. “Will this do?”

I moved closer, realizing that in addition to using a scrunchy, she had a hairpin. “Oh, my God. You might be a lifesaver. The fire is getting closer. If I can do this, we won’t have much time.” I was terrified that the fire had been raging for far too long. Time meant nothing when you were a prisoner. I was sick inside, finally accepting we wouldn’t be found in time unless we freed ourselves.

Her hand was shaking as she handed it to me, tears still in her eyes. I threw my arms around her, holding her close. “You can do this, Raven. Then my dad will come. You’ll see. He’ll be our hero.”

I didn't want to break her heart but I knew heroes didn't always come through. My dad had done that. I just hadn't understood why until now. I moved to the door, pressing my hand on the thick metal. It was warm to the touch but not scalding hot. Maybe we had a chance. I eased the metal into the lock, trying to take deep breaths. It wasn't like some I'd worked on and after a full two minutes, I almost gave up.

A loud clanging gave me a jolt and I closed my eyes, trying to block out everything else but what needed to be concentrated on. I didn't hear a click. I felt it. Yet I still said another silent prayer. "Get back. Please."

Zoe was panting, moving from foot to foot. I turned the handle, holding my breath this time. When the knob turned, the door opening, I almost screamed. But I was horrified I'd find Carter on the other side.

Instead, smoke rolled into the room. I stumbled backwards, grabbing her hand. "We're getting out of here. Stay low. Don't lose my grip."

I crouched down low, moving into the darkness, struggling to see anything. Flames were everywhere, the fire hissing as embers flew. Her squeals pushed me on, further into the darkness, the smoke making my eyes sting. Nothing was going to stop me. I had a wedding to plan. I had a man to love. I had a life to live.

And I had a new family.

*Please, God. Please.*

The heat was sweltering, the bits of the roof caving down upon us. Zoe screamed and I yanked her out from under the whoosh of a huge panel seconds before it collapsed on the floor.

"Keep going. We have to keep going." Even though I had no idea which way was out, I wouldn't allow us to die without trying.

The flames were getting closer, Zoe coughing, fighting with my hold. Beads of sweat were stinging my eyes. I couldn't see. Couldn't breathe.

Zoe pulled away.

I grabbed her arm, screaming. Screaming. “No!”

Then a sizzle was followed by a horrific crack second before...

*Boom!*

\* \* \*

*Arman*

The fire was visible from the street the moment Maddox skidded around the corner, almost losing control. He accelerated, moving quickly toward the building. There was no doubt Ramsey had been correct in his assumptions. I'd gotten the address out of the bastard then left him in the alley. If he'd been wrong, he knew there was nowhere on earth he could hide where I wouldn't hunt him down.

The moment Maddox skidded the SUV to a stop, I was out of the car, running toward the burning building. I refused to allow them to die. It wasn't going to happen.

“Call 911.” They would be too late to save the building, the woman I loved, and my daughter. I would need to save her myself.

“Wait! Arman. It's too hot,” Francois called from behind me, but he was right by my side, keeping up speed. When I was only twenty feet away, I stopped long enough to figure out the best way to enter. When I found a door, I could tell by the flames licking from almost every window on the six-floored building that it was possible we were already too late.

Fuck it. I would find them.

Nothing and no one was going to stop me.

The door was unlocked, the access easy but the wall of heat hit immediately. I fought my way through the debris, the crackling sounds and creaks indicating the steel in the walls was under duress. I'd seen enough fires in my life to know the

structure couldn't take much more without collapsing. If I had four minutes, I'd be lucky.

"Raven. Zoe. Go to the left. Call out to them."

"Don't do anything stupid, bro."

"You know me."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

I pushed my way through another pile of debris, embers raining down like a storm of orange. I ducked as a beam crashed into the floor beside me. Both of us kept calling out. I also heard Maddox.

"Come on, baby! Raven. Zoe!" I raked my forearm across my face, panting from the heat. Then I was forced to double over, coughing and wheezing. I called out to them again before covering as much of my mouth and nose with my arm as I could.

A sound grabbed my attention. I stopped and listened.

There was no doubt I'd heard a voice.

"Raven!"

"Here." It was weak but I heard her. I issued a loud bellow and rushed forward.

"They're over here."

I pushed and shoved, tossing debris as if it weighed nothing, determined to get to her. Then I noticed something in the flames, two female forms pinned by a piece of the roof.

"Raven. Zoe."

"Here. Oh, God."

One last hard shove of part of the roof and Raven collapsed in my arms.

"You came for me. For... us." Coughing, she sagged in my arms then did what she could to shove herself away. "Zoe first."

The smoke was getting worse. Fuck. We had to get the hell out of here.

Francois was suddenly right beside me. Thank God. “Jesus Christ. I’ll get Zoe. Get her out of here.”

“Don’t you let her die, brother or I’ll fucking kill you,” I snarled.

“Today ain’t a good day to die, bro.”

I yanked Raven into my arms. “Hold on tight, baby. One way in and one way out.” And it was going to be dicey as fuck. I’d never believed in angel wings or a greater being watching over us. But in those terrifying moments of carrying Raven through wall after wall of fire, all I could concentrate on was saying a silent prayer.

While I wasn’t the kind of man who deserved salvation, but my daughter and fiancée certainly did. If I could do one good thing before I died, it would be to find a way to save them.

“Go. Go. Go!” Francois said.

Maddox appeared out of the shadows, pushing us, guiding us. And as we all heard a rumble, felt the vibrations under our feet, I sensed the entire building was about to blow.

I’d heard it said that heroes were born every day, men and women finding the courage they’d believed they didn’t have in them.

As the rush of heat pitched our bodies forward, somehow, by some grace of God, the door was right there.

And we ran out of it seconds before a horrific blast tossed us like rag dolls to the ground. But I was still holding my beloved, trying to recapture my ability to breathe as the fire raged on.

“Oh, God. Are we alive?” Raven asked.

“We’re alive, baby. Very much alive.”

“Zoe. Zoe!”

“I’m okay,” my daughter called back.

“She doesn’t appear to be injured,” Francois said, although his voice sounded as if he was miles away.

I rolled Raven onto her back, pressing hair from her face. The light of the raging fire allowed me to bask in the shimmer of her eyes. “Baby. God. I thought I’d lost you.”

“I’m... here. I’m... You saved us. I knew you would. Zoe told me not to lose faith,” she said in a dark whisper. “I love you. God, I’ve fallen madly, deeply in love with you.”

“You’re my entire world. I can’t live without you. I’m not a good person, but you make me want to become a better man.”

“Geez, Dad,” Zoe said, still coughing. “Can you save it for later?”

I laughed but there was nothing funny about the moment or the situation. To place the two women that meant the most to me in such significant danger was unforgivable. It was time to end the rampage. It was time to live my life as Sophia would have wanted.

It was time to take care of my family.

“Don’t ever lose faith in me, Raven. I will protect you both with all I have.” I captured her mouth, enjoying a few seconds of breathing easier now that I’d managed to save them with the help of two men I trusted more than anything. The moment lingered, my heart racing. I’d been given a second chance, something few men ever received, especially those who’d forsaken almost everyone else because of hate and rage.

No more.

However, this wasn’t over. Not by a long shot. There was one more thing that needed to be done.

“Can you stand?” I asked, already pulling my sweet princess to her feet.

“Yes.”

“Daddy!” Zoe said, rushing toward me. I wrapped one arm around her, kissing the top of my daughter’s head. After glancing at the building, I gave both Maddox and Francois a nod. I’d find a better way of thanking them later.

“Let’s get you to safety.” As I started walking them to the car, we could all hear sirens in the background. The fire

department and the police would be here shortly. “Maddox. Take them to the vehicle.”

“You got it, boss. Come on, ladies.”

Raven blew me a kiss as Maddox led her away. The looks on their faces were ones that would haunt me for some time to come. As I glanced at the fire, I knew at that moment that nothing good came out of the need for revenge.

As my brother moved beside me, he bent over, planting his hands on his thighs. “You know how to have a hell of a good time.”

Chuckling, I wiped my brow, finally able to breathe. “Yeah, well, rest up. We still have work to do.”

“I know.”

As I started to turn around, the sirens getting closer, the hair stood up on the back of my neck. I scanned the street, removing my weapon.

“What the hell is it?” Francois asked.

“Something. It’s...” Out of the corner of my eye, a tiny flash occurred. Or maybe it was my sixth sense. Whatever the case, my reaction was swift, but was it quick enough?

“Raven. Zoe. Down!”

*Pop! Pop! Pop!*

## CHAPTER 27



*A* rman

Business.

Dangerous business. It was a part of my life that would never change because of who and what I was. While I'd already spent time legitimizing the majority of our corporation, improving the family's reputation, everyone in our world knew what we were.

Predators.

Maybe there continued to be a significant part of me that wouldn't have it any other way. I'd been able to look myself in the mirror most days, realizing that for all the brutality and desire for bloodshed, there was a light, the one that Sophia had seen and grasped onto, refusing to allow me to fall further into the darkness.

Having a daughter had perpetuated that need, but not enough to break the ugliness of guilt and the suffering I'd done in silence, not allowing my daughter to know more about her incredible mother. I watched her actions with Raven and realized that my little girl was poised to grow up and shift further out of my life. I was proud of her, eager to see the building relationship she'd developed with the only other woman who'd seen the same light.

I hadn't lied in that I wanted to become a better man. Not in business perhaps, but in my ability to enjoy life, to break

through walls and laugh.

I'd walked through fire and would do so ten times over to save my family. Perhaps it was time to dance in a fountain, laughing and enjoying a beautiful day.

And the amazing woman who had agreed to be by my side.

Deal or no deal, Raven Cartier was mine.

In her eyes, I no longer saw fear and trepidation, only admiration and love. Maybe I'd become her hero in some small way after all, her prince that she'd dreamt of as a child.

Whatever the case, there was business to finish, including the most important one of all.

Healing the family.

I stood outside the man's house, trying to debate what I'd say to him. For the third time, I looked back at Raven, who remained inside the rental car. She had every right to see her father, to discuss their private lives and the past, as well as the future.

But this I needed to do on my own.

She gave me a nod, placing her fingertips on the windshield in solidarity, providing her support. Hell, little did she know she'd given me the courage as well. I'd spent so much time hating Thomas, longing to crush him like a bug that years of my life had dissipated, vanishing before my eyes.

My daughter's first steps.

The first time she'd called me Daddy.

Her first piano recital.

Her first ballet recital.

Disneyland.

Graduating middle school.

All a blur because I'd been filled with hate.

That ended today.

There were some wounds that couldn't be healed completely. We'd likely never be close again, sharing everything from stories about girls and grades to a cold beer. But we would no longer be enemies.

Forgive and forget?

Not possible.

At least the forgetting part.

I hesitated for another minute before knocking on the door, taking a step back as I waited for someone to consider allowing me entrance. We'd come unannounced, although Raven had already spoken to her father on the phone briefly. However, he didn't expect us and quite frankly, I hadn't considered the possibility he wouldn't let me into his home.

Closing my eyes, memories rushed in. At least this time they were good ones, times filled with laughter, and there had been many of those before everything had gone to shit.

When the door was opened, I took a deep breath, coming face to face with my arch enemy.

Thomas and I stared at each other, I think both of us trying to figure out when was the last time we'd been this close. He exhaled and glanced toward the car, no surprise on his face.

"I've been expecting you. Please. Come in." Thomas stood back, opening the door wider. He'd changed significantly over the years, aging to the point I was surprised. But mostly, he appeared tired, beaten down, as if the years had taken an entirely different yet just as damaging toll.

He'd attempted in his own way to protect the only family he'd ever really known while determined to keep his distance. I didn't care about his reasons why, only that he had remained as loyal as he'd been able to. Or as much as his damaged psyche had allowed.

Who was I to judge? I'd become a shell of man, barely living.

After closing the door behind us, he moved slowly through his beautiful yet modest home, remaining quiet. I was struck by just how quiet everything was inside his house, only the slight

ticking of a clock somewhere giving away that there was any life inside.

He led me into his living room, heading straight for a bar. While it was only two in the afternoon, it was obvious in my mind he had been expecting a visit. He took his time pouring two drinks, two whiskeys. As he brought one to me, his features softened somewhat.

I accepted the gesture, just as strangely tongue tied as he was.

“You look good,” he finally said.

“You do as well.”

“Neither one of us are very good liars.”

I laughed. It was something he’d told me a long time ago, even trying to teach me how to become a better one. He’d taught me how effectively a poker face could be used, which I’d done countless times in my business life. It was apparent I’d done so in my personal as well.

“The years have been brutal.”

“I know,” Thomas said. “I am so sorry about Sophia. I never got a chance to tell you that. How’s Zoe?”

“She’s amazing. I have an amazing daughter about to head off to college. And I am terrified.”

Now we laughed together, his eyes misting over. “I was exactly that way with Raven. I wanted her to call every day, but I never told her that. She only knew me as the strict father who never allowed her to have any fun.”

“We had to be that way; our professions required it.”

“Did you ever wonder what it would have been like to be born into a normal family?”

His question was one I’d thought of a lot as a kid. Now? I’d come to an important realization. “Your daughter helped me realize that families are the most important thing in the world. There’s no amount of money or things that can come close to time spent together and laughter.” I looked away, thinking

about her bucket list of fun things. I wanted to experience every one of them.

“Isn’t it amazing how much smarter our children can be than we are?” He lifted his glass. “To our kids. May they not become the stupid assholes we did.”

We clinked glasses and for the first time in far too long, we really looked into each other’s eyes.

“I missed you, brother. I’m not going to lie that I wanted you dead, but I missed what we had.”

“I was lost, Arman. I needed to blame the world for everything that happened to me. I was too broken to see how important you and your family were, especially Pops. How’s he doing?”

“Still broken about you, and he hates retirement.”

He chuckled, shaking his head. “I’m shocked he allowed you to take the helm.”

“More like forced.”

“I’ve kept up with you guys, you know.”

“Travis mentioned it.”

He seemed somewhat surprised. “Travis was a good man for the most part. He helped me find another path.”

“Until he was lured into the same darkness the two of us continually tried to crawl out of.”

“It’s a part of us, Arman. We can’t run from who our fathers were, which is what I thought I was doing.”

“No, we can’t run. But in embracing our heritage, that doesn’t mean we have to abide by the same rules.”

“You’re right about that.” We stood in silence for a time, but the tension was slowly easing. “So, you’re marrying my daughter.”

“I am.”

“You forced her?”

“I did. Not any longer. She’s free to walk and knows that.”

“She loves you. She made it perfectly clear that if I interfered, she’d never see me again.” Thomas laughed. “Like father, like daughter. Huh?”

“She’s stubborn but loving and perhaps the kindest person I’ve ever met. Much like Sophia.”

“I agree with that. You know, I was at Sophia’s funeral. I didn’t let you guys see me of course. But I knew you were hurting. I guess I thought if I could offer comfort somehow by paying my respects, then maybe I wasn’t such an asshole after all.”

It was my turn to be surprised. “I didn’t know that.”

“It was just as well. We weren’t ready to bury the hatchet except for into each other.”

“I’ll drink to that.” I finally took a sip, giving him a nod on his choice.

“I heard about Carter and Travis.”

I took a deep breath, holding it for a few seconds. “Fortunately, Carter will live, although he has a long road to recovery, including mentally and emotionally. Unfortunately, he made good on his threat to his father, sending a history of the man’s criminal activities to the authorities. His career is ruined, but I suspect he won’t be arrested.”

“As my last act as administrator of the DEA, I used some influence. There won’t be any charges brought against him,” Thomas said. Then he waited for my reaction.

“Last act?”

“I’m retiring. I’m getting too old for this shit.”

“Hmm... You’re in your forties. You have your entire life ahead of you. What are you going to do?” He’d been older than me by a few years, returning to college after working with my father, and learning the business. So much of his life had changed. I wondered if I should offer him a place in the corporation once again. It was certainly worth a thought.

“I’m not certain yet. Spend some time getting to know my daughters before one of them runs off and marries my best

friend.” He lifted his arm, offering his hand.

It was that moment of forgiveness, a moment to remind each other through tragedies and triumphs we would always be family. We’d work on the friendship later. Maybe. If we could both pull our heads out of our asses.

I accepted without hesitation. Then lifted my glass. “To family.”

“To family. Maybe one day Pops will accept my apology.”

“He’s softened in his retirement. You never know. Something else your daughter taught me. Never say never.”

“God, our kids are smarter than us.”

He spoke the truth.

“So, when is the wedding?”

“Not until after Edmee’s wedding, which is in two weeks.”

“That’s right. She’s marrying some asshole. I’d watch him. He might not be good for the family and the business,” Thomas recommended.

“Don’t worry. Zane Northington will remain on my radar. Maybe you can help me watch him.”

It was a small olive branch, but one we both needed. “Yeah, I think I can do that.”

There was something about remembering the past that was no longer damaging, but what struck me as incredible was that for once in as long as I could remember, I was looking forward to the future.

To family.

Friends.

Business.

And continued forgiveness.

All because a beautiful girl had struck a deal with the devil.

\* \* \*

*Six weeks later...*

*Raven*

“Dad is going to think you’re the most beautiful woman on the planet. Oh, wait. You know what the truth is? You are.”

Zoe had prattled on about the dress I was wearing, the flowers in my hair, and the necklace Arman had given me the night before. She’d been my constant shadow, the girl who had stars in her eyes because in them, her father was a hero. She was well aware her dad was also considered a brutal, ruthless man, even a killer. He’d never sugarcoated that he wasn’t always the best of men.

But in her life, he was on a pedestal.

In my eyes, he was the love of my life. This moment was poignant somehow, ready to walk down the aisle marrying a man I still barely knew, yet one I knew I would enjoy spending the rest of my life with. I stared at myself in the mirror, trying to capture all the moments so I could remember them in the future.

When Emily took a picture I laughed, but I was grateful. She and Zoe were both bridesmaids, Paisley my maid of honor.

“Come on, girls. Let’s allow her a few minutes alone,” Paisley told them.

As Emily walked closer, tears formed in my eyes. There was no reason for me to cry, other than this was my wedding day. I was supposed to be emotional. Wasn’t I?

“I think you’re the most beautiful bride I’ve ever seen,” Emily said as she clapped her hands.

“I’m likely the most nervous bride in the world,” I responded, although the truth was that I was thrilled. In the weeks since the horrific fire had occurred, I’d spent glorious days getting to

know my husband to be more, also engaging in a different relationship with my father.

He'd changed, so much so I barely knew him any longer, as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders after meeting with Arman.

Hearing a knock on the door, all three women eased back.

"We'll be waiting for you," Zoe said.

I remained in front of the mirror. I'd wanted so many things out of my life and I knew that by marrying Arman they would change, but that was okay with me. Actually, it was more than okay.

As my father walked in, all I could do was smile. He looked ten years younger, his smile bright and his eyes flashing in happiness. I'd never thought it possible. I was marrying his best friend and his enemy after all. Although things had changed I'd been floored to hear he was returning to the family business, one that I would now have a part of.

It had been heartwarming to see and experience the reconciliation between him and the man he considered his father and his brothers. It didn't matter that they didn't share the same blood. They all shared a history, a past that they'd tried to deny but they'd been unable to squelch their true feelings.

I tried to smile but the tears were already forming. I'd wanted to marry a prince, even though I'd told myself that was not possible. However, I was getting that and so much more.

"You look beautiful," he said quietly as he approached.

I grabbed the single red rose meant for his jacket, my hands shaking as I tried to unfasten the pin. "I'm nervous."

"Don't be. Arman is a good man, even if he hides it."

"So are you, Daddy." I managed to pin it to his lapel after three tries, patting his tuxedo jacket and taking a step back. When I gave him a nod of approval, he laughed.

"My daughter. Ever so careful. Live your life, my sweet girl. Don't hold back or hesitate. Don't have regrets or wallow in

fear. Live your life as if it's the last day on Earth. That's my best advice to you. Oh, and one more thing. Don't lose that spunky personality. Keep Arman on his toes."

I laughed, although the tears were already flowing. "Don't worry, Daddy. I plan on it."

"That's my daughter. Bright. Beautiful. Bodacious. Are you ready?"

"I think I finally am."

There were so many words I wanted to say, but right now I was determined to concentrate on the happiest moment of my life. However, I knew there would be more. So many more.

I couldn't wait to share them with my extended family and friends.

That was, after all, the only aspect that mattered. Not money. Not precious things.

Family.

And all because I'd allowed myself to fall in love with a ruthless man, the love of my life.

Maybe there was such a thing as being lucky enough to find your prince after all.

\* \* \*

*Arman*

"The wedding was beautiful," Maddox told me as he approached.

"Beautiful. I'm not certain I would have ever believed you'd use that word, my friend."

"Fine. Raven made a beautiful bride. You were just your typical grumpy self."

I laughed and shoved the empty champagne flute on the tray as the waiter walked past. "I need a real man's drink."

“Then let’s go have a whiskey.”

The reception was everything both her mother and mine had wanted, allowing them to spend time together while I continued to handle business.

“Any news from Devin?” I asked in passing, although I wanted little to do with handling any aspect of the corporation right now. This was a day of celebration after all, one that seemed a lifetime in coming.

“Stop worrying. Francois has a firm handle on operations in Texas. You just got married. Remember?”

I glanced at the guests as they danced and continued to party, searching for my lovely bride as I always did. While the security was tight, I wouldn’t put it past any of my enemies to attempt to destroy such an incredible day. “I assure you that Raven won’t allow me to forget.”

He ordered drinks and I continued scanning the venue. When I was unable to locate her, my hackles immediately rose, my blood pressure rising. I took two steps and within seconds, Maddox had flanked my side.

“What’s wrong?” he asked under his breath.

“Where the fuck is she?”

“The last time I saw her, she was with the photographer, the man wanting to take some additional single pictures of her in her wedding dress.”

“Fuck this.”

“Hold on. The place is completely protected.”

“Then where the fuck is she?” I was momentarily gutted, reaching for a weapon that wasn’t there because my lovely bride had forbidden me to carry one. “Give me your weapon.” When he hesitated, I snarled. “Give it to me!”

“Don’t do anything rash.” He handed it to me, hesitating just enough I had to yank it from him, immediately checking the ammunition.

“Rash is my fucking middle name, Maddox. That’s how I survived. Gather the others. I need to find her. I will find her.” Dear God, this wasn’t going to happen. Not now. Not ever. I hurried through the crowd, trying not to panic. After checking every room, I was at the enraged point where I knew I’d do something stupid.

Then I remembered the fountain outside and took a deep breath. I’d noticed Raven admiring it when we’d visited the facility a couple weeks before. Was it possible my lovely bride was revisiting what I’d teased as being her wish list?

I moved toward the front, laughing softly to myself when I noticed her standing in front of what she’d called a work of art, water streaming from the mouth of the dolphin carved in stone. As I moved outside, I reached into my pocket, managing to find a few loose coins. I crept behind her, my movements masked by the streaming water. As soon as I tossed the coins into the water, she stiffened.

But a smile crossed her face.

“I’d pay all that I have to know what you wished for,” she purred.

“Then they wouldn’t come true.”

“Now you play by the rules.”

“Not always.”

“Really?” Raven cocked her head.

“You obviously don’t know me that well.”

She laughed and the lilting sound was sweet music. “Let me see.” I remained where I was as she removed her heels, tossing them aside. Then she stepped into the fountain, immediately backing away. “Show me.”

I lifted my eyebrows, shaking my head.

“Come on, big boy. Show me what you have.”

“I’m going to show you what you deserve later, my wife. You scared me. You weren’t supposed to leave the venue. Remember?”

“Oops. I guess I don’t always follow the rules.”

“Uh-huh. I can tell a spanking is in order.”

“You wouldn’t on our wedding night.”

“You think?”

Raven wrinkled her nose then planted her hands on her hips.

“Then come get me.”

“Oh, you’re such a tease.”

Laughing, I debated myself, glancing over my shoulder before removing my shoes and socks, rolling up my trousers. “You know, if any of my soldiers see me doing this, I will be a laughingstock.”

“So what?” She beckoned me with her hands, blowing me a kiss as well.

As I stepped in, I couldn’t stop laughing, the water sending an instant chill all through my body. Yet as soon as I took her hands into mine, I realized I’d never felt so exhilarated in my life.

My beautiful bride, my insanely gorgeous princess spun me around in a circle and for the first time in as long as I could remember, I couldn’t seem to stop laughing, as if a weight had been lifted off my shoulders.

I dragged her closer, pressing my palm against the back of her head. “I love you, Mrs. Thibodeaux.”

“You better. For the rest of your life.”

Almost as soon as I captured her mouth, I heard a series of sounds and bristled. I broke the kiss long enough to glance toward the facility. “We have an audience.”

She breathed out then turned her head. My father, her father, several of my men, my daughter, and dozens of guests were watching us. Suddenly, something incredible happened.

They all removed their shoes and climbed into the fountain as well.

There'd been moments through the years where I'd been certain the despair would be the end of me. Today wasn't one of them. Today was all about happiness, a new beginning, an entirely different chapter in a life that some might call a fairytale, others a nightmare.

Yet what I'd learned over the years was that you couldn't take a single moment for granted.

And I definitely planned on enjoying every. Single. One. Of them.

The End

# AFTERWORD

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## BOOKS OF THE RUTHLESS EMPIRE SERIES

### *The Don*

Maxwell Powers swept into my life after my father was gunned down, but the moment those piercing blue eyes caught mine I knew he would be doing more than just avenging his old friend.

I haven't seen him since I was a little girl, but that won't keep him from bending me over and belting my bare backside... or from making me scream his name as he claims my virgin body.

He's twice my age, and he's my godfather.

But I know I'll be soaking wet and ready for him tonight...

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### *The Consigliere*

As consigliere of New York's most ruthless crime syndicate, Daniel Briggs rules with an iron fist. But here in Los Angeles, he's just my big brother's best friend, forbidden in every way.

This stunningly handsome billionaire may be the most eligible bachelor on the West Coast, but to him I'm still just a little girl in need of protection from men who would ravage her brutally.

Men like him.

But he'll soon realize I'm all grown up, and then it won't be long before my teenage crush finally shows me the side of him he's kept hidden from me—the savage side that will blister my bare ass for talking back and then take what has always been his with my hair gripped in his fist.

I don't know what comes after that. I just know everything he does to me will be utterly sinful...

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### *The Underboss*

When Francesco Arturo helped me escape an unwanted arranged marriage three years ago, I didn't know he was the underboss of the most powerful mafia organization in New York.

I was just an eighteen-year-old virgin on the run, and he was the handsome savior mesmerizing me with eyes the color of the Aegean Sea before carrying me off to his bed to make me his.

He could have taken my innocence that day, but he didn't.

I gave it to him.

But this isn't a fairy tale. When that perfect night came to an end, I was still the daughter of a Chicago crime boss with a father set on marrying her off to whatever vile man paid the most.

Now he's finally found a suitor for me, but there is something the brutal bastard doesn't know.

I already belong to someone else, and he's coming to take me back.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

## BOOKS OF THE TAINTED REGIME SERIES

### *Cruellest Vow*

D'Artagnan Conti was born into poverty, raised to be a soldier in my father's savage regime. I grew up in luxury, longing to escape my family's cruel machinations, and the young man with sapphire eyes and the voice of an angel became not just my forbidden crush but my everything.

Then he was taken from me, killed in a brutal attack by our enemies. Or so I was led to believe...

For twenty years I did my best to forget him, until a devilishly handsome stranger awakened my desire in a way that I hadn't thought possible, baring my body and soul and setting them both ablaze with passion so intense it burns hotter than the lash of leather across my naked backside.

Every taste of his lips, every whisper in my ear, and every quivering climax pulled me deeper into this dark, twisted rapture, and only when I was already under his spell did I learn the truth.

The man I thought I'd lost is the one who has made me his.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Twisted Embrace*

Enzo Lazaro is my best friend's brother, yet the fact that it was taboo only left me even more desperate for him to undress me with those piercing eyes and then strip me bare and ravage me.

But until he found out a secret I hadn't even known myself, I never thought I'd be screaming his name in bed with my belted ass still burning because he decided I needed a lesson in obedience.

...or that he'd be claiming me as his bride.

It turns out I'm the daughter of a Russian mobster, and even though my adopted parents never told me, that means I have dangerous enemies. He says he's making me his wife to protect me.

But we both know he would have taken what he wanted eventually anyway.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Captured Innocence*

When Mattia DeLuca paid my father handsomely for the right to claim me as his bride, it didn't matter that I wanted nothing to do with my own Cosa Nostra family, let alone someone else's. Long before he put a ring on my finger, my own screams of climax told me I was his forever.

Even when I ran away, hoping to leave my family's mafia world behind, I always knew Mattia would track me down one day and take his belt to my bare ass before taking me to his bed again.

But when he came for me, it wasn't just to punish, ravage, and then wed me.

It was to rescue me.

**Buy on Amazon**

## BOOKS OF THE CARNAL SINS SERIES

### *Required Surrender*

My first mistake was agreeing to participate in a charity auction. My second was believing I could walk away from the commanding billionaire with a brogue accent and dazzling green eyes.

It was supposed to be one date, but a man like Lachlan McKenzie plays by his own set of rules.

As the owner of Carnal Sins, DC's exclusive kink club, his reputation is as dark and demanding as his desires, and before I knew it I ended up his to enjoy not for just one night but a full week.

I fought his control, but I knew I wouldn't win... and in my heart I don't think I even wanted to. Not after he called me his good girl, stripped me bare and spanked me with his belt, and then made me blush and beg and come so hard I forgot all about being his only for a few more days.

That didn't matter anyway. We both know he's keeping me forever.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Demanded Submission*

When he came to my aid after a head-on collision that seemed not to have been an accident, Jameson Stark offered me a ride, help with my car, and a job at the most exclusive club in town.

He also bared me, spanked me until I knew better than to argue with him again, and then showed me what it means to be in the debt of a billionaire who isn't afraid to take everything he's owed.

But as the owner of the Miami branch of Carnal Sins, it isn't just Jameson's wealth and good looks that draw attention, and I knew a man like him must have enemies. I just didn't care.

Not when his every smoldering glance all but demanded my submission...

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### *Compelled Obedience*

Grant Wilde is as arrogant as he is rich and powerful, and if I didn't need his help so desperately I'd tell him exactly where he ought to shove his money, his exclusive club, and his cocky smirk.

But I do need his help, and it will come at a price...

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## BOOKS OF THE KINGS OF CORRUPTION SERIES

### *King of Wrath*

After a car wreck on an icy winter morning, I had no idea the man who saved my life would turn out to be the heir to a powerful mafia family... let alone that I'd be forced into marrying him.

When this mysterious stranger sought to seduce me, I should have ignored the dark passion he ignited. Instead, I begged him to claim me as he stripped me bare and whipped me with his belt.

He was as savage as I was innocent, but it was only after he made me his that I learned the truth.

He's the head of the New York Cosa Nostra, and I belong to him now...

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### *King of Cruelty*

Constantine Thorn has been after me since I saw him kill a man nine years ago, and when he finally caught me he made me an offer I couldn't refuse. Marry him and he will protect me.

Only then did I learn that the man who made me his bride was the same monster I'd feared.

He's a brutal, heartless mafia boss and I wanted to hate the bastard, but with every stinging lash of his belt and every moment of helplessly intense passion, I fell deeper into the dark abyss.

He's the king of cruelty, and now I'm his queen.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *King of Pain*

Diego Santos may be wealthy, powerful, and sinfully gorgeous, but his slick veneer doesn't fool me. I know his true nature, and I had planned to end this arranged marriage before it even began.

But it wasn't Diego waiting for me at the altar.

By all appearances the man who laid claim to me was the mafia heir to whom I'd been promised, but I sensed an entirely different personality, one so electrifying I was swept up by his passion.

A part of me still wanted to escape, but then he took me in his arms and over his knee, laying my deepest, darkest needs bare and then fulfilling them in the most shameful ways imaginable.

Now I'm not just his bride. I'm his completely.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *King of Depravity*

When Brogan Callahan swept me off my feet, I didn't know he was heir to a powerful Irish mafia family. I didn't find that out until after he'd taken me in his

arms... and over his knee.

By the time I learned the truth, I was already his.

I went on the run to escape my father's plans to marry me off, but it turns out the ruthless mob boss he had in mind is the same sinfully sexy bastard who just stripped me bare and claimed me savagely.

He demands my absolute obedience, and yet with each brutal kiss and stinging lash of his belt I feel myself falling ever deeper into the dark abyss of shameful need he's created within me.

At first I wondered if there were bounds to his depravity. Now I hope there aren't...

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

***King of Savagery***

I knew Maxim Nikitin was a man to be reckoned with when I went undercover to help the FBI bring him down, but nothing could have prepared me for his raw power... or his icy blue eyes.

He caught me, and now he's determined not just to punish me, but to tame me completely.

Every kiss is brutal, every touch possessive, every fiery lash of his belt more intense than the last, yet with every cry of pain and every scream of climax the truth becomes more obvious.

He doesn't need to break me. I belong to him already.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

***King of Malice***

When I met Phoenix Diamonds, I didn't know anything about him except that he had a body carved from stone and a voice that left me hoping he'd order me to strip just so I could obey.

By the time I learned he's the head of a Greek crime syndicate intent on making me pay for the sins of my father, he'd already mastered me with his touch alone, belted my bare ass for daring to come without permission, and ravaged me thoroughly both that night and the next morning.

All I can do is try to pretend he isn't everything I've always fantasized about...

But I think he knows already.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

## BOOKS OF THE SINNERS AND SAINTS SERIES

### *Beautiful Villain*

When I knocked on Kirill Sabatin's door, I didn't know he was the Kozlov Bratva's most feared enforcer. I didn't expect him to be the most terrifyingly sexy man I've ever laid eyes on either...

I told him off for making so much noise in the middle of the night, but if the crack of his palm against my bare bottom didn't wake everyone in the building my screams of climax certainly did.

I shouldn't have let him spank me, let alone seduce me. He's a dangerous man and I could easily end up in way over my head. But the moment I set eyes on those rippling, sweat-slicked muscles I knew I needed that beautiful villain to take me long and hard and savagely right then and there.

And he did.

Now I just have to hope him claiming me doesn't start a mob war...

### [Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Beautiful Sinner*

When I first screamed his name in shameful surrender, Sevastian Kozlov was the enemy, the heir of a rival family who had just finished spanking me into submission after I dared to defy him.

Though he'd already claimed my body by the time he claimed me as his bride, no matter how desperately I long for his touch I vowed this beautiful sinner would never conquer my heart.

But it wasn't up to me...

### [Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Beautiful Seduction*

In my late-night hunt for the perfect pastry, I never expected to be the victim of a brutal attack... or for a brooding, blue-eyed stranger to become my savior, tending to my wounds while easing my fears. The electricity exploded between us, turning into a night of incredible passion.

Only later did I learn that Valentin Vincheti is the heir to the New York Italian mafia empire.

Then he came to take me, and this time he wasn't gentle. I shouldn't have surrendered, but with each savage kiss and stinging stroke of his belt his beautiful seduction became more difficult to resist. But when one of his enemies sets his sights on me, will my secrets put our lives at risk?

### [Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Beautiful Obsession*

After I was left at the altar, I turned what was meant to be the reception into an epic party. But when a handsome stranger asked me to dance, I wasn't prepared for the passion he ignited.

He told me he was a very bad man, but that only made my heart race faster as I lay bare and bound, my dress discarded and my bottom sore from a spanking, waiting for him to ravage me.

It was supposed to be just one night. No strings. Nothing to entangle me in his dangerous world.

But that was before I became his beautiful obsession...

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

***Beautiful Devil***

Kostya Baranov is an infamous assassin, a man capable of incredible savagery, but when I witnessed a mafia hit he didn't silence me with a bullet. He decided to make me his instead.

Taken prisoner and forced to obey or feel the sting of his belt, shameful lust for my captor soon wars with fury at what he has done to me... and what he keeps doing to me with every touch.

But though he may be a beautiful devil, it is my own family's secret which may damn us both.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

## BOOKS OF THE BENEDETTI EMPIRE SERIES

### *Cruel Prince*

Catherine's father conspired to have my father killed, and that debt to the Benedetti family must be settled. Just as he took something from me, I will take something from him.

His daughter.

She will be mine to punish and ravage, but when she suffers it will not be for his sins.

It will be for my pleasure.

She will beg, but it will be for me to claim her in the most shameful ways imaginable.

She will scream, but it will be because she doesn't think she can bear another climax.

But when she surrenders at last, it will not be to her captor.

It will be to her husband.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

### *Ruthless Prince*

Alexandra is a senator's daughter, used to mingling in the company of the rich and powerful, but tonight she will learn that there are men who play by different rules.

Men like me.

I could romance her. I could seduce her and then carry her gently to my bed.

But that can wait. Tonight I'm going to wring one ruthless climax after another from her quivering body with her bottom burning from my belt and her throat sore from screaming.

She will know she is mine before she even knows she is my bride.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

### *Savage Prince*

Gillian's father may be a powerful Irish mob boss, but he owes a blood debt to my family, and when I came to collect I didn't ask permission before taking his daughter as payment.

It was not up to him... or to her.

I will make her my bride, but I am not the kind of man who will wait until our wedding night to bare her and claim what belongs to me. She will walk down the aisle wet, well-used, and sore.

Her dress will hide the marks from my belt that taught her the consequences of disobeying her husband, but nothing will hide her blushes as her arousal drips down her thighs with each step.

By the time she says her vows she will already be mine.

**Buy on Amazon**

## BOOKS OF THE MERCILESS KINGS SERIES

### *King's Captive*

Emily Porter saw me kill a man who betrayed my family and she helped put me behind bars. But someone with my connections doesn't stay in prison long, and she is about to learn the hard way that there is a price to pay for crossing the boss of the King dynasty. A very, very painful price...

She's going to cry for me as I blister that beautiful bottom, then she's going to scream for me as I ravage her over and over again, taking her in the most shameful ways she can imagine. But leaving her well-punished and well-used is just the beginning of what I have in store for Emily.

I'm going to make her my bride, and then I'm going to make her mine completely.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *King's Hostage*

When my life was threatened, Michael King didn't just take matters into his own hands.

He took me.

When he carried me off it was partly to protect me, but mostly it was because he wanted me.

I didn't choose to go with him, but it wasn't up to me. That's why I'm naked, wet, and sore in an opulent Swiss chalet with my bottom still burning from the belt of the infuriatingly sexy mafia boss who brought me here, punished me when I fought him, and then savagely made me his.

We'll return when things are safe in New Orleans, but I won't be going back to my old home.

I belong to him now, and he plans to keep me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *King's Possession*

Her father had to be taught what happens when you cross a King, but that isn't why Genevieve Rossi is sore, well-used, and waiting for me to claim her in the only way I haven't already.

She's sore because she thought she could embarrass me in public without being punished.

She's well-used because after I spanked her I wanted more, and I take what I want.

She's waiting for me in my bed because she's my bride, and tonight is our wedding night.

I'm not going to be gentle with her, but when she wakes up tomorrow morning wet and blushing her cheeks won't be crimson because of the shameful things I did to her naked, quivering body.

It will be because she begged for all of them.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *King's Toy*

Vincenzo King thought I knew something about a man who betrayed him, but that isn't why I'm on my way to New Orleans well-used and sore with my backside still burning from his belt.

When he bared and punished me maybe it was just business, but what came after was not.

It was savage, it was shameful, and it was very, very personal.

I'm his toy now, and not the kind you keep in its box on the shelf.

He's going to play rough with me.

He's going to get me all wet and dirty.

Then he's going to do it all again tomorrow.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

### ***King's Demands***

Julieta Morales hoped to escape an unwanted marriage, but the moment she got into my car her fate was sealed. She will have a husband, but it won't be the cartel boss her father chose for her.

It will be me.

But I'm not the kind of man who takes his bride gently amid rose petals on her wedding night. She'll learn to satisfy her King's demands with her bottom burning and her hair held in my fist.

She'll promise obedience when she speaks her vows, but she'll be mastered long before then.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

### ***King's Temptation***

I didn't think I needed Dimitri Kristoff's protection, but it wasn't up to me. With a kingpin from a rival family coming after me, he took charge, took off his belt, and then took what he wanted.

He knows I'm not used to doing as I'm told. He just doesn't care.

The stripes seared across my bare bottom left me sore and sorry, but it was what came after that truly left me shaken. The princess of the King family shouldn't be on her knees for anyone, let alone this Bratva brute who has decided to claim for himself what he was meant to safeguard.

Nobody gave me to him, but I'm his anyway.

Now he's going to make sure I know it.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

## BOOKS OF THE MAFIA MASTERS SERIES

### *His as Payment*

Caroline Hargrove thinks she is mine because her father owed me a debt, but that isn't why she is sitting in my car beside me with her bottom sore inside and out.

She's wet, well-used, and coming with me whether she likes it or not because I decided I want her, and I take what I want.

As a senator's daughter, she probably thought no man would dare lay a hand on her, let alone spank her thoroughly and then claim her beautiful body in the most shameful ways possible.

She was wrong. Very, very wrong. She's going to be mastered, and I won't be gentle about it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Taken as Collateral*

Francesca Alessandro was just meant to be collateral, held captive as a warning to her father, but then she tried to fight me. She ended up sore and soaked as I taught her a lesson with my belt and then screaming with every savage climax as I taught her to obey in a much more shameful way.

She's mine now. Mine to keep. Mine to protect. Mine to use as hard and as often as I please.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Forced to Cooperate*

Willow Church is not the first person who tried to put a bullet in me. She's just the first I let live. Now she will pay the price in the most shameful way imaginable. The stripes from my belt will teach her to obey, but what happens to her sore, red bottom after that will teach the real lesson.

She will be used mercilessly, over and over, and every brutal climax will remind her of the humiliating truth: she never even had a chance against me. Her body always knew its master.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Claimed as Revenge*

Valencia Rivera became mine the moment her father broke the agreement he made with me. She thought she had a say in the matter, but my belt across her beautiful bottom taught her otherwise and a night spent screaming her surrender into the sheets left her in no doubt she belongs to me.

Using her hard and often will not be all it takes to tame her properly, but it will be a good start...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Made to Beg*

Sierra Fox showed up at my door to ask for my protection, and I gave it to her... for a price. She belongs to me now, and I'm going to use her beautiful body as thoroughly as I please. The only thing for her to decide is how sore her cute little bottom will be when I'm through claiming her.

She came to me begging for help, but as her moans and screams grow louder with every brutal climax, we both know it won't be long before she begs me for something far more shameful.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

BOOKS OF THE EDGE OF DARKNESS  
SERIES

*Dark Stranger*

**On a dark, rainy night, I received a phone call. I shouldn't have answered it...  
but I did.**

The things he says he'll do to me are far from sweet, this man I know only by his  
voice.

They're so filthy I blush crimson just hearing them... and yet still I answer, my  
panties always soaked the moment the phone rings. But this isn't going to end when  
I decide it's gone too far...

I can tell him to leave me alone, but I know it won't keep him away. He's coming  
for me, and when he does he's going to make me his in all the rough, shameful  
ways he promised he would.

And I'll be wet and ready for him... whether I want to be or not.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

*Dark Predator*

**She thinks I'm seducing her, but this isn't romance. It's something much more  
shameful.**

Eden tried to leave the mafia behind, but someone far more dangerous has set his  
sights on her.

Me.

She was meant to be my revenge against an old enemy, but I decided to make her  
mine instead.

She'll moan as my belt lashes her quivering bottom and writhe as I claim her in the  
filthiest of ways, but that's just the beginning. When I'm done, it won't be just her  
body that belongs to me.

I'll own her heart and soul too.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

## BOOKS OF THE DARK OVERTURE SERIES

### *Indecent Invitation*

I shouldn't be here.

My clothes shouldn't be scattered around the room, my bottom shouldn't be sore, and I certainly shouldn't be screaming into the sheets as a ruthless tycoon takes everything he wants from me.

I shouldn't even know Houston Powers at all, but I was in a bad spot and I was made an offer.

A shameful, indecent offer I couldn't refuse.

I was desperate, I needed the money, and I didn't have a choice. Not a real one, anyway.

I'm here because I signed a contract, but I'm his because he made me his.

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### *Illicit Proposition*

I should have known better.

His proposition was shameful. So shameful I threw my drink in his face when I heard it.

Then I saw the look in his eyes, and I knew I'd made a mistake.

I fought as he bared me and begged as he spanked me, but it didn't matter. All I could do was moan, scream, and climax helplessly for him as he took everything he wanted from me.

By the time I signed the contract, I was already his.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Unseemly Entanglement*

I was warned about Frederick Duvall. I was told he was dangerous. But I never suspected that meeting the billionaire advertising mogul to discuss a business proposition would end with me bent over a table with my dress up and my panties down for a shameful lesson in obedience.

That should have been it. I should have told him what he could do with his offer and his money.

But I didn't.

I could say it was because two million dollars is a lot of cash, but as I stand before him naked, bound, and awaiting the sting of his cane for daring to displease him, I know that's not the truth.

I'm not here because he pays me. I'm here because he owns me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

## BOOKS OF THE CLUB DARKNESS SERIES

### ***Bent to His Will***

Even the most powerful men in the world know better than to cross me, but Autumn Sutherland thought she could spy on me in my own club and get away with it. Now she must be punished.

She tried to expose me, so she will be exposed. Bare, bound, and helplessly on display, she'll beg for mercy as my strap lashes her quivering bottom and my crop leaves its burning welts on her most intimate spots. Then she'll scream my name as she takes every inch of me, long and hard.

When I am done with her, she won't just be sore and shamefully broken. She will be mine.

[\*\*Buy on Amazon\*\*](#)

### ***Broken by His Hand***

Sophia Russo tried to keep away from me, but just thinking about what I would do to her left her panties drenched. She tried to hide it, but I didn't let her. I tore those soaked panties off, spanked her bare little bottom until she had no doubt who owns her, and then took her long and hard.

She begged and screamed as she came for me over and over, but she didn't learn her lesson...

She didn't just come back for more. She thought she could disobey me and get away with it.

This time I'm not just going to punish her. I'm going to break her.

[\*\*Buy on Amazon\*\*](#)

### ***Bound by His Command***

Willow danced for the rich and powerful at the world's most exclusive club... until tonight.

Tonight I told her she belongs to me now, and no other man will touch her again. Tonight I ripped her soaked panties from her beautiful body and taught her to obey with my belt.

Tonight I took her as mine, and I won't be giving her up.

[\*\*Buy on Amazon\*\*](#)

## MORE MAFIA AND BILLIONAIRE ROMANCES BY PIPER STONE

### *Caught*

If you're forced to come to an arrangement with someone as dangerous as Jagger Calduchi, it means he's about to take what he wants, and you'll give it to him... even if it's your body.

I got caught snooping where I didn't belong, and Jagger made me an offer I couldn't refuse. A week with him where his rules are the only rules, or his bought and paid for cops take me to jail.

He's going to punish me, train me, and master me completely. When he's used me so shamefully I blush just to think about it, maybe he'll let me go home... or maybe he'll decide to keep me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Ruthless*

Treating a mobster shot by a rival's goons isn't really my forte, but when a man is powerful enough to have a whole wing of a hospital cleared out for his protection, you do as you're told.

To make matters worse, this isn't first time I've met Giovanni Calduchi. It turns out my newest patient is the stern, sexy brute who all but dragged me back to his hotel room a couple of nights ago so he could use my body as he pleased, then showed up at my house the next day, stripped me bare, and spanked me until I was begging him to take me even more roughly and shamefully.

Now, with his enemies likely to be coming after me in order to get to him, all I can do is hope he's as good at keeping me safe as he is at keeping me blushing, sore, and thoroughly satisfied.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Dangerous*

I knew Erik Chenault was dangerous the moment I saw him. Everything about him should have warned me away, from the scar on his face to the fact that mobsters call him Blade. But I was drawn like a moth to a flame, and I ended up burnt... and blushing, sore, and thoroughly used.

Now he's taken it upon himself to protect me from men like the ones we both tried to leave in our past. He's going to make me his whether I like it or not... but I think I'm going to like it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Prey*

Within moments of setting eyes on Sophia Waters, I was certain of two things. She was going to learn what happens to bad girls who cheat at cards, and I was going to be the one to teach her.

But there was one thing I didn't know as I reddened that cute little bottom and then took her long and hard and oh so shamefully: I wasn't the only one who didn't come here for a game of cards.

I came to kill a man. It turns out she came to protect him.

Nobody keeps me from my target, but I'm in no rush. Not when I'm enjoying this game of cat and mouse so much. I'll even let her catch me one day, and as she screams my name with each brutal climax she'll finally realize the truth. She was never the hunter. She was always the prey.

**Buy on Amazon**

***Given***

Stephanie Michaelson was given to me, and she is mine. The sooner she learns that, the less often her cute little bottom will end up well-punished and sore as she is reminded of her place.

But even as she promises obedience with tears running down her cheeks, I know it isn't the sting of my belt that will truly tame her. It is what comes next that will leave her in no doubt she belongs to me. That part will be long, hard, and shameful... and I will make her beg for all of it.

**Buy on Amazon**

***Dangerous Stranger***

I came to Spain hoping to start a new life away from dangerous men, but then I met Rafael Santiago. Now I'm not just caught up in the affairs of a mafia boss, I'm being forced into his car.

When I saw something I shouldn't have, Rafael took me captive, stripped me bare, and punished me until he felt certain I'd told him everything I knew about his organization... which was nothing at all. Then he offered me his protection in return for the right to use me as he pleases.

Now that I belong to him, his plans for me are more shameful than I could have ever imagined.

**Buy on Amazon**

***Indebted***

After her father stole from me, I could have left Alessandra Toro in jail for a crime she didn't commit. But I have plans for her. A deal with the judge—the kind only a man like me can arrange—made her my captive, and she will pay her father's debt with her beautiful body.

She will try to run, of course, but it won't be the law that comes after her. It will be me.

The sting of my belt across her quivering bare bottom will teach Alessandra the price of defiance, but it is the far more shameful penance that follows which will truly tame her.

**Buy on Amazon**

***Taken***

When Winter O'Brien was given to me, she thought she had a say in the matter. She was wrong.

She is my bride. Mine to claim, mine to punish, and mine to use as shamefully as I please. The sting of my belt on her bare bottom will teach her to obey, but obedience is just the beginning.

I will demand so much more.

**Buy on Amazon**

### ***Bratva's Captive***

I told Chloe Kingstrom that getting close to me would be dangerous, and she should keep her distance. The moment she disobeyed and followed me into that bar, she became mine.

Now my enemies are after her, but it's not what they would do to her she should worry about.

It's what I'm going to do to her.

My belt across her bare backside will teach her obedience, but what comes after will be different.

She's going to blush, beg, and scream with every climax as she's ravaged more thoroughly than she can imagine. Then I'm going to flip her over and claim her in an even more shameful way.

If she's a good girl, I might even let her enjoy it.

### **Buy on Amazon**

#### ***Hunted***

Hope Gracen was just another target to be tracked down... until I caught her.

When I discovered I'd been lied to, I carried her off.

She'll tell me the truth with her bottom still burning from my belt, but that isn't why she's here.

I took her to protect her. I'm keeping her because she's mine.

### **Buy on Amazon**

#### ***Theirs as Payment***

Until mere moments ago, I was a doctor heading home after my shift at the hospital. But that was before I was forced into the back seat of an SUV, then bared and spanked for trying to escape.

Now I'm just leverage for the Cabello brothers to use against my father, but it isn't the thought of being held hostage by these brutes that has my heart racing and my whole body quivering.

It is the way they're looking at me...

Like they're about to tear my clothes off and take turns mounting me like wild beasts.

Like they're going to share me, using me in ways more shameful than I can even imagine.

Like they own me.

### **Buy on Amazon**

#### ***Ruthless Acquisition***

I knew the shameful stakes when I bet against these bastards. I just didn't expect to lose.

Now they've come to collect their winnings.

But they aren't just planning to take a belt to my bare bottom for trying to run and then claim everything they're owed from my naked, helpless body as I blush, beg,

and scream for them.

They've acquired me, and they plan to keep me.

### **Buy on Amazon**

#### ***Bound by Contract***

I knew I was in trouble the moment Gregory Steele called me into his office, but I wasn't expecting to end up stripped bare and bent over his desk for a painful lesson from his belt.

Taking a little bit of money here and there might have gone unnoticed in another organization, but stealing from one of the most powerful mafia bosses on the West Coast has consequences.

It doesn't matter why I did it. The only thing that matters now is what he's going to do to me.

I have no doubt he will use me shamefully, but he didn't make me sign that contract just to show me off with my cheeks blushing and my bottom sore under the scandalous outfit he chose for me.

Now that I'm his, he plans to keep me.

### **Buy on Amazon**

#### ***Dangerous Addiction***

I went looking for a man working with my enemies. When I found only her instead, I should have just left her alone... or maybe taken what I wanted from her and then left... but I didn't.

I couldn't.

So I carried her off to keep for myself.

She didn't make it easy for me, and that earned her a lesson in obedience. A shameful one.

But as her bare bottom reddens under my punishing hand I can see her arousal dripping down her quivering thighs, and no matter how much she squirms and sobs and begs we both know exactly what she needs, and we both know as soon as this spanking is over I'm going to give it to her.

Hard.

### **Buy on Amazon**

#### ***Auction House***

When I went undercover to investigate a series of murders with links to Steele Franklin's auction house operation, I expected to be sold for the humiliating use of one of his fellow billionaires.

But he wanted me for himself.

No contract. No agreed upon terms. No say in the matter at all except whether to surrender to his shameful demands without a fight or make him strip me bare and spank me into submission first.

I chose the second option, but as one devastating climax after another is forced from my naked, quivering body, what scares me isn't the thought of him keeping

me locked up in a cage forever.

It's knowing he won't need to.

**Buy on Amazon**

***Interrogated***

As Liam McGinty's belt lashes my bare backside, it isn't the burning sting or the humiliating awareness that my body's surrender is on full display for this ruthless mobster that shocks me.

It's the fact that this isn't a scene from one of my books.

I almost can't process the fact that I'm really riding in the back of a luxury SUV belonging to the most powerful Irish mafia boss in New York—the man I've written so much about—with my cheeks blushing, my bottom sore inside and out, and my arousal soaking the seat beneath me.

But whether I can process it or not, I'm his captive now.

Maybe he'll let me go when he's gotten the answers he needs and he's used me as he pleases.

Or maybe he'll keep me...

**Buy on Amazon**

***Vow of Seduction***

Alexander Durante, Brogan Lancaster, and Daniel Norwood are powerful, dangerous men, but that won't keep them safe from me. Not after they let my brother take the fall for their crimes.

I spent years preparing for my chance at revenge. But things didn't go as planned...

Now I'm naked, bound, and helpless, waiting to be used and punished as these brutes see fit, and yet what's on my mind isn't how to escape all of the shameful things they're going to do to me.

It's whether I even want to...

**Buy on Amazon**

***Brutal Heir***

When I went to an author convention, I didn't expect to find myself enjoying a rooftop meal with the sexiest cover model in the business, let alone screaming his name in bed later that night.

I didn't plan to be targeted by assassins, rushed to a helicopter under cover of armed men, and then spirited away to his home country with my bottom still burning from a spanking either, but it turns out there are some really important things I didn't know about Diavolo Montoya...

Like the fact that he's the heir to a notorious crime syndicate.

I should hate him, but even as his prisoner our connection is too intense to ignore, and I'm beginning to realize that what began as a moment of passion is going to end with me as his.

Forever.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

*Bed of Thorns*

Hardened by years spent in prison for a crime he didn't commit, Edmond Montego is no longer the gentle man I remember. When he came for me, he didn't just take me for the very first time.

He claimed my virgin body with a savagery that left me screaming... and he made me beg for it.

I should have run when I had the chance, but with every lash of his belt, every passionate kiss, and every brutal climax, I fell more and more under his spell.

But he has a dark secret, and if we're not careful, we'll lose everything... including our lives.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

*Morally Gray*

Saxon Thornburg is known to the world as a reputable businessman, but I knew his true nature even before he kidnapped me, bared, bound, and punished me, and then shamefully ravaged me.

He is not just the billionaire boss of a powerful crime family. He is the Patriarch.

Women drop to their knees on command for him, but he chose me because I didn't surrender.

Until he took off his belt...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

*Vicious Intentions*

Cain, Hunter, and Cristiano were heirs to some of the richest and most powerful families in the world, men who might as well have been kings. Ten years ago they caught me eavesdropping, and when they were done setting my bare ass on fire with a belt they claimed and ravaged me.

Or at least that's what happens in the fleeting memories I still have left after the car accident...

Though I'm a successful musician now, wealthy and famous myself, in my heart I know if one of those brutes—let alone all three—ordered me to strip and surrender to them in the most shameful of ways, I wouldn't even need the threat of another humiliating punishment to obey immediately.

I never expected to see them again, of course... or to find myself naked, wet, and blushing as a ruthless Chicago crime boss takes his time enjoying me along with two of his closest friends.

But even before the memory of their faces returned, my body remembered its masters.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

*Scandalous Liaison*

Recently divorced from my cheating ex, the last thing I needed on the flight home for my brother's wedding was a too-hot-for-his-own-good asshole sitting by me in first class.

But when I escaped to the bathroom to hyperventilate in peace, Mr. Tall, Dark, and Surly followed me. Then he made me forget all about the turbulence with a punishing kiss, a hard spanking, and a series of screaming climaxes loud enough for everyone on the plane to hear.

It wasn't until after our deliciously shameful tryst that I learned the truth.

The man who ravaged me is my father's greatest enemy... and he's willing to help me take control of the company my father has used for his ruthless schemes for far too long already.

All it will cost is my complete surrender.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

## BOOKS OF THE MISSOULA BAD BOYS SERIES

### *Phoenix*

As a single dad, a battle-scarred Marine, and a smokejumper, my life was complicated enough. Then Wren Tillman showed up in town, full of sass and all but begging for my belt, and what began as a passionate night after I rescued her from a snowstorm quickly became much more.

Her father plans to marry her off for his own gain, but I've claimed her, and I plan to keep her.

She can fight it if she wants, but in her heart she knows she's already mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Snake*

I left Missoula to serve my country and came back a bitter, broken man. But when Chastity Garrington made my recovery her personal crusade, I decided I had a mission of my own.

Mastering her.

Her task won't be easy, and the fire in her eyes tells me mine won't either. Yet the spark between us is instant, and we both know she'll be wet, sore, and screaming my name soon enough.

But I want more than that.

By the time my body has healed, I plan to have claimed her heart.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Maverick*

When I found her trapped in a ravine, I thought Lily Sanborn was just another lost tourist. Then she tried to steal my truck, and I realized she was on the run... and in need of a dose of my belt.

Holed up in my cabin with her bottom burning and a snowstorm raging outside, there's no denying the spark between us, and we both know she'll soon be screaming my name as I take her in the most shameful of ways.

But when her past catches up to her, the men who come after her will learn a hard lesson.

She's mine now, and I protect what's mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

## BOOKS OF THE MONTANA BAD BOYS SERIES

### *Hawk*

**He's a big, angry Marine, and I'm going to be sore when he's done with me.**

Hawk Travers is not a man to be trifled with. I learned that lesson in the hardest way possible, first with a painful, humiliating public spanking and then much more shamefully in private.

**She came looking for trouble. She got a taste of my belt instead.**

Bryce Myers pushed me too far and she ended up with her bottom welted. But as satisfying as it is to hear this feisty little reporter scream my name as I put her in her place, I get the feeling she isn't going to stop snooping around no matter how well-used and sore I leave her cute backside.

She's gotten herself in way over her head, but she's mine now, and I protect what's mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Scorpion*

**He didn't ask if I like it rough. It wasn't up to me.**

I thought I could get away with pissing off a big, tough Marine. I ended up with my face planted in the sheets, my burning bottom raised high, and my hair held tightly in his fist as he took me long and hard and taught me the kind of shameful lesson only a man like Scorpion could teach.

**She was begging for a taste of my belt. She got much more than that.**

Getting so tipsy she thought she could be sassy with me in my own bar earned Caroline a spanking, but it was trying to make off with my truck that sealed the deal. She'll feel my belt across her bare backside, then she'll scream my name as she takes every single inch of me.

This naughty girl needs to be put in her place, and I'm going to enjoy every moment of it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Mustang*

**I tried to tell him how to run his ranch. Then he took off his belt.**

When I heard a rumor about his ranch, I confronted Mustang about it. I thought I could go toe to toe with the big, tough former Marine, but I ended up blushing, sore, and very thoroughly used.

**I told her it was going to hurt. I meant it.**

Danni Brexton is a hot little number with a sharp tongue and a chip on her shoulder. She's the kind of trouble that needs to be ridden hard and put away wet, but only after a taste of my belt.

It will take more than just a firm hand and a burning bottom to tame this sassy spitfire, but I plan to keep her safe, sound, and screaming my name in bed whether she likes it or not. By the time I'm through with her, there won't be a shadow of a doubt in her mind that she belongs to me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

*Nash*

**When he caught me on his property, he didn't call the police. He just took off his belt.**

Nash caught me breaking into his shed while on the run from the mob, and when he demanded answers and obedience I gave him neither. Then he took off his belt and taught me in the most shameful way possible what happens to naughty girls who play games with a big, rough Marine.

**She's mine to protect. That doesn't mean I'm going to be gentle with her.**

Michelle doesn't just need a place to hide out. She needs a man who will bare her bottom and spank her until she is sore and sobbing whenever she puts herself at risk with reckless defiance, then shove her face into the sheets and make her scream his name with every savage climax.

She'll get all of that from me, and much, much more.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

*Austin*

**I offered this brute a ride. I ended up the one being ridden.**

The first time I saw Austin, he was hitchhiking. I stopped to give him a lift, but I didn't end up taking this big, rough former Marine wherever he was heading. He was far too busy taking me.

**She thought she was in charge. Then I took off my belt.**

When Francesca Montgomery pulled up beside me, I didn't know who she was, but I knew what she needed and I gave it to her. Long, hard, and thoroughly, until she was screaming my name as she climaxed over and over with her quivering bare bottom still sporting the marks from my belt.

But someone wants to hurt her, and when someone tries to hurt what's mine, I take it personally.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

## BOOKS OF THE EAGLE FORCE SERIES

### *Debt of Honor*

Isabella Adams is a brilliant scientist, but her latest discovery has made her a target of Russian assassins. I've been assigned to protect her, and when her reckless behavior puts her in danger she'll learn in the most shameful of ways what it means to be under the command of a Marine.

She can beg and plead as my belt lashes her bare backside, but the only mercy she'll receive is the chance to scream as she climaxes over and over with her well-spanked bottom still burning.

As my past returns to haunt me, it'll take every skill I've mastered to keep her alive.

She may be a national treasure, but she belongs to me now.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Debt of Loyalty*

After she was kidnapped in broad daylight, I was hired to bring Willow Cavanaugh home, but as the daughter of a wealthy family she's used to getting what she wants rather than taking orders.

Too bad.

She'll do as she's told or she'll earn herself a stern, shameful reminder of who is in charge, but it will take more than just a well-spanked bare bottom to truly tame this feisty little rich girl.

She'll learn her place over my knee, but it's in my bed that I'll make her mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Debt of Sacrifice*

When she witnessed a murder, it put Greer McDuff on a brutal cartel's radar... and on mine.

As a former Navy SEAL now serving with the elite Eagle Force, my assignment is to protect her by any means necessary. If that requires a stern reminder of who is in charge with her bottom bare over my knee and then an even more shameful lesson in my bed, then that's what she'll get.

There's just one problem.

The only place I know I can keep her safe is the ranch I left behind and vowed never to return.

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## BOOKS OF THE DANGEROUS BUSINESS SERIES

### *Persuasion*

Her father stole something from the mob and they hired me to get it back, but that's not the real reason Giliana Worthington is locked naked in a cage with her bottom well-used and sore.

I brought her here so I could take my time punishing her, mastering her, and ravaging her helpless, quivering body over and over again as she screams and moans and begs for more.

I didn't take her as a hostage. I took her because she is mine.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

### *Bad Men*

I thought I could run away from the marriage the mafia arranged for me, but I ended up held prisoner in a foreign country by someone far more dangerous than the man I tried to escape.

Then Jack and Diego came for me.

They didn't ask if I wanted to be theirs. They just took me.

I ran, but they caught me, stripped me bare, and punished me in the most shameful way possible.

Now they're going to share me, and they're not going to be gentle about it.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

## BOOKS OF THE DARK WOLVES SERIES

### *His to Claim*

For centuries my kind have hidden our feral nature, our brute strength, and our carnal instincts. But this human female is my mate, and nothing will keep me from claiming and ravaging her.

She is mine to tame and protect, and if my belt doesn't teach her to obey then she'll learn in a much more shameful fashion. Either way, her surrender will be as complete as it is inevitable.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *His to Possess*

Stone Keeler is a six-foot-four hunk who could win any girl's heart and then make her scream in bed, but as he claimed my quivering body for the first time the look in his eyes was terrifying.

It was dark and savage, as if at any moment he might lose control completely and take me like a beast takes his mate, mounting and rutting me and marking me as his with every brutal climax.

I ran from him... but I couldn't stay away for long.

Not when I belong to him already.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

## BOOKS OF THE ALPHA DYNASTY SERIES

### *Unchained Beast*

As the firstborn of the Dupree family, I have spent my life building the wealth and power of our mafia empire while keeping our dark secret hidden and my savage hunger at bay. But the beast within me cannot be chained forever, and I must claim a mate before I lose control completely...

That is why Coraline LeBlanc is mine.

When I mount and ravage her, it won't be because I want her. It will be because I need her.

But that doesn't mean I won't enjoy stripping her bare and spanking her until she surrenders, then making her beg and scream with every desperate climax as I take what belongs to me.

The beast will claim her, but I will keep her.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Savage Brute*

It wasn't his mafia birthright that made Dax Dupree a monster. Years behind bars and a brutal war with a rival organization made him hard as steel, but the beast he can barely control was always there, and without a mate to mark and claim it would soon take hold of him completely.

I didn't know that when he showed up at my bar after closing and spanked me until I was wet and shamefully ready for him to mount and ravage me, or even when I woke the next morning with my throat sore from screaming and his seed still drying on my thighs. But I know it now.

Because I'm his mate.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Ruthless Monster*

When Esme Rawlings looks at me, she sees many things. A ruthless mob boss. A key witness to the latest murder in an ongoing turf war. A guardian angel who saved her from a hitman's bullet.

But when I look at her, I see just one thing.

My mate.

She can investigate me as thoroughly as she feels necessary, prying into every aspect of my family's vast mafia empire, but the only truth she really needs to know about me she will learn tonight with her bare bottom burning and her protests drowned out by her screams of climax.

I take what belongs to me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Ravenous Predator*

Suzette Barker thought she could steal from the most powerful mafia boss in Philadelphia. My belt across her naked backside taught her otherwise, but as tears run down her cheeks and her arousal glistens on her bare thighs, there is something more important she will understand soon.

Kneeling at my feet and demonstrating her remorseful surrender in the most shameful way possible won't bring an end to this, nor will her screams of climax as I take her long and hard. She'll be coming with me and I'll be mounting and savagely rutting her as often as I please.

Not just because she owes me.

Because she's my mate.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

### ***Merciless Savage***

Christoff Dupree doesn't strike me as the kind of man who woos a woman gently, so when I saw the flowers on my kitchen table I knew it wasn't just a gesture of appreciation for saving his life.

This ruthless mafia boss wasn't seducing me. Those roses mean that I belong to him now.

That I'm his to spank into shameful submission before he mounts me and claims me savagely.

That I'm his mate.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

## BOOKS OF THE ALPHA BEASTS SERIES

### *King's Mate*

Her scent drew me to her, but something deeper and more powerful told me she was mine. Something that would not be denied. Something that demanded I claim her then and there.

I took her the way a beast takes his mate. Roughly. Savagely. Without mercy or remorse.

She will run, and when she does she will be punished, but it is not me that she fears. Every quivering, desperate climax reminds her that her body knows its master, and that terrifies her.

She knows I am not a gentle king, and she will scream for me as she learns her place.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

### *Beast's Claim*

Raven is not one of my kind, but the moment I caught her scent I knew she belonged to me.

She is my mate, and when I claim her it will not be gentle. She can fight me, but her pleas for mercy as she is punished will soon give way to screams of climax as she is mounted and rutted.

By the time I am finished with her, the evidence of her body's surrender will be mingled with my seed as it drips down her bare thighs. But she will be more than just sore and utterly spent.

She will be mine.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

### *Alpha's Mate*

I didn't ask Nicolina to be my mate. It was not up to her. An alpha takes what belongs to him.

She will plead for mercy as she is bared and punished for daring to run from me, but her screams as she is claimed and rutted will be those of helpless climax as her body surrenders to its master.

She is mine, and I'm going to make sure she knows it.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

## MORE STORMY NIGHT BOOKS BY PIPER STONE

### *Claimed by the Beasts*

Though she has done her best to run from it, Scarlet Dumane cannot escape what is in store for her. She has known for years that she is destined to belong not just to one savage beast, but to three, and now the time has come for her to be claimed. Soon her mates will own every inch of her beautiful body, and she will be shared and used as roughly and as often as they please.

Scarlet hid from the disturbing truth about herself, her family, and her town for as long as she could, but now her grandmother's death has finally brought her back home to the bayous of Louisiana and at last she must face her fate, no matter how shameful and terrifying.

She will be a queen, but her mates will be her masters, and defiance will be thoroughly punished. Yet even when she is stripped bare and spanked until she is sobbing, her need for them only grows, and every blush, moan, and quivering climax binds her to them more tightly. But with enemies lurking in the shadows, can she trust her mates to protect her from both man and beast?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Millionaire Daddy*

Dominick Asbury is not just a handsome millionaire whose deep voice makes Jenna's tummy flutter whenever they are together, nor is he merely the first man bold enough to strip her bare and spank her hard and thoroughly whenever she has been naughty. He is much more than that.

He is her daddy.

He is the one who punishes her when she's been a bad girl, and he is the one who takes her in his arms afterwards and brings her to one climax after another until she is utterly spent and satisfied.

But something shady is going on behind the scenes at Dominick's company, and when Jenna draws the wrong conclusion from a poorly written article about him and creates an embarrassing public scene, will she end up not only costing them both their jobs but losing her daddy as well?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Conquering Their Mate*

For years the Cenzans have cast a menacing eye on Earth, but it still came as a shock to be captured, stripped bare, and claimed as a mate by their leader and his most trusted warriors.

It infuriates me to be punished for the slightest defiance and forced to submit to these alien brutes, but as I'm led naked through the corridors of their ship, my well-punished bare bottom and my helpless arousal both fully on display, I cannot help wondering how long it will be until I'm kneeling at the feet of my mates and begging them take me as shamefully as they please.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Captured and Kept*

Since her career was knocked off track in retaliation for her efforts to expose a sinister plot by high-ranking government officials, reporter Danielle Carver has been stuck writing puff pieces in a small town in Oregon. Desperate for a serious story, she sets out to investigate the rumors she's been hearing about mysterious men living in the mountains nearby. But when she secretly follows them back to their remote cabin, the ruggedly handsome beasts don't take kindly to her snooping around, and Dani soon finds herself stripped bare for a painful, humiliating spanking.

Their rough dominance arouses her deeply, and before long she is blushing crimson as they take turns using her beautiful body as thoroughly and shamefully as they please. But when Dani uncovers the true reason for their presence in the area, will more than just her career be at risk?

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

### ***Taming His Brat***

It's been years since Cooper Dawson left her small Texas hometown, but after her stubborn defiance gets her fired from two jobs in a row, she knows something definitely needs to change. What she doesn't expect, however, is for her sharp tongue and arrogant attitude to land her over the knee of a stern, ruggedly sexy cowboy for a painful, embarrassing, and very public spanking.

Rex Sullivan cannot deny being smitten by Cooper, and the fact that she is in desperate need of his belt across her bare backside only makes the war-hardened ex-Marine more determined to tame the beautiful, fiery redhead. It isn't long before she's screaming his name as he shows her just how hard and roughly a cowboy can ride a headstrong filly. But Rex and Cooper both have secrets, and when the demons of their past rear their ugly heads, will their romance be torn apart?

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

### ***Capturing Their Mate***

I thought the Cenzan invaders could never find me here, but I was wrong. Three of the alien brutes came to take me, and before I ever set foot aboard their ship I had already been stripped bare, spanked thoroughly, and claimed more shamefully than I would have ever thought possible.

They have decided that a public example must be made of me, and I will be punished and used in the most humiliating ways imaginable as a warning to anyone who might dare to defy them. But I am no ordinary breeder, and the secrets hidden in my past could change their world... or end it.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

### ***Rogue***

Tracking down cyborgs is my job, but this time I'm the one being hunted. This rogue machine has spent most of his life locked up, and now that he's on the loose he has plans for me...

He isn't just going to strip me, punish me, and use me. He will take me longer and harder than any human ever could, claiming me so thoroughly that I will be left in no doubt who owns me.

No matter how shamefully I beg and plead, my body will be ravaged again and again with pleasure so intense it terrifies me to even imagine, because that is what he was built to do.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

### ***Roughneck***

When I took a job on an oil rig to escape my scheming stepfather's efforts to set me up with one of his business cronies, I knew I'd be working with rugged men. What I didn't expect is to find myself bent over a desk, my cheeks soaked with tears and my bare thighs wet for a very different reason, as my well-punished bottom is thoroughly used by a stern, infuriatingly sexy roughneck.

Even though I should have known better than to get sassy with a firm-handed cowboy, let alone a tough-as-nails former Marine, there's no denying that learning the hard way was every bit as hot as it was shameful. But a sore, welted backside is just the start of his plans for me, and no matter how much I blush to admit it, I know I'm going to take everything he gives me and beg for more.

### **Buy on Amazon**

### ***Hunting Their Mate***

As far as I'm concerned, the Cenzans will always be the enemy, and there can be no peace while they remain on our planet. I planned to make them pay for invading our world, but I was hunted down and captured by two of their warriors with the help of a battle-hardened former Marine. Now I'm the one who is going to pay, as the three of them punish me, shame me, and share me.

Though the thought of a fellow human taking the side of these alien brutes enrages me, that is far from the worst of it. With every searing stroke of the strap that lands across my bare bottom, with every savage thrust as I am claimed over and over, and with every screaming climax, it is made more clear that it is my own quivering, thoroughly used body which has truly betrayed me.

### **Buy on Amazon**

### ***Primitive***

I was sent to this world to help build a new Earth, but I was shocked by what I found here. The men of this planet are not just primitive savages. They are predators, and I am now their prey...

The government lied to all of us. Not all of the creatures who hunted and captured me are aliens. Some of them were human once, specimens transformed in labs into little more than feral beasts.

I fought, but I was thrown over a shoulder and carried off. I ran, but I was caught and punished. Now they are going to claim me, share me, and use me so roughly that when the last screaming climax has been wrung from my naked, helpless body, I wonder if I'll still know my own name.

### **Buy on Amazon**

### ***Harvest***

The Centurions conquered Earth long before I was born, but they did not come for our land or our resources. They came for mates, women deemed suitable for breeding. Women like me.

Three of the alien brutes decided to claim me, and when I defied them, they made a public example of me, punishing me so thoroughly and shamefully I might never stop blushing.

But now, as my virgin body is used in every way possible, I'm not sure I want them to stop...

### **Buy on Amazon**

### *Torched*

I work alongside firefighters, so I know how to handle musclebound roughnecks, but Blaise Tompkins is in a league of his own. The night we met, I threw a glass of wine in his face, then ended up shoved against the wall with my panties on the floor and my arousal dripping down my thighs, screaming out climax after shameful climax with my well-punished bottom still burning.

I've got a series of arsons to get to the bottom of, and finding out that the infuriatingly sexy brute who spanked me like a naughty little girl will be helping me with the investigation seemed like the last thing I needed, until somebody hurled a rock through my window in an effort to scare me away from the case. Now having a big, strong man around doesn't seem like such a bad idea...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Fertile*

The men who hunt me were always brutes, but now lust makes them barely more than beasts.

When they catch me, I know what comes next.

I will fight, but my need to be bred is just as strong as theirs is to breed. When they strip me, punish me, and use me the way I'm meant to be used, my screams will be the screams of climax.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Hostage*

I knew going after one of the most powerful mafia bosses in the world would be dangerous, but I didn't anticipate being dragged from my apartment already sore, sorry, and shamefully used.

My captors don't just plan to teach me a lesson and then let me go. They plan to share me, punish me, and claim me so ruthlessly I'll be screaming my submission into the sheets long before they're through with me. They took me as a hostage, but they'll keep me as theirs.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Defiled*

I was born to rule, but for her sake I am banished, forced to wander the Earth among mortals. Her virgin body will pay the price for my protection, and it will be a shameful price indeed.

Stripped, punished, and ravaged over and over, she will scream with every savage climax.

She will be defiled, but before I am done with her she will beg to be mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Kept*

On the run from corrupt men determined to silence me, I sought refuge in his cabin.

I ate his food, drank his whiskey, and slept in his bed. But then the big bad bear came home and I learned the hard way that sometimes Goldilocks ends up with her cute little bottom well-used and sore.

He stripped me, spanked me, and ravaged me in the most shameful way possible, but then this rugged brute did something no one else ever has before. He made it

clear he plans to keep me...

**Buy on Amazon**

***Auctioned***

Twenty years ago the Malzeons saved us when we were at the brink of self-annihilation, but there was a price for their intervention. They demanded humans as servants... and as pets.

Only criminals were supposed to be offered to the aliens for their use, but when I defied Earth's government, asking questions that no one else would dare to ask, I was sold to them at auction.

I was bought by two of their most powerful commanders, rivals who nonetheless plan to share me. I am their property now, and they intend to tame me, train me, and enjoy me thoroughly.

But I have information they need, a secret guarded so zealously that discovering it cost me my freedom, and if they do not act quickly enough both of our worlds will soon be in grave danger.

**Buy on Amazon**

***Hard Ride***

When I snuck into Montana Cobalt's house, I was looking for help learning to ride like him, but what I got was his belt across my bare backside. Then with tears still running down my cheeks and arousal dripping onto my thighs, the big brute taught me a much more shameful lesson.

Montana has agreed to train me, but not just for the rodeo. He's going to break me in and put me through my paces, and then he's going to show me what it means to be ridden rough and dirty.

**Buy on Amazon**

***Bounty***

After I went undercover to take down a mob boss and ended up betrayed, framed, and on the run, Harper Rollins tried to bring me in. But instead of collecting a bounty, she earned herself a hard spanking and then an even rougher lesson that left her cute bottom sore in a very different way.

She's not one to give up without a fight, but that's fine by me. It just means I'll have plenty more chances to welt her beautiful backside and then make her scream her surrender into the sheets.

**Buy on Amazon**

***Beast***

Primitive, irresistible need compelled him to claim me, but it was more than mere instinct that drove this alien beast to punish me for my defiance and then ravage me thoroughly and savagely. Every screaming climax was a brand marking me as his, ensuring I never forget who I belong to.

He's strong enough to take what he wants from me, but that's not why I surrendered so easily as he stripped me bare, pushed me up against the wall, and made me his so roughly and shamefully.

It wasn't fear that forced me to submit. It was need.

**Buy on Amazon**

### *Gladiator*

Xander didn't just win me in the arena. The alien brute claimed me there too, with my punished bottom still burning and my screams of climax almost drowned out by the roar of the crowd.

Almost...

Victory earned him freedom and the right to take me as his mate, but making me truly his will mean more than just spanking me into shameful surrender and then rutting me like a wild beast. Before he carries me off as his prize, the dark truth that brought me here must be exposed at last.

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### *Big Rig*

Alexis Harding is used to telling men exactly what she thinks, but she's never had a roughneck like me as a boss before. On my rig, I make the rules and sassy little girls get stripped bare, bent over my desk, and taught their place, first with my belt and then in a much more shameful way.

She'll be sore and sorry long before I'm done with her, but the arousal glistening on her thighs reveals the truth she would rather keep hidden. She needs it rough, and that's how she'll get it.

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### *Warriors*

I knew this was a primitive planet when I landed, but nothing could have prepared me for the rough beasts who inhabit it. The sting of their prince's firm hand on my bare bottom taught me my place in his world, but it was what came after that truly demonstrated his mastery over me.

This alien brute has granted me his protection and his help with my mission, but the price was my total submission to both his shameful demands and those of his second in command as well.

But it isn't the savage way they make use of my quivering body that terrifies me the most. What leaves me trembling is the thought that I may never leave this place... because I won't want to.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Owned*

With a ruthless, corrupt billionaire after me, Crockett, Dylan, and Wade are just the men I need. Rough men who know how to keep a woman safe... and how to make her scream their names.

But the Hell's Fury MC doesn't do charity work, and their help will come at a price.

A shameful price...

They aren't just going to bare me, punish me, and then do whatever they want with me.

They're going to make me beg for it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Seized*

Delaney Archer got herself mixed up with someone who crossed us, and now she's going to find out just how roughly and shamefully three bad men like us can make use of her beautiful body.

She can plead for mercy, but it won't stop us from stripping her bare and spanking her until she's sore, sobbing, and soaking wet. Our feisty little captive is going to take everything we give her, and she'll be screaming our names with every savage climax long before we're done with her.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Cruel Masters*

I thought I understood the risks of going undercover to report on billionaires flaunting their power, but these men didn't send lawyers after me. They're going to deal with me themselves.

Now I'm naked aboard their private plane, my backside already burning from one of their belts, and these three infuriatingly sexy bastards have only just gotten started teaching me my place.

I'm not just going to be punished, shamed, and shared. I'm going to be mastered.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Hard Men*

My father's will left his company to me, but the three roughnecks who ran it for him have other ideas. They're owed a debt and they mean to collect on it, but it's not money these brutes want.

It's me.

In return for protection from my father's enemies, I will be theirs to share. But these are hard men, and they don't just intend to punish my defiance and use me as shamefully as they please.

They plan to master me completely.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Rough Ride*

**As I hear the leather slide through the loops of his pants, I know what comes next. Jake Travers is going to blister my backside. Then he's going to ride me the way only a rodeo champion can.**

Plenty of men who thought they could put me in my place have learned the hard way that I was more than they could handle, and when Jake showed up I was sure he would be no different.

I was wrong.

When I pushed him, he bared and spanked me in front of a bar full of people.

I should have let it go at that, but I couldn't.

That's why he's taking off his belt...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Primal Instinct*

Ruger Jameson can buy anything he wants, but that's not the reason I'm his to use as he pleases.

He's a former Army Ranger accustomed to having his orders followed, but that's not why I obey him.

He saved my life after our plane crashed, but I'm not on my knees just to thank him properly.

I'm his because my body knows its master.

I do as I'm told because he blisters my bare backside every time I dare to do otherwise.

I'm at his feet because I belong to him and I plan to show it in the most shameful way possible.

### **Buy on Amazon**

#### ***Captor***

I was supposed to be safe from the lottery. Set apart for a man who would treat me with dignity.

But as I'm probed and examined in the most intimate, shameful ways imaginable while the hulking alien king who just spanked me looks on approvingly, I know one thing for certain.

This brute didn't end up with me by chance. He wanted me, so he found a way to take me.

He'll savor every blush as I stand bare and on display for him, every plea for mercy as he punishes my defiance, and every quivering climax as he slowly masters my virgin body.

I'll be his before he even claims me.

### **Buy on Amazon**

#### ***Rough and Dirty***

Wrecking my cheating ex's truck with a bat might have made me feel better... if the one I went after had actually belonged to him, instead of to the burly roughneck currently taking off his belt.

Now I'm bent over in a parking lot with my bottom burning as this ruggedly sexy bastard and his two equally brutish friends take turns reddening my ass, and I can tell they're just getting started.

That thought shouldn't excite me, and I certainly shouldn't be imagining all the shameful things these men might do to me. But what I should or shouldn't be thinking doesn't matter anyway.

They can see the arousal glistening on my thighs, and they know I need it rough and dirty...

### **Buy on Amazon**

#### ***His to Take***

When Zadok Vakan caught me trying to escape his planet with priceless stolen technology, he didn't have me sent to the mines. He made sure I was stripped bare and sold at auction instead.

Then he bought me for himself.

Even as he punishes me for the slightest hint of defiance and then claims me like a beast, indulging every filthy desire his savage nature can conceive, I swear I'll never surrender.

But it doesn't matter.

I'm already his, and we both know it.

### **Buy on Amazon**

#### ***Tyrant***

When I accepted a lucrative marketing position at his vineyard, Montgomery Wolfe made the terms of my employment clear right from the start. Follow his rules or face the consequences.

That's why I'm bent over his desk, doing my best to hate him as his belt lashes my bare bottom.

I shouldn't give in to this tyrant. I shouldn't yield to his shameful demands.

Yet I can't resist the passion he sets ablaze with every word, every touch, and every brutally possessive kiss, and I know before long my body will surrender to even his darkest needs...

### **Buy on Amazon**

#### ***Filthy Rogue***

Losing my job to a woman who slept her way to the top was bad enough, and that was before my car broke down as I drove cross country to start over. Having to be rescued by an infuriatingly sexy biker who promptly bared and spanked me for sassing him was just icing on the cake.

After sharing a passionate night, I might have made a teensy mistake in taking cash from his wallet in order to pay the auto mechanic, but I hadn't thought I'd ever see him again...

Then on the first day at my new job, guess who swaggered in with payback on his mind?

He's living proof that the universe really is out to get me... and he's my new boss.

### **Buy on Amazon**

#### ***Captive Mate***

When the fearsome alien warrior who invaded my dreams came for me in the flesh, he did more than just spank my bare ass and then make me scream his name as he mounted and rutted me.

He marked me as his.

Then, with the imprint of his teeth still red on my skin, he carried me off with him.

Because he isn't just my fantasy. He's my mate.

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# ABOUT PIPER STONE

Amazon Top 150 Internationally Best-Selling Author, Kindle Unlimited All Star Piper Stone writes in several genres. From her worlds of dark mafia, cowboys, and marines to contemporary reverse harem, shifter romance, and science fiction, she attempts to delight readers with a foray into darkness, sensuality, suspense, and always a romantic HEA. When she's not writing, you can find her sipping merlot while she enjoys spending time with her three Golden Retrievers (Indiana Jones, Magnum PI, and Remington Steele) and a husband who relishes creating fabulous food.

Dangerous is Delicious.

\* \* \*

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