



THE VILLAIN
GENTLEMEN ROGUES

USA TODAY & WSJ BESTSELLING AUTHOR

NANA MALONE



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BOOK 5

NANA MALONE

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MALONE
Sing, Faith, God, Romance

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DAPHNE



YOU CAN'T DO THIS. YOU'RE TOO SICK. YOU NEED ME TO TAKE CARE OF YOU.

I shook the thoughts out of my head. My mother had no place here. I wasn't that same scared, too-sick-to-do-anything girl. I was a badass. And I was jumping off bloody Tower Bridge today.

Except when I peered over the ledge, I started to rethink my decisions. As I stared down at the mile-long drop, my heart thudded against my ribs. Okay, sure, I had some second thoughts. Who in their right mind thought this was a good idea to bungee jump over the Thames River?

I was a moron. I had choices here. I could get down. I could walk away from this.

Yes, walk away. You know how you get grand ideas, but you can't do any of them. You need to be taken care of.

Again, I shut my mother's voice out of my head with a slam of a steel door.

"Shit or get off the pot, Daphne. We don't have all day."

I chewed my lip, sliding a glance at my boyfriend, Christopher. "You know it's harder than it looks. Doing my best here."

Christopher was handsome. Sandy blond hair, decent jawline, and he was in shape. And boy, did he love his clothes and the trappings of his job. His killer smile was legendary.

However that smile was nowhere to be seen now. Right now he just looked annoyed. He shifted restlessly on his feet. "If you're not going to do this, come down. This is ridiculous."

I kept staring down over the ledge at the creek below. When I had suggested bungee jumping, I thought it would be fun, something for Christopher and me to do together outside of business hours.

Christopher and I worked at Baines Data. I was one of the account managers. Any data that needed to be securely encrypted in the CRM, I handled. We had been dating for nearly a year. But most of our dates consisted of places that we already went to for lunch with the team. Nothing exciting ever happened. It was like we'd gone straight into comfortable bored married phase. I would kill for a little excitement. Some effort from him.

Hell, *I'd* been the one to plan today's date.

He never wanted to come to my place. All because he'd run into my sister Willow *one time* and she'd asked him a slew of probing questions. He was very uncomfortable about that.

If we did anything outside of work, it was always with his friends, never with mine. And it was always the same two friends, Chad and Mark. Occasionally one of them would have a girlfriend along, and their girlfriends were always scarily too young. Like barely approaching twenty or just out of uni. And come to think of it, they didn't seem like girlfriends. They seemed like hookups or casual things because they never brought the same girl twice.

I'm sure the company he kept said a lot about him.

And me dating him said a lot about me.

My therapist had suggested some time ago that I start doing things that scared me, things that meant I was really living, so I thought something like this would be a great idea. Because if I was being honest, I hadn't really

branched out. Hadn't made new friends or done a lot to prove that I was really living my life.

And wasn't that the whole point of moving away from home and starting over? Burying my past. I got to be a whole new person in London. But funny enough, I was still terrified to *do* anything.

But standing here on the ledge, all harnessed up, I felt like this was a joke. That I was a fraud. When my vision swam, I stepped back away from the edge.

River, the bloke who was in charge of adventure jumps, sighed. I got the impression from his face that I wasn't the first person who'd chickened out. He didn't seem to be looking at me with condemnation, just resignation. I glanced back at Christopher as I stepped down. "Okay, maybe this was dumb."

He shrugged. "I told you. You look ridiculous. I swear you have more failures than wins. I'm going to make you a wall of shame for the office so we can all keep track." His glance shifted to River. "Remove all that gear from her."

He was always rude. Never said please. Never said thank you. He was rude to waiters and waitresses and busboys and valets. He talked to everyone like they worked for him. To make up for some of his rudeness, I always felt obligated to be twice as nice.

"You don't have to be mean, Christopher. Jesus."

Christopher shrugged. The embarrassment that always accompanied an outing crept up my spine and swirled around my shoulders. I'd chickened out...again. It wasn't even a surprise.

It was kind of the joke between my friends. I'd get some hairbrained idea, be really up for it...then chicken out. But my own boyfriend didn't need to make fun of me.

Christopher shifted on his feet as he glowered at me. "While River gets you out of there, I need to tell you something."

I frowned. "I get it. I failed. You don't need to drive the point home anymore."

"I think we should break up."

River chose that exact moment to come back with the clamp that would release me from the straps.

"W-what?" I whispered.

"You heard me. Besides, it's embarrassing for me to be with you."

"I don't understand. *You pursued me.*"

"Let's face it, you were available. And it was easy."

Heat suffused my face, and a wave of dizziness crashed into me, leaving me unsteady on my feet. River immediately reached for me and steadied my elbow. "Why are you doing this, Christopher?"

"I've met someone else, so I'm trying to let you down gently."

I looked around and could feel the hysteria bubbling up inside me. "You call that gentle? You wait until I'm about to jump off a bridge and then tell me you're breaking up with me because you've met someone else?"

"I've known her for a long time. Kali Klausman."

My stomach roiled. She was one of our best paying clients. "That time I came into the office and you two were so close..."

He shrugged. "Accidents happen."

I stared at him. That incident was over a month ago. I'd walked in and felt the electric charge in the air. The way she had looked at him.

"So you've been cheating on me for over a month? I just want to make sure I've got that right."

He pressed his lips tightly together. "There's no need for drama. And it never seemed like the right time to tell you, but I'm telling you now."

My palms started to sweat and my heart squeezed in my chest. "What did I ever do to you?" I swiped at the tears that were rolling down my face with the back of my hand.

He took a weary step back. "Other than be pathetic? Isn't that enough?"

Just so we have an understanding. Try and stay professional.”

A light buzzing sound started somewhere deep inside. Somewhere between standing over the edge of the creek, staring down, and then looking into his pale gray eyes and wondering what on earth I ever saw in him. Around quavering lips, I muttered, “I’m *always* professional.”

Despite him wanting to stay quiet about our relationship, I was a rule follower. I’d disclosed to HR. Since he was my boss, we had to. Turns out it might protect me now. He couldn’t fire me.

But he could make my life miserable.

His eyes narrowed as he flattened his lips. “That remains to be seen.”

A cold shiver ran up my back. Forget miserable, he was going to try to make me quit. Fury sparked somewhere deep inside, but the ignition switch wouldn’t turn on. I wanted to tell him I’d fight him. I wanted to rip him a new asshole. But I didn’t.

I just took it.

Because you’re weak.

Christopher double checked his line and safety rig. He nodded at his jump instructor and stepped up to the platform.

With the boulder sitting in my stomach, all I could do was watch as he prepared to jump.

“Alright?” River asked. The concern was etched into his face, the crease of his brow, and the fine lines around his mouth. He was worried that I was having a panic attack.

I nodded even as I furiously blinked back tears. The team unhooked me from the line and all the safety equipment while I silently wiped away the salty liquid streaming down my face. And just as the last piece of safety equipment fell away, I watched Christopher swan dive off the platform.

I might not have been brave enough to jump, but I had enough self-respect to hurry away so that I could let the tears fall freely without anyone seeing them.

As I walked into the main office, I caught a shadow in the park opposite and frowned. A man was leaning against a tree, and I couldn't explain it, but I could *feel* his eyes on me. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up, suddenly making me more afraid than I had been standing on the platform. What the hell was that?

I had no bloody idea. But it forced me to hurry up and get my things. My souvenir photo which consisted of me smiling on the platform giving the camera a thumbs up, my keys, and my sweater. When I rushed back outside, the man was gone.

See, chasing shadows again. No one is there.

But as I got into the car, the feeling of being watched stayed with me. I was checking the rearview mirror when my phone rang.

My sister.

There was no avoiding her call. She was checking to see how I'd done. "Hey, Willow."

"How'd it go? Are you now a professional bungee jumper?"

I winced. I was supposed to be the older *braver* sister. "Not quite."

"Oh honey. I'm sorry. I should have come."

"No. It's better you didn't. Long story. I'll tell you about it later. You okay?"

"Yep, fine. Wedding stress of course, one of the bridesmaids suggested she wear white too. Can you believe that. She's a stropping cow that one. But before I say anything else, are you sitting down?"

Shit.

"What's the matter?" With Willow it could be anything from losing their venue, to Travis irritated her that day, to they lost their deposit somewhere.

My sister hesitated and I could only twist in the wind as I wondered what on earth could be so bad.

"Well, it's two somethings. The check for Gran's care. It's nearly a thousand quid higher for next month. The other is about the wedding."

Shit. How the hell was I going to be able to cover that? I had a small savings account, but it was nearly gone. But this was Gran. She took me in when I had no one.

“Okay. I’ll figure it out for Gran. What’s the problem with the wedding?” Willow would be marrying Travis O’Connell in four weeks. The two of them were great together. I could always see how much he loved her.

“The thing is... Mum will be coming.”

Oh fuck.

DRAKE



ONE MONTH AGO...

ALL THOSE YEARS WORKING TO BRING DOWN THE SYNDICATE, AND I'D BEEN betrayed.

Trusting the wrong person will do that.

Now I was on the fucking outside. I needed back in. Home Office might think I might heel like some kind of trained dog. After I'd been bailed out, they'd sent me to Spain to stay out of sight until they knew what to do with me.

But the mission wasn't over until my target was dead or I was.

Too bad for me, I'd run into a brick wall, so now I needed access. Access burned spies didn't usually have. Except I had an ace in the hole who was still on the inside.

"Liam, tell me something good."

His reticence was palpable even over the phone. "You shouldn't be calling."

He was right. I shouldn't. But I didn't give a fuck. Liam Rhodes was one of the best MI5 analysts I'd ever come across. If anyone could find what I needed to get back in from the cold, it would be him.

Or you could have gone to Rogues.

The Rogues Division was a black box secret spy operation that British Intelligence liked to "consult" with from time to time. Home Office would love to own and control them, but the Rogues were bloody independent.

Gabriel Webb, who ran the division, had been a mate back in the day. We'd come up in a special MI5 training program together. Hell, it had been Gabe that had pulled me out of that hellhole six months ago. His sister, Saffron, was set to run Rogues one day. Unfortunately for me, she still held a grudge from an undercover mission I'd been part of where her parents died. She knew I didn't murder them, but I supposed part of her still felt betrayed by me for the things that I did while I was undercover.

And she didn't know the truth about my undercover status, so she was pretty much a shoot-on-sight person when it came to me.

So going to Rogues for help was a non-starter.

"Liam, did you really think I wouldn't try to come back?"

"I should have known better. Well, you'll be glad you called me. Just so you know, you owe me a bottle of Scotch."

"Whatever you want. My firstborn is yours."

He sighed and I could almost see his slight shoulders hunch. "You know Reina won't let you come back. Things are still too hot."

My handler Reina Torres couldn't keep me out for long. "I know that's what she'll say, but I haven't done anything wrong. I want my life back."

"She knows that, but you have to lay low until we can at least find something to plug the hole. You know what the protocol is."

Liam had been in the program just like Gabe and me. His specialty was technology, and he was damn good at it. And well, he was used to doing the occasional favor for me.

"I do know the protocol. But I still need you, mate."

"Fine. But you're not going to like this."

"Give me something."

"All right, the Syndicate is thriving in your absence."

I'd known that, but it still stung to hear. "Ah, fucking brilliant."

"And what's worse, Massimo Igno is working his way up. He's taking out lieutenants left and right, making deals. He's building up power. He doesn't just want a seat at the table. He wants the whole fucking enchilada."

I whistled softly. Massimo Igno was the son of a major Syndicate player, Antonio. With the help of Rogues, we'd taken him off the playing board last year. Massimo was a minor player though. "He was a sniveling piece of shit the last time I saw him. What's made him so bold?"

"I don't know. Syndicate leadership is meeting at Isola Bella off the coast of Italy in two months."

I perked up then. "Are you serious? Are they all going?"

"From the chatter we've picked up, yes. There is an auction for the final piece of the ledgers."

"Fucking hell, has he got it?"

"Not as far as we can tell. But there's something else."

Nothing about this call was good news. "What?"

"A woman. She lives in London. Her name is Daphne Winslow. She's fit too. Looks like that actress, Naomi something-or-other. The Jamaican one."

"Well, what has she got to do with it?"

"I'm not sure. Her name popped up as a search hit for him. He's been keeping tabs on her."

"How are they connected?"

"She looks normal on the surface. Works for a CRM data company as an account manager. Mid-sized clients. She brings them up to speed on the system. She's got a sister, a boyfriend, nothing special. I have no idea what he wants with her."

I frowned, working this information through my mind. "What connection does she have to anything?"

"I can't see *any* connection. It's possible he just wants to shag her."

"So you're saying she's an innocent?" I found that hard to believe. Everything the Igno's touched was radioactive. If Massimo was interested in her, then she was connected to all of this.

Liam muttered, "It looks that way."

"What did she do to get on his radar?"

"Just giving you the information as I see it."

He had to be missing something.

Didn't you say he was the best? If Liam can't find anything, then maybe there isn't anything to find.

"All right, anything else?"

"No. And for what it's worth, whatever you're planning, Reina won't like it."

"I don't care what Reina likes. I want back in."

"All right, if you want back in, you've got to come up with something good on Igno. Otherwise forget it. Get yourself a nice tractor, spend a few hours on the weekend pushing around the grass, you know, something like that. Maybe get a girlfriend, or a nice lad. Because if you fail, there is no coming back."

I didn't plan on failing. "No. I belong in the field."

"If you say so. All I know is some people would beg for normalcy. No more ghosts and shit."

"Well, I'm not most people. I need to be back in the field."

"Fine. Figure out what Massimo wants with this woman then. She probably holds the key."

"Send over her details, yeah?"

"What are you going to do?"

"If Massimo Igno wants her, I have to make sure he never gets her."

DRAKE

DAPHNE WINSLOW WAS NOT WHAT I EXPECTED.

She was hardly a sophisticated asset. Hell, she couldn't even bungee jump. So what did Massimo want with her?

I pinched the bridge of my nose and kept my gaze on her as she sat in her car. I knew far too much about her life right now. I'd followed her and the piece of shit that was her boyfriend. Did she even know he was cheating on her?

Didn't look that way. And she seemed genuinely surprised when he broke up with her right before he abandoned her and jumped himself.

Git.

There was no one there for her. Didn't people like her always have someone?

Not that I cared one way or the other. I just needed to know who to clear out of my path.

I'd been watching her. I knew what she liked to eat. I knew who her friends were. I knew every nervous tick, every smile. I knew everything about her, including the way she belted Beyoncé and Imagine Dragons songs

in her car. Sadly, I also knew she was completely tone deaf.

But she liked to sing in the car like she was giving a full-fledged concert. Car dancing included.

Her neighbors liked her and were dependent on her. She had one neighbor, Mrs. Belcher, who was a giant pain in the arse. But Daphne Winslow was nothing if not unfailingly kind. Always willing to help even when Mrs. Belcher was taking the piss.

She had a sister she loved. They saw each other a couple times a week. Sometimes with the sister's fiancé, sometimes without.

And I'd known she had this boyfriend. More than once I'd been tempted to just fucking get rid of the twat already. Leave evidence of his cheating ways. But I had to wait. So far, Massimo hadn't come near her, and I wasn't getting involved until he did.

And what do you call this?

Surveillance. I bloody called this surveillance. But given the breakup, I now needed to act as if Massimo was going to make a move. So far he'd just kept tabs on her social media, which honestly, only consisted of photos with her attempting death defying stunts like the bungee jumping. There was also race car driving, a helicopter flight, and a motorcycle lesson. Pictures of her standing next to things, but never...on the things.

There were no photos of any family other than her sister and Grandmother. Her Grandmother lived in a memory care facility and she saw her religiously every Wednesday night. I knew her mother was still alive, but they didn't see each other much. And outside of her sister Willow mentioning her mother now, they hadn't had any contact. Given Daphne's response, the way she clutched the steering wheel and had to take several deep breaths as she sat in the car and cried, there was a story there.

Not a story you give a fuck about. You are here for Massimo.

No. I didn't give a fuck about her family drama. But I did need to understand her if I was going to do this.

She would make the perfect bait.

DAPHNE



PRESENT DAY...

“Your *mother* is going to be there?”

My best mate, Talia Reynolds, took a large sip of her martini as she tried to process the information.

“Yep. And Willow dropped this little piece of magic on me right after I chickened out of bungee jumping and got dumped. I had no more adrenaline to spare, so I couldn't even react.”

“Mate, I'm so sorry. What are you going to do? I mean, I know you're the maid of honor and you hadn't really planned on taking a date, but you need someone there. I'll come with you. We'll tell everyone we're a couple now.”

I couldn't help but laugh. Talia was my first real friend. We'd met when I'd moved in with Gran. She lived down the road and decided we were going to be best mates at first sight. She didn't give a shit that I was the weird girl. She said my past made me interesting.

“Thank you. I love you for offering, but I wouldn't subject anyone to my mother voluntarily.”

I knew it would be bad. My mother was a malignant narcissist with a slew

of mental health issues.

“I mean why would Willow do this if she knows you don't get on.”

I chewed my bottom lip trying to think of the best way to answer this question. “It's not her fault. When we were taken away to live with Gran, she didn't know any of the reasons why. All she really knew was that she missed her mother. She knew mum was sick and had to go away and get better. Gran convinced me it was better to not tell her.” I shrugged. How could I explain that it was my job to look out for her. And that meant emotionally as well as physically. “Willow is sweet. Always was. She wouldn't have understood.”

“And now? Because this is a bloody big deal. And she's hurting you by having her there.”

There was no other choice. I shrank from the truth. It was the question I couldn't ask myself out loud. *What if Willow knew and still wanted my mother in her life?*

Who was I kidding? “The truth is, I'm a chickenshit.”

It had been nearly a week since Willow had dropped the bombshell on me, and I still hadn't managed to sit her down and have a conversation about it. Just the thought of it made my stomach knot with fear.

Talia lifted a delicately arched brow as she tossed her silken black locks over one shoulder. “Her mother is a narcissistic attempted murderer. If Willow knew, you know she would take your side. You know she wouldn't let your mother anywhere near you.”

Did I know though? What if she still chose mum after hearing the truth?

I shoved that thought aside. This wasn't about being chosen or believed. I had moved on. I just had to survive this damn wedding.

“...I mean, he's always an option. But what you want is somebody really fit.”

It took me several moments to realize that Talia had been speaking. And I had just spaced out on her. My brain scrambled to catch up.

I frowned. What the hell were we talking about? “Fit?”

Talia laughed. “Yeah, he's got to be hotter than Christopher by miles. Like maybe we need to hire you a model or an actor.”

I shook my head. “What the hell are you on about?”

She rolled her eyes. “Your date for the wedding of course.”

Oh boy. This was the last thing I needed. Talia in fix it mode. The last time she'd gotten like this, she'd signed me up for *all* the apps. My life had been pure chaos for a month and a half as she ran my dating life. There were some nights I had two back-to-back. I'd finally had to take things over and shut everything down. And soon after was when Christopher and I had gotten together. Before that he hadn't really paid much attention to me. But I think seeing me dressed and ready to go out on a date practically every night of the week lit a fire under his arse.

Of course, the moment he had me. He'd stopped trying at all. And now I was alone and betrayed.

“Talia, I don't need a date. I'll be fine. Besides, I'm the maid of honor. I'll be so busy I won't even be able to talk to her.”

My best friend leaned across the table. The glow from the candle lit her light brown skin, making it glow. “Bullshit. You know your mother. You're kidding yourself.”

My mother was more than capable of causing a scene. I sighed, a sense of dread closing in on me. She had a point. A year and a half ago. I'd made the error of posting that I was excited about getting my motorcycle license on Instagram. She tracked me down only to berate me about what a bad daughter I was in front of everyone. Thankfully I'd already had my turn and despite several errors and a panic attack beforehand, I had my license in hand. But I'd just made a slew of new friends, and we were all making plans to go grab a pint before she showed up and ruined the moment.

“Okay, you have a point. But honestly, I don't have time to scramble for a date.”

Talia pointed an accusatory finger at me. “First and foremost, you don't

have time because you don't *make* time. But we can get you a date just like that." She snapped her fingers in front of my face.

"I doubt that." After today I didn't believe that for a moment. The humiliation of being publicly dumped and my just-now ex doing the activity I'd just chickened out of.

"Oh ye of little faith."

Talia's eyes suddenly went wide. "Don't look now, but we have incoming."

Oh no. I tried to get up, but Talia shook her head and muttered, "Too late."

Before I could think of a proper way to escape, I felt someone's body heat behind me.

I turned slowly and saw a man who looked vaguely familiar. Average height, average weight, looked like he worked out. Dark hair, very nice camel peacoat. Where did I know him from?

Who was he?

The bloke gave me a warm smile. "Daphne, I'm so glad to run into you. Been a while, hasn't it?"

He knew my name? Why did he know my name? Was he a reporter? It had been years since the vultures had circled, wanting my story. It was nearing the fifteen-year anniversary though, so maybe someone was digging up the past? "I'm so sorry. Have we met?"

Playing dumb could usually buy me a little bit of time. Except in this case, I *was* dumb. While he looked familiar, I couldn't place him.

Dark olive skin, dark hair, and very intense eyes. It took another moment, then it clicked. Oh yes. I remembered meeting him at Travis's office when I'd gone to meet him to set up Willow's birthday.

This guy had lingered a little too long when I'd shaken his hand. His smile was smarmy. "Oh, I think I remember. Travis's office, right?"

He placed a hand on my back as he nodded enthusiastically. "Yes, you do

remember. Massimo. How lucky to run into you.”

I shifted forward to shake off his touch, which was too cloying. “Yes, how are you?”

“I’m great. Do you mind?” He asked, but it wasn’t really an ask because he helped himself to one of the seats at our table.

Talia’s eyes went wide. “The fuck are you doing?”

“You don’t mind, do you, Daphne?” he asked, pinning me with his dark gaze.

I inwardly shrank from his touch. I wished I had some cool retort, but even if I did, I wouldn’t be able to say it. Talia knew this look. It was my deer-in-the-headlights look. But she also knew the reason for it. It had taken me years of therapy to understand that sometimes I’d need a minute to process what was happening after all the years I’d been terrorized.

“I—”

My words choked and nothing came out. Talia, though, mate that she was, was right there. “Daphne and I are having a private conversation, so if you don’t mind...”

Massimo scowled at her. His earlier smile had slid off like a mask, and the scowl replaced it. One that sent a shiver up my spine and put me into fight or flight mode.

The bartender, who was a friend of Talia’s, leaned over to speak to her, and Talia flirted with him shamelessly. Satisfied she at least had someone other than Massimo to speak to, I tried to buy myself a reprieve. “I—if you’ll excuse me for a moment.”

I pushed away from the table, but Massimo grabbed my elbow. “Hurry back. I’m looking forward to talking to you.”

A shiver of fear ran down my spine, and I had to force myself to swallow bile at the back of my throat.

I walked blindly toward the loo, and sure, maybe I wasn’t looking where I was going, but I hadn’t expected to crash into a wall of muscle. Strong hands

grabbed my biceps and held me before I bounced back. "Easy does it."

My eyes darted up and, well, my brain shorted out.

This really must have been what people meant when they said stupid hot. When the other person was so insanely attractive that they made you instantly stupid and incapable of stringing together a coherent thought.

I registered that he was tall, at least six foot four. Inky dark hair that looked thick and soft. Long on top and short on the sides, either artfully styled with gel or he'd spent an unusual amount of time running his hands through it.

It was all topped off with bright blue eyes, cheekbones and a jawline that looked like they had been sculpted by the gods, and a smile that made my tongue freeze.

I honestly couldn't work out how to put the words together.

"Are you all right?"

I stammered, "Um, sorry. I'm so sorry. I wasn't paying attention and I... There's this guy and..."

He narrowed his eyes and gazed somewhere beyond me. "Trying to avoid someone?"

I glanced over my shoulder. "Like you wouldn't believe."

His bright blue gaze rested on my eyes, and heat pooled in my stomach. Seriously, this guy should come with a warning label and caution tape.

"I've got an idea how to shake him, but you probably won't like it."

I turned to see Massimo standing up and looking in our general direction. "At this point, I'd accept any kind of rescue."

Mr. Tall-Dark-and-Henry-Cavill frowned. "Are you sure about that?"

I looked back nervously. "Oh, I'm sure."

Then, with a wry grin, he pulled me close, his woodsy, spicy scent overwhelming my senses. His warmth enveloped me, making me feel safe and protected. He smiled, the promise of wicked sin in his expression. And then he kissed me.

DRAKE

AND THIS WAS WHERE I MADE MY MISTAKE. AN ERROR IN CALCULATION. YES, I was supposed to set the trap, but was I supposed to enjoy it?

Her lips were so damn soft. One brush and I felt myself being drawn in. Sucked in.

It wasn't just her beauty. It was about her essence. This woman I'd been watching for weeks.

If I was the good guy, I would have backed off and put the plan aside because using someone who was already scared as bait was a bad idea. They were likely to get hurt. Then I would have that on my conscience.

Good thing I didn't have one. Besides, whatever she'd done to get on his radar, that was why she was here. And that was why I was going to use her to get my fucking life back.

I slid my hand up her back to cradle her neck, pulling her closer and angling her head just the way I liked it. She was smaller than me. Maybe five foot six or seven. It was hard to tell because she was wearing high heels, but I still towered over her.

I deliberately turned my body so that more of my back was to the front of

the restaurant. Massimo would only be able to see part of my profile but all of hers. I took the risk that he would come closer. That he would try to make me stop kissing her, stop touching what he thought was his.

But something in the deep, dark recesses of my mind wanted to claw its way out. *No. She's mine.*

I deepened the kiss. A growl of deep satisfaction bubbled up as she moaned and then parted her lips for the onslaught of my tongue. I wasted no time diving in, licking deep, teasing her tongue to play.

I knew where I was, what I was doing, and how well I was doing it.

But there was something I couldn't place happening. Something that made me want to relax into the kiss, to melt into her, to let her melt into me until we became one.

My mistake was not letting go in that moment, not pulling away. My mistake was going back for more. She was making this whimpering sound, like a kitten mewling. And fuck me, I went back for seconds and thirds until I was lost in the whirlwind and fire of the kiss.

I tried to pull away, to save myself, but then her fingers dug into the lapels of my blazer, pulling me closer as she pressed her lithe body against mine.

My cock was straining against my trousers, demanding and desperate. All the blood in my head rushed south, leaving me with no functioning thought processes. All that was left were primal, desperate impulses to claim her.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

The brain cells in my head were now soup, rendered completely useless by the raging hard-on in my jeans. Thanks to her.

She pressed even closer, my erection kicking against her belly. She gasped and tried to pull away, but my arms tightened around her hips, holding her still. I didn't pull her closer. I didn't grind against her like I desperately wanted to. I just held her there and gave her a choice.

Would she run like a rabbit or would she stay?

When she pulled back for a second, my eyes fell to her mouth as I watched her tongue peek out and lick her lower lip.

I knew I was in her system, but I waited for her eyes to meet mine, to tell me what she was thinking, to show me what she was feeling. But her eyes never opened as she came back for more, pressing against my thick erection, her hips rocking ever so slightly.

Fuck. The alarm bells clanged as I dove into dangerous territory with her sweet scent wafting around me, coaxing, teasing, tempting. I groaned and pulled her closer, ready to burn us both to ashes.

Someone jostled by us, and at the slightest movement, I managed to break the spell she had on me. Bloody hell.

She blinked quickly, her breath coming out in sharp gasps. "I'm so sorry. I never should have—"

My fingers itched to pull her back, but I let go. "Let me get this straight; I maul you in a bar, and you apologize to *me*?"

"Well, you didn't exactly maul me. I'm pretty sure I begged you to kiss me, which is pretty damn humiliating."

I shoved my hands into my jeans pockets to avoid touching her again. "You're fine. And what do you want to bet you're not being stalked anymore?"

Her eyes darted over my shoulder, and then she frowned as she had to lean around me to see. Her eyes went wide. "He's saying something to Talia and Talia is giving as good as she gets. He's leaving. I can't believe that actually worked."

I shrugged. "I live to serve." I said it through clenched teeth. I could taste her on my tongue. All I wanted to do was sink into her, take a bite.

Now is not the time. Follow the plan.

"Thank you. I uh—" She licked her lips nervously then opened her mouth as if to say something else. But then she thought better of it and shut it before she gave me a small wave and walked back the way she had come.

I watched her go, every nerve in my body trying to claw its way out to grab her and hold on.

I had a plan. If I followed it, I would have Massimo Igno in no time. Feeling anything for Daphne would complicate that and be counterproductive.

She was just a pawn. One that I knew exactly how to play.

DAPHNE



I DON'T KNOW WHY I THOUGHT THAT CHRISTOPHER COULD BE AN ADULT. I was wrong.

He'd broken up with me, so why was he being a wanker?

And that's why you shouldn't sleep with your boss.

To be fair, he wasn't my boss when we started dating. He was one level above me and I hadn't been rolled under him yet.

Hehehe. You said under him.

My inner twelve-year-old diva had a field day with me.

Between Talia's barrage of messages this morning, asking lots of questions to find out more details about last night's hot guy, and Christopher darkening my door first thing at work, it had been quite a day.

I'd slept like shit. My mind had been plagued by thoughts of a man I didn't even know. Like, who the hell was that bloke? Last night, I'd returned to the table to a shocked Talia and thankfully no Massimo. Apparently he'd had a work emergency.

For shame.

Talia had drilled me and then congratulated me on picking the fittest

bloke in the bar to snog. She'd thought I was brave and taken my fate in my own hands.

I didn't have the heart to tell her I'd been rescued.

Like a coward.

Kissing a stranger in a bar. It wasn't me. Not bothering to find out said stranger's name? Not me either.

Obsessing over his lips and the way he'd touched me and why I was more aroused by his kiss than I'd ever been with Christopher... Well, okay, that seemed like me.

No sleep meant that today would require every ounce of patience I had. Every last ounce.

But here Christopher was basically being a moody little twat. Today's complaint was that my clients were showing favoritism. There was no policy against clients showing their appreciation with appropriate gifts like dinner or something. But Christopher hated that.

Haruto Tanashi was particularly appreciative of my work on his account and sent me a case of Lagavulin.

"It sets a bad precedent," Christopher complained. "It's inappropriate."

I looked up at him as I continued typing. I had to get a status report out by 10:00 a.m., and his blathering was not going to stop me.

"What is?" I asked, playing dumb.

"A client can't send you a case of expensive scotch. You don't even like scotch."

I raised my eyebrows. "Who says I don't?"

His brow furrowed. "You refused to drink it with me."

"That was then. This is the new me." For the good stuff, I could learn to appreciate it. I stopped typing. "Is there anything you really need? I had a long night, and I'm very busy."

His eyebrows raised. "Why the hell was it a long night?"

"Pretty sure that falls into the none-of-your-business category."

He furrowed his brow. "Wow, your attitude leaves a lot to be desired, Winslow."

Cocking my head, I said, "And by attitude, do you mean reminding you that my personal business isn't fodder for office gossip? Perhaps this is a matter I should discuss with HR."

His jaw ticked. I had him there. He cleared his throat as he rocked onto the balls of his feet. "I've got a new client for you."

I shook my head. "No. We've talked about this, Christopher. I'm already overworked. I don't have enough developers on my team. And the ones I do have are taxed. If you want to give me a new client, you'll have to take two away. And of my eight clients, six are already in development and two are in the pre-work phase. Plus, these clients love me and I'm actually excited to be working with them."

One of them was a new charitable foundation by Adeline Lasso, a huge West End actress who had just been cast in the latest sci-fi epic. She was literally the coolest client I had, and I had pitched her hard.

Christopher grinned at me. "Well, I guess I'll have to manage Adeline Lasso myself."

That asshole. He'd been miffed when he'd been overlooked by the client. "That's such bullshit. She wanted me. When our managing partner, Paul Jacobson, showed her our portfolios and gave her the options, she personally chose me."

"I think you forget that I, as your manager, can dictate your workload. If you tell me that nine clients is too many and I need to remove two in order for you to be effective at your job, then my job is to make that happen for you."

"Or your job is to just go over to Adam and give him the new client," I said through clenched teeth.

Christopher shrugged. "Well, for your information, Adam is also booked."

"There are several junior account managers who could probably handle a new client," I said. "Let one of them work under your direction as the senior account manager."

But no matter what I said, Christopher still wanted what he wanted the way he wanted it. And that meant regardless of what was going on with me, regardless of what was good for the company, I was going to get this new client and he was going to torture me with the extra hours.

"Your new client is Drake Foster. He's a venture capitalist. He's looking for a CRM solution for a new company he's setting up that will be more on the philanthropic side."

"You mean I can't say no?"

He grinned. And looking at him now, with his pale gray eyes and his too greasy, too floppy hair, I wondered what on earth I ever saw in him. Honestly, what was I thinking? Just thinking about the kiss last night. The way, that man had pulled back ever so slightly and smiled against my lips before diving in for the kind of kiss that made my lady parts sit up and sing. In comparison kissing Christopher had been like playing spin the bottle with amateurs at church camp.

"No. You don't have a choice, and I should probably mention that he's here."

My eyes went wide. "What the hell do you mean, he's here?"

"I mean he's in reception. Sorry, I should have mentioned that."

"You're such an asshole," I muttered.

"You'd better watch that attitude," he said bitterly.

I raised my eyebrows. "I've been here longer than you, and you can't demote me. At least not without management's input."

"I can for lack of performance. It's only a matter of time."

There was a shadow on the other side of my door, and I knew there was no way I was prepared for this. I didn't have a pitch deck ready.

You can use Tanashi's.

It was my last one. With some quick edits it could be ready.

Game face. I could do that.

But this was bullshit. It was clear Christopher had it out for me. It wouldn't be the worst idea I'd ever had to start tidying up my CV.

The problem was that I didn't want to change companies until I'd made it to senior account manager. At that point, the salary at my next job would be an exponential jump, instead of a lateral move. And it would take me years to build accounts and credibility in a new place.

Christopher smirked at me. "Maybe next time you'll dress more professionally for work."

I glanced down mournfully at my bright yellow V-necked sundress. It was perfectly appropriate for work, but it wasn't something I'd normally wear to meet a new client.

"Are you kidding me? Dare I ask you how long you've known about this meeting?"

He grinned at me. The contempt and malice in his smile was evident at the corners of his lips. He looked like the bloody Joker. "Since last week. Couldn't wait to spring it on you."

Suddenly there was a voice from the doorway as it began to open. "I guess my arrival is causing a bit of a stir."

Heat prickled my skin and the fine hairs on my arms stood at attention.

That voice.

Low and mellow with just enough gravel to make my lady parts sing as I thought about last night's kiss.

No. No. Absolutely not. There was no way this was happening. Not to me. No.

I closed my eyes, determined to close them so tightly that when I opened them again, the man in front of me would not be who I saw.

Unfortunately, when I opened my eyes, there he was. Still standing there. Looking just as handsome as he had last night when he'd kissed me.

As if that was just a kiss. That was some earth-shattering shit.

What the hell was he doing here? And why hadn't the ground opened up to swallow me? This was such bullshit.

It was only after several moments that I realized that Mr. Tall-Dark-and-I-Look-Like-I-Fuck-How-I-Kiss was talking to Christopher. They had said many words that I had missed.

I shook myself back to the present and tried to pick up the thread of the conversation. Fortunately, it sounded like Christopher was giving him the rundown on how I would give him everything he needed.

Mr. Tall-Dark-and-I-Look-Like-I-Fuck-How-I-Kiss leveled his gaze on me. "I am 100% confident in Miss Winslow's abilities."

Thankfully, this seemed to irritate Christopher, which irritated Tall-Dark-and-I-Look-Like-I-Fuck-How-I-Kiss.

Which we cannot think about right now because we have to be professional. Professional customer face.

I plastered on a smile. "Mr. Foster, although I did not expect us to work together, I can absolutely take care of all your needs." He smirked and I wanted to kick myself. Why the hell did I have to say it like that?

"As I said, I have no doubt." He turned to Christopher. "Mr. Cable, if you will excuse us, I should probably get to know my account manager."

Christopher raised his eyebrows. "Well, it's customary for me to take you out, tell you about the company, get to know you, and let you know how we all work together."

Drake narrowed his eyes. "All I need is Miss Winslow."

That shouldn't have made something deep in my stomach tighten with heat, but it did. I squeezed my thighs together, trying to ward off the pulsing throb between my legs. It was the last thing in the world I needed. What I needed was to forget everything that had happened last night.

When Christopher finally got the hint, Drake turned to me. "Wow, this is awkward."

I winced. "It doesn't have to be awkward. As far as we are concerned, the Daphne Winslow you see this morning is not the woman you met last night."

He cocked his head. "What if I told you that I happen to *like* the woman I met last night? Matter of fact, I woke up thinking about that woman and how she tasted. Made me wonder if she'd taste that sweet all over."

Holyfuckingshit. Not what I needed to hear at all. Why couldn't he be professional and just pretend it hadn't happened? After all, wasn't that the right thing to do?

"The woman you met last night didn't know you were her new client, and if she had, the woman you met last night would never have kissed you. So maybe we can just focus on working together and not talk about it. Never bring it up."

He lifted his eyebrows. "Is that really what you want?"

Somehow it felt like a trick question.

"Yes, that's what I want."

The heat instantly vanished from his gaze. The transformation was so swift I could almost feel the chill of the draft. "Good. Let's get to work then, shall we?"

I quickly finished typing and sent off my status report. Then I grabbed my laptop to join him on the couch in my office. He waited for me to sit down before choosing his position, which was a little too close if you asked me.

I could smell his cologne, something slightly musky with a woody scent. Enticing, with just enough spice to draw me in. I didn't know how long I sat there trying not to sniff him, but he grinned at me and raised an eyebrow.

"Something wrong?"

I pursed my lips as something occurred to me. "Did you know who I was last night?"

Something flashed in his eyes at that moment. Something I couldn't quite put my finger on. How could he know who I was?

"I knew *of* you. You worked on a campaign last year for Blythe Industries

and their giving plan. Thomas Blythe sang your praises, and that's how I knew to ask for you."

I *had* worked on the Blythe account a year and a half ago. "Yes, we were quite successful with their giving platform. Is something similar what you'd would like to move forward with?"

He leaned in to see what I was opening on my laptop. This was not the way we usually did things. There was usually more distance between me and a client. I liked to do things in a presentation style. It made it easier to keep some separation.

"I hope we won't have a difficult time working together, Miss Winslow."

"Of course not. I'm a professional, even if you did know who I was last night and said nothing, and even if I'm forced to take the job now, when I'm full up with clients, we're going to get along just fine."

His grin was slow and easy. "If I had told you who I was last night, would you have begged me to kiss you?"

I widened my eyes. "We're not talking about that. And I didn't beg you. You kissed *me*."

"Okay, then I guess we're not going to talk about that sexy little keening whine you make in the back of your throat either. We won't talk about it at all."

I forced my shoulders back. "You're Drake Foster. I know the name even though I didn't know your face. Because believe me, if I had, I wouldn't have kissed you. But that's neither here nor there. If what I've read about you is true, you have a large philanthropic organization and plenty of daddy's money, but you keep a low profile. No magazine covers naming you the most eligible bachelor, but I'm sure you don't have to kiss random women."

His eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly, but I saw it. Well, he wasn't happy. Tough. He'd known who I was last night and he'd let me make a fool of myself. And he'd let me kiss him, which was almost worse.

"Did I know who you were? Yes. But if you remember the events of last

night, you bumped into me, used me as a shield, then begged me to help you. Have I got that right?"

Okay, so maybe the order of events was something like that, but he made it sound like I'd climbed all over him, which I hadn't exactly. "That's hardly fair. I was in dire straits."

"Doesn't change what happened. You asked me for help, and I told you that you probably wouldn't like it. Then I kissed you. Correct me if I'm wrong, but didn't you kiss me back?"

Heat crept up my neck as I clenched my molars. "I did no such thing," I bit out. When in doubt, lie. Lie big. Lie badly if you have to, but never show fear.

You always show fear.

He leaned back on the couch, his arm thrown casually over the back, his pose reeking of insolence. "Fine, have it your way. But we will be working closely together for the next few weeks. Once you're on site, I'm sure this little tension you feel toward me will dissipate and..."

I lifted my brow. "Excuse me. On site?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I thought Mr. Cable had mentioned that you'll be working on site for the duration. Your other clients won't be a problem. He assured me he's already assigned you to me alone. So you have nothing but time. We leave on Friday. Wheels up for Barcelona."

Excuse me? There was no way I could move that quickly. Besides, I needed to be here for Willow. We were touring Balhurst this weekend. What the hell? I cocked my head and glowered at him. Was he just used to getting whatever he wanted? "Sorry to disappoint you. But I won't be going anywhere on Friday. As we don't start this project till Monday, I will leave on Sunday night and meet you in the office on Monday."

A slow, smug grin spread over his lips. "It's better for us to leave on Friday. You'll get settled, and we'll get to talk business. We'll have a plane waiting for you."

I forced calm into my voice. “I will not be on it on Friday. If you would like the plane to pick me up on Sunday evening to make sure I get to you, or even better, Monday morning bright and early, I'm happy to meet you at the office. You cannot claim my weekends. Besides, I have plans. So like I said, I'll see you on Monday. I'm sure your people can leave notice of where I'm supposed to be with my people?”

He leaned forward then, planting his hands on his knees, his long body folding in. “One way or another, you'll be on that plane on Friday.”

DRAKE



AS IT TURNED OUT, DAPHNE WINSLOW HAD A BIT OF A SPINE ON HER. I hadn't expected that.

What did you expect?

I'd expected some pushback, but not full-on defiance.

I watched her climb in a black car on Thursday night instead of staying home and packing. She looked like she was headed out for a night on the town, and it set my blood simmering.

It also made me respect her because she wasn't laying down and taking it.

That's not what you need. In this instance, you need compliance.

It was certainly going to be a hell of a lot easier if she just complied. But since it looked like she wasn't feeling up to that, we were going to do things the hard way.

That twat Christopher had called today to tell me that Daphne was, in fact, not available until Monday at the earliest. And sure enough, he caved and offered me the other project manager. Not that I gave a shit about that bloke.

I'd insisted on Daphne. But if I wanted Daphne, that meant I was going to

have to wait.

I didn't do well with waiting. And the sooner I could get her off the chessboard, the better. Which meant we were going to have to go to plan B.

I watched from the shadows as Daphne skipped out the front door of her flat wearing some kind of fluttering red skirt that should be illegal. It was a little shorter than mid-thigh, and the wind tickled the edges, threatening to lift it up and show everyone what she was hiding under there.

The low heat in my gut was unwelcome at best. I did not have time for that shit. Some orbital force pulled me toward her upturned chin and her dark-as-sin eyes that saw clear to my soul. She looked good enough to eat with her brown skin seemingly luminescent. She'd styled her hair, sleek straight and piled up on top of her head. The night I'd met her, she'd had it more wavy and flowing down around her shoulders.

I had a plan. I needed to see it through. Getting caught up in her and that gorgeous smile wasn't part of the package.

As soon as the car pulled away from the curb, she lowered the window, and I could hear her giving instructions to the driver. The driver did a double take when he took her in, and he gave her a broad smile.

The tightening in my gut only got worse, chased down by incendiary fire. That bloody driver needed to keep his eyes on the bloody road.

Concentrate. Get in and get out.

When she'd left the office today, she'd had her laptop. I needed to get in, copy her files, then bug her flat. With the change in plan, I could adjust, but I'd have to move up my timeline.

Since she wouldn't just be getting on a plane with me, I was going to have to check her schedule and figure out where the hell she was going to be on Friday.

It was fine. I was still in control.

Getting into her flat was easy enough. An older woman carrying an umbrella held the door open for me. "There you go, handsome. Here to pick

up a date?” She eyed me up and down with a broad smile.

“Matter of fact, I’m here to visit someone.”

“Gosh, I wish it was me.”

I gave her a wink. “Next time, love.”

She giggled as she headed off to the mailboxes. “Don’t threaten me with a good time.”

I shook my head. She was a firecracker. Also, Daphne needed better security. Anybody could just walk in here.

I didn’t bother with the lift. Instead, I took the stairs. Not as many CCTV cameras to contend with. On the third floor, I eased out and found my way to her flat.

I kept my head down, knowing exactly where each of the cameras was. Getting into her actual flat was child’s play. She had electronic locks, like a hotel, nice and extra secure... except for the likes of me.

Once in her flat, I didn’t bother with the lights, but I used a flashlight to have a glance around.

Daphne had done me the favor of keeping her hallway light on. My guess was it led to her bedroom and the bathroom, giving the impression of someone being at home to deter any would-be thieves.

I found her laptop easily. It was still in her work bag. Pulling it out, I set it on the dining room table while I fiddled with the decrypter’s settings to pull the information that I needed.

Once I had a copy, I’d have access into her company. I checked to see if Massimo Igno had any inroads or what he might be looking for from her. That done, I set the bugs. Two in the kitchen. A video feed in the electrical outlet and then an audio bug in the lamp.

I frowned when I saw the landline though. Who still had one of those?

She also had an old school answering machine that had a blinking light. I hit play as I set and calibrated the other bugs.

“Hello, Daphne. This is your mother. I’ve tried calling your mobile

number, at least the one that Willow gave me, but you're not answering. And it says your message box is full. I'm not sure if this is your number or not, but just a reminder, I will be at Willow's wedding. And for Willow's sake, we need to get on. Your refusal to speak to me is childish. Honestly, I can't believe you're holding a grudge after all this time."

"Willow is my daughter. And I want her to have the best day. She would like for us to get along. So you're going to have to speak to me at some point. If you continue to ignore me, that's only going to make it worse. You forget I know you. I know what you need. And this estrangement isn't good for us. More importantly, it's not good for Willow. She wants me back in her life. I know what you and your gran tried to do, but she's my daughter and she wants to be with me and she wants me as part of her wedding. So you need to call me back, or we're going to have a problem. I won't hesitate to make a scene. I know how important your sister is to you. Call me. I mean it."

I stared at the machine. Wow, manipulation and narcissism. The woman was a real gem. From what I knew, she hadn't been in Daphne's life for over a decade. Daphne had been raised by her gran from the time she was twelve. I'd had a full workup done on her, but not much on the mother.

And I was going to need to utilize that information to get her to cooperate. It was dirty work, but it would get me what I needed in the end.

I put audio and visual in her bedroom. I was headed back out to the living area when I heard the front door. *Fucking hell*. As I stepped into the closet, I glowered down at my phone. The tracker I placed on her phone when I touched it during our meeting still registered her as headed to the West End.

So who was in her flat? I stayed perfectly still, palming my knife at my hip. Messy. No plastic to put down. I'd have to keep it quick and off her bloody carpets.

Maybe the kitchen. The floor in there was hardwood. Fast enough to clean up, but it could stain. This was going to be a problem.

Then I realized I also had a tranq. That would put whoever was in here

out. Unless they were here for me and not her, in which case there was a fucking problem.

Didn't matter.

I heard whistling, and through the slats in the closet, I saw who it was. *Christopher.*

Son of a bitch. What the fuck was he doing here? It looked like he was there to collect his things, but why wait until Daphne was gone?

My frown only deepened when he rifled through her nightstand. What the fuck was that? Was that a cock ring?

Christ.

A shudder ran up my spine. He tossed it into the box along with some lube and a couple of vibrators. Wow. And then he went to the top drawer still looking for something.

My fury simmered to life. Yes, I might be hiding in her closet, and yes, I might have just bugged her place, but I wasn't pawing through her intimates.

He murmured to himself as he cleared items from the loo. "Might as well see if I can repurpose these perfumes I bought you."

I could have let him go, but the little shit needed to be taught a lesson. I hadn't liked him when we met. And now, well, now he was giving me reasons to kill him. He was still whistling in the bathroom when I stepped out of the closet and back into the shadow right next to the bathroom door. He was laughing to himself as he came out.

"I don't know about you mate, but that's right nasty, regifting knickers and perfume. That's just sad."

His eyes went wide just as I smashed my fist into his face.

He immediately doubled over, holding his nose. Then I was behind him and had him in a chokehold.

"If you ever try to see her again outside work," I said, dropping my voice an octave and not bothering to mask it because he wouldn't recognize me, "I will fucking slit your throat."

I pressed the knife to his jugular just to make a point, being sure to leave a sliver of a cut. In the moonlight, I could see the drops of blood rolling down his neck. In my arms he was holding perfectly still, but I could tell he was fighting a shiver of fear.

“What's going to happen is you're going to leave this box. Then you're going to walk out of here. If you come back, I'll know. If you tell her about our conversation, I'll know. If I find out that you've come to remove any of her belongings, I'll come to your house when you're sleeping or fucking someone new, and I will slit your throat. Do you understand?”

He coughed, unable to speak, so I loosened my grip.

“Nod so that I know you understand, asshole.”

“Who are you?”

I tightened my grip again. “That doesn't say you understand.”

He swallowed hard, licking his bloodstained lips before muttering, “I understand.”

When I released him, he wasted no time running. He didn't stop to look back, just ran. But understanding the kind of bloke he was, I didn't linger.

I wasn't going to think about why I risked exposure to teach that little shit a lesson.

DAPHNE



“WAIT, SO IT’S THE SAME BLOKE?”

I took the martini my sister handed me and flopped back on one of the leather couches at the quaint pub in the castle. Honestly the vibe was giving lounge bar but the service was impeccable so we didn’t mind it. “The very same. “

She shook her head and took a sip of her drink. “Explain, please. So you meet this bloke on your night out with Talia? Then he what? Followed you? God I’m glad I’m about to be off the market.”

I shook my head and took a delicate sip of my drink. “No. He knew who I was already at the bar.”

Willow’s mouth dropped open. “So he knew he was going to be a client and kissed you anyway?”

I knew it sounded ridiculous. “Pretty much.”

“But how is that even legal or whatever?”

“I don’t think it’s illegal to kiss women you might know. I did consent to the kiss. But I’ll tell you, it’s not fair. That’s for damn sure.”

"Okay, so wait, now he wants you to go with him to Barcelona?" Willow

asked.

"Yes! It was sprung on me Monday. As if I'd drop my whole life at a moment's notice. That's total bullshit. But ever since I worked for Alana, it's in my contract that I don't travel at the drop of a hat, not for any client. I need two-week's notice, so I'm being generous by saying I'll go this Monday when I return. Besides, we had this weekend planned and I wasn't going to miss sister time and wedding duties. Not even for a man who kisses like he got a degree in seduction."

Willow pursed her lips.

I knew that look well. "What's the problem?"

She lifted her brows and shook her head, acting as if she had no idea what I was talking about.

"Spill it. Obviously, you have something to say."

"Nothing. Just that I want you to be careful. Blokes like this seem exciting but, honestly you need a nice normal average bloke. Stability you know. That's more your speed. You should let us set you up."

I knew my sister loved me. But how did I tell her that while that might be what she wanted, the idea of getting a carbon copy of my future brother-in-law made me want to yawn.

Willow gathered her bone-straight locks and piled them high overhead. My sister looks like me, but more like Brown Barbie version of me with pin straight hair and perfect make up. I usually wore my hair natural or in braids. But she religiously rocked her relaxer and if she went out without full lashes on, she would moan all day about how ugly she felt.

"Thanks but no thanks. I think I'll let the Christopher thing settle a bit first."

"Okay, if you say so but quick question... Do you want to kiss him again? Your client," Willow asked, just as I was taking a sip.

Vodka I had just swallowed came right back up, burning its way out of my nose. "What do you mean, do I want to kiss him again?"

"It's a straightforward question. Do you want to kiss that fine man again?"

"No," I lied. "He's an asshole. He knew who I was and knowing full well he was becoming a client the next day. And never mind if he's good or if he does this thing with his tongue, teases you into chasing him. And just when you think you're the pursuer, he turns the kiss and deepens it. It becomes a whole body experience. Lord, that man made me curl my toes, but that is not the point. I won't be doing that again because he knew who I was and then walked into my office like, 'surprise!' And then he tried to force me into doing what he wanted."

Willow gave me a knowing look and I schooled my expression. "I hate that part the most. It's beyond cocky. That's full-on I'm-an-alpha-arsehole territory."

"But what if we just banged him?" Willow asked.

"We don't shag clients, remember?" I shook my head at her.

"We don't?" She feigned surprise.

I blinked at her slowly.

"Okay, fine. We don't shag clients. Although, I think that rule needs relaxing. At least for a bit of fun on the side before settling down."

"Why he even asked for me directly is beyond me."

Willow grabbed a pillow, launching it at my head, and I barely managed to duck it. "Hey! You are my sister. Brilliant. Magnificent. You need to believe it."

"I know, I'm very good at my job."

"No, you don't know, because he wanted you specifically for this project. So that's something."

"I guess so."

"It looks like he was referred to you specifically. That has to feel good. Just remember how brilliant you are."

I had to giggle. "I know. I'm fucking awesome."

"Yes, you are. You're sure shagging him is off the table?"

“Yes, shagging is off the table. Or have you forgotten? I’m no longer doing arseholes.” I shook my head, needed to shift the topic from myself.

"Enough about me and men I have no business kissing. You're getting married," I exclaimed.

Willow squealed and clapped her hands together. "I know, right? Isn't Balhurst Castle gorgeous?"

The castle was like a fairytale, with blooming gardens and a quaint charm that was irresistible. Part of the castle had been transformed into a boutique hotel, making it the perfect location for a wedding.

"The grounds are stunning, Willow. This is perfect for the reception."

"God we are so lucky that they had a last-minute cancellation and can accommodate us," she confessed. "I just want everything to be perfect for the day."

I chuckled. "And it will be. But just remember it's about more than the day. Travis loves you. You two are going to be so happy." I hoped that was true. She was so young. I hoped her getting married right now wasn't a response to being too sheltered and desperately needing freedom.

We finished our drinks and opted for a walk through the castle to go meet Travis. As we went, she was buzzing with excitement, almost like I had to hold onto her just to keep her grounded. It was good to see her like this. For a long time I had often felt like I was her mum. It was silly, but with her getting married it felt like I was finally reverting back to the role of big sister.

When we turned the corner, some of her exuberance faded and was replaced by a serious look. "Are you sure you're okay about Mum?"

I hesitated for a split second and forced my face into complete neutrality. "I don't get to have feelings about Mum. Not at your wedding. You want her there, and I support you." I tried not to say that through my teeth. "You only knew her as the mother you didn't have. So experience your feelings as you need to and don't worry about me. As long as she leaves me alone, we won't have any problems."

She chewed on her bottom lip, and I could tell that wasn't quite the answer she wanted but it would have to suffice. "I'm glad to hear that. Thank you for always supporting me. I love you."

"I love you too, Wills."

She took a breath, a sheepish smile playing on her lips, and I braced for the coming blow. "Oh, Jesus Christ, Wills, now what?"

"Just... You know Massimo has been invited, right?"

I held my breath for a beat. Would I never be free of this guy? "To the wedding? I know he's a friend of Travis's. I guess I don't care, but he is a little creepy. I guess I left out that I ran into him about a week ago when I was out with Talia. The night I snogged my would be client."

She grimaced. "That makes so much sense now. He, um, told Travis all about it."

I halted my footsteps then. "Excuse me? He ran and told Travis he'd seen me out?"

"Yeah, that night he called Travis a bit miffed, actually. Said he'd seen you out and you were rude. That you snogged some bloke right in front of him. That didn't really sound like you but now I'm putting two and two together."

I blinked at her slowly, not sure if I was hearing correctly. "What business is it of his if I snog somebody? And second, what business is it of yours, Travis's?"

Willow winced and rushed to explain. "I'm just telling you what he told us. That he'd seen you and reintroduced himself, then you basically ran up and snogged somebody. He was a bit irritated because Travis told him you were single, so he thought he had a shot. I didn't realize this was the night of the client kiss."

What the hell? Where did he get off? "I very much hope you told him that only I determine who has a shot with me. Not to mention that he has zero ownership over me. I don't even know the bloke."

“Oh, I did. And Travis got an earful, too, because he was the one who was busy trying to play matchmaker.”

It didn't sit right with me. Something was off about this whole situation. “That's bullshit. I don't need a matchmaker, and I don't know this guy. Why is that so hard for him to understand? And let's go ahead and circle back to that part where who I snog is none of his business.”

Willow sighed. “I'm sorry, Daphne. I shouldn't have said anything.”

“No, I'm glad you did. Because now I need to talk to Travis.”

She put her hands up to stop me from marching straight up to my brother-in-law-to-be. “No, don't do that. He'll feel terrible if you yell at him. I don't want him getting upset. He's just trying to show you he cares about you.”

“By giving some creep the impression that he has a shot with me? Does Travis not know that we don't live in the 19th century? I don't need a male relative to arrange dates for me.”

Willow shifted from foot to foot, and I could feel her anxiety coming off her in waves. “He was just trying to help, Daph. He figured you would be uncomfortable with Mum there, so he thought a date would make it better.”

I was caught between a rock and a hard place. I didn't want Willow to feel anxious, but I still wanted her to get the message. “I hear you. But he was just super creepy and acting a little bit possessive. Considering I didn't even remember him, it was ridiculous. He acted like we were dating or something.”

“Maybe you just misunderstood. Or maybe Travis told him you'd be happy to be his date.”

“Not okay, Willow.”

“I totally get it,” she said, chewing her bottom lip. “To be fair, though, I didn't know he was being creepy and possessive. And he is a friend of Travis's, so Travis can invite whoever he wants. I just thought you should know so there are no surprises.”

I sucked in a sharp breath, finally understanding why I had been so

reluctant to tell Willow about everything my mother did. This Massimo thing was minor, but from the sounds of it she was siding with Travis. Like I was the one who just didn't understand.

"Let's move on, okay?"

"Okay good. I just... I don't want you to be uncomfortable."

Uncomfortable didn't even cut it. "I won't be. It's your wedding. I can handle a lot for your wedding. Now show me around. What else do we need to see here?"

As we located the restaurant, Travis was waiting for us. When he saw us, he stood and embraced his wife-to-be. "Hello, my beautiful love." And then he gave me a tight squeeze. "And my soon-to-be sister. What are you two cackling about?"

"It's not a cackle. It's a hoot and a holler really," I said. "We're planning our next adventure."

His brows furrowed at that. "Maybe the next one won't get my wife killed?"

"Ugh, one time you fall off a tight rope..."

He rolled his eyes. "How much longer do you need to have your adventures?"

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. Did he really need to talk to me like he was my dad? "I don't know. Until I think I've had enough, I guess."

He nodded. "Maybe we keep Willow away from them. Or maybe don't tell us until after you've done it. I mean that's *if* you even do it. It makes her worry."

I knew what he was saying. He was concerned about his wife. But I didn't want to be shamed as if I was a rebellious child.

Just a few weeks. It's just wedding stress. I shoved down my unease.

The chef came over and introduced himself. He was a short, squat, jovial man with a zesty enthusiasm that played out on his ruddy face as he talked about the dishes he was going to bring us to taste. He was animated in a way

that made you excited to eat whatever he was bringing.

When he was gone, Travis leaned forward. "So, how are we doing on the dating front?"

I expelled a long breath. "Please, can we not talk about it?"

Willow nudged him with her elbow. "Lay off, love. Besides, maybe she wants to bring the bloke she was snogging."

Drake's smug smile flashed in my memory, and I squirmed in my seat to try to dull the slight throb between my thighs. "I barely know the bloke. I'm not bringing him as my date. Besides, I might just go by myself."

Travis groaned. "Please, God, no. Your sister will not let me hear the end of it. Just let me set you up with someone. I heard Massimo ran into you."

I had just been taking a sip of my wine and put it down immediately. I was not doing this, and one glance at my sister said she was not going to stop him. "Actually, Travis, him running to you after he crashed my night out was bang out of order."

Travis's brows furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, I don't know him and what I do is none of his business. The fact that he was pissed off about me snogging some bloke is a problem."

The patch between his brow and just below the bridge of his nose also squinched up. "Oh, he's just being persistent, that's all. He's harmless, I promise."

I wanted to believe him, but I didn't. My intuition was telling me that something was wrong. It was also screeching at me that Travis needed to listen.

"Well, I wish it would stop."

Travis sat back. "What? You don't have a date. He likes you. Just go out with him once. You'll probably like him if you get to know him."

"You're not listening to me, Travis. I don't *want* to go out with him. He gives me the creeps."

"I'm vouching for the man. There's nothing creepy about him."

I clenched my jaw, biting back the fury. "He makes me uncomfortable. Isn't that enough?" Heat spread over my skin. It was so rare I dug in my heels.

Travis rolled his eyes and sat back, crossing his arms. "Bloody fine, I guess. I thought it was going to be a good thing. Besides, Willow has been going on and on about being all you have. I mean she said she doesn't understand why you bother going on all these adventures if you're just going to chicken out. We both agree you need more of an outlet than just Willow."

That heat turned to a block of ice in my chest as I turned to my sister. I blinked to force the tears back. "You said that?"

Willow's gaze darted between Travis and me. "Wait, that's not what I meant."

Except, she did mean it. I could see the look of chagrin on her face. I shook my head. "It's fine. I just... Can we drop it? I don't want to talk about him."

As Willow started to speak, the hairs on the back of my neck stood up and I felt the shadow over my shoulder.

"Is this seat open? Can I join you?"

DAPHNE



I GLARED UP. "WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?"

"Relax, rabbit, I was invited," he chuckled.

Travis glanced up at Massimo, back down at me, then back up at Massimo. "Um, Massimo, why don't you sit here? Let the girls sit together. Willow, didn't you want to show Daphne the chapel at night? Maybe now is a good time while we wait for the food."

"Absolutely," Willow chimed in quickly. "Nice to see you again, Massimo." She stood, but Massimo shook his head.

"No, I'd rather enjoy Daphne's company."

My skin crawled, and my stomach churned.

"You know, I'm actually kind of tired," I said, attempting to rise. I could get room service.

His hand shot out, grasping mine in a vice-like grip. "Daphne, you wouldn't be so rude as to leave before we've had a chance to talk, would you?"

I ground my teeth. Every instinct was screaming at me to get away. This was worse than my frustration with Drake. Drake was annoying but tolerable.

And well, I was annoyed with Drake because I *wanted* to be near him. This was cloying, claustrophobic and manipulative. It was like he was siphoning off my energy until I had nothing left to give.

The same way my mother made me feel.

"Actually, I was just leaving. Enjoy your meal," I snapped, wrenching my hand from his.

He leaned in closer. "People are watching, Daphne. Sit down. I'll release you when I'm ready to. Your vanishing act the other night was rude."

I had no idea what got into me. None whatsoever. But I laughed. "If they're watching, then they'll hear me say, for when the police ask, I don't want to see you. I want nothing to do with you. We aren't friends. We aren't dating. I am not interested. Let me make sure you hear that I don't want you."

Oh, boy.

The flash of anger in his eyes told me I had hit a nerve. I probably should be more worried but all I could muster was exhaustion, annoyance and discomfort. I just wanted him to leave me alone.

His eyes narrowed. "Are you sure that's the way you want to play it, Daphne? I always get what I want."

"Please just stop," I muttered. "I'm just coming off a relationship. I'm focusing on myself." Turning to my sister and Travis, I said, "I think I'm going to have a lie down."

Massimo stood. "I'll walk you."

Travis, nodded. "That sounds like a great opportunity to get to know each other. Maybe you guys can be friends or something. Give Daphne a chance to get over her ex."

Massimo scoffed. "She won't even think about him after a few minutes with me."

I only barely resisted the urge to gag.

My sister, who I expected to stand up for me, folded. "Maybe becoming friends is a good idea. Daph, you don't really know Massimo that well.

Maybe there's no harm."

I didn't know what the hell I was waiting for. Or why the hell I thought that anyone would stand up for me. "I'm done." Before Massimo could join me, I put up my hand. "No. I'm going. By myself. I need air." I marched out of the restaurant, not giving a damn that people were staring at me. I retreated to my room, planning to leave the next day.

I didn't want to. I wanted to spend time with Willow and Travis, but Massimo was like that creepy guy at school that just leered at you. Not really scary, but creepy and persistent.

I was tired. I kept trying to be that person that said I wanted to live my life to the fullest, to experience everything, but something always stopped me. There was so much I was excited to do, but it was either shit or get off the pot. I wanted that life. The one I kept promising myself. So the moment I got home, I was going to start living it. I wasn't going to let anyone scare me away.

I'd been angry with my mother for so long, and while she was a problem, she wasn't in control of me now.

A man like Massimo just wanted to control me in his own way, just like Christopher had. I might want to run, but I wasn't going to. And I wasn't going to let people like Massimo stop me.

Once in my room, I began packing my bag quickly until banging started at the door. Someone was shouting my name, and they were insistent about getting in.

I knew who it was. What more did I have to say? Why couldn't I skulk out like a normal person avoiding an over eager suitor?

The banging started to rattle the door and my heart rate spiked. This was more than creepy now. I shoved a chair under the door handle, backing up.

My phone in my hand I was ready to call emergency services. But how long would it take to get out here. I was better calling the front desk for security.

He banged again, this time shouting my name. “Open the door Daphne!”
I barely contained a squeak as I jumped and backed up.

The tingle of awareness came a second too late as my arse hit crotch and a hand clamped over my mouth.

DAPHNE



HEADBUTT.

Instep.

Fight.

Claw.

I could feel his presence looming behind me, the heat of his breath radiating off my neck. Adrenaline pumped through my veins, and my palms were slick with sweat. I had never been in a predicament like this before, and I was absolutely petrified.

My mind raced as I tried to remember everything that I had learned in self-defense class. *Elbow, head, your whole body is a weapon.* I mustered all my strength and shot my elbow back, digging the pointy tip into a rib bone.

A low growl escaped from his throat as he grabbed both my arms and squeezed them tightly, leaving me immobile and helpless. Panic flooded through my body as I frantically searched for a way out.

"Stop struggling."

My heart skipped a beat. I had heard that voice before. It was familiar, deep, and terrifyingly menacing. I knew exactly who it belonged to—the man

who had kissed me so good I wanted to slap my ex. He was here, inches away from me, and there was no escape.

Dread engulfed me like a tidal wave. Who the fuck was Drake Foster? I'd looked him up. He was legitimate, so what was he doing here in my room? And was he going to give me to Massimo?

I fought the panic and rising bile. The only way out was to fight like hell. I might not win, but I might take enough evidence with me to send him to the nick for a long time.

I tried to smash his instep with my foot, but he had me up in the air and there was no leverage. I could feel tears rimming my eyes, and I knew screaming for help was pointless—no one would be able to hear me except Massimo.

Desperately, I whacked the back of my head into his face with as much force as I could muster, and suddenly my head felt like it was on fire as a sharp pain surged through my skull. He released his grip on me slightly, allowing me to squirm away from him just enough so that I could throw an elbow at him again.

"Stop fucking attacking me!" he growled out. "Get your shit together!"

"Maybe you don't kidnap me," I growled right before I bit his hand.

Drake yowled and held me tighter.

"Miss Winslow, I like things done in a particular way. If you can't comply, things will get far more difficult for you."

I writhed in his grip. "You mean more difficult than a client kidnapping me?" My breath huffed out with my muffled question. I was embarrassingly out of shape. Should have spent more time really working in the gym and less time on the Krav Maga mats staring at the ceiling wondering how I got there.

"Kidnapping is such an ugly word. Think of it as momentarily restraining."

When I ran out of options, I made my body go slack. What was he doing here? Was he working with Massimo?

It suddenly occurred to me that they were the same kind of men. Brutal and terrifying.

But even as I thought it, my brain wouldn't latch on. No, that wasn't right. They weren't the same. This was different.

Behind me, he murmured, "That's it, relax. Is there anything here that you cannot replace?"

I frowned, my brain wary. I pointed at my phone, and he chuckled softly then dragged me backward, carrying me as if I weighed nothing. I still couldn't find a purchase on my feet.

He lowered me just enough for me to grab my phone but didn't release my mouth or the grip he had around my waist, and then he dragged me to the window.

As he carried me, I felt my body start to tremble with fear. My every instinct told me to fight back, to lash out with everything I had. But I knew deep down that it would be useless. This man was stronger than me, more experienced at this kind of thing. I was entirely at his mercy.

"If I let you go, will you scream?"

I could lie and say I wouldn't scream and then scream anyway. He didn't seem to want to hurt me. Or rather he wanted to take me somewhere else to hurt me. Fuck. I was never supposed to let an attacker take me to a second location, right?

But then the door was rattling again, and this time Massimo was sticking something inside the door, trying to fuck with the latch.

I shook my head vehemently.

"That's it, that's a good girl."

Then he shoved the window open even further and dropped me feet first. I gave a little yelp as he plopped me into the shrubs below. "Aaaahhh."

He was on the ground with me seconds later. But I had to at least try to run for it. If I was lucky, maybe I could make it to the parking lot. The attendants would see me, or somebody would help me, right?

I made it exactly three feet, just enough for the crunch of gravel under my feet to sting. Then I winced as he hauled me back up against him. "And here I thought you were going to play nice."

Before I knew what was happening, he picked me up and swung me over his shoulder, digging into my midriff as I now had a perfect view of his arse.

My stomach flipped. Wow. Taut, high, firm. Obviously, he never skipped leg day.

I knew that this was not the time to be admiring my captor's physique, but I couldn't help it.

He had a strength that belied his size, and I knew that he could crush me if he wanted to. But instead, he carried me as if I weighed nothing at all.

I shook my head at the thought. All of this was wrong. Even so, there was something about him that drew me in, something that made me feel safe when everything else about this situation screamed danger.

"What do you want from me?"

"Right the fuck now, I want to get you bloody well away from here. After that, we'll talk about it."

He moved quickly for a man his size. He carried me through the back end of the property, past the lawn and over to the tree line as if I weighed nothing, and I could feel that he wasn't even breathing hard.

And then he dragged me to the woods.

Every time he turned, my hair caught on leaves and branches and twigs.

"Could you slow down? It could take me a month to get these twigs out. Maybe you're going to kill me, but don't let me fucking die with sticks and leaves in my hair."

He didn't say anything, but he did slow his pace ever so slightly. Finally, we reached the road on the other side of the woods. There was a car there. Something shiny and black.

He dropped me into the back seat, and his face was grim and stern as he buckled me into the car. When he slammed the car door and then ran to the

other side, I considered crawling over the console and driving away, but I didn't have the goddamn keys, and I was guessing they were on his person.

Fuck. At least he hadn't shoved me in the boot, and I could sort of see where I was going. Maybe I could roll out when we started moving. That was a thing, right?

You're going to kill yourself.

He opened the car door and smirked at me in the mirror as he started the engine. "Considering locking me out?"

I frowned. "I gave it some thought."

"Smart you didn't. I have the keys."

"I know that."

"You're not dumb, that's for sure."

"But you've been riding my arse ever since you bloody showed up."

The smirk he gave me as he pulled along the winding road sent a hot slice of heat through me. "Trust me, sweetheart, when I ride your arse, you'll know it."

I flushed hot. Oh, shit, that was not what I meant to say. "Oh, for fuck's sake, that's not what I meant."

"Are you sure? Because it can be arranged if that's what you're looking for."

I widened my eyes. Did he mean— "No, you piece of shit. Where are we going? Why did you kidnap me?"

He winced. "Kidnapping is such a harsh word."

"What the fuck do you call it then?"

He shrugged. "I was liberating you."

"Liberating me? From what?"

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but were you or were you not about to attempt to defend yourself from a terrorist with nothing more than an umbrella and, as best I could tell, makeup-setting spray?"

I shook my head. "What? Who's the terrorist?"

He shook his head, only driving faster. "Don't be daft, Daphne. I need you to start talking. Just what the fuck are you doing with Massimo Igno?"



ONE OF THE FIRST LESSONS I'D BEEN TAUGHT WAS TO HAVE A PLAN, TO follow that plan as closely as possible, and to keep the improvisation to a minimum.

Problem was, from the moment I'd seen Daphne Winslow, I'd done nothing but improvise.

I'd secured her hands when I tossed her in the back seat. There was no way she was getting out. But that didn't stop her from trying the door. What was she going to do, open the door and roll out? She would only hurt herself. And I would just stop and drag her back.

Didn't keep her from trying though.

I shoved down that sliver of pride that bubbled up. I liked that she didn't just take anything, that she thought about fighting back. There was something dark and masochistic about me that enjoyed the fact that she challenged me.

When she caught me watching her in the rearview, she lifted her chin in that way of hers. "I don't know what you want from me."

"You have information I want. When you give it to me, I'll let you go."

She wiggled her wrists. "You'll forgive me if I don't believe you, you

know, with the kidnapping and all?”

She had a point there. I needed her to draw Massimo out. And then I was going to extract the information that I needed from him and take him off the board. She could go back to her life after that, putting herself in adrenaline inducing situations for fun.

“You don't need to believe me. You just need to sit and answer my questions.”

She struggled again. “What part don't you understand? I don't have any information for you. I don't know Massimo. Look, I appreciate the rescue, though I'm certain you will kill me just as easily as he would, but you wasted your time in kidnapping me. I don't have any information that you want.”

I kept my eyes on the road as I took the turn at high speed. The blackened forests just on the edge of the road, cast shadows, calling to me to lose my focus for just a moment.

“You know more than you think you know. I'll get what I need during interrogation.”

Her gasp was sharp and audible. “Interrogation? You mean torture, don't you?”

She started kicking and thrashing. Trying to use her socked feet to push out the window. She would have no success that way. The windows and doors were reinforced.

“You're only going to hurt yourself. You'll be useless to me if you can't answer questions.”

“And if I can't answer your questions, you'll kill me, right? Which doesn't really mean a lot to me because you'll kill me anyway, won't you?”

I ground my teeth. I needed her. And she needed to cooperate.

Massimo Igno was a name known in the darkest, grimmest corners of the underworld, and Daphne? Well, she mattered to him. He'd come for her, and when he did, he'd make a mistake. The fact that Massimo wanted her so badly had to mean she knew something. Extracting her was the only logical

choice. Getting that information out of her was all I cared about.

As I pulled onto the motorway, the scent of her perfume tickled my nostrils. It was soft and sweet, a stark contrast to the harsh reality of the situation.

“My plan isn’t to kill you. You’re not who I’m after.”

She went perfectly still for a moment. "I’m not who you’re after. Okay, I hear you, but I've told you, Drake," Daphne said, her voice steady but her eyes shimmering with fear, "I don't know who Massimo is. He's been stalking me, and I want nothing to do with him. He just keeps turning up."

It was the same tune she'd been singing since I swiped her from the castle, though I had to admire her gumption. She knew *something*. She just didn't know what she knew. Massimo was obsessed with her for a reason. It wasn't about her beauty or her body, though both were enticing enough to make you look twice, look hard, and fantasize even harder.

“Whether you’re conscious of it or not, you have something he wants. If I take you off the board, he’ll come looking. And when he does, he’ll make a mistake.”

I thought it was about where she worked. The more I dug into Baines Data, the more I realized that Massimo wanted something from there. I just had to figure out what she knew but didn't realize that she knew.

"Really, Drake, you have the wrong woman," she pleaded, desperation seeping into her voice.

I remained silent, a steely resolve hardening in my chest. That deep pull into her orbit, I needed to fucking ignore it. All I would do was scare her anyway.

Careful now, before you become just as obsessed as Massimo.

From the back seat, her voice was soft now. The adrenaline was probably waning and shock was setting in. "Where are you taking me?" she asked, breaking through my thoughts.

"Home," I answered curtly, catching her bewildered expression in the

rearview mirror.

Daphne started to struggle again, her body straining against the ties. I sighed, pulling the car over to the side of the empty road. I needed to lay down the rules. I swiveled in my seat to face her, and her beautiful hazel eyes locked onto mine.

"Listen up, Daphne," I began, my voice stern, "I'm going to keep you for two weeks, just long enough for Massimo to fall into the trap I've set. If you're a good girl, I won't hurt you, and you'll get to go home."

Her eyes widened, a flash of fear igniting in them. She swallowed hard, the question tumbling out of her lips before she could stop it. "And what if I'm a *bad girl*?"

I didn't answer, letting the silence hang heavy between us.

DAPHNE



TERROR WIPED MY BRAIN BLANK.

I was going to die. This man I'd entertained kissing again was going to kill me.

And I wasn't even brave enough to fight.

If I fought, he'd kill me. And while my life lacked the excitement I so desperately tried to inject, it was still mine.

When we slowed down, like we were getting off the motorway or nearing a location, I started struggling again, shouting and pulling at my restraints. I was lucky he didn't tape my bloody mouth.

Why hadn't he?

But just my luck, we were not in fact stopping. My hopes of a swift and imminent rescue were dashed. We drove for about thirty minutes and that's when I started pleading. I'd heard that you could humanize yourself and it would trigger empathy or something.

So, I started talking. And talking. And talking some more.

"Look. You don't have to do this. Remember the night we met? Well, I was out with my best mate, Talia. We grew up just down the road from each

other. She's like my sister. Honestly, I'm all she has. She has a very strict no new friends policy, so she will definitely miss me."

When there was no response, I kept going.

"I have a gran. She's older now. We found a nice place for her. Costs a bloody fortune though. I'm trying to come up with the extra cash to keep her there. She looked after me after everything with my mum, so I sort of owe her."

Still no response.

"But I wasn't going to be deterred. "I have a sister too. She's getting married soon. I was with her and her fiancé Travis. When you took me. Please, she must be beside herself. Please let me call her. I won't say anything or give anything away."

God he was like talking to a stone wall. Zero emotion. Nothing but a hard, cold blank.

But then the dense silence was broken by his deep baritone. "What, no parents who love you? Neither of them are going to call and check on you?"

All courage and hope and will to try whooshed out of me then. He'd landed a fatal blow and didn't even know it.

Terror and hopelessness made for a merry cocktail and wound around my spine. The first tear slipped down my cheek and despite myself, I couldn't make then stop after that.

I knew. I was going to die and possibly no one other than Talia would worry about me for days.

A little over an hour later, we finally stopped.

Oh God. Where the hell were we?

He hauled me out of the car and cue the panic flailing. I dug my heels into the gravel driveway as he tried to haul me toward an enormous, ivy-covered Tudor manor.

Oh hell no.

He was not dragging me into some Beauty and the Beast type castle. With

nothing else to try, I threw my head back, making contact with his chin. And giving myself a ringing headache. He must have been surprised, because his grip loosened.

The moment his vice grip loosened around my waist, I took off blindly. Running for my life with the literal devil on my tail.

I'd run track and field in school, so I had a quick start. But he was faster. And enormous. And I had no idea where I was going.

His stomping footsteps behind me had me darting wildly, but it was a fool's errand. He caught me easily.

When he reached me, he yanked me back against him and hissed in my ear. "You try to escape again, and I'll shoot you myself."

I gritted my teeth together but I nodded sharply. I knew better than to test his limits again, wholeheartedly believing that he'd kill me.

He dragged me along as he walked up to the door. A tall, dark skinned man with hair that was more salt than pepper and a wide smile greeted me with a warm smile.

"This is Reginald's place," he muttered. "You'll be safe here."

"As if I'd believe you, you overgrown donkey spawn."

His lips twitched at the insult. "Believe me or don't. I don't care."

I bucked in his arms. "Please don't hurt me. I'll give you whatever you want."

He ignored me and carried me inside, introducing me to the older man. "Reginald, this is Daphne. She'll be staying with us for a while."

The older man's dark eyes met mine and he gave me a warm smile. When his gaze turned to Drake, his eyes went harsh and his lips pressed together into a thin line.

"You're safe here," he said, offering me another kind smile. "No matter what Drake tells you. Just stay put, and you'll be home in no time."

Drake dragged me upstairs, not inclined to show off any conversational skills. He guided me to a simple room with modern decor and simple

furnishings, But then before I could ask any questions he deposited me on the bed just before locking the door behind us.

I looked around the room warily, my gaze unfortunately settling on the bed. "Where am I supposed to sleep?" I asked, voice quivering.

"Here," He muttered.

My eyes widened in horror and I shook my head adamantly. "No. Where are you sleeping?"

"Don't worry about it."

Oh hell no. "You can't expect me to sleep in the same room as you."

I wiggled against him as he released my restraints.

"Behave," he growled, stepping away from me.

My eyes remained fixed on him as he strode to the other side of the room, glowering at me.

"If you try anything, I swear to God I'll scream, and Reginald will come in here with his shotgun."

He smirked at me. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Please let me go," I whispered. All the fight leaving my body.

"No. You're staying right here for the foreseeable future."



"YOU NEED TO FEED HER."

I scowled at Reginald. "She's fine. She can go another few hours."

Reginald Thornton had been a mate of my uncle's. He'd always been around the house. When my uncle was deployed and died in service, I lived with Reginald and his Jasmine.

When Jasmine died six years ago, the old man hit a low point, so I moved him out of the old house in Mayfair and gave him a fresh start. When I built this house for him, he'd said he wanted something like a farmhouse inside, but he wanted all the modern amenities. It made no sense, but fuck, the man sacrificed his life for me, so I gave him what he wanted.

His slightly lined, dark brown skin had barely aged in all the years I'd known him. He still looked vaguely fifty-something. Too young to be a grandfather type, but somehow older and wiser beyond his years. And right now, he was fixing me with a look that said *you are a wanker*.

"You knew this was what I was going to do."

"Yes, I knew this was what you were going to do, and didn't I warn you against it?"

"You did. But you knew I was going to do it anyway, so why are you giving me that admonishing glare?"

"Because I thought you were better than this."

"What am I supposed to fucking do?" I leaned against the counter in the kitchen as Reginald cooked. He looked like he was making a stew of some sort. It smelled heavenly and divine, and my stomach grumbled.

"If you're hungry, she's hungry too."

"I'll feed her, all right? I'm going to make her a sandwich."

I aimed for the fridge, and Reginald planted a hand on it before I could open it. I could fight him for it. But while he was old, he was shockingly strong, and I knew I'd have to hurt him to open it, which I would never do.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

"You're not making that girl some sandwich. You're going to take her some of this oxtail stew. Do you understand me?"

"You're feeding her oxtail?"

"Just because I don't like you doesn't mean I don't like her. She's innocent in all this. She has done nothing, as you already said."

"It doesn't matter what she's done or hasn't done. The point is, Massimo wants her. I thought you understood that."

"You don't listen to anyone. All you can see is what *you* want, boy."

"I'm hardly a boy, Reginald."

"To me, you'll always be a boy, insisting that you are following in your father and your uncle's footsteps, running off to play secret spy. They did it for Queen and Country. You did it for them, hoping to avenge them or something. I don't know. Hoping to make them proud. And up until you did this, they *would* have been proud of you."

Proud of me? I was doing this *for* them. I wanted to get back in the field to bring the people responsible for their deaths to justice. Why couldn't he see that? I knocked his arm out of the way, but he didn't move. "Let go of the fridge, old man."

He laughed in my face. Reginald was as tall as me, but he was older, not nearly as muscled as I was.

"I'm going to make her a bloody sandwich."

"Boy, sit your arse down. You will not make that girl a sandwich. You will take her real and proper food with real goddamn utensils."

"I'm not giving her utensils. Are you fucking mad? She's already proven too resourceful. She'll just make a weapon."

"Well, you can feed her then."

Putting me in close enough proximity to bite? "I'm not feeding her. She'll feed herself."

Reginald shook his head. "You sit down."

And much like when I was eleven, I obeyed. Because the only alternative to complying was to fight him, and even I wasn't that far gone. He was basically the only person in the world I would listen to after my uncle died.

"Now, I'm going to feed you, and then I'm going to feed that girl up there. Let her know that someone in this house other than her doesn't think she belongs here."

I frowned at that. "Why are you like this?"

"Because sometimes, boy, you need a father to tell you what's right and what's wrong. You have fucked up."

"I haven't fucked up. Besides, Massimo wants her. How long do you think she's going to survive on her own anyway?"

He laughed in my face then. An actual laugh. One that showed the crinkles around his dark brown eyes. "Oh boy, if I thought for a moment you had brought her here to protect her, I wouldn't be giving you half the guff I am. You brought her here for your own purposes. You're just as bad as he is."

I glowered at him. "No, I'm not. He and his father work for the Syndicate. I gave half my life working for that gob shite of a man to take out members of the Syndicate, to dismantle the whole fucking organization. They killed my father."

"Your uncle should never have told you that, but I can't do anything about it now because he did. And do you think that fool trying to take them down was a good idea? That's exactly why he isn't around anymore."

"They took him from you too. He was your best mate. You should *want* revenge."

He sighed and then put a bowl of stew in front of me. "Do you know what I learned about revenge? All that hate, all it does is bubble up inside you. It eats you alive. The Syndicate is thriving, or maybe not. Maybe someone else has taken them out."

"They are *mine* to take out."

"You see there, son? Now that is what we call vengeance. When you seek vengeance, you might as well dig two graves. In this case, three, because that girl is going to get hurt."

"I'm doing her a fucking favor. And right now, the ends justify the fucking means."

"That is not what your uncle believed. I know that is not what he taught you. And that is not what your father taught you."

"I was six when my father died."

"I know, boy. I know. And your mum, she hung on for two years, but she had a soft heart. Without him, she couldn't survive. When your uncle took over, I thought that was going to help, but he was missing his brother too. And all he gave you was a set of skills that now you want to use to take down the bad guys. Which I understand. If you wanted to be in the service, be in the service because you want to, not because you're chasing something. Your father was proud of you when you put Legos together, kid. He didn't need anything else. And the kind of people your mother and father were, they wouldn't have wanted this life for you. Kidnapping innocent young women. What the hell is wrong with you? By the time Jasmine and I got you when you were eleven, we tried to carry on what they would have taught you until Her Majesty came calling." He shook his head. "What would Jasmine think if

she saw you now?"

I winced at Jasmine's name. She had been the sweetest woman and a mother figure for me. She taught me how to talk to girls, how to be a gentleman, and how women should be treated.

What would she say about you now?

"Don't bring Jasmine into this. She would understand that I had to do what I had to do."

"You would look that woman in the eye and lie to her and tell her you were saving that girl. And maybe that will be the outcome, but that's not what you are doing. You want to use her as bait, hold her here until Massimo comes looking. What you're doing is going to get her killed. I think we don't want any more blood on our hands, yeah?"

"What the fuck do you know?"

The whack that happened on the back side of my head was so sudden my face almost fell into my stew. "You used to hit harder than that," I muttered in retaliation.

"Boy, I will use the wooden spoon next time. Trust me, your face in the soup will be an improvement on your ugly mug."

I smirked at that. He might not agree with me, but he also wouldn't let her go. Because while I wasn't noble, he was. He would keep her safe and protected here.

And as for Daphne Winslow, she was just going to have to get used to the fact that until I was ready to let her go, she was my property.

DAPHNE



THERE WAS A KNOCK ON MY DOOR. THAT'S HOW I KNEW IT WASN'T DRAKE. He wouldn't have knocked.

I quickly shoved all the bolts I'd managed to unscrew off the bed, looking for something useful to use as a weapon. I hadn't been able to get all the bolts out though, which made everything basically useless. "Come in."

When the door opened, the same tall, elderly black man walked in. He had skin like burnt leather, but he looked young, like maybe late fifties or early sixties, and he had kind eyes. "Well, love, I know Drake is a bit of a wanker, but I wasn't going to let him just bring you a sandwich. I've got some oxtail stew here and a spoon. Sorry, he wouldn't let me give you a knife or fork, so you're going to have to use your fingers if you want to get at this bone."

I gave him a sheepish smile when my stomach grumbled. "It smells good."

"It is. I made it myself from my Jasmine's recipe. She was Jamaican. I did one of those DNA tests once. They said I was Tanzanian and South African."

I smiled at him, trying to endear myself to him anyway I could. "I think

with the tests now, you can even find some tribes. But we have to wait until they get even better. But God, if you're European, you'll get told down to the exact location."

He chuckled at that. "Right? You'll get to find out what neanderthal strain you came from."

I laughed. "Yeah."

He placed the tray on the table. "Now, that one downstairs, he might be a bit of a grump and act a bit stern, but he's not going to hurt you."

Somehow I didn't quite believe that. So far he'd infiltrated my life, kissed me, tried to manipulate me, kidnapped me, and threatened me. It was safer to believe he *would* fucking hurt me. "Why do you work for him?"

He grinned then, and a low chuckle emanated from his throat. "Work for him? As if he could afford me. I don't work for him. Never have, never will. He's a spoiled brat, that one."

"Then why are you here? Is he holding you against your will too? Listen, if we work together, we can probably get out."

He gave me a wry smile. "Sweetheart, I don't work for him, but he's not holding me against my will. I know that you're scared, but as long as I'm here, no one is going to hurt you in this house, okay? But you need to just stay here for the time being until he says you can go, okay?"

"He's never letting me out of here. I know how this ends. I die. Or worse, *much worse*, I could get sold off to someone. I could—"

He held up a hand. "Easy does it. Like I said, as long as I'm here, nothing bad is going to happen to you. Now, why don't you have a seat and eat your stew. I put some cornbread on the side there too."

"Cornbread? Isn't that an American thing?"

"Yeah, my Jasmine, she spent a lot of time in the States too. So we used to make a hodgepodge of food."

"Where is she? Downstairs being held against her will?"

His smile became sad, and he shook his head. "She died about six years

ago."

Fuck.

I don't know why, but I felt a sudden wave of sadness for one of my apparent captors. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah, me too. She would have been even more against what Drake is doing. And trust me, she would've given him hell."

"But let me guess, she wouldn't let me go either?"

"No, not when being here is probably the safest place you could be for the time being."

I eyed the stew. "Is it drugged?"

He sighed. "No, honey." But he nodded as if he understood and went over and took one of the spoons he had given me. "Here, see?" He took a bite and didn't keel over so I tentatively picked up the spoon. "Good girl. Now, I want you to eat then try and get some rest."

He eyed the bed, then his gaze met mine and he winked. "I don't know what you're up to, girl, but whatever it is, give him hell."

I blinked wide-eyed at him. "What?"

He shrugged. "I think he needs someone who isn't just going to do what he says."

"But didn't you just tell me I have to stay here?"

"Yes, you do." He shrugged. "However, you don't have to be docile about it."

"You're telling me I should try to piss him off?"

He chuckled. "I'm saying it would be entertaining for me if you did. You would still be in this house, but it might get out some of those frustrations."

"And if I escape?"

He grinned at me. "That's the spirit. But you won't. And like I said, no one's going to hurt you. If he tries, you tell me. You holler for all your worth, and I will come running with a gun."

"Guns are illegal."

He laughed. "You think I don't know that?"

"Right. You know him, so obviously, you have a gun."

"Honey, no one is going to shoot you either. Now eat. Don't make my hard work go to waste. It's not drugged, okay? Eat. Then I'll come back and take your tray."

"Thanks," I mumbled. I was hungry, and I did need to keep up my strength. I hadn't eaten a thing since lunch, thanks to Massimo.

"You're welcome. And for what it's worth, I'm working on getting you out of here sooner. He will just take some time to convince." And then he was gone, leaving me with soup and a spoon. A spoon I might be able to use.

To my horror though, I realized that the spoon he gave me only looked like silver, but it was plastic. Though the food smelled too good not to at least try.

I took a tentative bite, and my stomach grumbled. The stew was hot and thick, filled with oxtail and vegetables, and goddamn it was so good.

The cornbread was sweet on my tongue, and I groaned after taking a bite. The soup was just spicy enough that it made my nose run.

Before I knew it, I'd drained half the bowl. I laid waste to the cornbread too but couldn't finish it because my stomach was suddenly full. I slowed down and sat on the edge of the bed, staring at my spoon.

It was plastic, so it *could* be broken.

I looked at one of the drawers and placed half the spoon inside the drawer, held on to the other half with my hand, and then slammed the drawer shut. The spoon finally snapped, giving me two sharp ends.

Okay, at least I had a weapon.

I tucked the straight handle in my sleeve and then used the other end to finish the soup. After I used the bathroom, I washed my hands and felt like a new person.

I was going to have to do something with my hair at some point. My curls were out of control and in need of a serious conditioner. And I had no

products here.

Not that he would give me any. And of course, he'd kidnapped a black woman without thinking about giving her a satin pillowcase to sleep on. I must look crazy.

I was checking out my hair in the mirror and caught a glance at the toilet paper roll. Now wait a damn minute. It occurred to me there might be a spring inside of it. Actual metal. Metal that I could straighten and make into a weapon. I ran over to it and placed the toilet paper roll on the back of the toilet and looked at the coil inside.

"Bingo."

Slowly I uncoiled it, twisting it into the kind of weapon that I could use to wrap around my knuckles and leave a pointy end that I could stab with.

"This is perfect."

I knew how to throw a punch at the very least. Maybe just enough to be dangerous, but with a weapon attached, this could be a gamechanger. I shoved my modified weapon under my other sleeve. He might be able to disarm me with one weapon, but not two.

When the bedroom door opened again, I shouted from the bathroom, "Just a second, Reginald. I'm coming out."

I made sure my clothes looked okay and he couldn't see the weapons I'd hid. When I stepped out into the bedroom, I frowned when I saw it was Drake. "Oh, it's you."

"Sorry to disappoint you, sweetheart."

"You should have sent Reginald back. I like him."

"Yeah, everyone likes him."

"I've been well-fed, so I'm appreciative of that. I wanted to say thank you to him."

The corner of his lips quirked at that. "Let's get you changed for bed. There are some clothes in the bottom drawer if you want to change, and then I'll tie you to the bed."

Fear sliced through me. "The fuck you will."

He frowned. "I can already tell you're going to be trouble. You can change on your own, or I can do it for you. That's certainly an entertaining prospect. I don't want to tie you to the bed, but I will if you don't cooperate."

He was considering changing me? Hell no. "You're not tying me to that bed. Over my dead fucking body."

I squared up with him, and he held up his hands. "Why don't we have a conversation about it? You change your clothes in the loo. They're in the drawer. Come back out, and we'll talk."

"No, not if talking means you tying me to the goddamn bed."

"If I don't tie you to the bed, that means I'll be sleeping with you." He licked his bottom lip. "And judging from how much you liked me kissing you, I don't think either of us will sleep."

My eyes bulged. "No."

I went over to the drawer and found a few of the things I'd brought with me for the weekend, as well as other things that were in my fucking size. What the fuck?

I grabbed a pair of joggers and a T-shirt, and as I did that, I dropped my weapons from my sleeves into my hands.

Looking back on this moment, I could be proud of a couple of things. One, I surprised him. Two, I actually got a hit in on him. But what happened after, well, not my brightest moment.

I threw the clothes at him and then immediately went for an attempted swipe across his neck. All I managed was to nick his chin a little, and then I hit him with my left hand, but I didn't fully rotate my hips. So all that did was puncture his thigh muscle. He bellowed and howled. Instead of hitting me back, he tucked his body and launched himself at my midriff, grabbing me. I tried to stab him again, but I'd already lost the weapon. He launched us both onto the bed, tucking my arms beneath me and using his whole body on top of mine to immobilize me.

And then, thanks to my earlier efforts to dismantle the bed, the whole thing fucking collapsed.

He cursed as I fell with him, the surprise of it catching him off guard. I quickly scrambled to my feet and ran for the door.

I made it out, even though his fingers grazed my ankle. The moment I was out in the hall, I screamed, "Reginald! Reginald!"

And the next thing I knew, a door down at the end of the hallway opened, and the old man stuck his head out. His eyes were wide in alarmed surprise, but I wasn't focused on him. Instead, my gaze was on the staircase leading down.

I was close. So close.

Reginald came out and held his hands up. "Girl, are you all right?"

But before I knew it, Drake had me. His thundering footsteps that I had expected to hear didn't happen. He was as silent as an assassin, which is what he likely was. He scooped me up from behind as I kicked and screamed and clawed. "Little minx took the nuts out of the goddamn bed. It made the whole thing collapse."

And then Reginald did the most interesting thing. He grinned. "I told you so."

"Aren't you going to help me? You said you would help me," I screamed.

"I said if he was trying to hurt you I would help. He's not trying to hurt you. Look at how he's holding you. He's trying to keep you from hurting yourself."

Then I realized Drake wasn't hitting me, he wasn't slamming me into any walls, despite my wild attempts to kick and flay.

Christ. It didn't stop me from fighting to get away though.

I smashed my head back, catching him in the jaw again.

"Fuck me."

"Over my goddamn dead body. You into necrophilia, asshole?"

"What? Fuck. Stop fighting."

And then he tossed me in the air just a little bit, bringing me back around, causing my legs to collapse from under me. We were on the ground, and he was on top, his full body weight on me, hands on my arms as he growled in my face. "You will hurt yourself if you keep doing this."

I stopped struggling.

"Good girl." his voice had gone husky and it sent a shiver of awareness through me.

I could feel his erection pressing against my belly. Or maybe it was my imagination. Yeah, it was. I'm sure it was. Of course it was.

The unwanted flood of heat to my core had me lifting my hips and testing what I knew to be true. And then he shifted, just a little, and inhaled sharply.

A groan tore out from deep in his chest, and his face dipped closer to mine.

With a strangled squeak, I whispered, "What are you doing?"

His furious gaze snapped to my lips and I waited.

And waited, my clit pulsing in time to my pulse.

Excruciatingly long seconds, and I felt every heartbeat in my throat.

And then he was gone.

His entire weight lifted off me, as he dragged me back to standing. "Are we done?" His voice rough-hewn and raw.

That unwanted pulsing between my thighs only intensified. "Yes."

As he shoved me toward the bedroom, I was terrified, I'd just blown my one and only shot for escape.

Drake

GETTING DAPHNE SETTLED HAD TAKEN LONGER THAN EXPECTED. THE OLD man looked fucking smug when I finally came downstairs again. "Could you

please not?”

He shrugged. “I didn’t say a bloody word.”

Maybe he hadn’t said anything, but, his eyes had said so much. Everything about his body said *I told you so*.

I glowered at him. “If you have something to say, just say it.”

“Who me?”

I shoved by him, heading for the kitchen. I’d been forced to put Daphne in another room for now. I’d already cleared out anything that could potentially be dangerous, including the toilet paper holder. And the bed was on a platform, one of the low ones with a very modern design. She’d already proven far too resourceful. I wasn’t taking any chances.

“Can you keep her safe when I’m not here?” I asked.

“Always. I don’t agree with you, but like I said, no one gets in. And for her own safety, *for now*, she does not get out.”

I nodded at the old man. “Okay, I’m headed back to the city for a meeting in the morning.”

He nodded solemnly. “Are you armed. Do you have fresh ammo? You can stock up before you go.” He pushed past me, heading for the shed in the back. It looked like a regular garden shed on the outside, but I knew well that it had a subterranean level that could double as a bomb shelter. And it was armed to the teeth.

I followed him automatically, neither of us speaking until we were in the shed.

“She hurt you?” Reginald asked.

I glanced down at my leg and shrugged it off. “What’s the matter, old man? You worried about me?”

He smirked. “You’re still just Drakie to me, boy. A pain in the arse but still lovable. The thing you’re doing with this girl, though. I worry.”

I rubbed at the back of my neck where the tension had knotted. “I know. I’m still looking for the connection. I have full intentions of taking her back.”

Liar.

I couldn't tell him that the more she fought me, the more I was inclined to keep her. The stronger she was, the more a little part of me admired her strength.

“You had better. This thing you're doing... You're flirting with a line you can't come back from once you cross it.”

At this point, knowing she was upstairs in bed, there was a part of me that didn't want to come back from that edge.

DRAKE



THE DREAM ALWAYS STARTED THE SAME WAY. WITH ME AT THAT ICONIC bench trying to warn Saffron Abbott. Trying to tell her without blowing my cover what was coming for her if her parents came to visit.

For the Syndicate, for Massimo's father, Antonio Igno, taking out the Abbotts was a coup. They were the heads of a secret group of spies that had been the bane of the Syndicate's existence for over a decade.

I could almost feel the sunshine on my skin, feel the breeze. I could see the red in Saff's braid's picking up the sunlight.

And then came the dread like instantaneous storm clouds.

The stinging burn of the bomb blast at the airport.

Don't interfere, Drake, my handler had said. Orders. And I, like a good soldier, followed them. Dutiful, disciplined, dumb. He swore to me they had been warned.

But it hadn't mattered.

In my mind's eye, I could still see Saffron running toward the fire, screaming. Me? I just stood there.

Her tear-streaked face. That look of utter disbelief, tinged with a hint of

accusation. I woke up gasping for air, my heart pounding in my chest. My bed sheets were drenched in sweat, my body trembling. It took me a few moments to ground myself in the present, to remind myself that it was just a dream. But the images lingered, haunting me like a curse. The bench, Saff's braids, the explosion...

I got up from my bed and went to the bathroom, splashing cold water on my face then closed my eyes, trying to shake off the memories. But they refused to let go. They followed me like shadows, like ghosts. And I knew that I would never be free of them, that they would haunt me until the day I died.

I sat on the edge of the bathtub, my head in my hands. Maybe I should have done something. Maybe I should have disobeyed orders and warned them. Maybe I could have saved them. The what-ifs and the could-haves swirled inside my brain like a tornado, threatening to tear me apart.

"Goddamn nightmare," I muttered to the dark room.

Moonlight filtered in, painting the room in shades of silver. Too quiet, too peaceful.

But that peace was a lie. I was waging war right now.

An image of Daphne pirouetted into my mind, innocent and stunning as I fell back onto the bed, glaring at the ceiling. That bullshit in the hall couldn't happen again. She was a means to an end. That was all. My brain had just glitched for a minute when she lifted her hips.

Did you take her to possess her? Or to use her?

No. Fuck that. She wasn't going to be a problem for me.

But the question lingered like a bad smell that just wouldn't go away. Was I doing this for her? Or was I just claiming what I wanted and to hell with the consequences?

I tried to push the thought away, but it taunted me. I remembered the way her lips had tasted when we kissed, the sweet and salty flavor mixing together in a way that intoxicated me. And then the way her body had felt pressed

against mine, the blood rushing to my cock, making me hard as steel. Damn it, I couldn't let myself get distracted like this. I had a job to do, a mission to complete.

My mind raced with images of her, of the way her lips felt against mine. My body responded, blood rushing to my cock. I took a deep breath, trying to focus on the mission and the bigger picture. But it was hard when all I could think about was Daphne. How she might look when she slept, how she might sound when she moaned my name.

The more I tried to push it away, the more it kept creeping back. The memory of her soft skin under my hands and of her gasps of pleasure.

I groaned, running a hand through my hair, then lay back on the bed, closing my eyes and picturing Daphne beneath me. There was no sleeping with my cock like this. I resented the fact I couldn't get her out of my bloody head. But I'd work one out and be done. Just this once.

Sure. If you say so.

I slid my hands into my boxers and wrapped my hand around my cock, stroking it slowly. In my mind's eye, Daphne's lips parted slightly and her tongue darted out to wet them.

I imagined my hand drifting lower, past her slim waist, down the curve of her hip until I reached the waistband of her leggings.

With several rough pulls, I tugged the cotton and the satin knickers down, revealing bare brown and pink delicate folds.

The image of moisture on her lips had my hips jolting up, my grip tightening on my cock and my hand moved faster, my breathing growing ragged in my ears.

Despite the mutiny and malice in her gaze, she'd lift that sweet pussy up, seeking contact. Seeking what only I could give her.

"You bad girl. Is this what you want? You want my cock?"

When she didn't immediately answer, in my mind I'd pull back, taking her prize away. Pretend Daphne whimpered and then muttered a soft, "Yes,"

through clenched teeth.

Fisting my cock, I slid the bulbous tip over her clit making her toss her head back, her hands fighting the one I had restraining her.

"Please," she whimpered.

I gave her what she wanted, and thrust into her slick heat with one swift motion.

She cried out, the sound loud in my ears. *"Yes..."*

My hand released hers, and I wrapped it around her throat, stilling her movements. Her hips bucked, seeking more, as my cock slid in and out of her slick wetness.

"Drake."

I growled, thrusting back in, harder this time.

"Fuck. Fuck."

I pulled out, only to thrust back in.

"Harder," she begged, her eyes half closed, her cheeks flushed.

"You want it harder, Daphne?"

"Yes. God yes."

"Then you better beg."

"Please."

I applied more pressure to her throat and thrust harder.

"Drake."

I used my other hand to hold her hips down, and drove into her body, giving her everything I had. Her pussy clamped down on me, milking me for everything she could get. I was so close.

"Fuck."

I was so close to the edge. All I needed was for her to moan my name. My cock jerked in my fist as I imagined her saying my name in that throaty voice of hers. Just one more thrust.

"Drake," she cried as her pussy convulsed around me.

I was there. And my name on her lips tipped me over the edge. With a

groan, I came, burying my length into her, my hips jerking involuntarily.

The sound of my name on her lips echoed in my ears.

I groaned, imagining her taste and how sweet she'd be. My hand moved faster, my hips bucking up. I could feel my orgasm twisting deep inside me, the power coiling tight, ready to spring free. Unable to help myself, a low moan escaped my lips.

My hand tightened around my cock, stroking harder, faster. I bucked one last time, coming hard, my cum spilling across my stomach.

A full shudder wracked my body, and my breath tore out in sharp pants. My heart was in full gallop.

While I lay there panting for several long minutes, trying to catch my breath. My cock attempted to stir back to life. Despite coming so hard I'd almost blacked out, it wasn't enough.

My cock wouldn't be satisfied until I had her for real.

DAPHNE



I'D SLEPT VERY FITFULLY, THE FEAR, TERROR, AND ADRENALINE ROBBING ME of sleep. I'd spent most of the night thrashing around on the mattress, swearing I could hear Drake breathing outside my door.

When the sun was up, Reginald brought me breakfast, and I ate maybe the fluffiest scrambled eggs I'd ever had in my life. And bacon. God, the bacon had been to die for.

Then he left me with movies playing on the television and a little buzzer that I could use my foot to press if I needed to call Reginald. God, what the fuck had happened to my dignity?

Well, you were kidnapped.

And I had to focus on getting out of here.

Willow was counting on me.

She wouldn't even come looking for me because of the stupid work trip I'd told her I had scheduled. Hell, she'd even gone so far as to tease me about meeting somebody hot in Barcelona. Little did she know I hadn't even left England. The problem was, neither she nor Talia would come looking because I had a tendency to get tunnel vision about my work. They would

assume that I was just in full concentration mode when I didn't answer their calls. Hell, I didn't even know where my phone was.

From what I'd seen from the windows, we were pretty far out in the countryside. But there had to be civilization somewhere nearby. I just had to get out of here. If I could do that, I could run across a person, a town, something. But first, I had to escape.

One small problem with my plan. I'd already checked. The window did open, but there was sheer two story fall to the secondary roof wrapped around below it. If I survived that fall, I'd be able to jump down on it. There were shrubs around the living area. I'd seen them. They would break my fall from there if it wasn't too far to the ground. And then I would need to run.

But how are you going to survive that fall? Two stories Daphne. Use your head.

I pressed the buzzer, and several minutes later Reginald came in. "Are you all right, love?"

"Yeah, if you could just undo these so I can go to the loo."

"Yeah, I'm sorry about those, love. But he was quite perturbed last night."

"I asked for your help."

Reginald winced. "Yeah, but like I said, he was not hurting you."

I jingled my cuffs. "What do you think this is?"

"I think he's keeping you here for your safety."

"For my safety? That's a joke, right? Are you having a laugh?"

He sighed. "Look, that lad hasn't had an easy time of it. With both his parents gone, and then his uncle, I took over. I did the best I could. He knows the right thing to do. He has a huge capacity for love. He built me this house."

He uncuffed me and I frowned up at him, wondering if I'd be able to take him in a fight.

He smiled down at me warmly. "Now girl, I'm an old man, but I can restrain you if I have to. I have the necessary skillset, but I don't want to use it if I don't have to. I don't want to hurt you. I want you to walk out of here and

go back to your family or whoever the hell is waiting for you, whether that's a boyfriend or someone else."

"I don't have a boyfriend. Last one dumped me before we were meant to bungee jump."

His gaze was sympathetic when he said, "Well, you deserve better than that. You deserve better than this. I'm glad he moved you in here though."

"Look, you seem like a kind man," I said as I rubbed my sore wrists.

"I'm glad you think so. I try to be a good one."

"I have a sister. If you could just bring me my phone, I just need to text her."

He smiled at me softly. "There's no reason for your sister to worry."

"Yes, there is. I'm being held against my will. Her wedding is in three fucking weeks. I'm the only family she's got. My mum, she's terrible. My sister needs me."

"Is your sister expecting you?"

I lied as best I could. "Yes. She is. She'll call the police."

"Believe me, Drake is well aware of your commitments and how much time he's got. He's very good at what he does. Likely he's left a text for her from you. But don't worry. He has every intention of returning you."

"You saw what happened last night. He was a monster."

Reginald leveled me with a stare, and I could almost believe that he was the grandfather I'd never had. "Did he hurt you?"

I clamped my jaw shut tight. Because despite having held my wrists above me and using his body to block mine, the only thing he'd really done last night had been to stop me from hurting myself, just like Reginald had said. Any bruises I'd sustained last night had been self-inflicted, not caused by Drake.

"He won't. On my honor, that won't happen. Now why don't you go ahead and use the loo and freshen up a little? You'll feel better. And then come on back."

I frowned at him. "Come back and be handcuffed again? You don't have to handcuff me. There's nothing in here to hurt me."

He sighed and shook his head. "I already watched you barrel down that hallway once, and I patched up Drake's triceps, his thigh, and I saw that nick you left on his face too. Those plastic spoons were thick, honey. The fact that you managed to break one and get a chunk out of him shows your determination, and he's not going to forget that soon. I know better than to underestimate you already."

I rolled my eyes then used the bathroom so that I wouldn't have to go in the woods later. I washed my hands then came back. "Can I have a sweater? I'm cold."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I think he put them in the middle drawer."

He fetched me one that was nice and warm.

"Can I get some thicker socks too, please?"

"Sure thing."

He retrieved them for me, thinking I was going to take off the other pair. I shook my head. "I have the worst circulation. My toes are always cold." Little did he know, I was prepping for a run outside. I had no shoes in here, so two pairs of socks was the best I was going to do.

"Now, there is no getting out of here," His head inclined towards the lock on the door. "So I'm going to leave you free so you can use the facilities when you need to. Don't make me regret that."

I whispered, "Thank you for not hurting me."

He frowned then. "I'm so sorry *that* is a thing you had to thank me for. When Drake said he was bringing a girl home, I had hoped for something else. Someone I could show off my cooking skills to. Someone who might help me bake."

I laughed. "I'm not exactly the baking type."

"Oh, by help me bake, I meant eat what I make."

"Well, if you feel like baking scones at any point, I volunteer to eat."

"I like you," he said then shook his head.

I searched his gaze and read the sincerity there. But I'd seen sincerity before. My mother had taken care of me. Pretended to love me. I needed to guard myself better.

Trust no one.

I refused to fall victim to Stockholm Syndrome. There was nothing anyone could do to convince me that Drake Foster wasn't the devil.

DAPHNE



AS SOON AS I WAS ALONE, I RAN I TO THE WINDOW BUT I IMMEDIATELY balked at how far down I'd have to jump. That three-story dip was suddenly looking like a bad call.

It hadn't seemed that high yesterday when I saw it from the outside. But now...Damn it.

What I wanted to do was cry. I wanted to curl up in a ball, close my eyes, and wither away. I was tired, I was scared. Hell, scared didn't even cut it. This was a baseline terror I had never really known before.

As a teenager, I was always afraid that my mother would find a way to get back at me. Always afraid that Child Protective Services would send me home to her. But this was not that.

This was a visceral feeling in my gut, a heart-pounding fear that made me very aware of how much I wanted to live.

This fear was tangible. The bullet had a face and a name and a massive six-foot-plus body that was more than capable of breaking my neck.

This fear was real. It had shoulders broad enough to block out the sun, a jaw chiseled enough to make angels weep, and eyes that thought too much.

And his name was Drake Foster.

Stop crying and get your arse up.

Even though there was a part of me that really wanted to give up, I just couldn't. There was a time when I promised myself that I would never be a victim again. That no matter how scary, I would take control of my life. I'd failed at that so far, but if ever there was a time to finally unearth some courage, it was now.

I looked around the room. I wasn't exactly winning at this point, as I was currently stuck playing Rapunzel locked in a tower.

However, with Mr. Too-Good-Looking-for-His-Own-Good conspicuously absent, I smelled opportunity. Cue Operation Freedom. Attempt number three.

I frantically searched the bedding. Last night I took out my bobby pin and laid on it, afraid that if Drake or Reginald saw it, they'd take it away. I dug around in the sheets and had to throw off the covers to finally find it. And I said a silent prayer of thanks.

Time to pick that damn lock.

With each tick of the internal metronome in my head, the minutes passed as I tried to wedge the end of the bobby pin in the internal mechanism latch. Several times it slipped past and I cursed under my breath.

My palms grew sweaty, and I scowled at the lock. Why wasn't this easier? It should be easier. It always looked so simple in the movies.

Well, this isn't a movie. If you don't get out of here, Mr. I-Have-a-Face-Like-a-Greek-God will probably kill you. How's that for an incentive?

It was true. He would probably kill me. Good looks be damned, the man had kidnapped me.

I took a deep breath and tried again, crouching down beside the lock. Bobby pin in my right hand, left hand on the doorknob. My eyes desperately tried to get x-ray vision so I could see the damn mechanism.

Another minute went by as I poked and prodded. Any second now...

Suddenly the door swung toward me and I fell on my arse, narrowly avoiding a blow to the head on the corner of the corner chest.

I looked up to see Drake grinning at me like the Cheshire Cat. "Having fun, hellcat?"

I blinked up at him, the bobby pin slipping from my fingers as I tried to shove it into my back pocket.

He tilted his head as he studied me. "What were you doing, hellcat?"

"Please refrain from calling me nicknames," I bit out.

There it was again, the smile that just tugged at the corner of his mouth, the slight one. The one that told you he was probably biting back a wider one. The idiot was having fun.

"I feel like this is the point where I should tell you that the door has an electric lock." He swung the door wider and I could see it on the other side. It was electric with a handle on the other side. I'd missed it yesterday when he'd carried me in here. There was no way to pick the lock from this side. The keyhole I'd been fiddling with was for show.

I said nothing, just continued to stare at him mutinously.

He bent down to my level. "I see you don't want to talk. OK, I'll talk enough for both of us. "That means, sweetheart, that whatever you tried was going to fail anyway. There's no way out of this room unless I let you walk out of here."

"Go to hell."

I got more of a full smile this time. It was just as deadly as the personal one. But it was the kind of smile reserved for a man who thought he'd won.

Little did he know that I was just this side of crazy. Leveraging my heels and pushing myself up, I launched myself at him, fists flying. I managed to get him just below the jaw.

I dodged his grip, ducking under his arm, and bolted. I heard him behind me, but I didn't dare look back. I turned right this time trying for what I thought was the opposite hallway I'd run down last night.

He was right behind me and I could hear his boots on the hardwood floor. I didn't have time to think, just to run.

When I reached the end of the hall, it finally hit me just how big this house was. The decor was giving modernized Downton Abbey vibes as I ran, trying door after door.

When I saw the winding staircase leading downstairs, I frowned. This was not the way I'd come up last night.

Nevertheless, I made my way down the stairs as quickly and quietly as possible. When I reached the bottom of the steps, I darted for a door tucked in the corner. It was a pantry filled with canned goods and other supplies. But perfect for hiding.

I held my breath as I heard him thumping down the stairs. He took them two or three at a time, his heavy footsteps echoing through the space. As he ran past, I heard him swear under his breath but thankfully he didn't stop to check if anyone was hiding in here.

Without wasting another second, I pushed open the door again and started running in what seemed like an opposite direction from where he'd gone.

My feet flew across the floor as fast as they could go until finally, after what felt like I'd run up and down too many hallways that looked far too similar to each other for comfort.

When I made a hard right, suddenly I hung suspended in the air with an arm like steel around my waist.

Drake.

I'd run straight to him.

DAPHNE



I FLAILED MY ARMS, TRYING TO GRAB AHOLD OF SOMETHING ANYTHING TO stop my fall, but he caught me. He'd been waiting for me.

"Let me go."

He smirked. "That's not going to happen, Daphne. Why won't you just stay put?"

"You might as well let me go. I will just keep running."

He chuckled as he carried me back up the stairs. "And I'll keep hunting you down. You are a feisty hellcat. I'll say that."

All I knew was he was carrying be back to doom. I flailed again trying to reach for any doorknob. Another way out. Another chance for escape.

When one knob turned, I held on for dear life, and that forced him to a grunting stop.

"Of course you want to go in there." To my surprise, he stopped and opened the door. Then placed me on my feet.

The room was pure masculine charm. While the rest of the house harkened to a different time, with a cozy updated flair, this room was all masculine with floor to ceiling windows that looked out on the woods beyond

and a massive bed in the center with dark wood accents highlighting the modern design.

I swallowed hard. "Whose room is this?"

There was a beat of silence, only serving to add more crackling tension between us. "Mine."

My gut twisted. How was my luck this horrifically bad? How?

My heart racing, panic seizing me, I still tried to fight. I almost landed a blow too, but he blocked me with ease.

"You have to stop," he growled.

I shook my head. "No. You have to let me go. I have people who need me and hell, I don't want to die."

Our little fight was Kitten vs. Panther. Two guesses who won.

I wasn't sure what was more humiliating, the fact that I hadn't gotten very far, the fact that I had tried to pick an electronic lock, or the fact that he had scooped me up as if my attack had been so minor that it had barely registered as an actual attack.

He chuckled and wrapped his arm lightly around my waist, pulling me off my feet. I thrashed until he finally wrapped his other arm around my middle as well, this time catching both my hands, giving a whole new meaning to 'catching these hands.'

"All right, that's it." His breath was ragged against my ear, and to my chagrin, heat pooled in my core, and I had to squeeze my thighs together to stop the pulsation.

He blocked my blows easily. "Easy, hellcat," he muttered while picking me up as if I weighed nothing and throwing me onto the bed.

I gasped, my heart racing then tried to scramble off, but he was already beside me, his eyes blazing with something that made my insides quiver.

"You're not going anywhere."

I had no idea where I got the courage, but I reached my hand back and slapped him with all the force I could muster. He barely moved, but the

muscle in his jaw ticked. I tried to hit him with my other palm, but he blocked me easily, then drew my hand above my head to manacle both my hands with one of his large ones.

The exact same position we'd been in last night. When I'd felt the thick length of his erection pressing into me.

Kind of like now.

His brow furrowed as he scowled down at me. "Why are you like this?"

I muttered softly through my quivering lips, "I hate you."

"No you don't."

Even as I said it, my body betrayed me. My hips lifted ever so slightly, seeking him out.

He pinned me down, and I could feel the heat of his body on mine. His gaze softened as he gazed into my eyes, and suddenly the connection between us, pulsed to life as if it were tangible. My skin tingled at his touch, and my breath came in short gasps as I stared into his eyes.

His gaze bore into mine and we stayed locked like that staring at each other...and then his gaze dipped to my lips.

I opened my mouth to say something, but no words came out, the words caught and constricted between what I wanted to say, what I shouldn't say, and the secret urges I kept hidden.

He leaned in closer, his warm breath tickling my skin making my pulse kick up, and my body started to tremble.

His breath was warm against my lips. He was so close.

His gaze darted to mine, and I froze. Suddenly his mask slipped, and he was the Drake I'd met in the bar. Sexy, fun and full of mischief.

He seemed to be at some kind of war with himself, but then he groaned, and he fused his lips with mine.

The explosion of riotous feelings in my body was almost too much to be contained.

I should have been fighting. I should have been biting him. I should have

been screaming. But instead, I kissed him back.

We were a tangle of teeth and tongues and lips locked in a desperate embrace.

His kiss was rough, punishing. He kissed me as if he would never get the chance again, and it drove me wild with the need for more.

His free hand found my breast and roughly squeezed it through my shirt.

I gasped as heat pooled between my thighs and I made a low keening sound. I was desperate for more of him. More of this. I wanted to feel him against me. I wanted to feel his skin.

I tried to wriggle closer, but he was so strong. So big.

He dragged his lips from mine to kiss along my jaw, then my neck leaving a trail of fire in their wake. His nips and kisses sent shockwaves through me, making me writhe beneath him.

His hips rocked into me, sliding his jeans clad cock along my cleft and making me pulse. When he reached the edge of my shirt, he tugged it up, exposing my bare skin to his gaze.

His hand came up and cupped my breast, squeezing it roughly as he leaned down to take one of my pebbled tips into his mouth.

I arched my back in a desperate deranged effort to get closer. With a muttered growl, he did the one thing, I didn't anticipate.

He let go of my wrists. And like the Stockholm case that I was, instead of fighting, I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him closer, pushing myself up against him.

Our hands clawed at each other as we fought clothes and tried to fuse our bodies together. He kissed me again, this time shoving his hands into my hair, tugging gently to tilt my head back further as he continued to ravage me with his mouth.

I had never felt anything like this - like I was on fire from the inside out - and with each brush of his lips and each stroke of his tongue, I wanted more and more.

His hand trailed up to my breast, and he tweaked my nipple, sending another shot of need to my core.

He squeezed my breast hard, and I moaned, my body trembling. When he released my lips and trailed his hot wet tongue down my neck to my nipple, a low groan rumbled in his chest.

He sucked the tight bud into his mouth, swirling his tongue around it and then biting down lightly, making me moan loudly, my body going limp.

With a chuckle, he released my nipple with a pop and then his hands slid down to my leggings. He paused momentarily at the elastic, his head snapping up and his gaze meeting mine.

His lips were swollen, his pupils dilated and his eyes hooded, but he was pausing as if asking for something.

If I wanted to stop.

He was giving me a choice. I opened my mouth, wanting to talk, to say something, but nothing intelligible came out. Instead, all I could do was nod intently.

I thought he would strip my leggings off. Instead, he slid his hand inside, his digits sneaking past my knickers like a thief in the night.

He kneed my legs apart and stroked over my sensitive folds. I groaned, arching up into his touch. I was so wet, so ready for him.

He went back to sucking on my nipples and my hands threaded into his thick dark locks, fisting them tight as he continued to stroke me. I couldn't believe how good he felt.

I felt like a live wire, and I needed him to touch me, to feel him inside me, to hear the sounds I would make.

"Please," I whispered, my hips lifting up to meet his hand. He stroked me again, circling my clit, but the friction wasn't enough. But he kept teasing me until I whimpered.

"Please," I begged.

"Please what?" he asked, his tone rough.

I groaned and arched up into his hand, and he gave me one more stroke before he stopped.

I whimpered, my body imploring his hand to continue.

"Please what, Daphne?" he asked, his voice low and raw.

My humiliation made me want to hide, to cower, but I spoke the words. "Please let me come."

"My pleasure." The thrumming strokes became more insistent as he tugged on one of my nipples with his teeth.

With a few for rough strokes, that coiled spring inside me finally snapped, making me come apart under his steady fingers.

His face was so close, his eyes blazing with lust, heat and possessiveness as he watched me.

I came so hard my vision went white with stars behind my eyes.

He didn't let up, his fingers continuing to thrum over my clit. The beginnings of another climax rose up within me, and I arched up into his hand. This time, he leaned in capturing my lips with his, swallowing the cry I couldn't hold back.

With a grunt, he adjusted his wrist so that he slid two thick, blunt fingers inside my pussy and his thumb took up the job of clit whisperer.

"Fucking hell, you've drenched my hand, kitten. Be a bad girl and leave me a wet spot I'll need to sleep in tonight. Come for me again."

His words, his thumb, the carnal forbidden pleasure. That second release was more powerful as I convulsed, trying to escape the sensations. But he planted his other hand on my lower abdomen, drawing out the wave of pleasure.

I was panting, my body limp. Still he stroked, more lazily now, as if he planned to keep me hovering here in a state of bliss. All the while his erection kicked insistently against my leg.

When I dropped my head back and my spent body splayed before him, Drake kissed up my body, landing back at my lips as his cock nudged at my

cleft. My hips, treacherous traitors that they were rose to meet the occasion.

I'd spent months barely interested in sex, but one night with my kidnapper, and I couldn't get enough?

While I frantically tried to yank off his shirt, I heard something from the hallway.

"Drake? Are you up there?"

Reginald.

"Fucking hell," Drake muttered. His hips seemed to give an involuntary roll towards me before pushing he pushed off the bed and away from me.

While we stared at each other like a couple of caught teenagers, he grabbed my discarded T-shirt for me and tugged it back over my head.

Not before his gaze drifted back to my breasts though. When I was dressed, he nodded. "Am I carrying you back or are you walking?"

I stared at him. After what we'd just done, what the hell was the protocol? I'd come hard. Twice I might add. I had no leg to stand on by trying to pretend that hadn't been me. "I'll walk."

Back in my room, Drake stalked toward me. I blinked rapidly falling back on the bed, not sure of what was happening.

His brows furrowed, settling into deep grooves as he watched me. 'If I wanted to hurt you, I would have done it when you were creaming all over my fingers.'" Then, with the pair of shiny handcuffs he pulled from his back pocket, he murmured, "Safety first, kitten."

The shame was a stinging slap to my ego along with a new sting of terror and I tried to crawl away, but he held me tight as he clinked the metal bracelets on my wrists. "I'm going out," he announced as he pushed himself to his feet. "You'll be well looked after. If you need anything, just ask Reginald."

I didn't know what the hell had happened in his room, before. It was hot and confusing and so sexy in the moment. But now I just felt used. Used and manipulated.

Then he was gone, leaving me handcuffed to the headboard. I jerked and tugged at the cuffs, but it was useless.

Exhausted, I collapsed back onto the bed. My frustration spilled over and hot tears streamed down my cheeks.

I wasn't sure how long I cried, how long I let myself cry, but even as sleep tugged at me, I promised myself one thing. I would not go down without a fight. Not a chance in hell.

DAPHNE



I HADN'T SEEN DRAKE FOR ALMOST TWENTY-FOUR HOURS.

What if something happened to him? I couldn't stay here forever. Willow was getting married soon. She needed me.

What's it going to be, Winslow, cry or take charge of your life? Whatever the fuck is left of it.

For twelve years I'd been a prisoner locked up in my own body. Never again. I clasped my hands together, said a little prayer, and then dislocated my thumb, saying a little prayer of thanks for being born double jointed. It felt more like I needed to crack my knuckles than actual pain.

I held myself still for just a little bit longer as I listened for Reginald. Every creak and groan of the house had me on high alert.

But I heard nothing.

In the process of wiggling out of the cuffs, I scraped the skin on my hands, and I did not have the time to wrap them with gauze. I needed to move. Now.

Carefully, I rolled off the bed onto a crouch, waiting and listening for any footsteps coming close. Nope.

One breath. Two breaths. In and out. In and out.

When nobody came, I ran to the window, pushing it up with all my strength. The window needed oiling, and God help me, I did not want to break it because that would alert Reginald.

We were still on the third floor, so I had a falling issue. But I had to risk it. After what had just almost happened with Drake, I couldn't stay. That man would destroy my soul.

And you would like it.

I had no phone and no sense of where I was, but at the very least, I knew which way was north, south, east, or west. I just had no idea which direction London was from here, for fuck's sake.

Pick a direction and go.

I opted for east. I didn't love the idea of having to traipse through the woods with no shoes on, but with doubled socks it would be my best option. It would at least provide some cover, and from what I could see, there was a creek flowing that way, so I'd have access to water. And God help me, I hadn't heard any dogs, but if they had some, I knew it would be harder to track me near the water. And when people went camping, they camped near water, so I might run into someone who would let me borrow a phone.

Get your arse moving, girl.

Once the window was open, I climbed out onto the sill, dubiously looking down. My stomach pitched again at the idea of the fall. Jesus, suddenly it looked far from up here, and I could not afford to twist an ankle.

First things first though. I had to turn my body around to close the window, which was a feat all on its own. Once I finally had the window closed so anyone walking up the side of the house wouldn't see, I squeezed my eyes shut and let go. My knees screamed out in pain when I landed with a thud and a roll onto the secondary roof.

The pain in my knees had me wincing, but holy hell, I was alive. The exhilaration dampened the pain with a flood of adrenalin. I shimmied myself

to the ledge, having to crawl a few feet over to the left, so that I would be right above the bushes.

I was wearing thick leggings and thick socks. So far, it hadn't rained today, so I wouldn't have to suffer with wet socks, but fuck. It wasn't very cold, but I needed to make some headway before nightfall. Otherwise, I was screwed.

Don't get wet. Don't break an ankle. Stay as dry as possible. Find water. Find people. All before nightfall.

Okay, I could do this. I was athletic. I did barre class. I also went on long walks all the time. I liked to hike.

Walking around Primrose Hill is hardly hiking.

Okay, so occasionally I had hiked. It didn't matter because I didn't have any other options. I glanced down at the shrubs dubiously, and they seemed to glance back saying, *Come on in, the water is fine*, though they looked thorny. I placed a hand over my mouth, closed my eyes, and jumped.

The fall, though short, had this free-fall effect for a millisecond, making me think that I was flying.

But that brush was quick to meet me. Oh, God. Something stuck at the back of my heel, and I winced, pulling out a tiny little branch before rolling onto the ground.

Again, I waited for some kind of alarm or something, but I heard no noise. My heel was going to be annoying, but not too bad. All I had to do was run across that garden, and I could stay close to the hedges. Then there was the field, and I could cross the road and enter the woods. Not bad. I could do this.

I clasped my hands and prayed. *Dear God, if you are there, yes, I would still like bigger boobs and a smaller arse, and I want to survive this. Please, God, please.*

My prayers thrown up, I ran like hell.

My heart hammered all the way. I kept expecting Reginald with a shotgun

behind me. I could almost hear the crack of the bullet.

But nothing like that happened. There were no dogs. No thundering footsteps behind me. Nothing.

But that didn't slow me down.

The grass was wetter than I expected, so my feet wouldn't stay dry for long, and I would have to eventually stop and swap my socks out. But I could do that when I got to the woods.

I made it through the garden and waited, looking over my shoulder to see if Reginald was following or if Drake was home and had discovered me gone. But nothing. I was going to get out of here.

It was just through the meadow, into the woods, and I would be home free. Easy.

With another deep breath, I got up and ran.

With every stride forward, I kept thinking about the way my mother had said that I would never amount to anything, that no one was ever going to look after me the way that she had. All the times that she had lied to me and made me sick, taken me to the hospital, when all along she was the one making me ill. The anger, the hurt, and the disappointment fueled me, and I ran faster than I ever had in my life.

The year after I had gone to live with Gran, the doctors were shocked by my miraculous recovery. I danced and played sports for the first time, only to discover I was bad at most of them. But God, did I enjoy at least trying. I had never been given an opportunity before.

And with every step, I ran farther and farther away from that little girl who was kept in the dark because she was too sick to do anything. Because her mother didn't love her... or loved her too much.

Halfway through the meadow, I saw several cars driving along the main road. They were still about a quarter of a mile away, so I didn't worry about them. Those weren't the ones I was trying to flag anyway. I needed to get into the woods and further along the road, and then I would stop someone when I

had cover and could see who was coming. It'd be just my fucking luck to stop Drake as he was coming back from whatever errand he was running, and that would just be damn fucking fantastic.

I was almost through the meadow when suddenly, the hairs on the back of my neck stood at attention. The prickle of awareness I always felt when he was near, like my body was honed to his. Along the main road, a car slowly drove back and forth. Going back toward the house, then away from the house. Suddenly, it stopped and the tires screeched. Then I stopped and stared. I didn't need to be closer. Didn't need to see the make and model of the car. I just knew. That was Drake.

Holy. Fuck.

Bitch, move.

I didn't need to be told twice. I booked it into the woods. He still had to catch up to me. I didn't know how far I was going to get, but I needed to get as far as I could. Maybe if I could get up into a tree, he wouldn't find me.

Run, honey, run.

I was reminded of a parable my grandmother told me. She loved to tell me and Willow African parables that she'd heard from her mother. Our favorite was always the one about the lion and the gazelle.

The basic idea was that every day a lion woke up knowing he had to be faster than the slowest gazelle or he would starve. And every morning, a gazelle woke up, knowing he had to be faster than the fastest lion, or he would be eaten. And when the sun came up, no matter if you were lion or gazelle, you had better be running. That's what this felt like.

For fuck's sake, I needed the odds to be in my favor. So I bore down and ran faster, knowing that Drake was coming for me.



WHAT. THE. FUCK.

There was no fucking way.

Even though my eyes were relaying the message, my brain refused to compute. There was no way the runner in the meadow could be Daphne. No way.

My body knew though. The way that she stopped and stared at me and then took off even faster, I knew.

I screeched the car over, parking along the edge of the woods and allowing another car to pass. Fuck me.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I was still wearing my fucking suit.

I slammed the car door shut, locked it, and took off running. She had a lead on me, a quarter of a mile at least. Maybe half.

She was quick, but I was quicker. And there was the question of how long she'd been running and if she knew anything about covering her tracks. I was a decent tracker. Not the best, but not the worst. Although I had better find her before dark, otherwise, I was fuck out of luck and Massimo would fucking win.

I took off across the field. At the entrance to the woods, I double-checked the pattern of the broken twigs.

I slowly followed one for several feet, and then the pattern stopped. No footprints, no broken twigs. I went back and retraced my steps to the other path. That one went on further. She'd gone this way. Smart girl. The twinge of guilt that hit me dead center in my chest was annoying and not something I was prepared for.

Once I knew which path she took, it was easy to see if she stayed on the trail. She was heading straight for the stream. Also a smart move. If I'd never seen her, this path would have led her right to water, and she could have stayed hidden in the woods and gone home. Granted, I would have just been waiting at her flat.

But I knew she wasn't that stupid. She would have gone to her sister or to the police. I didn't need the fucking law up my arse, not now. I was too close. I wanted to get my fucking life back, and I wasn't going to let her ruin it for me.

I followed the path at a quick pace, making as much noise as I cared to. Let her be afraid. Let her know I was coming for her.

Worry about that later.

I hadn't left shoes in the room. Was she wearing socks? What kind of stupidity was that? She was going to fucking rip her feet to shreds.

I heard a scream up ahead, and my stomach dropped making me pick up my pace, bolting in that direction. One of the pathways had veered off to the right.

Fuck.

My heart stopped. The sudden flood of adrenaline with the chaser of fear sliced through me. Was she hurt? Had she fallen? Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

The faster I ran, the louder the thrashing around got in the bushes up ahead. When the path led up an incline that had steep drops on either side, I slowed down. And that was when I saw her in a tangle below. She was trying

to scramble back up one side of the ravine. Then she turned, her eyes wide when she saw me.

There were too many fallen leaves, and she kept sliding in the mud. And yes, there she was in fucking socks. She winced and cried as she tried to scramble.

"Daphne, enough. Just come back."

"The fuck I will," she called.

She managed to scramble halfway up, and I bolted down my side, going for her.

When she heard me coming, she scrambled faster, pulling herself up and over onto the path. When I reached for her, she turned swiftly and kicked me in the chest, sending me sprawling because it was the last thing I had expected.

I nearly hit my head, and I groaned when I landed right on a rock on my arse.

"Fuck me."

Her eyes went wide and her lips parted, almost as if to ask, "Are you all right?" But then she caught herself and scrambled again. Next thing I knew, she was on the path.

I suddenly realized why it was so difficult for her to climb back onto the path. It was wet and muddy, and even with my shoes on I was struggling.

When I finally managed to make it back to the path, she was running as if her life depended on it. But she was limping and favoring her right side. And she was cradling one arm. Fuck, she'd hurt herself. I swore to God I was going to tan her hide.

Well, I'm pretty sure her arse is pretty tan. How are you going to accomplish this?

I had some ideas. But throwing her over my knee was an appealing one. And surprise, surprise, my cock entered the conversation.

She might like it.

Shut it.

I was not losing to my dick today. Nope, I was not thinking about that right now.

Up ahead, she fell again and used her arms to break her fall, crying out in pain as I chased her down.

Ten feet, five feet. She took a sharp left, and I ran right past her. When I came back for her, she stuck out her leg, causing me to trip and tumble right back down the ravine.

She was running again.

Oh, for fuck's sake. One woman. So much goddamn trouble.

"Daphne, I'm not fucking around."

"Fuck yourself then."

Despite myself, a chuckle escaped.

I liked her spunk. She really did not give up. And fucking hell, if that wasn't the sexiest thing I'd ever seen in my life, I didn't know what was. I was up on the path and after her in seconds. And this time, I could see she was definitely favoring that leg. She was almost at the road.

Fuck.

With fifteen feet more to go to hit the pavement of the main road, I wrapped an arm around her waist and hauled her up.

DAPHNE



I WAS DONE. MY BIG REBELLION WAS OVER.

Before I could even get a scream out, his hand clamped over my mouth. "Where do you think you're going?"

I struggled in his arms, and he held me against him tight. "I swear to fucking God, if you do not stop moving, you will hurt yourself."

Not only did that make me move more, but it also made me do head strikes and groin strikes with my hands.

And that's when he flipped me around like I was a rag doll and threw me over his shoulder, carrying me back the other way.

I whacked against his back and his arse.

But all he did was chuckle. "I kind of like you spanking me."

I tried kicking my legs, but he had such a strong lock on them I couldn't move.

He *tsked* as he carried me back. "What am I going to do with you? Do you care to explain to me how the hell you broke out of your cuffs?"

"Do you care to explain to me how you became such an arsehole?"

He chuckled. "Well, I see you're just a spicy kitty."

"Fuck you."

"Oh, that mouth. I know you think you're insulting me or hurting me, but it's making me hot. I like a spicy kitty."

I shut my mouth then, because what if he did like that? Fuck. I was never getting away from him. I was going to die here. No one was ever going to find me. There would be pieces of me in fucking Reginald's goddamn freezer, where he kept the extra meat.

I frowned thinking about the oxtail soup. Was that...?

No. No, that was oxtail. I had eaten enough oxtails in my life to know what oxtail tasted like, but fuck me.

As we lumbered back across the trail that we came from, he planted his hand on my arse to secure me. And the warm gush between my legs forced me to press my thighs together.

What the fuck was wrong with me? This man had kidnapped me, tied me up, held me against my will, chased me down, basically hunted me, and somehow, he still made my clit throb? Fuck me.

Yes, fuck you, indeed.

No, not like that.

But my body wasn't listening, because his hand, big enough to practically cover a whole cheek, cupped my arse gently, and I did not have a small arse.

Fucking hell. I did not want to think about just how big his hands were. I did not want to think about what he could do with those hands.

He can just as easily choke you out. Which is not what we want.

This was true. He could choke me out. He could hurt me. Not in a fun, kind of sexy way. If he had his way, I was going to die in captivity.

I was so screwed.

No, he's going to take you back, and you're going to find another way to escape. That's all this is. Rest up. Then fight again.

Could I do that? Fight again? How much fight did I have in me?

So I slumped into his hold. The sun had already started to set, and the

orange and purple sky had dimmed mostly into purple now. Soon it would be dark, and I hadn't gotten far.

I worried as we started going down the slope of the ravine when his hand was even firmer on my arse. Was he massaging? The hold was gentle but firm.

No, he just doesn't want to drop you.

But fuck, it was the way he was holding me. As if I could infer tone from a grasp. What was wrong with me? Was this some fucking Stockholm bullshit?

No. If you survived your mother, you can survive this.

Are you there God? It's me Daphne. Please let me be right about surviving. And while you're at it, can you please give me a better escape plan?

And I wouldn't cave. He thought he could break me, but he had no idea where I'd come from or what I'd been through.

He carried me across the field to the car he'd left on the side of the road. No one would see him with me now. As we approached the car, I squirmed a little, hoping maybe I could get free and dart back into the woods somehow.

A swat on my arse came so fast and quick that I gasped. "Stop it. You're only going to hurt yourself. That is not my fucking intention."

I wasn't sure what was worse, the fact that I'd been spanked like a child or the fact that I was pretty sure I was wet.

Or even worse, I think he knew it, because his hand soothed the spot where he'd smacked me. And fuck me, I was so close to coming. I might die if I didn't.

You will not come for him. Swear to fucking God, over your dead body.

When we reached the car, I assumed he was going to shove me into the backseat. Would he handcuff me? Or worse, zip-tie me?

But no, instead of the backseat, he opened the boot and bent over to put me in. I launched myself at him, wrapping my body around his. "No. No,

please God, no. Not there."

He attempted to peel me off, but I hung on like a baby kitten, all claws and terror, refusing to be put into the carrier.

"What the bloody hell is wrong with you? I can't trust you being in the car with me. You could use the seatbelt to choke me out."

I stilled for a moment. "That's a thing?"

"I'm not telling you that answer. Now, get in the fucking car. I don't want to knock you out."

I held on tighter, locking my feet. Problem number one, there were no cars to see me. Problem number two, there was no one around to hear me. Problem number three, I couldn't be locked in the boot.

Please God, I'll do anything. Do not let him lock me in there, not in the dark and the cold. Do not let him lock me in the boot, please, please, please, please.

I prayed to every deity I could think of. I prayed to a God I thought had abandoned me years ago. It didn't matter. I prayed, because I did not want to go in. But he was stronger than I thought, and he grunted as he unlatched me from the back of his neck and used his power to unlock my legs.

When he tossed me unceremoniously into the boot, I pleaded with him, reaching my hands up. "Please, God, I'll do anything, okay? I'm sorry. I shouldn't have run. I'm sorry. Please, God, do not lock me in. Please, please, please, don't. Oh my God."

He frowned down at me. His gaze flicked to my wrists, and he winced. "I don't have any other choice. You did this."

Before I knew it, the tears were spilling. "Don't lock me in the boot. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Please, I'm begging you."

"You should have thought of that before you made your escape. Tell me one fucking thing, is Reginald even still alive?"

My brows lifted. "Reginald? Why would he not be alive? Did something happen to him?"

His brows furrowed. "You're telling me you didn't hurt him to escape?"

I shook my head. "I would never hurt him. Sure, he's helping you keep me against my will, but he's been kind to me. Besides, I don't hurt people. That's your job."

His brows knitted, and I could see my opening. "Please, I'll be good, I swear. Just don't lock me in here."

He scrubbed a hand over his face and shook his head as if to clear it. He almost seemed to hesitate. Suddenly, the hint of vulnerability I could have sworn I'd seen just a moment before vanished, and his eyes went cold and flat, a steely gray, no longer looking electric blue. And then he closed me up in the darkness.

DRAKE



I RAN INTO THE HOUSE, DETERMINED TO FIND REGINALD FIRST. SHE SAID SHE hadn't hurt the old man, but history had taught me that people lie.

I didn't have to go far. He was in the kitchen. "Hey, you're back earlier than I thought. I was thinking—" He stopped, eyes going wide when he saw me. "What's the matter?"

I wish I could even explain the relief I felt as the tension melted away. I walked over and wrapped my arms around him. "Bloody hell, I thought you were dead."

He frowned. "What the devil is wrong with you?"

"I... Fucking Daphne. I found her running, and I thought she'd hurt you to escape."

Reginald's face fell. "Daphne's out?"

"Well, she was. Now she's in the boot of my car."

And then his shock was replaced by horror. "What the fuck is wrong with you, Drake?"

"What the fuck is wrong with *me*? What the fuck is wrong with *you*? I thought she hurt you, mate?"

Before I could stop him, he marched out the door, straight to the car. "Open the bloody boot."

"Be careful, because she was kicking and screaming when I put her in there."

He scowled at me. "Have you learned nothing? Of course, she was kicking and screaming when you put her in there. Jesus fucking Christ."

I unlocked the car and the boot popped open. But instead of a kicking and screaming Daphne, we were met by pitiful sobs. Reginald's look of reproach was one I wouldn't soon forget. He looked disappointed and disgusted with me. When I joined him at the boot of the car, I could see why. Daphne's eyes were red-rimmed. Her face was soaked with tears and snot, and she was curled up in a ball, unmoving except for the excessive shaking caused by her crying.

My gut knotted.

Reginald reached for her, and I batted his hands away. "No, I'll get her."

The knot in my gut only squeezed and tightened as I reached in to lift her. Fuck me. I had more than scared her. She was terrified.

She weighed barely anything as I scooped her in my arms and carried her in the house. I was more aware than ever of her limpness and her blank stare. She wasn't looking at anything. She was done fighting.

Isn't that what you wanted?

The answer shocked me.

No, it was not what I wanted. I didn't want her scared or terrified.

Reginald followed me upstairs and into my room. Nothing looked amiss. The cuffs were still where we placed them, so how the fuck had she gotten out?

When I laid her in the bed, Reginald *tsked*. "For fuck's sake lad, look at her hands."

I could see the rough, raw scrapes right at her thumb knuckle. Had she fucking broken her own thumbs?

I laid her down gently and smoothed her hair out of her face. "Daphne, talk to me. Did you hurt yourself? Did you break your thumbs to get out?"

She didn't answer me.

Reginald knelt down next to me. "Love, are you all right?"

Her dead gaze flicked to him and then away again, fixating at a button on my shirt.

Reginald shook his head. "You've gone too far now, mate."

"What was I supposed to do? Let her run back to London?"

"Yeah, if she managed to outsmart us, make it out of this house, and get a ride back to London, she deserves her freedom then."

I swallowed hard. "I can't let her go."

He rounded on me. "Look what you have done to this poor girl. She hasn't done anything wrong. You said it to me yourself. She has done nothing. And now look at her."

Guilt wasn't an emotion I was used to. Everything I did had a reason, had an expected outcome.

"Would you get her something to eat? I'll clean her up."

Reginald scowled at me. "I'm not sure I can trust you to do that. You tossed a terrified woman in the bloody boot?"

She was muddy. Filthy. And she was hurt. I knew when I peeled away her socks that I was going to find an injury on her right foot. She'd been desperate to get away from me.

Of course, she was. You kidnapped her. She thinks you're going to kill her. Start talking to her, or she will kill herself trying to escape you. And that'll be another death on your conscience.

Fuck.

"I'm not going to hurt her. Just get her some food, okay?"

Reginald turned to leave, but I could feel his judgment as he walked out of the room. I had fucked this up.

I knelt down near her feet. "Daphne, I need to take a look at your feet,

okay?"

She didn't acknowledge that I'd spoken. I wasn't sure what was worse, her fighting and kicking the whole way or this frozen zombie routine.

I peeled off the sock. Her feet were raw. Red on the bottom. The right one had a nasty gash that needed cleaning. She didn't move, and I had to peel her leggings off her. I left her knickers where they were and resolutely looked away. She didn't say anything, didn't move at all. I hoisted her up and peeled the jumper off her as well as her Henley, but I left her in her bra.

Right. "Daphne, I'm going to sit you in the tub so I can wash you off, yeah? But I'm going to leave your undergarments on, okay?"

Again, she didn't acknowledge me.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I carried her into the loo and sat her on the edge of the counter while I started to run the bathwater. Her hair was grimy, completely filthy, and I didn't know what to do.

You know what to do. She's going to get sick if you do not clean her up.

I was grateful for one thing; her bra and knickers were black. Not see-through at all. Simple. Like a bathing suit. That's how I had to look at them.

I put some Epsom salt in the water, as well as some bubbles. And when it was filled up halfway, I eased her into the tub.

"Can I trust you to sit here and not try to drown yourself? I picked up some things for you earlier. They're in the car. Do you mind?"

Her gaze darted to mine, but she said nothing. "I'll take that as a yes."

I've never moved so quickly in my life. I took the stairs two at a time all the way down, back into the car to grab all the things, and then back upstairs. She was exactly where I'd left her. She'd made no attempt to move. She could have been out of the bedroom again if she wanted, but she hadn't moved an inch.

You actually broke her this time.

I laid out all the products Reginald had told me to get. Some conditioners,

some shampoo, hydrating things for curly hair, bath gels, and stuff. Detangling brushes, those sorts of things. I'd spent all bloody last night watching a goddamn YouTube video because I knew she couldn't be trusted to do it on her own without either trying to poison herself or use it to escape in some way. Knowing her, she'd plan a way to make some beauty product into some kind of incendiary device.

The sick, whacked-out part of me found that funny.

I grabbed a washcloth and started with her feet, using the baby cleanser I'd bought for her skin to clean them.

She didn't wince. She didn't move.

"I'm sorry you hurt yourself. I didn't want you to get hurt."

The truth was a funny thing as it wound its way around my heart.

Her gaze flicked to me again, but she still said nothing as I silently cleaned her feet. The only indication that she was still with me was the way she winced and flinched away from my touch when I cleaned the gash.

"I'm sorry. We need to clean it, or you'll get sick."

She glowered at me mutinously, and I was glad to see some semblance of her former self back, even if it was just a peek. I moved through the basics of her bath quickly, even as I checked and inspected her. She had some bruises, a few cuts and abrasions, but she was mostly okay. I was all business as I washed her legs and then proceeded to start draining the water even as I added fresh water in. When she was all clean, save her hands, I used another gentle cloth to clean them. "How did you get out? You scraped up your hands pretty bad."

Her palms were abraded and bruised and scratched. She winced when I cleaned those, but I was most worried about the abrasions on her wrist, her knuckles, and her thumb. "Does this hurt?"

She didn't answer. Just stared past me.

I preferred her fighting. This hollowed out version of her sliced me too deep.

Daphne

LATER THAT NIGHT, I LAY IN BED, UNABLE TO FALL ASLEEP. DRAKE HAD cleaned me up as best he could and Reginald had tried to feed me.

They'd left my hair for tomorrow since I was so out of it.

The darkness of the room weighed on me like a heavy, suffocating blanket. My mind raced, replaying the events of my life in an endless loop. Eventually, I managed to calm down enough to drift off into an uneasy sleep, but it was far from peaceful. Nightmares haunted me throughout the night, leaving me exhausted and emotionally drained come morning light.

I was six again. I flashed back to my mother's cruel laughter as she slammed the door shut, trapping me in the closet. Tears of terror streamed down my face as the familiar feelings surged through my veins like electricity, refusing to be ignored and making it nearly impossible to relax.

The memories of that night came flooding back. I could feel the cold fear in my chest, a tightness that refused to be released. Tears streamed down my face as I remembered how helpless I had felt when my mother had slammed the door shut, trapping me in the closet.

I shivered, my body trembling with terror and anger. I curled up into a ball, trying to make myself as small as possible so I could disappear and never have to face her again. But I knew it was impossible. There was no escape from her cruelty and hatred.

Then I woke up. And still, all these years later, I couldn't help but wonder why she did those things to me. Was it really just because she didn't want me around? Or was there something else going on? Something deeper than the obvious?

I was still at Reginald's country home, moonlight filtering through the cracks in the blinds. And instead of the biting cold of the closet, I felt a warm

hand holding mine.

Drake.

He was standing over me, a frown etching deep lines into his face. Even in the dim light, I could see his eyes, bright and watchful. It struck me then how protective he seemed. For a moment, I let myself bask in that feeling, something I'd never experienced in the past. His gaze dropped from my face to our joined hands, then back up to meet my eyes. I could see the questions in his gaze. He wanted answers, but I wasn't sure if I was ready to give them.

I opened my mouth to speak, wanting to tell him about the nightmare and all of the emotions it had dredged up from the depths of my soul. But as soon as I began to form words, they died on my lips. Instead of explaining what had happened, all that remained was a thick silence between us.

But it was okay. Even without speaking a word, I could feel his understanding. He squeezed my hand gently in response and nodded, offering me comfort and support even in this dark moment of vulnerability.

For a few moments we stayed like that, silent but connected by an invisible bond that transcended even language. He stood there for a moment longer, seeming to understand that my mind was still preoccupied with the events of the day and the nightmare that had jolted me awake.

"Why are you here?" I croaked, clearing my throat.

"You were having a nightmare," he answered simply. He let go of my hand, and I felt a pang of disappointment.

"Why aren't you asking what it was about?" I challenged, my guard back up. I was curious as to why he didn't probe further, why he didn't demand to know the reason behind my torment.

He looked at me for a long moment, a flash of something I couldn't quite decipher in his gaze. Then he shrugged, his lips quirking into a half-smile.

"Demons are true arseholes," he said. "They love to make us relive our worst memories, our deepest fears. And honestly, I've met a few in my line of work. It's not my place to ask you to face yours, Daphne."

His words hung in the air between us, mingling with the tension that was a constant companion these days. It was an odd moment of understanding, one I didn't expect from someone like Drake. It seemed we both had our fair share of demons.

In the silent aftermath, I felt a twinge of gratitude. For his presence, for his tact, for his weird, dark sense of humor.

"Thanks," I said quietly.

He nodded, his eyes still locked on mine. Then, without a word, he turned toward the door. Before he left, he paused, his hand on the doorknob. "One question. How did you get out of the cuffs?"

Sleepily, I muttered, "Double jointed."

If he was surprised, he said nothing. "Get some rest, Daphne," he said softly.

With that, he disappeared through the doorway, leaving me alone with my thoughts once again. But this time the darkness didn't seem as suffocating, and the memories didn't feel as unbearable.

As I drifted back to sleep, I couldn't help but wonder what demons Drake carried with him. What nightmares haunted him in the dark? But for now, I pushed those thoughts aside and focused on the warmth of his hand, the sound of his voice, and the comfort that came with knowing he was there, watching over me.

And I shouldn't feel at all safe. But somehow I did.

DAPHNE



SOMETHING WAS WRONG WITH HIM. DRAKE WAS HOVERING. MORE LIKE leaning moodily in corners. But still. All day he'd watched me warily.

After he'd watched me eat lunch, I guess he'd had enough of the silent treatment. "Christ, woman. Are you okay?"

I didn't bother to answer. I was so far the fuck away from okay. What did he expect from me? Energy and ebullience?

"You're not talking. Even when you shouldn't you talk. You have to start talking I'm—" He halted for a moment as if looking for the right word. And then he finally settled on, "I didn't know."

Again, I didn't bother to respond.

Later that evening when I was in the tub, trying to work up the energy to deal with my hair, there was a knock on the bathroom door.

I had the bubbles way up to my shoulders, so I said, "Come in."

It was Drake not Reginald. "Oh, it's you."

"I know you were probably needing these things before. I'm sorry it's coming so late. But before we do much else, I need to take a look at your feet again. I'm sure they're pretty torn up, and I'll need to clean them again."

“Okay.”

He proceeded to take my feet in his big hands, and using a separate bowl with water and soap, he cleaned my feet thoroughly. Though he was being gentle, my feet stung. I should have waited until I had shoes. But I had been so damned impatient.

When he released my feet and eased them to the side so that they stayed out of the water, I watched him warily. "I'm going to wash your hair now if that's okay."

"I'll wash it myself."

"Sure, I'll let you do that if you can lift your arms up."

I managed to try and then groaned. Fucking hell. I couldn't. The idea of having to detangle and comb through my hair made me feel like I was swimming upstream with no hope of shore on either side.

"I've got you. You don't have to do everything alone. I'm here. Use me. Especially since you're hurt because of me. Reginald helped me to get you some things."

He rummaged through the bag and pulled out a hair mask, shampoo, and a moisturizing conditioner.

I eyed the brands. Briogeo. Well, that was fancy. With Grans bills, I never splurged on anything that nice.

He muttered a curse. "Is it the wrong stuff? Fuck, I'll go back straight away. What brand do you use? The lady at the store said it was luxurious or bloody something so I thought..." his voice trailed off.

I shook my head. "No, it's perfect." Why was he so worried? A swell of emotion I didn't understand built up in my chest. First, last night, and now this? Why was he doing this? He'd tossed me in the boot last night. He didn't care about me.

"The girl at the store said I'd need some brushes and wide-tooth combs for detangling. I didn't know what to get, so I got several different things."

I recognized the tapered and then flared-out brush as one of the ones I

used at home. "That one is fine. Um, I need to wash it first, or at least rinse out the mud and things."

"Yeah. I've got a bucket for that. Just sit back against the headrest."

I eyed him dubiously. I didn't exactly think he had any experience with my kind of hair.

"I told you I have you. I'm taking care of you. Whatever you need, I can give you. Whether it's a hair detangler or a shadow to chase away your nightmares. I'm the one to do it. Considering I'm the reason that your hair looks like a literal bird's nest, I need to put it right. Please let me. I want to."

"I..." I needed the help. I couldn't do this on my own. And he was here with the right comb and conditioner so expensive it might as well have gold dust in it.

Let him help.

I nodded because I had no other solution. My hair would be an awful, tangled afro nest, but at least it would be clean. "Okay, thank you." I settled back like he asked. "So the client thing. That was a fake job, obviously."

He hesitated so long I didn't think he would answer for a moment. "Not really. The company does exist. I do have an LLC setup for the company when I get started."

"Right. Let me get this bucket filled."

He used the shower to fill the bucket. He also had had a big plastic cup with a spout.

"If this is too hot, tell me."

The whys of today were burning a hole in my tongue. But hell would he even answer me? "I know you said that you have to put it right, but why? Why not just leave me to it?"

He pressed his lips together. "You were never supposed to be hurt."

I furrowed my brow as I watched him, and he swallowed hard. "I didn't expect you to run. And that was my underestimation of you. So let's get this show on the road, yeah?"

When he peeled off his shirt, my eyes went wide. He held up his hands. "I'm not going to touch you. I just imagine that there's going to be some mud splatter and stuff, right?"

"Lay back."

The water was the perfect temperature, and his hands were fucking massive. As he poured water into my hair, letting it drain down into an empty bucket, I almost wept with joy as I could feel all the grime and stickiness, the twigs, leaves, and mud pouring out.

Despite his size, his touch was gentle. Just like it had been when he cleaned my feet. The rinsing out of debris probably took the longest as he saturated my hair. And then when he opened the deep conditioning mask, the scent of jasmine and hibiscus filled the air. Sweetly scented and relaxing. He gently parted my hair into sections with his fingers, massaging the scalp. It was so relaxing my lids started to close and my muscles started to unknot.

"Your hair is a lot longer than it looks." He gently eased my head from side to side to make sure that he got the back of my hair.

"Yeah, the shrinkage is real."

He coughed a laugh, and it took me a second to realize what I'd said. And despite myself, I laughed in the tub with my captor. The man who had thrown me in a dark place and left me there.

But with the simple act of looking after me truly, it was like the terrified girl could finally rest if even for a moment. And maybe just maybe I could forgive him.

"Well, I guess you know all about shrinkage."

He chuckled and said, "To some degree."

"Ah, so you're a grower?" I said with a smirk.

Daphne, you twit. Why the hell would you say that? Why would you reference his dick at all? This whole time you've been trying to avoid thinking about him like that, and you just brought up his dick.

I closed my eyes, hoping he didn't notice. When I cracked one eye open,

he was grinning at me. "Oh, for fuck's sake, can we just forget that I said that?"

"Nope. Absolutely not."

When he was done with the mask, he pulled out a plastic shower cap and put it on my head. "It says to leave it on for a few minutes."

The stab of disappointment that he was done so soon surprised me. I liked the intimacy. "Right. Honestly, you've done enough. I can just try and rinse from here."

"No, we've already covered this. I broke it, so to speak, and I will fix it."

The joke was on the tip of my tongue. "Now look at that, a kidnapper with a code." Jokes were easier to hide pain with. Instead, I went with sincerity. "Thank you. No one's ever done my hair for me since gran got too old to deal with it."

"I like it. Your hair is so soft. And I could play with your curls for hours. Also, I know you don't think so, but I *do* have a code of conduct."

I narrowed my gaze at him. "Clearly, it doesn't exclude kidnapping."

"I know. I'm an asshole. But I need you, and you need me."

I had nothing. I didn't know what he wanted from me. "Why do you need me?"

He rinsed his hands at the sink and then sat down on the counter while we waited for the conditioning mask to do its work. "Massimo is someone from my past."

That one statement told me I needed more information. If he'd gone so far as to kidnap me, I wanted it all. I turned to face him. "Who are you, really?"

We sat in silence for a long breath, and at first I thought he wouldn't answer me. But when he started talking, my heartbeat started to tick up. And for the first time since I jumped out the window, I could breathe.

"My real name is Drake Webster. Up until a few months ago, I was a deep-cover operative for MI5. I was undercover with an organization called

the Syndicate. Massimo Igno is the son of a man who used to work with the Syndicate. Massimo's father has been arrested. Up until then, no one knew I was a deep-cover operative. But I was burned. Almost killed in the field. I had to watch someone else that they'd taken die because someone revealed my identity. No one in my organization would have done it."

He paused, his voice going flat and his eyes narrowing as he shook his head.

"Antonio Igno is the only person who knew I wasn't who I said I was. I believe he told his son."

I shivered in the warm water. I'd known he was dangerous, deadly even. I'd even called him an assassin. But I'd never imagined this.

"You almost died?" The idea that there was a possibility that he and I might never have met made me feel oddly hollow.

When he met my gaze, his eyes were grave. "I was ambushed, captured and tortured. Came to chained and hanging upside down. There was a woman they were holding as well. Turned out she was the daughter of a Syndicate member. I helped her escape, but they killed her in front of me before we could be rescued." He shook his head. "She was a kid. I chose this life she didn't. I got her killed."

"No, you didn't. You tried to save her." I might not know anything about him. But I could sense that much.

"I should have known better. Something." He swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing up down.

"You're going after them now?"

His eyes turned hard. "They stole my life. And that girl's life. They have it coming."

"I'm so sorry."

"You didn't do this."

"Do you know why he's fixated on me? Is it because he saw us kiss?" I shook my head. "Wait, no, I met him before I met you. This doesn't make

sense."

"That's the piece I've been trying to dig out. I was given intel that he was tracking and keeping tabs on a woman who worked at Baines Data and Technology."

"Oh God." I breathed. All this time I was convinced this was happening to me because of sheer dumb luck, not because I might actually know anything.

"In the course of investigating him, I've seen what he's been up to since his father was arrested several months ago. Your name came up on his computer searches. Searches on your family. And I needed to know why. I thought you were involved with him."

I started to sit up and winced when my hand hit the edge of the tub. "I am not."

"Well, I know that now, but at the time, I didn't. So I needed to get close to you."

"Did you break?"

He furrowed his brow. "What do you mean?"

"You said everybody breaks under torture."

He shook his head. "No. But it was only a matter of time. Another four days, five, hell, maybe another month. Or maybe only hours, depending on how high the pain was. Anything can happen. Your brain sometimes just breaks."

"So Massimo... he just was looking me up?"

His gaze softened to something that looked a lot like pity. "As far as I can tell, he seems to have formed an attachment to you. He wants *you*. Maybe something you know."

"You mean he's *fixated* on me."

He nodded. "Yeah. Wherever you met him, his obsession grew from that, I think."

I leaned back against the tub, closing my eyes and trying to force all of

those memories aside. "I met him, I don't know, five months ago, maybe. My future brother-in-law had some property Massimo wanted to buy. There was an exchange. It was basically easy. I happened to be in the office trying to grab Travis so that we could surprise my sister for her birthday."

"And he saw you then?"

"Yeah. I didn't see him again until the night I met you at the bar, and I honestly didn't even recognize him at first. I literally don't even know the guy."

"I have a theory about that. The Syndicate is having a sort of all-hands meeting in a few weeks where the top echelon will meet in person. Massimo has been making moves against some of the mid-tier players, bottlenecking everything around him before you get to the top. I think he's trying to take them all out in one fell swoop. To get access to that meeting, he would need money. A lot of it."

"Is this why you started stalking me?"

He rolled his eyes. "I was hardly stalking."

I lifted a brow.

"Okay fine. Light stalking. I needed to know your connection to him. Best way is to surveil. When I couldn't find an obvious connection, I needed to get closer."

I've been tracking his bank transactions. There's also a Ledger that supposedly holds information on all members of the Syndicate from top tier to bottom level runners. For years, most people thought it was a fairy tale. But as it turned out, Antonio Igno, Massimo's father, was what you'd call the record keeper. He had a record of every favor owed, every transaction, and the amount of those transactions, as well as the accounts they went to."

"All in one place? That hardly seems wise."

"I mean I understand. But still. I'm obviously not involved. I know nothing."

"Actually, I think you know something without knowing something."

These people are more paranoid about electronic transactions. They use them, but with anonymous numbered accounts. That Ledger pointed to exactly who the numbered accounts belong to, how much is in there, and what the money is marked for. A few months ago, intelligence agencies captured Antonio after someone had stolen the Ledger from him. We recovered the Ledger in pieces only to find that decoding it required a cipher. Eventually the cipher was recovered, but there's a third missing piece of the Ledger that ties all the names to the accounts, and I think Massimo has it. And now I'm planning to take it from him.”

“So, you're basically antagonizing him?”

“Let's just call it drawing him out for now. I think there's something he wants you for. Specifically, something you know. Some information you have from Baines Data.”

I shook my head. “I don't know anything. You can see the full list of clients that Baines has. All my bosses have access to them. You don't need me.”

“I think there's a piece we're missing. And until we know what that piece is, I'm just trying to keep you out of sight and keep you safe.”

“So you're saying this whole thing has been about keeping me safe?”

He swallowed hard and lifted his gaze to meet mine. “Not at first. At first I just wanted my life back. I won't take out the Syndicate in a way that makes them *all* go to jail. Otherwise, they're just going to replace everyone and nothing will change. I want the information that will topple them. Those people are responsible for my father being dead. For my uncle being dead.”

My eyes went wide. “What?”

He jumped off the counter, only to lean against it and cross his arms. “My father and uncle were also spies. They both died on deep-cover Syndicate jobs.”

My stomach pitched. “Oh shit. I'm sorry.” I always felt like sorry was such a useless platitude. There wasn't much comfort to be conveyed in it.

Mentally, I tried to scan through any clients that had been decommissioned for non-ethical behavior. Or think through anyone with shady practices, but I had nothing.

"I guess maybe Massimo is still doing some business with Travis. I don't really know, but they sort of formed a friendship. Up until this past weekend, Travis thought maybe I was being mean or something, giving him the cold shoulder."

A soft chime went off, and he hopped off the counter, coming back to my hair.

Gently, he rinsed out the conditioning mask, and the soft soothing strokes had my eyelids drooping again. He was so gentle with his fingers I didn't even notice any knots.

"Keep going," he urged.

"There was one time though. I came home from work, and you know that feeling you get when it's like someone has been in your place? I just couldn't shake it. I came home and I could feel it, like someone had been in my house. I thought I was going crazy."

His hands stopped moving. "When was this?"

"I don't know, two months ago maybe?" I only remembered because Christopher had cancelled plans to suddenly go out of town for a lad's trip.

"What did you do?"

"I went straight down and got Tommy, the doorman, to come and check it out, but there was no one there."

"And in the time you left to go get Tommy, he might have just left."

"Funny, now that you mention it, my towels were in the wrong place."

He frowned. "Towels?"

"In the guest bath. No one ever uses it. They're kitschy, you know? It's something I got from Las Vegas when I went on holiday with my sister. They just said *Viva* and *London*. It's silly, but they were out of order. They read *London* first, then *Viva* second."

“Damn it. He got to you long before I did. Look, obviously I’ve scared you and terrorized you. I want to trust you. And I need you to trust me.”

“That's unlikely to happen.”

Sighing, he leveled his gaze on me. “I know about your gran. The money you need to look after her. I need your help, and you look like you could use a hand yourself. I can help you.”

“What? You happen to have £50,000 lying about?”

He shrugged. “Do you want that in cash?”

I sputtered and sat up straighter, the bathwater shifting dangerously low. “You must be joking.”

“So you don't want cash?”

I was unsure of what to say. “That's too much money. I can't ask for that.”

“Why don't you let me decide what you can ask for. I know you can't forgive me for what I've done, and I probably don't deserve forgiveness. But I can help you in exchange for a little help from you. In addition to you not running anymore, I need your help figuring out exactly what it is at Baines that Igno wants.”

It seemed so easy. If I said yes, if I agreed to help him, what would that mean? And could he be trusted to keep his promise? I had no reason to trust him. No reason to *think* that he could be trusted. But still, there was something about his eyes. The hint of honorability.

I could feel the truth of it all. If I just chose to trust him, everything I needed would be right there at my fingertips. Help for Gran. And I could go home. Hell, I might even be out of here in time for Willow's wedding.

It was a tempting offer. But I still needed to know one thing.

"If any of these things you say are true, who you are, who he is, how does this end?"

“With you back to your life and Massimo captured.”

“And if he hurts me? Or worse?”

“Then I will not rest until his head is on a spike.”

Reginald was right. Given the lengths Drake would go to protect me, I might be in the only place on earth that was safe.

DRAKE



SHE REALLY DIDN'T KNOW ANYTHING. AFTER ALL THIS.

I was wrong.

If you just let her go home...

It was tempting. She wasn't an asset. But, she could still be useful...as *bait*.

I was so focused on a recalibration, it took me a moment to see that she winced slightly. I frowned, easing up. "Sorry, that was too hard."

"I probably have tangles."

Actually, her hair was really soft. I'd managed to wash it and was working the conditioner through with my fingers, but I was going to need to use the brush, and the angle was not ideal. Her hair was too long. "Um, with the angle, I need you sitting upright more to detangle it."

She frowned. "I think I can, but I'll have to put my feet in the water."

I winced at the bandages. "No. I'll get in and prop you up."

She went perfectly stock-still.

"I'm not going to touch you."

Though my cock was not in on that thought, because he very much

wanted me to put my hands all the fuck over her. And not in a friendly get-her-cleaned-up sort of situation.

"Um, maybe I can manage?"

"I've already told you. I'm looking after you now. Things will go easier for you if you just allow it. Just scooch forward. I'll get in behind you."

I unzipped my jeans, and she whipped her head toward me.

"What are you doing?"

Instead of answering, I dropped my jeans, tossing them aside before slipping into the bathtub behind her. I left my boxer briefs on, and she whipped back around immediately. There was zero hiding that I was hard, but I hoped she would ignore it just like I was trying to do.

I climbed in behind her and some water sloshed out onto the floor, but there was plenty of room for me. "Okay, sit back."

"What?" she squeaked.

"You have to sit back, so you're supported while I detangle."

"Um, okay."

When she laid her back down against my chest, it was the most natural thing in the world. She fit like she was supposed to be there. Her arse scooted against my groin, and I started doing math equations and operational tactical plans in my head. Anything to keep from thinking about how soft she was, or the way she fit against me, or, if I was a full wanker, all the ways that I could take advantage.

I grabbed the detangling brush and used my fingers to separate her hair out into at least four chunks.

"Okay, this is the part where I need some help. Because using my fingers is one thing, but this brush looks complex."

She smiled ruefully at my comment. "It's fine. Just start at the ends in small sections then work your way up."

I took one section, and she shook her head. "You'll need a smaller section than that. My hair is pretty thick."

I took a smaller section and started working my way up. Once I got the hang of it, everything was easier. "Hey, I'm doing pretty good."

"You know, I don't get you," she said out of the blue.

"What do you mean?"

"You're some kind of international super spy, James Bond. Don't you have like, people for this or something? A female agent you can toss at me to help me with this stuff?"

"Well, that's not really how it works. If we were active in the field, you would be my asset. Mine to work with. I was burned so I don't have any support right now." All alone. Just like always. The only person on the planet who would care if I wasn't on it anymore was Reginald. That shit was sobering.

In slow motion, I worked with her hair, lulling us both into a relaxed conversation. "I keep thinking back to what you said. Why me?" she asked. "All senior staff at Baines have access to the clients."

I needed a moment to mentally adjust my plan. Figure out another angle. "Leave it. We'll attack again in the morning." I did want to keep her talking though. The rasp in her voice was soothing. "You've mentioned your sister. Are you close to your family?" I knew the answer, but I wanted her to be the one to tell me.

"Not really. Never met my dad. Mum insists that he ran out on me when I was just a baby. I tried finding him, but didn't have any luck. All I knew was he was some kind of scientist. Anyway, once she said that, I used to think I would maybe study science one day."

She was quiet for a long moment, but I wanted her to keep talking. If anything, it would distract from the detangling process which probably wasn't fun. "I heard you talking to your friend at the bar about your sister and the wedding. I take it you don't want your mum there?"

She went stiff in my arms.

But I silently waited for her to continue. Silently demanding an answer

for a while.

When she realized I was just going to wait for her to continue, she took a deep breath and relaxed by degrees. "To say we don't get on is an understatement. So yes, her being at the wedding is a problem for me."

"Well, it's your sister's wedding, right?"

"Yes, which is why I am not saying anything to her. Willow didn't grow up with her really, so she doesn't know what she's like and wants a relationship with her. Which I could warn her about, but I don't want it to be like I'm keeping Willow from her mother. I would hate that."

"Your sister sounds deliberately clueless."

She turned slightly to peer back at me. "It probably does to you. Do you have any family?"

I nodded. "I've got Reginald."

"Did he adopt you or something?"

I didn't usually talk about my family. I'd never told anyone about my past. No one ever got close enough. But it felt good to talk to her.

"No, my dad was killed in action. And mum, she couldn't take it, you know? She was really depressed for two years, and then she passed away from cancer. My uncle took me in when I was eight, but then he also died in action when I was eleven. Reginald was his best mate. He and his wife, Jasmine, gave me a home. So basically, Reginald is the closest thing to a parent I have."

In the silence of the bath, I waited for her to speak.

DAPHNE



I COULD TELL HE WAS UNACCUSTOMED TO SHARING. I DIDN'T WANT HIM TO stop. "I think you were very lucky to have a Reginald."

He cleared his throat as he continued to massage. "Anyway, Reggie looked out for me. And his wife, she was the best."

"She's gone now, right? Reggie mentioned her to me."

"Yeah. A few years back. MS."

I winced. "That hardly seems fair. He's a lovely man. Seems like he deserves big love."

I felt rather than heard Drake's chuckle. "He's helping me keep you here, and yet you think he's lovely?"

"Well, because he clearly doesn't want to," I said. "He's trying to save your soul or something."

Quietly, he added. "Don't get it wrong. I didn't want to bring you here either."

"Yeah, your vibe is more of a *you'll do whatever it takes* thing, and that's not him. He's got markers. Lines he won't cross."

"I see you've already got a good read on him."

"Well, yeah. He's easy to read. Unlike you."

He chuffed softly behind me. "I'm easier to read than you think."

He finally finished detangling a section and tried to move on to the next, but I stopped him.

"Oh wait. You'll need to twist it first."

He hesitated. "Like a twist tie?"

I giggled. "Sort of. Take the section, split it in two. Then you have to hold it taut and twine the pieces together like a rope."

His level of concentration was so endearing I had to smile as he twisted. When he got to the end, he paused. "How do I keep it from unwinding?"

"Oh, you coil the ends around you index finger, the curls will clump together."

When the twist was done a thick twist hung down my back. "Well, that is handy."

His self-satisfaction made me smile. "If I'm trying to use twists for a style I make them smaller, but for now that's great. Good job."

As he worked, he continued our conversation. "I'm not hard to read. Ever since I was a kid, I always wanted to do things right. You know, make my dad and mum proud. Make Uncle Charlie proud, and Reginald, too. There was black and white when it came to doing the right thing. But somewhere along the line, things got murky."

"Isn't that what being a spy is all about? Working for the greater good and all that?"

He chuckled low. "You'd be surprised. There are a lot of wankers who are in it for the glory."

"Is there glory?"

"For those in the know, yeah. While you are alive, the glory is the sweetest nectar."

Thirty minutes later, I had been conditioned, detangled, rinsed, and my head was in a towel. Drake held up a towel for me to climb out of the tub and

resolutely turned his gaze away from me. When I was all wrapped up, he nodded. "When you're finished, there's a blow dryer in the bottom there. And it's got one of those... I don't know what they're called. You know, they look like a little octopus with hands, with tentacles, spikes or whatever sticking out."

I laughed. "A diffuser."

"Yeah, one of those. I'll dry your hair."

I bit my lip. He'd just taken better care of me than my own mother. And the realization was making me emotional. He'd laid a lot on me and I needed a moment to process. "Actually, can you let me do it? I think I need a little time on my own if that's okay."

His brow creased. He looked like he wanted to finish, but he let me have this one. "Sure. Head on downstairs when you're done. Or call if you need more help."

"Thank you."

He walked out and quietly left me behind after he picked up all the bits and bobs from our hair session, and I wasn't even thinking about an escape right then. All I could think was that the man who just spent the last hour and a half or so washing and detangling my hair and cleaning me up was not the same man who kidnapped me. There were two sides to him. So which part of him was real?

DRAKE



I DIDN'T LOCK THE BEDROOM DOOR. MATTER OF FACT, I LEFT IT WIDE OPEN. And Daphne, walked right through it.

I expected nothing less. After all, she was back to herself, not that scary shell of a woman who couldn't move when I took her out of the boot. My relief that she seemed to have recovered from our misadventure last night, was palpable.

She looked more like herself now. Freshly showered, curls dried, face devoid of makeup. She was stunning though. She didn't need it.

"I'm shocked you didn't try the front door."

She grinned at me and then at Reginald. "Who's to say I didn't?"

Reginald clapped and hooted. "Ah, I've gotta tell you, boy, I like this one. She gives you a run for your money."

I frowned at him. "Whose side are you on?"

"Hers."

"Thank you for letting me eat down here." She cleared her throat. "And for what it's worth, I didn't try the door. I'm not running anymore. I know I need to be here."

The way she said it let me know she was honest about her thank you.
"You're going to eat down here from now on."

Daphne

MY SKIN FLUSHED UNDER THE INTENSITY OF DRAKE'S GAZE. MY BRAIN OH SO helpfully offered up the image of him in the tub behind me.

I lifted my brows. "So, what's for dinner tonight?"

"Well, shockingly," Reginald said, "We have some cornbread."

Drake wrinkled his nose. "What is your obsession with cornbread?"

"What? You don't like it?" I gasped. "It's delicious."

Drake shook his head. "It's sweet bread. Who wants sweet bread?"

Reginald just rolled his eyes. "This boy can eat field rations every day for months on end. But should I try and feed him anything from America, and the way he'll squinch his face is so funny. Look at him."

"That's not true," Drake said. "I like chili."

I had to laugh at that. "It smells amazing. Can I help with anything?"

Reginald shook his head. "Nah, lass. You're a guest."

"I should do something, shouldn't I?"

Reginald scoffed. "I like having someone to wait on. And it will be nice if you eat downstairs with me."

"Just you?"

Drake frowned. "I need to go to the city and keep an eye on Massimo."

I scowled thinking about him. "Can I help in any way? Because the more I think about what he was trying to do to me, the more I want to poke him in the eyeball with something sharp."

Drake laughed. "Same sentiment."

"You're not going to tell me what you're planning at all? Maybe I can be

helpful. The sooner I help you, the sooner I get to go home. Poor Willow, she's probably worried sick. She doesn't know what happened."

"I left a message with the front desk that you'd been called back to work for an integration emergency, and that you would call her this week."

"There's no way Willow would believe that."

Drake narrowed his gaze at me. "She believes it enough. She hasn't been calling. As long as you check in this week, she'll continue thinking everything is okay."

This was real? He'd let me talk to my sister? The surge of emotion, had me blinking away tears. "You don't know what this means to me."

He watched me carefully before standing up and going to the cabinet.

I could hardly be blamed if I was picturing him in just his boxer briefs as they molded to him. I was human after all. I had eyeballs.

In the cupboard was a small safe. His body was covering the code, so I couldn't see it. But soon it chirped and opened, and then Drake turned around and handed me something I hadn't seen in days.

My phone.

Hope. Having my phone back felt like hope. I wouldn't be so cut off and isolated. This was my connection to home.

"Obviously, you don't know where you are, so you can't tell her anything specific. Keep it brief. Let her know that you're fine. Ask her about the wedding, what she decided about the venue, those kind of details. Let her believe you're in Barcelona on a job like she expects you to be."

My hands shook as I took the phone. "You'll let me talk to my sister?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"You're not worried that I'll say something about you, Reginald, the house, or anything like that?"

He cocked his head and studied me. "No, I'm not. Not anymore."

My brow furrowed. "Why not?"

"I want you to trust me. So I'm going to trust you."

My gaze flickered from him to Reginald. Reginald was watching Drake. I couldn't read his expression, but when his gaze met mine, he smiled at me kindly. "Go on, call your sister. The cornbread is just about to be out of the oven."

My heart pounded as I turned my phone on. Shockingly, I didn't have any phone calls. Not even the office had called to check on me. Fuck. My stomach fell. Nothing like realizing that you were irrelevant to everyone in your life.

There were, however, dozens of texts from Talia. Some were about funny work things. Some were about the new bloke she was chatting to. Some asking me if I had shagged Drake yet.

"Can I text Talia? She has left twenty-six messages. Oops, no, twenty-seven."

"Yeah. There's nothing you can tell her anyway."

"Besides. If I told her you kidnapped me, she would think that I was the luckiest girl in the world."

Drake, cocky asshole that he was, leaned back in his chair and grinned at me, lifting his chin in my direction. "Oh, yeah?"

"You're disgusting."

The cocky grin turned into a bright wide one, and I was momentarily stunned. I didn't think I'd ever seen him smile like that before. Not a proper full-on grin. One that said he was having fun. Playful Drake was even more dangerous than Dangerous Drake because the danger was still there underneath the surface, but on the outside, he looked open and welcoming, friendly. Like someone you could care about. Also, while he was dangerously sexy when he was brooding. That smile was genetically bred for one purpose and one purpose only...dropping knickers.

I dialed my sister's number and waited for her to pick up. "Does it have to be on speaker?"

Reginald said, "No, love, you just talk to her. Go on. You can walk about

the house. I'm confident you will not try and kill me in my sleep."

My shoulders sagged, because the first night I was brought here I'd wondered if I was going to have to. When Willow answered, her voice was somber. "Daph?"

"Yeah, kiddo, how is it going?"

"Ugh. God, I just got in a row with Travis."

In so many ways, hearing her be normal was such a relief. "Oh, hon, I'm sure whatever it is you guys will figure it out. You're getting married soon."

"Yeah, but he's left me to make all the final decisions. And God, he's just so frustrating—" She stopped midsentence. "Wait, where are you?"

Oh, the question I couldn't actually answer. "Remember, I'm on the work trip with Drake Foster?"

"Oh yeah, the hottie from the office."

I glanced down at my wrists and hands where my thumb knuckles had been scraped up. If only she knew I'd been trying to escape "the hottie from the office" for days.

Drake's words floated through my head.

"You're okay though, yeah?" I asked Willow.

"Yeah. Honestly, I thought maybe you hadn't called because you were mad about Travis and Massimo."

My stomach twisted. "I wasn't happy, obviously."

"I know. And then the front desk said you'd had to check out for a work emergency and I got the message you'd left for me which said, 'I love you. I'll call you. I have to get back to this work trip.' But Massimo was convinced that someone had taken you. He is a looney tune. I see what you mean now. I don't like him at all."

"You need to stay away from him, Will. He can't come—"

"Oh my God," she exclaimed, interrupting me. "I've been dying to talk to you because Caroline wanted to change her bridesmaids dress design to look more like my wedding dress. Can you believe that?"

I bit my tongue, before I let the frustration mount. I was Willow's sounding board. Always had been. The one she talked to about everything. I needed to try and at least be understanding. But this was important. "Honey, Caroline is annoying. Cut her from the bridesmaids line. But I need you to listen about—"

"What are you talking about? I can't cut her. We're too close to the wedding date."

"OK fine. Don't cut her but I need you to —"

"Oh, and do you know what? Gran had a conniption when I went to visit her at Shady Oaks and told her Mum was coming to the wedding. She was unhappy. She said that Mum had been really awful to you."

My stomach dropped. *Shit.* "Gran said that?"

"Yeah, she was actually having a lucid day yesterday. She knew who I was, who Travis was, asked about you and everything."

I smiled at that. "Oh, good. I'm glad she was having a good day."

"I'm just hoping, that she doesn't do anything wild at the wedding. The last thing I want is for her to have an episode. I mean I'm already going to be so stressed out. The last thing I need is for her to take off, or worse, say something really inappropriate.

The truth was unavoidable in that moment.

My sister was selfish.

There were times, where I wondered if I could have done something about this part of Willow. The part that couldn't see beyond her own needs. I wondered how much of it was for me to fix. But my sister was my sister. There were some things she wasn't willing to hear yet.

"It'll all work out. I love you. We'll talk when I get home, yeah?"

"Yeah."

I hung up with her, my heart squeezing. I had to blink rapidly to keep the tears at bay.

"Sweetheart, are you all right?"

Reginald's firm hand on my shoulder had me nodding. "Yeah, just let me send a quick text to Talia." I pulled a face, stuck my tongue out, took a photo, and sent it to Talia with the message, *Love you*.

When I was done, I went back to the kitchen and found both men had started eating. I handed the phone back to Drake, a part of me hoping that he would let me keep it, but he didn't. Instead, he got up and put it back in the safe as he said, "If you want to talk to your sister again, let me know."

I was conflicted about that. I loved her more than anything. But things were different now. This week had changed me. I could see our relationship more clearly. Had it always been this one-sided? Had she ever really listened to me? Or had listening always been my job? "Thank you," I murmured. "I thought you had to head back to the city tonight?"

"My plans changed."

I forced a smile as I sat down to dinner. Reginald regaled me with stories of the type of child Drake had been. Too inquisitive for his own good, as he'd almost gotten bitten by a badger when he was eleven. And he once poked a wasp's nest, and they were trapped in the house for over two days as they had to call a specialist to come and gather them all before they could go outside.

All the while, Drake just shrugged. "I was curious."

Reginald just shook his head. "My poor wife. She was constantly patching him up for something."

Drake laughed. "Yeah, I was a bit of a handful."

I stared at him. His smile was something to behold. The sheepish son part of him was even more fascinating than the charming playboy in the bar. There was almost a sweetness and vulnerability to him as a dimple peaked out. The man had dimples? Where the hell had they been hiding? It was probably for the best that he didn't flash that smile around everywhere.

"Oh, good to see some things don't change."

He grinned. "No, not very much."

And as we ate and Reginald went on with more stories about teenage

Drake, I realized that for the first time in years, it almost felt like I had family. *Real* family.

DAPHNE



AT MY BEDROOM DOOR THAT NIGHT, WE STOPPED IN THE HALL. I OPENED THE door and turned to Drake unsure of how to thank him. "Thank you for tonight. I feel so much better after talking to Willow."

"Of course. If it makes you happier, it was a small concession to make."

I nodded and then turned to walk into the bedroom, closing the door behind me, as I went. But the door met resistance, making me turn back with a frown. "What's wrong?"

Drake lifted a brow. "Just because I let you make a phone call, do you think I'm going to let you sleep by yourself after the stunt you pulled yesterday? Last night I slept outside your door. Tonight, I'm going to be more comfortable. While I'm not going to chain you to the bed, you're definitely not sleeping in here by yourself."

I widened my eyes. "The hell I'm not." He was mad. I certainly wasn't sleeping with him...in here...after what had happened the other day.

"Sorry, princess, we might have a bit of a truce, but this is also for your safety. I need a bed. I slept like dirt last night. And I'd have to be mad to leave you to your own devices. Especially when I'm asleep. So why don't you

go ahead and get ready for bed. You will be sleeping with me."

I widened my eyes. "You've got to be kidding me."

"Well, it's that, or I can zip-tie you to the bed. You can sleep with your arms unencumbered, or you can sleep zip-tied. It's really up to you. But I'm sleeping in this bed either way. Now go ahead and get ready. I'll take my turn after you."

"You can't just sleep next to me," I sputtered.

"I'm not sure what part of that you missed, kitten. You. Are. Not. Sleeping. *Alone.*" He enunciated.

"That makes me very uncomfortable."

"I guess we'll both be uncomfortable then, won't we?" he smirked.

"I'm not going to shag you," I squeaked.

He lifted his brow, watching me intently. "Kitten, you've already begged me for it. Or don't you remember?"

My pussy throbbed like the traitorous bitch she was. "I was in a heightened emotional state!"

He had the nerve to smirk at me. "If you say so. But I do recall you soaking my hand and sheets you came so hard."

"Drake!" I admonished.

But he kept going like he didn't hear me. "I remember you panting, begging, calling my name. I remember you saying yes."

Heat suffused my face, though I wasn't sure if it was from fury or humiliation. "Reginald is right down the hall. If I scream, he'll come and get me."

"He would if you were screaming because I was hurting you. He already knows I'm not going to hurt you, so he's not coming. He might think you're a screamer though. Tell me Daphne, are you a screamer?"

My gaze darted to the door and then back to him.

"I see what you're thinking," he said. "You're not going to make it this time. And let's not forget how that ended." I shifted my weight to my other

foot, and he grinned. "I do like a fighter, but you're still not making it past me. Get ready for bed. *Now.*"

I lifted my chin. "Do not boss me around."

"I will boss you around when I feel like it. Also, your eyes betray you. You like it when I boss you around. I'm starting to think it makes you wet for me."

"I cannot believe you. You made me think that you were changing. That you were nice. That you might let me out of here. But you just want to get your rocks off."

He leaned close, his sandalwood scent wafting around me and he lowered his voice. "Again, please listen carefully, I like my women willing. Are you willing?"

I narrowed my gaze at him. "Sod off."

"So, you're mad I'm asking if you're willing? Or that I haven't thrown you on the bed and stuck my tongue in your pussy. Please be clear about exactly why you're angry."

He was the most infuriating, annoying, idiotic man. And he made me throb.

I whirled on him, jabbing a finger into his chest. "That is not the fucking point, and you know it."

"Be clear, Daphne." He leaned in close. "Do you want me to leave you alone, or do you want me to suck on those pert nipples of yours? While you decide, get in the goddamn bed, or I will put you there."

Exasperated, I growled and threw up my hands whirling around to get ready. Within fifteen minutes, I was ready for bed, freshly scrubbed and irritated.

"You can be mad all you want, sweetheart. Either way, you have a roommate."

"*Roommate* implies that you will be sleeping in another *room.*"

He climbed in next to me, and I wedged the duvet around me. I was

feeling quite smug until he reached for the light and the panic seized me. “No wait.”

I tried to knock his hands away from the light, but he caught my hands easily. "Stop it, Daphne, or I will zip-tie you."

I shook her head back and forth. "Please, don't turn off the light."

His brow furrowed. "Love, it's bloody midnight. I have things I have to do tomorrow that are going to require me to be awake and alert. So we've got to turn out the lights."

I shook my head vehemently. "Please don't. I'll... Just please don't turn off the lights."

I sighed. "Why not?"

"Can't you just sleep with it on?"

He frowned at that. "What's going on?"

I rolled over, my hand grasping his iron-hard bicep. "Talk to me, Daphne."

"I can't be in the dark, okay?"

He sighed. "Hold on." Then he reached over to the nightstand again, and this time I applied more force with my body, throwing it over his.

Look, I was desperate. "Please, don't turn off the lights. I'm begging you."

“If you beg me just a little to the right, you are going to find out that you are exactly my fucking type.”

He eased me away from him just a little bit. "I'm not going to turn it off, I'm just going to get my phone and turn on a low, ambient light so it won't be completely dark, okay?"

My grip loosened slightly, and I nodded but still held on because the fear held me in a vice-grip.

He showed me his phone. "See? Ease up. I'm just going to put this ambient light on, okay?"

I licked my lips nervously, but then bit my bottom lip. I relaxed my hand, and when he reached out to turn off the light, I only tensed up a little bit.

"See? There's plenty of light in here, okay?"

I nodded in the near darkness, and tried to curl into a ball facing away from him.

When he spoke again, his voice was low. "You were scared in the boot, weren't you?"

My stomach pitched as I recalled the cloying darkness and the cold that threatened to pull me under. "Yes."

"Why didn't you say something?"

"I tried. Over and over, I tried."

He did something unexpected then and pulled me into him, cradling me against his body.

When I finally relaxed a little, his voice was warmth and caramel, "Why are you so afraid of the dark?"

"It's a long story," I whispered.

"You can trust me to chase away the shadows, Daphne. I'm here."

Drake

HER VOICE WAS SO SOFT WHEN SHE STARTED TO SPEAK, I HAD TO STRAIN TO hear her.

"You know we were talking about Willow and my mother. As a kid, I was always sick with something. Always sick to my stomach or running a fever. Some days I couldn't get out of bed. I was weak and tired all the time."

I let her talk. I got the distinct impression none of this was going to feel good.

"I was hospitalized a few times. My bloodwork did not make sense. My mother was always by my side, frantically worried. When I was twelve and Willow was six, during one of my phases when I was feeling better, Mum

had a new boyfriend. She went to spend time with him, and we went to the neighbor's house with strict instructions not to go outside, not to do anything remotely taxing. Of course, the moment I was out from under her watchful eye, I didn't listen. They had a big tree in their back garden. I had never climbed a tree before. Ella's brother, Max, dared me to climb it, and I'd been feeling good, so I did."

As she talked, I kept her where she was, tucked against me. I could feel the vibrations of her voice against my arm.

"Anyway, I fell out of the bloody tree. I wasn't as strong as I thought. I broke my arm and we had to go to the emergency room. Mum wasn't there, and Mrs. McDaniel kept calling her, but she didn't answer. So I was taken to St. Andrew's instead of my usual hospital. The doctors wanted to keep me for observation. When Mum finally came back from her date, she came to the hospital and insisted that I be moved. She rubbed the doctor the wrong way, so he refused. Plus, there were some oddities in my bloodwork, and they had questions about how I had fallen in the first place and the nature of all my previous hospital visits and all of that. They were basically trying to see if I was being abused. I told them no, that my mother was the best mum, and that she took care of me always. That I was lucky to have her and that without her, I wouldn't have anyone who loved me nearly as much. And what was interesting about the hospital is other than my arm being broken, I got massively better. Much better, like my color vastly improved. I no longer had a nasty gray pallor to me. My hair also started to grow. It had always fallen out before in patches, so I wore it short in a sort of patchwork afro."

Oh, Jesus. I knew what was coming.

"The doctor said something was off with my bloodwork, so he sent it out to an expert, a mate of his. The next thing I knew, social services was there asking me loads of questions. Mum suddenly wasn't allowed to see me. My Gran was called. And after a week in that hospital, I was the healthiest I'd ever been in my life. All because the nurses had deliberately kept my mum

away from me. At the other hospital, she'd always had a cot in my room. She'd been the one who always got me water and fed me. Little did I know she continued making me ill. She'd been poisoning me for ages."

I cursed under my breath. "What kind of fucking mother does that?"

"The reason I'm afraid of the dark is that whenever I did something she didn't like, or I really didn't feel well and was a bit unmanageable, she'd yell at me for not resting enough. And then she'd insist that I clearly needed to be taught how to rest. So she'd lock me in a closet in total darkness with a blanket. I would call for her, but I was too sick half the time, and I'd just be stuck in there all by myself."

Her breathing was shallower now, and I could almost smell her tears. "Shhh, I'm sorry, Daphne. I'm sorry, I didn't know. I'm so sorry."

When she rolled over and tucked her face into my chest, I did the only thing I knew to do. I held her. Tight. Vowing that if I ever crossed paths with her mother, I was going to kill the bitch. And I wasn't going to be quick about it either. She had tortured a little girl for her own ends. "I'm so sorry. I should never have locked you in that boot. I didn't know."

She was nodding against my chest, and I just held her, my hands smoothing back the curls so I could look down at her. "I'm sorry. I will never do that again. I'll never leave you in the dark alone, okay?"

Peering up at me, her eyes swimming in tears, she nodded. "I never had to live with her after that. Gran took me and Willow in. And that was the best time in my life. I finally got to go outside, play, and even made a friend. I wasn't sick a day in my life after that, either."

"I will send that woman to meet her maker," I said without even thinking about it.

She reached a hand to my face and caressed me. "You would do that for me?"

"Immediately and without hesitation."

"It's why we have no contact. But Willow doesn't know her. She didn't

make Willow sick, and all Willow knows is that she was six years old and went to live with Gran. She doesn't remember or know why I was always in the hospital. She was a little kid. I've never had the heart to tell her the truth."

"She's your sister. She deserves to know. And you deserve to have her support."

"She deserves peace. I have to go to the wedding and keep the peace."

"Fine. With one small caveat. I'm coming with you."

DAPHNE



FOR THE FIRST TIME IN WHAT FELT LIKE WEEKS, I SLEPT. HARD. I FOUGHT IT at first, but I was so cocooned in warmth that there was no avoiding it. I wouldn't say so much that I dreamed, but it was more like I had these visions of someone big and protective surrounding me, where for once, nothing could touch me, nothing could hurt me.

My mind conjured up images of a man because, well, of course, it would be a man. But I couldn't see his face. His chest was broad and tapered down to his waist as he showcased ridges on his flat abdomen. And his arms were strong enough to keep the world out. To keep out anything that would harm me.

I started blinking awake and nuzzled against the heat, balling in. When I blinked my eyes open, that same chest in my dreams was right there in front of me. My mouth went dry, and I did something that didn't even feel like me. I leaned forward and pressed a kiss against one of his pectorals.

Suddenly, a hiss filled the air, and I jerked back, meeting Drake's gaze. He was awake. And I was in no dream. All night he'd held me tight to his body. But somehow, we'd turned from the spooning position to one where I'd

been tucked right up against his chest. His gaze bore into mine, and it was almost like he was holding his breath.

I blinked up at him, not sure where to go, or what to do, or what to say.

He, of course, said nothing. Just watched me expectantly, waiting for me to do or say something.

But what was I supposed to do? What was I supposed to say? All night, he held me and kept the monsters away. And before that, he'd let me talk to my sister. Maybe he wasn't the devil I'd thought he was all along.

Daphne, this is insane.

I knew it was wild. The thing was it almost didn't matter. No one had ever made me feel as safe as he did. He just waited for me to say something, waited for me to make a move. Waited as if he had all the time in the world.

I leaned forward again, pressing another kiss to his pec.

What are you doing?

I had no idea. There were a million and one really good reasons why this was the worst idea I'd ever had in my life, and there were many. So, so many.

But the point was, I was drawn to him. And despite my better judgment, I believed him. I'd been around liars all my life. People who'd lied about what they wanted from me, people who lied about caring about me. But Drake wasn't lying. His honesty was something I could feel. It was tangible, palpable.

Just like the desire in his eyes right now.

Again, he was still watching me with the same single-minded focus. The intensity, the desire mixed with need and confusion. Yet still, he waited.

I tilted my head up, shifting my body slightly, licking my lips before I tentatively placed a kiss on his. And then I waited. His growl was low, but I could feel the rumble against my chest. When I pulled back, his gaze had darkened and his tongue peeked out to taste his bottom lip.

I absolutely knew what I was dealing with. I absolutely understood that

Drake was a caged animal. But I reached up and kissed him again, this time licking my tongue over his bottom lip. And then he kissed me back, his tongue meeting mine, his hands fisting gently into my curls, anchoring me close as he deepened the kiss. His tongue swept into my mouth, claiming me, making sure that not a single corner went unexplored. When he increased the tension in my hair and gently pulled back, his gaze was harder, more intense. "Is this what you want?"

The question was clear. He was asking me to make a choice. And I realized in that moment, from the second I'd seen him up until now, I'd never stood a chance. This was an inevitability. He was just asking me to voice that invisible thing. That tension between us that kept pulling me into his orbit and him into mine.

"Yes."

He flipped me on my back so fast I gasped, unable to get enough air. My head spun, his big body bracketing mine as he kissed me deep. Hands in my hair, tugging on my curls, angling me just how he wanted. His tongue swept in, giving me drugging kisses meant to cloud and confuse and entice. I didn't know which way was up. All I knew was him. His hands, his lips, his body, his hips notched between mine, the length of the erection that had been pressing against me all night like a constant, steady anchor. Insistent now. Harder than steel and promising ecstasy. And if I was honest, possibly pain.

He rocked his hips into mine, and I gasped as a shot of pleasure rang through my body. He did it again, and this time he hissed as he pulled back, burrowing his face into my neck, licking, nipping, biting. The feel of his teeth had my back arching and my hands clasp in his hair, holding him against me. He rocked against me one more time, and I went off like a rocket.

Even as he rotated his hips against me, his cock lining up right over my clit, rubbing gently, over and over and over again, he watched me. His hooded gaze softened the cocky smirk on his face. "Fuck me, you have a hair trigger."

There was no way for me to communicate that I had never had a hair trigger in my life. That this thing that I was feeling was him. All him. A complete by-product of what he was doing to me. He rocked into me again, and I whimpered, begging for something I didn't even know.

"Fuck, baby, every time you whimper like that, all I want to do is bury myself to the hilt."

Jesus Christ, that was all I wanted too. His hands were on my hair again. I could tell that he liked it. His fingers kept playing with my curls gently.

"Fucking hell, Daphne," he hissed.

His hips ground against mine as I whimpered in pleasure, my body begging for more. His hands roughly tugged down my tank top, revealing my breasts to him. "Your tits are so damn perfect," he groaned, his voice thick with desire. "I don't know what I want first, to suck them or fuck them."

His words were raw. Dirty. And the hoarse cement texture of his voice told me he was desperate. Bracing himself over me with one arm, he palmed my right breast with his big hand and then hovered over my nipple with his mouth. "I have been dreaming about your tits since I first saw you. I know I'm not supposed to say that, but fuck..."

He teased me, gently blowing on my flesh. Too impatient to let him take his time, I pulled him to me, and he chuckled as he wrapped his lips around me. When he sucked me deep, my back bowed again.

His teeth grazed the tip of my nipple before soothing it with gentle strokes from his tongue. I was panting, clawing at his back, the sensation of pleasure and pain building to a fever pitch within me. His mouth opened wide, engulfing me and stabbing my flesh with the heat of it. I squirmed, but he held me firmly in place as his mouth branded me.

As the pleasure peaked, he pulled back, licking his lips as he moved back up the plane of my body. His gaze burned with passion, and his voice was husky as he whispered, "God, I'm going to make you come so hard you'll forget your own name."

I couldn't get any words out as he began to stroke his fingers over my slick heat. His thumb pressed deep, pushing against my g-spot as he curled his fingers, his other hand gently taunting my clit. His eyes never left mine as he explored and found my most sensitive spots. My whole body flushed with pleasure as he moved faster and faster, pushing deep and then withdrawing, teasing and caressing until I was about to go over the edge.

"Come, Daphne."

His voice was deep and demanding, and his hands never stopped their relentless movement. His tongue flicked over my nipples, licking up the sweat on my chest before he slammed into me with two fingers, pushing up inside me as far as he could go. I screamed, the pleasure too much, and then he began to thrust in and out, driving me closer and closer to the edge.

"Take it, baby. Take it like a good girl."

I shuddered, my fingers digging into the sheets, my body shaking, and then I exploded, my orgasm tearing through me, wave after wave of pleasure crashing over me. I felt lost, my vision blurring, my skin on fire as I rode the waves of pleasure. And when it was finally over, I was spent and boneless.

He pulled his fingers from me, and then he was above me again, pressing the fingers he'd used against my parted lips. "Suck, Daphne."

I complied tentatively, tasting myself on his fingers and licking them clean. His growl of approval vibrated through me.

Finally, he pulled his fingers away and his lips were on mine again, consuming me as his hips rocked against me.

When he tore his lips from mine and hissed along my jaw, he murmured, "You are so beautiful." With a groan, he buried his face in my neck. "Go back to sleep, Daphne."

I jerked back to stare at him. "What?"

He licked his lips and shook his head. "I only have so much control. Go back to sleep."

I frowned, not understanding. "Y-you don't want me?"

Drake threw an arm over his eyes. "Woman, you can see how much I want you. The evidence has been poking against that perfect peach of an arse half the night. I have been entertaining every dirty, filthy fantasy I can muster. But even I'm not that much of an arsehole. We can't."

"So you're going to get me off, then just roll over?"

With a heavy sigh, he muttered. "That's the general idea. I'm not what you need. You need lovemaking. And right the fuck now, I lack the control to be gentle. Not to mention, I didn't anticipate this, so I don't have any condoms."

I should be relieved. The whole situation was insane, but the truth was I wanted him. I had from the first kiss.

I cleared my throat, stalling for time. "And if I'm not asking for gentle?"

Ever so slowly, he removed his arm, turning to face me. His gaze was intent and his voice low when he asked, "What are you saying, Daphne? Are you asking me to fuck you?"

I talked about being brave all the time, but I was hiding from my life. Sometimes afraid to take what I wanted. I knew it was now or never. "Yes, I want you to fuck me. And I'm on the pill."

I could barely believe those words had come out of my mouth, but it had been a long time since I had felt so alive.

"Then let me give you what you need," he said, his voice dark and hypnotic. His hands grabbed my hips, and I felt the warmth of his breath as he leaned forward to press his lips against mine. His tongue slid in possessively, stealing my breath. I moaned as he deepened the kiss.

"You will feel every thrust and every touch," he murmured. "I won't stop until you scream my name."

He kissed me again, deep this time. His mouth, tongue, and teeth an onslaught to my senses. One hand wrestled with my tank until he finally gripped it down the middle and tugged, the sound of ripping fabric filling the room.

He palmed one breast, moaning into my mouth as his thumb and

forefinger found my nipple. With each tug, I arched my back, begging him to take more.

His other hand tangled in my hair, and I opened my thighs wider as he pressed up against me.

His mouth left mine and trailed slowly down my neck and chest, stopping to suck and pull at my nipples. His hand left my breast and traveled down, resting at the top of my thigh before slipping downward.

His fingers brushed against my clit, and I gasped at the sensation. His tongue lashed against my nipple as he teased me, and I shuddered, moaning his name. And then he stopped, pulling away with a smirk.

"You like this, don't you? Your tits are so bloody sensitive. I bet you can come just from me teasing them, can't you?"

How did I even explain that I'd only ever been like this for him. "N-no. Just for you."

"Say it again, hell cat," he breathed, honey dripping from his words.

I pinched my eyes shut, and I said it. "Just for you."

He growled, the sound sending a thrill of pleasure through my body. "Eyes open."

I blinked, meeting his gaze, the intensity of it searing me to my soul. He used his knee to nudge my thighs further apart, and when I was splayed before him, he dropped his forehead to mine. "Be sure, Daphne."

I swallowed hard and lifted my hips, seeking his heat.

"Fuck me," he whispered, taking my hands into one of his and securing them above my head firmly.

He rocked his hips, the tip of his cock grazing my entrance. "You feel so damn good." I gasped, my body arching at the sensation as he pushed the tip inside me.

Christ, he was thick. So big.

I squeezed my eyes shut and he halted.

"Eyes open," he commanded, the intensity in his voice causing my eyes to

snap open. Our gazes met, and he thrust hard, taking me entirely. I moaned as he filled me, deepening the connection between us. His hands grasped my hips, kneading and demanding, pushing and pulling me against him as his hips moved

I mewled, my legs shaking as he delved deeper, inch after inch. And then he was fully seated inside me, and I was panting.

His eyes were silver in the moonlight, glittering with intensity, and then he moved. Long, slow thrusts that filled me up, stealing my breath. I dug my nails into his back as I wrapped my legs around him, desperate to hold on.

He started slow, his thrusts measured and gentle at first, but when I squeezed him with my inner walls, he shoved a hand into my curls, tugging my head back. "Naughty thing. No trying to make me come too quick."

Then he increased his pace, and soon our hips were slapping together in a frenzied rhythm. With each thrust, he sucked my lower lip, then nipped at my jawline or my neck before coming back around to claim my mouth.

He whispered dirty things against my lips as his hips pumped faster and faster. "Come for me, baby. Take my cock like a good girl."

I gasped. I knew he was close, and I wanted to make it good for him. I tightened my grip on him and pushed my hips, grinding against him. His movements became even more frenzied, and I heard the low rumble of pleasure he was trying desperately to contain.

My body was on fire, and I was oh so close, each thrust pushing me to the peak of pleasure. It felt so good, and I wanted it to never end.

"Say my name," he commanded, and I screamed it as I tumbled over the edge. My inner walls clenched around him as I shuddered, my body racked with pleasure. He was close, his movements becoming erratic as his orgasm grew. His grip on my hips tightened, and he murmured my name as he drove deep.

And then with one more thrust, his body went rigid as he came, filling me with jets of his hot cum. He shuddered and collapsed on top of me, our

mutual panting filling the room.

He rolled us both over before kissing me softly and easing out of me. I hissed at the friction, and he frowned. "I'll be right back, kitten."

I dragged the sheets around my naked body, too exhausted to think about any ramifications right now. I'd save that for the morning, but right now, I was too sated to worry.

When Drake returned, he had two washcloths. "Drop the sheet, kitten."

I hesitated, but he didn't bother to wait for me to catch on, tugging at linens. "There is no universe in which we don't do that again. And next time, I'll take more time, so I'm going to see every inch of you. No point in covering up."

Narrowing my gaze, I loosened the sheet. "We'll be doing this again?"

His eyes darkened when they met mine. "Yes. Because not only are you mine to protect, you're mine now."

He eased one of the washcloths against my pussy, gently wiping away the sticky mess he'd left, the warmth of the cloth soothing the sting.

"You licked me, so now I'm yours?" I giggled.

"Something like that."

He tossed one of the washcloths onto the night stand.

"What's the other one for?" I asked.

His smile was crooked as he forced my thighs apart once more, placing a cool cloth against my aching core.

"Oh!"

When he eased between my thighs again, I watched him dubiously. "What are you doing?"

"Making sure the last thing you remember about our first time together is pleasure." Then he shifted the washcloth and planted his lips over my clit... and sucked.

DRAKE



I COULDN'T WIPE THE SHIT-EATING GRIN OFF MY FACE. I'D LEFT DAPHNE IN the shower and come down to scrounge up some breakfast for her.

But it seemed I wasn't early enough.

"Judging from all that creaking last night, I assume you two overcame your differences?"

I whipped around from the stove. "Jesus, old man, you have the reflexes of a cat and the feet of a ninja. Also, I don't kiss and tell, Reginald."

He drank his coffee and smirked at me. "And lucky for me, I like long walks."

I smirked and shook my head. "It was unexpected."

He gave me a nonchalant shrug. "Hey, I don't judge. I'm glad you two have come to an understanding."

"Yeah, well, I'm still determined to keep her safe."

He took another slow sip of his tea. "Do you have a more concrete plan for Massimo?"

I flipped the eggs and turned to him. "Daphne and I were talking, I think he's been after her because of her job primarily. I think she has access to data

he needs. The only way to know for sure is to get that ledger. He needs her. I can draw him out, but I want insurance for her first."

He sighed. "So tomorrow is still on then?"

He hated the idea of me going into the field without back up. "Yeah. I want you to keep an eye on Daphne, while I follow my hunch. If I don't come back in forty-eight hours, execute pinnacle protocol." Pinnacle protocol was a whole background work up complete with false ID's, bank accounts, etc. I had that contingency for her in case I fucked up and failed.

"I will guard your treasure with my life. You know, there was a time when I was just like you."

"Oh, really? You haven't always been this overbearing, too strict, fatherly type?"

"Lad, there's no being too strict with you. You just looked for trouble all the time."

"Yeah, I was a slippery little cunt, wasn't I?" I chuckled.

"Yes. You are also a damn good son."

The warmth of his statement spread through my chest. I shrugged and gave him a smile. "You're a half-decent father. I'll give you that."

"Well, Jasmine and I did our best."

I smiled at the memory of Jasmine. She was the first person since my mum died who had thought about giving me a hot breakfast. Uncle Charlie, well, he had fed me, but mostly cold cereals or convenient shit like Pop-Tarts. There was occasionally a fruit or two thrown on the plate. But Jasmine made sure I had warm oats, eggs, sausage, bacon, and lots of fruits. Uncle Charlie had tried his best, but he wasn't one for the warm and fuzzy. He had a great housekeeper, but most of the good times I remembered were in Jasmine and Reginald's house. It always felt like home.

I plated the eggs and checked on the bacon. "I do care about her, you know?"

He chuckled low. "You think I don't know that? Please. You wouldn't

have brought her here if you didn't care for her. You wanted her looked after. And after all, this is your home."

I frowned at that. "I could have easily taken her to the condo."

"Yes, and the condo is, um, fine."

I turned to raise my brow. "What does that mean?"

"Lad, that condo is dry. Dry, dry, dry. It might as well be a hotel. Not a picture in sight. It's like no one actually lives there."

"I live there."

"Do you, though? It might as well be a safehouse as far as you're concerned."

"It's just a place to lay my head. It doesn't mean anything."

"And that's exactly it. She would have been safe, but not looked after. Whenever you need looking after, you come here."

"Not true."

He just chuckled. "Boy, when are you going to realize you need family as much as the next person?"

An image flashed in my head of me and Daphne holding hands, Reginald holding a brown cherub that had Daphne's smile. That was a thing that could happen.

Except you're going back into the field.

Field agents didn't get families.

"Fine. I need to get the banking information to get answers. And while taking that ledger, the key to him taking over The Syndicate, it'll make him well ticked. And emotional people make poor decisions.

He sighed. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Regardless of what's going on, I have to make it safe for her. Because in the end, when she's done with me, she needs to be able to go home. She has to walk away from this intact. I would never forgive myself if..." I didn't finish the statement, almost half afraid that I could call it into being. "I'm going to make it safe for her, so she can go home."

He studied me. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but you want her."

"Yes, I do. But do you think this life is good for her? She needs family. It's written all over her. She *deserves* family. I can't give her that."

Reginald shook his head. "You're so close, but you still don't get it, do you?"

"What does that mean?"

"Lad, you both need family. She's just the one smart enough to know it."

"I have family. I have you."

"You do. But you can have so much more."

I shifted on my feet and turned off the stove, taking the bacon off the heat. "I have what I need, and I'm close to getting what I want. Getting back in the field."

"What about what you *really* want? When you think about yourself five, ten, fifteen years from now, will you still be in the field?"

"Yes."

"Right. Deep cover, fraternizing with the enemy to take them down?"

I didn't like his line of questioning. "I'm good at it."

"Boy look me in the eye and tell me you don't feel something for that woman upstairs. I know you."

I did. And the idea of leaving her was already burning a hole in my chest. And I didn't like that.

"It's better for her if I stay away."

"I'm pretty sure I didn't raise an idiot. I have several distinctions of yours proving that I didn't raise an idiot, but here you are, being an idiot."

"What am I supposed to do, Reginald? If she stays with me, she'll get hurt."

"It doesn't have to be like that."

"I'm keeping her safe. Right now, the safest place she can be is with me. But when that's resolved, she needs to stay very, very far away."

"Sure, boy, if you say so. But she's a grown woman who can decide that

for herself. Don't you go making decisions for her."

Daphne's footsteps coming down the stairs stopped our conversation. She had a wide smile for Reginald and a shy one for me. Considering the way I'd made her come repeatedly, the shy smile was unnecessary.

Tread carefully. You don't get to keep her. What the fuck was that? Keeping her? Having one person in your life you worried about as bad enough. And Reggie could look after himself. I didn't need that pain and hassle. What the hell was wrong with me?

When this was all over, I was going back into the field.

She was wearing a soft sweater in that beautiful marigold color. She'd paired it with jeans, her hair held up in a high puff, a few curls cascading around her face. "I knew I smelled bacon." She hesitated. "Good morning, Reginald. You're up early."

He nodded. "Good morning, love. It was a lovely morning, so I woke up early and went for a walk down to the forest. I picked some truffles."

She moaned with delight. "Truffles, wow."

"I'm thinking of making some truffle chicken for dinner tonight."

Her stomach grumbled. "Ugh, Reginald, you are talking to my stomach now."

"I love a girl who likes to eat. I didn't make breakfast this morning, but I think you can make do with what he's making."

"Hey, you taught me to cook," I grumbled. For some reason it felt important that Daphne knew I had other skills besides fucking and killing.

But you're so very good at both.

"Sure, I did. I still have yet to see you make a simple dinner since you've been here."

"Old man, you're constantly busting my balls."

Daphne gave me a shy smile as she went to the cabinets to pull down the plates. "Thanks for breakfast."

I grinned at her while Reginald studiously made himself busy pouring

another cup of coffee. I leaned down and brushed my lips over hers. I'd meant it to be quick. Light. But the moment our lips touched, I wanted more.

Her eyes went wide as her gaze darted to Reginald, and then I very purposely pulled her into my hips, looped a thumb through her jeans, and pulled her close.

"I'm not letting you hide." Then I kissed her fully. Tongue and everything. Her body eased against mine immediately. And that craving, that hole in my heart that had been a constant companion for too many years, once again started to fill. It was so easy with her.

Reginald cleared his throat, and I released her slowly.

There was no way he was ever letting me forget this.

Daphne had a soft pink flush on her cheeks. Hard to tell with her coloring, but I knew it was there.

Reginald just gave her shoulder a squeeze and took the plates from her, and she went to get the utensils. And then we sat down and had breakfast like a bloody family.

Goddamn it.

Reginald started asking her questions about her sister's wedding. And that was when my phone rang.

Drake

"WHAT PART OF *KEEP YOUR HEAD DOWN AND DON'T DO ANYTHING RASH* DO YOU not understand?"

Gabe Webb.

He'd been clear when he pulled me out of that hell hole that I was supposed to lay low. I hadn't exactly listened.

"It's been a long time since someone admonished me like a teenager,

Gabe. Please do your best. I probably won't listen any better than I did back then.'

If I was being honest, I should have expected the call.

The man wouldn't have been very good at his job if he'd saved my life a few months ago and then just left me in the ether.

I'd expected him to be watching me. And most of the time I'd been careful. But when Igno didn't react when I took Daphne off the board, I had to step it up.

I needed to force him into an error.

After weeks of research, I had already guessed that he wanted something Daphne had access to. And since she didn't *know* what it was, things were about to get a little more dangerous.

It would be one thing if she knew what to protect, what to keep hidden. It was quite another that she still didn't know what he was looking for.

Of course, there was also the fact that she was damn beautiful and I wanted her all to myself. That made the situation a powder keg.

The last few days she'd been with me, I'd been digging deep into Baines's files. I had narrowed down the likely targets for Igno to three clients. All of which Daphne worked on. Her boss, Christopher, wasn't as good as she was. He didn't have the technical background.

He'd been hired for business development. So for the most part, he didn't even know how to access the sensitive data, and that made him a useless target. The other transition manager, Adam Bailey, was a possibility. But from my research, as far as I could tell, Igno wasn't interested in Bailey. And frankly, Daphne handled more high-profile clients. They asked for her by name.

She was good at her job. There was no denying that. So her client files were the place to start.

I took a look at the most secretive, high-profile clients with the most creative bank records. The ones with more offshore accounts and hidden shell

companies rolled up under them. I'd narrowed the list down to three. That meant I needed to have a looky-loo around the companies and where they kept their primary assets. That would require physical access.

While I was worried about Massimo's money trail and exactly what he was looking for from Daphne, I was also worried about something else. Something Gabe had said when he was hunting down Igno Senior earlier this year.

Massimo's father, Antonio, had a set of documents that contained the names and dealings of everyone in the Syndicate. Basically, his terrorist Ledger.

But after the Rogues had retrieved both the Ledger and the cipher, they discovered that they still couldn't identify the names of all the Syndicate members. There was another piece. A secondary cipher.

While Massimo had taken over his father's role, it probably only gave him access to another level in the Syndicate to know who these people were. To get access to them, he would need this secondary cipher.

If my hunch was right, one of Daphne's clients was Syndicate and they had the cipher. Antonio Igno had been a key part of the Syndicate for so long. But often, he'd acted against the Syndicate's best interests, seeking to elevate his own position.

Many of us in the intelligence community had wondered if and when they would ever try to take him out.

And when they hadn't, it had occurred to me, at least, that he had something on them. Cue the ledgers.

If he held those over their heads, they couldn't touch him. But they could certainly take him off the field in other ways.

Even when he had been taken off the map by the Rogues, his son had appeared like a bad penny, eager to prove himself and with no compunction about how these things were done.

Massimo was reckless and bloody. He'd already proven himself deadly.

Which meant that innocent people like Daphne would be caught in the crossfire.

For now, my job was to keep her off the board. If Igno wanted something from any of her three suspicious clients, one thing was for sure; he would need Daphne to access the data.

My job was to get to the data before he did. That would certainly force him out into the open. And then I was going to take that motherfucker out and get my goddamn job back.

The problem was that singular focus of mine was now blurred and laced with images of Daphne, of needing to keep her out of this. I had to keep her safe.

This wasn't just about getting back in the game. This wasn't about taking down the Syndicate. This was about keeping her away from Igno. For her safety.

Careful now.

I wanted her. Even now, as Gabe read me the riot act over the phone, my eyes drifted to her and that pull somewhere deep in my chest ached with the need to be near her. To hold her close and use my body to shield hers.

The urge to protect her, to hold her, to cover her body with mine, not just to claim, but to protect. It was more than wanting her. Terrifyingly, it was the urge to give her everything that prevailed. All she had to do was ask.

Gabe's voice was tense. "Running off without any backup. Do you realize how colossally stupid that is?"

"Yeah, I have an idea. After all, I feel like I've given you that advice before."

"This is not about me. This is about you. I told you to lay low. Instead, you're running around stirring up a hornet's nest. You're going after Igno."

I almost had to grin. "Did you really expect anything else? He ruined my life. Not to mention he's dangerous. You and I both know him to be weak and ineffective. But you don't understand. I saw his men kill a young girl for no

reason. He had his men gut her like a fish to send a message to her father. There are rules to these games."

Sure, family got kidnapped. Family got murdered sometimes but usually for a reason. Not on a whim. Not because someone was bored.

"Mate, look, I know. But you going after him alone is unwise. I've had Rook check your movements. You've gone off the grid. Where are you?"

There was no way I was going to give him my location. "Somewhere safe."

I could almost see him pursing his lips. "So, you're with Reginald. For an old man who says he's out of the game, he finds a way to stay in and keep his skills fresh. Even my people can't find him."

"And I'm pretty sure that's the way he wants it," I muttered. "I'm not telling you anything, so you might as well let it go."

"Fucking hell. At least tell me if you have a good lead. I can help you."

I could tell him that much. At least he would know that I wasn't doing this for nothing, that this wasn't just about revenge. "I have a lead on the last piece of the Ledger and the secondary cipher. I think I have it."

There was a muttered curse on the phone, and I could almost see him sitting up straighter. Maybe standing up to pace. "Where the hell is it?"

I chuckled at that. "Like I'm going to tell you, so you can sweep in and take it from me before I can actually use it. Don't be daft. When I'm done with it, I'm more than happy to turn it over. After all, I'll be back in the fold by then."

"Don't fuck with me, Drake. We can help each other."

"I don't need your help."

He sighed. "Everybody needs help from time to time. You're not alone, mate."

I looked back at Daphne. "Maybe not, but either way, I'm not letting you touch this until it's over."

"At least tell me what you're doing with the woman. I can't find her

either."

My stomach tightened. Gabe knew about Daphne. Had he been that close and I just hadn't noticed?

"Nothing. The woman is none of your business, Gabe. Leave her out of this, or I'm going to get very, very cranky. I'm going to hang up while I still remember that we're mates. But if you get in my way, I'll shoot first and ask questions later.



MY DAYS WERE NUMBERED, AND I WAS COUNTING DOWN. MY BRAIN KEPT trying to go back to Daphne even though I had a mission to complete.

This was the problem when you started to care about people. They started to worm their way under your skin. This mission was a step closer to taking Massimo off the board. I had to focus.

I stood on the pavement outside Whitmore bank. I knew from Gabe and Liam that Whitmore Bank was where Massimo Igno was getting his cash from, so I needed to go inside and have a look-see. Which meant going in as a potential client. I'd get a tour.

As I walked in, I was met by Noah Pratt, the Vice President. "Mr. Foster." I nodded and smiled. "Yes. Drake Foster. Just call me Drake."

"We are excited to talk to a client of your caliber. We obviously have done our homework on you, and we would love the opportunity to work with you."

"Thank you."

As he prattled on and talked about how long the bank had been in existence, when it was built, and the architect who designed it, I only half

listened. I knew everything about this bank. I'd spent days pouring over it already. After all, never walk in somewhere unprepared.

He led me upstairs to the offices that had a beautiful corner view that looked over Westminster. "So, how might I help you?"

I started my story with confidence. "I'm looking for a bank for my new endeavors. Import-export. I have sent my portfolio over already. You're aware of the kind of business that we do. It is, however, selective and private. What I'm looking to have your bank do for me is offer a level of discretion."

Banks like this that had shady-as-fuck clients loved the word *discretion*, which meant *keep my shit in an offshore account where no one could touch it*.

"Of course, sir, we specialize in discretion. We have several banks all over the world. Obviously, the Cayman Islands are not nearly as discreet as they used to be, but they do offer a variety of options. Our home office is in Switzerland. Many of our clients choose that route."

He went on and on, and as he talked, I planted a bug. I walked over to the window and installed the compression tape that I would need for later. It would be used to dampen the movement that might set off the alarms when I came back and needed to get onto the computer.

Above his desk was the vent I was going to use for the most dangerous part. I would be in the vent for quite some time, leading all the way down to the vault. The vault room had all kinds of fans, security measures, and lasers I'd have to get around. It was the temperature control that I was going to have a hard time with.

"I'd like to take a tour of the vault if possible."

"Of course."

As he stood, I placed the next device directly under his laptop. It was a cloning device that would work all day copying his files. That's all I'd have to retrieve tonight when I came back. I would get all the information that I needed.

Luckily, the layout of the building was very simple. No major surprises. The vents would be a tight squeeze, but I could manage it. And then, at least I would have a paper trail of Massimo's money. Someone was funding him. The question was, who? Who had the juice to get me burned?

Massimo had money from his father, but without the Ledger, his funds were limited. More in the millions than the billions range. If Massimo was making a play to beef himself up in the Syndicate, he would need a lot more than that.

Noah chatted with me amiably as we toured. He very helpfully showed me where all the cameras were. As we went down to the vault, he pointed out key features. "I know we have some lens balls, but I promise you, we have state-of-the-art security. In the evenings, when we don't need access to the vault, you see those lines right there? That's where the lasers are. And as you can see, in there is our temperature control monitor. It's very simple. If there's a person there, the temperature increases. And then, of course, there's the vault itself, with 64-bit encryption. Your money and your information are safe here."

As he led me to the marble banquette where depositors could open their boxes in private, I nodded and forced my brain to ask a list of questions that I had come prepared with. About how many people banked here. Capacity. Privacy. I was more than grateful that I was able to focus on more than one thing at a time.

I had an inch-thick tabular canister designed by Matthias Weller from Blake Security, a firm in New York. I'd already prepped to turn it on at 6:00 p.m. When the bank closed and it would begin lowering the temperature. So when I waltzed in here, straight into the vault, the room would be far colder than usual already. My body temperature wouldn't set anything off.

I was laying out the plan. All I had to do tonight was execute.

"Well, Mr. Pratt, I am thrilled to have been able to get this meeting done today. Thank you for the tour of the bank."

"Thank you. I look forward to seeing you again."

And as I let myself be escorted out, I chuckled under my breath. "Oh, I will be back, but you won't be seeing me."

DRAKE



I PARKED SEVERAL BLOCKS FROM THE BANK, HAVING ALREADY SCoured THE area for gaps in CCTV. Staying low, I stuck to the shadows in the alley. I was a block from the bank when I realized I had a tail.

Motherfucker.

I could be wrong, but it was unlikely. That feeling, the one I'd gotten accustomed to in all the years of fieldwork, had been dogging me for about half a block now. Like feeling eyes on me somewhere along the way.

No, I was certainly being followed. *Fuck.* Had I gone wrong somewhere? Had I exposed Daphne at some point?

I took a left into an alley, scurrying up on top of a garbage bin and up a fire escape, pressing my body into the shadows. And then I waited, not daring to breathe lest it disturbed the mist of the rain around me. I didn't see anyone. My shadow was clever. They were very, very good.

Or you're fucking paranoid and there's no one there.

No, I knew someone was there.

I had an alternate route. It wasn't ideal because it put me at the back of the bank, and scaling that side of the building would be a pain in the arse. Plus, if

I crossed that street, the whole block of CCTVs was on, and I'd have to go over the buildings.

No, I wanted this route, but I would take that one if I had to use it.

I went up and over the fire escape, going down on the opposite side of the building, crossing the street and making another sharp left as I headed back to the bank. No one was following me now. That much I knew. And as I made a right toward the bank, in the shadows behind the building where the employees parked, I heard the click of a gun, and I knew without a doubt exactly who had been tailing me.

"Who the fuck told you I was down here?"

Gabe Webb shrugged. I turned swiftly, blocking the gun and disarming him. With a sharp grin, he procured another gun, and suddenly, we were both standing there pointing guns at each other. "What the fuck?"

"I was hoping to tranq you before you did anything truly stupid."

I shook my head. "You're not stopping me, mate. Reginald told you my plan? That old man does worry about everything I've been doing lately."

Gabe shook his head. "No. But how is the old geezer anyway?"

"If it wasn't him, who was it?"

Gabe just chuckled low. "You think I'm an Ops Director for the Rogues for no bloody reason? After the round of questions you were asking the other day, I had Rook work his magic with search histories and phone logs. You used your phone once to call Liam. Imagine my surprise to learn you weren't, in fact, in Spain. Then of course there was your little visit here last week. You were caught on CCTV. You weren't even hiding."

I shrugged. "Should I have been?"

"Is that a real question? A series of checks and I could tell exactly what you were doing. Imagine what Massimo would do if he found you."

"I wanted him to know."

Gabe's brow furrowed. "So you're really trying to draw him out?"

"I'm trying to draw him out with something hopefully more important to

him than her."

Gabe stepped back, understanding dawning, "His money."

"Exactly. So, are we going to shoot each other in the bollocks, or are you going to let me go in there and do what I came to do?"

Gabe shrugged. "My wife is partial to my nuts. She will be irritated if you shoot them off."

There was a slight shuffle behind me, and I pulled my other gun out, pointing in the direction of the shadows.

A feminine voice with a slight hint of a South African accent clued me in to who had joined Gabe on his task. "*Tsk-tsk*, Drake Webster. Next time, I won't be in such a hurry to save your life. You owe me."

I shook my head. "I should have known it was the dynamic duo. You take your wife on fucking missions, Webb?"

Gabe chuckled. "Have you met Tabatha? She's almost as deadly as Saff, and there's no leaving her behind. It's like she's got a bloody cowbell tied around me. Every time I try to escape, there she is, waiting on me."

Tabatha stepped into the light and grinned. "Exactly. Like I said, you die, I die. We might as well go together."

He shook his head. "It makes it impossible to protect you."

She wrapped her long red ponytail into a tight bun after she tucked her gun away. "Are you two going to have a chat all night, or are we breaking into a bank?"

"The dynamic duo didn't come with backup?"

Gabe nodded his head. "Rook is in the van."

Tabatha handed me a small comm unit. "Stick that in your ear, pretty boy."

I winked at her. "I'm glad to see you're not ready to rearrange my face yet."

"The night is young," she quipped as she started to pull her backpack off and remove her climbing gear. "P.S., nice trick with the fire escape. That

little parkour action was very impressive."

I shrugged. "You're not a bad tail. I didn't see you."

"You didn't?"

"No. Just had a feeling."

She beamed. "You are slippery."

"And you are stealthy."

Gabe rolled his eyes. "If you two are done with the mutual admiration, can we get on with robbing this bank or what?"

Tabatha stood and then smoothed a hand through his hair. "Darling, you almost look nervous."

"We don't have a lot of backup, sweetheart. So I'd like to get in and out, preferably before the cops are called."

She laughed. "Please, you know Rook won't let that happen. The moment a call goes into our units, he's going to redirect them."

"True, but still, there are guards, so let's be fast about this, yeah?"

"I couldn't agree more."

We all had our own set of suction grips. And once I had the comm unit in my ear, I could hear Westin St. James's voice in my ear. "Ah, the villain. I'm glad you're here."

"Oh, someone's feeling smart."

"Yeah, I wasn't exactly thrilled about it. Saff doesn't even know."

I slid a glance over to Gabe. "So she's new Ops Command, and you still haven't told her?"

"We still have some things to debrief."

Fucking hell. That was going to be a war when it happened. "That's an understatement."

Tabatha waved her arms. "Yeah, that's going to be awful. I'm going to have to fess up that I've been holding a secret from her, but we have to have the meeting with her. It's only been a month since she took over. It's been a little busy."

"Yeah, but it's happening," Gabe agreed. "By the time we deal with Massimo, she'll know."

"Right. So look for targets on my back then."

He shrugged. "My sister is pretty level-headed. Most of the time anyway."

"Yes, I remember. Except when she threatened to kill me and cut off my balls."

We began the climb, and the ascent was grueling. We all had our climbing shoes on, but there were no knots. And we were headed to the bloody tenth floor.

I reached my destination only a hair ahead of Gabe, and Tabatha was right behind him. I had my laser out in seconds, bracing myself against one ledge and using it to cut an entry hole in the window.

Once I had one big enough for Gabe and myself, we both waited for Tabatha to climb through. She was responsible for helping pull us through. Gabe made me go first, and then him.

Once we were inside, Tabatha pulled out a machine I'd only seen once in the field. She waved the wand over the climbing grips, and a blue light shone on all of them. Then they all dropped to ten stories below, making a smacking sound as they hit.

I knew the polymer they were made of wouldn't break, but there were probably some divots in the concrete and gravel below.

"We'll find another way out of here," she said.

Excellent. I'd planned to rappel, but it would be interesting to see how they planned to leave.

Once in Pratt's office, I picked up the bugs I'd planted and then grabbed the cloning device from underneath his laptop.

It was lit green. All his files had been copied.

Gabe gave me a sharp nod as he and Tabatha stood watch at the door.

"That's what I would have done too."

I chuckled. "I'm so glad you approve."

The three of us went out the door and down the hall.

We reached the supply closet just in time as we saw the lights of the guards headed our way. I knew they wouldn't walk into the office unless they saw something disturbing, so we had some time.

Tabatha frowned. "How are we getting down to the vault?"

I grinned and pointed up.

Thanks to the schematic maps I had, I knew the vent that was in Pratt's office led along this hallway. It was far less risky for us to climb up here than in his office.

Turning a bucket over, I stood on it and removed the grate.

I was up and through in seconds. It was a tight fucking fit, but we'd make it work.

I didn't wait for Gabe or Tabatha. They were professionals, and they knew what to do. Working our way through the vents was grueling work. Some turns were hard to make, and it took a total of twenty minutes. But finally, we made it to the vent chute that led to the vault.

Bracing with my feet and my palms was rough work, but I finally managed to reach into my tool belt and pull out the cooling canister. I opened the grate and then dropped it down.

The dry ice quickly started to spread, cooling the room rapidly. The thermometer I'd pointed at the room finally read the temperature I needed, and then I let myself drop down to the ground.

Less than thirty seconds later, Tabatha was behind me, and then Gabe followed her. Tabatha gave me a nod of what I thought was appreciation, and she and Gabe took up their posts again at our likely egress.

The way the vault was designed, obviously, it should be locked from the outside.

No one ever assumed anyone would need to walk out of the vault. That would likely change. I went to the box that I needed and began drilling. My

watch buzzed, telling me we had exactly fifteen minutes to get the hell out of there before the temperature of the room became an issue.

It took me five minutes to get the box open. And then after that, it was easy. I reached in and pulled out the Ledger. The *final* Ledger.

And to be a wanker, I took all the cash and the passports, too. And then I put the box back. You could tell it had been opened, but not at first glance. I wanted him to have hope when he came back for it. My watch buzzed. "That's our cue. We have to move."

I stood on the table and groaned as I glowered at the vent. "This is going to hurt."

Pulling myself back up was more of a chore. But this was the plan. It had always been the plan.

It took us only fifteen minutes to make it back up to Pratt's floor before the next round of guards were coming. And then we had to use a decoder to get back into his office.

Two minutes to go. I could almost hear the guards with their flashlights walking the other way again.

"Come on, come on, come on, let's go. Fucking hell."

When the decoder flashed green, I muttered a curse and then all three of us went through the door, closing it quietly behind us. We hooked a knot around the heavy oak desk, and Tabatha went first, rappelling down the side of the building.

She shook the rope, and Gabe stared at me and said, "You next."

"Bullshit. You."

He crossed his arms. "No."

I narrowed my gaze. "Fuck you."

He flashed a grin. "Age before beauty."

"I'll remember this."

"Yeah, remember that I came to cover your arse."

"I don't owe you a favor for this. I could have done this on my own."

"You could have. But it's not wise to do so. You're not a lone wolf. Face it, we're family. Like it or not."

"No. Don't like it."

Gabe just smirked.

Once I was on the ground, I discovered Gabe was right behind me. And then he jostled the rope and it released. The only evidence that we had been there was the big gaping hole in the window.

Once we had our bags packed, we all ran to the end of the alley where a nondescript gray van waited. A smiling Westin St. James opened the side door. Westin was another Rogues agent I'd worked with before.

I gave him a nod in greeting. As far as most Rogues were concerned, I was the villain of their story. I was the bad guy. They thought I was locked up in a black site because of my involvement with The Syndicate. Gabe had known I was a deep cover agent for years. His wife had found out after I'd helped rescue them from a spot of trouble earlier in the year. As for Westin, he was the Rogues best hacker. But he thought I was one of the bad guys.

Westin cocked his head. "I have so many questions."

I shrugged. "Ask your boss."

He shook his head, "I fucking knew something was off. So let me guess. Not the devil incarnate after all."

I shrugged. "Yes, well, can we go now?"

As they drove me to my car, Gabe studied me. "You know we need that ledger you took from the vault."

"And as soon as I'm done with it, you can have it." If I was willing to fight dirty, I could take all of them. I'd rather not, but I could do it. He wasn't leaving here with it. I was.

Studying my face, Gabe sighed. "I guess there's no point in telling you not to go down this path?"

I shook my head. "No. No point at all."

Westin cocked his head. "You're going to need help with those files."

"If I need help, I'll call you."

The muscle in his jaw twitched. "Okay, then."

When we reached my car, I climbed out. "Thanks for the assistance that I didn't need."

Gabe shrugged. "Just a heads up, I talked to Igno Senior. He doesn't know what the hell his son is up to. He's very angry that the kid hasn't tried to spring him. So, like we suspected, Massimo has gone rogue, which means he's either trying to work his way up in the Syndicate, or he's the one taking them out."

"Noted. Thanks for the assistance."

"Anytime."

And in less than two hours, I was on my way back home to Daphne.

I was almost there when a text from an unknown number came through.

I know you have her, and I want her back.

DAPHNE



MY PALMS WERE SWEATY. MY HEART WAS NO LONGER BEATING IN A STEADY thrum but at a rapid, galloping pace. Why the hell had I agreed to this?

You agreed because you're trying to claim back some of your life. Not in a safe structured way, but in a way that actually makes a difference.

"Would you relax? Everything is going to be fine. Remember, everyone thinks that we've been at an event in Barcelona for a week."

"I still don't like it."

"Do you have any other ideas? We've been over the data that I collected the other night. Right now Tanashi looks like our culprit. So I need into that account. I just want to have a look around. We're not going to touch anything. I'm just making a copy, and taking a peek at the data. I didn't want you out in public, especially not since Massimo knows I have you. It's too risky, but I had no choice."

We walked into the Baines Data offices like we had every right to be there. All of this felt like somebody else's life. Suddenly, I didn't feel like me anymore. The job I had loved as of last week, the importance of it, the need for adventure... That woman just felt a million miles away.

Michael Knighting, our night security guard, lifted his head and grinned when he saw me. "Miss Winslow. Welcome back. Hello, Mr. Foster."

"Hi, Michael. I'm back a little early. I need to access some files though."

"Yeah, go on up. Nice to see your beautiful smile."

"Flatterer."

Drake scowled as we marched off. "You don't have to be so friendly."

I slid him a glance as we reached the lift. "If I'm not friendly, he'll notice. And I assume we don't want to stand out for any reason."

"Yes, you are correct," he muttered.

"Then fair enough. I'm being nice."

Drake scowled. "There's being nice, and then there's being *too* friendly."

"Are you honestly jealous of our security guard?"

In the lift, he gave me what looked to be a grimace. "You know what? Never mind. I'm just saying, you never smile at me like that."

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing. "To be fair, Michael has never kidnapped me."

"You're still on that, I see," he grouched.

I laughed and bumped him with my hip. I was surprised when he pulled me closer, locking my body against his as he asked, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, actually I feel fine. Just odd. My whole life went topsy-turvy ten days ago. Feels like a different me coming back."

"I know. And I walked into your life like a bloody tornado. I swear, I'll put it back the way I found it when I'm done."

How could I tell him that there was no putting it back. And not necessarily in a bad way. I'd just changed so much. I couldn't become that Daphne again. Somewhere between hiding in my room from Massimo, getting kidnapped by Drake, and starting to fall for him, I had become a completely different person. I couldn't just slap myself back into my old life.

"Now at least I'm being proactive. Before it was this scary thing of: this might just be my life and there's no stopping Massimo's obsession with me."

But this isn't about me. Or maybe not *just* me. This is about what he can *get* from me. So let's stop him from getting it or at least make him think that I don't have what he needs, and maybe he'll stop pursuing me."

I wished I could believe that. The problem was that Massimo didn't seem like the kind of man who left loose ends. I was worried I would be the ultimate loose end, but I needed to believe Drake wouldn't let him hurt me.

You have a lot of faith in a man you don't know.

The scary part was, I felt like I did know him.

Drake

I HAD ONE JOB, TO KEEP DAPHNE AS DISTRACTED AND CALM AS POSSIBLE.
"Tell me about Tanashi."

"Great client, kind, polite. Very precise about his data. It requires a two-factor authorization. He has basic data storage and he wants it protected. He's very particular and constantly wants us to test his firewall."

"Should he want his data out, how does he get it?"

"He has to come in. It's a two-factor authorization process. Both of us have to grant access for him to access the data."

"What happens if you're not here anymore?"

"I can give authorization to someone else. Usually, it's one of the owners of the company. Obviously, we can't access it without the client, and they can't access it without us. That means if they want access to their data, they have to come in. Or we go to them. Which explains why Massimo wants me at that meeting in Italy."

"Exactly. Show me the data setup, and maybe I can see what he's storing. Is there any other way in?"

"There's a brute force way to do it. But it's hard, and it requires data from

both the account owner and me."

"Okay, so with you alive and kicking, that means that they need you to get to this data."

"Yes. If they want to see the details, they need both me and Tanashi to download it. Each of us can look at a portion of the data, but most of it doesn't make sense without the other half. It's like looking at a redacted letter."

"But you can only look at it from inside the office?"

I nodded. "Yeah, that's right."

"What's to prevent you from taking a photo for example?"

"Well, nothing." She frowned, thinking about it.

"Perfect."

"But that's unethical."

"It is, but this is a matter of life and death. I want to know what it is that Massimo wants to know."

The lift dinged, and we were let out onto her floor. I watched her like a hawk as her fingers traced along the walls and she glanced around. "Is it okay that it feels weird to be here?"

"Thanks to some friends of mine, no one's going to catch you on CCTV. Because you still intend to work here after this is all over, let's just go ahead and do it from a different computer."

"I'll just type in my credentials and I can look at the raw data because I've been given clearance. But I won't be able to read it. I can only tell you what *kind* of data it is. It's all encrypted."

She went through the biometric and fingerprint scans. "And we're in. Without Tanashi, I can't see anything important. I certainly can't download it, but I can see the details. It looks like these are just names, but I don't recognize any of them."

As she scrolled through, I took photographs. It was just a list of names and accounts. It meant nothing to me until a familiar name popped up. "Wait,

right there, George Santiago."

"Who is George Santiago?"

The gnawing dread that had been swirling around for weeks solidified. "Fucking hell. Log out."

She did as she was told. "Why?"

"We have to go. Right now."

"What's going on?" She went toward the lift, but I pulled her down to the service exit.

"We're not going out the front way."

"We're not?"

"No, we'll take the service lift to the second floor, then we're going in the laundry chute."

"The laundry chute? Are you insane?"

"Maybe. But that name, George Santiago..." I tugged her along behind me. If there was some kind of alarm triggered when she went looking for information, I wanted her as far away from here as possible. "George Santiago is dead. As for Tanashi, someone tried to take him out two weeks ago."

"What?"

"He's alive. But I think it was Massimo Igno who tried to kill him."

"But why would he take him out? Tanashi is just a corporate raider. He's nothing special."

"Not to you, but to the Intelligence world, he is a member of the Syndicate." The service lift arrived, and I shoved her inside. I was on high alert.

She swallowed hard. "So Tanashi isn't exactly on the up and up if he knows who all these people are? And Massimo thinks that means I know who they are too?"

"Massimo is pulling a king-maker play. To some, it might look like he's trying to rise through the ranks. But no, he's taking them out. If he gets that

full list of names, he'll be even more deadly. He'll also be at the very top of the largest criminal organization in the world.”

“Jesus. What’s to stop him from coming after me again at that point?”

“Me. The Syndicate is a problem. We've been trying to take them down for years. Every time we get one name, or ferret someone else out, there are two more to replace them. But I plan to take down the whole thing, to collapse the infrastructure. Massimo is trying to keep the infrastructure, and we have a pile of dead bodies to prove it.”

"That's why you took pictures of the names?" she asked.

"Yes. I can get it to my people, which means I'm back in play."

"Oh, so you get to go back to being a spy."

"Yes and no," I hedged. "They know who I am, but now I know who they are, so at least I'm not going in blind anymore. But more importantly, this tells me who Massimo's targets are. If we can get ahead of him, we can catch him."

On the second floor, the lift let us out, and we marched quickly. We had ten minutes left before the cameras came back online, thanks to Rook, but we had no time to waste. When we reached the laundry chute, I opened it for her.

"Up and over."

"But it's dark. What if there's no basket?"

"There's a basket."

"Are you sure?"

"Do you trust me, Daphne?"

She bit her bottom lip. "Yeah, I trust you."

Then she climbed over, and down the chute she went. Despite being scared, she didn't make a sound as she went down the chute. "Good girl."

She used something to bang on the chute to let me know she was down, and I followed after her. Sure enough, there was a basket and I lay in a pile of towels. "See? All good."

"Yeah."

I helped her out, and we headed out the door. My mind was still buzzing and reeling from the data I'd gathered. All I had to do now was get to somebody before Massimo could access it. I'd send the names to Reina, and she'd have to put me back in. But somehow, getting what I'd ultimately wanted didn't feel like what I *really* wanted anymore. It wasn't about getting back into the game. I just wanted Massimo gone. I wanted to make sure that Daphne didn't have any reason to be afraid anymore. So right now, I needed to get home and at least start laying the groundwork to ensure her safety.

When she was safely tucked in my car, she grinned at me. "Hey, I sort of like this secret spy stuff. It's fun—"

She was cut off when the alarm started blaring, and I cursed under my breath. As I started the engine, I noticed a motorcycle at the end of the road, and the rider was putting on a helmet.

"Oh, fuck me."

"What? What is it?" she asked, her eyes wide.

"Massimo."

DAPHNE



MAYBE ME DRIVING WAS A BAD IDEA, BUT DRAKE THOUGHT IT WAS BETTER that his hands were free to shoot.

London's city streets sparkled in the cold, steady rain, their dark beauty amplified by the flood of adrenaline in my veins. Massimo wasted no time. Even before Drake could get his door closed, he fired a bullet, and I peeled out of our parking spot.

Sweat popped on my brow as I drove, the wheels skidding slightly as I took a turn too fast. My knuckles tightened on the steering wheel, trying to outmaneuver Massimo in the backstreets.

You can do this. You can do this. You can do this.

Drake kept a vigilant watch beside me and fired behind us, but Massimo dodged the bullets and stayed hot on our tail, hugging tight to his motorcycle.

I was familiar enough with the roads around my office, but as we got deeper into central London, I needed more assistance. Since it was so late at night, I didn't have the added benefit of getting lost in traffic.

And with every turn I made, the quiet night was shredded by the relentless roar of his engine and the pouring rain. We needed to shake him

off, fast.

As we fishtailed again, my teeth were clenched tight, and my heart threatened to jump out of my chest.

We raced through the shadowy, rain-soaked labyrinth of central London, windshield wipers working overtime. Drake seemed to have an uncanny grasp of these winding, narrow lanes.

"Where am I going?" I yelled over the engine's roar.

"Finding a way out!" he hollered back. "Just follow my lead!"

He directed me around unexpected bends and turns. My pulse pounded with each sharp corner, fearing Massimo might ambush us from the next bend. Yet no matter how we darted or twisted, his ominous silhouette loomed dangerously close on the bike.

Drake's voice was low and tight. "Left! Great Russell Street!" His shout barely cut through the rain. I swerved onto the street, barely registering the sign. Massimo, his headlight a sinister glow, followed suit.

As we neared the British Museum, Drake took a shot at our pursuer then directed me toward St. Paul's Cathedral. The majestic dome illuminated our frantic drive. We weaved through late-night traffic, my grip tightening on the wheel as the rain grew heavier.

Around the cathedral, Drake fired off more shots. For a moment, it seemed to work. Massimo fell back a bit. But we couldn't let our guard down.

"Millennium Bridge!" Drake's voice barely carried over the rain. The pedestrian bridge over the Thames wasn't made for cars, but Drake's determined gaze told me we had no other choice.

We raced across the rattling bridge, Drake retaliating with gunfire. Despite the rain, Massimo managed to keep up. A sudden idea hit me as I spotted a sharp turn leading to a narrow alleyway. "Brace yourself, Drake!" I yanked the wheel hard.

Our car screamed around the corner, tires squealing on the slick cobblestones. Caught off guard, Massimo lost control. His bike skidded,

throwing him into the cold Thames.

We didn't stop. Drake guided us to a hidden garage where we left the car. Catching our breath, we shared a sigh of relief, safe for now.

I could barely hear anything above the roaring in my ears. But something was very wrong with my hands. They were shaking. And I couldn't feel the tips of my fingers. Shaking was a bad sign, right?

Drake took my hands and warmed them in his. "Shhh. You're okay. We're safe now. He's in the river. Take a deep breath. Count it out with me. One, two, three. Good girl. Now release it slowly. One, two, three."

After several deep breaths, I started to feel like myself again as my brain functioning came back online.

"Oh my God, that was terrifying. Is this what it's like for you all the time?"

His smile was rueful. "Most times I do a lot of paperwork and watching. But sometimes, yeah."

Sometimes. Sometimes he was likely in far worse danger than this. My stomach knotted just thinking about that. "Okay, so what's next?" I asked, my voice shaky from the adrenaline still coursing through my veins. Drake exhaled slowly, looking out the rain-streaked window of the garage.

"We'll have to lay low for a while," he said, his voice heavy with concern. "Massimo won't forget this, and he'll be out for blood. But we'll figure it out."

This wasn't my life. How the hell had I ended up here? A week ago I'd never even seen a gun outside of television.

Drake turned to me, his dark eyes searching mine. "You okay?" he asked, his voice softening.

I took a deep breath and nodded, trying to steady my racing heart. "Yeah, I think so," I replied, my voice coming out more composed than I felt.

He smiled wryly. "You did good out there."

I couldn't help but grin back at him, despite the gravity of the situation. "I had a pretty good teacher."

Drake chuckled, and I felt a warmth spread through me. I knew I shouldn't be feeling this way, not when my life was in danger, but there was something about his calm, confident demeanor that was hard to resist.

"So what do we do now?" I asked, breaking the moment.

"We need to head back to the house," he replied, reaching for his coat. "We've got some planning to do."

Drake

TONIGHT HAD BEEN CLOSE. MUCH TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT. WE NEEDED A moment to catch our breath, to regroup, and to figure out our next move. I never thought I'd become the kind of guy who drew baths, but Daphne had a rough night and needed to relax.

Or you like her.

As I ran the hot water and bubbles, I smiled to myself. For a moment, all the danger had been forgotten. I was just happy to be able to provide Daphne the simple luxury of taking a bath.

With a shy smile, she dropped her clothes and threw a robe on, and all my worries came back. I was a man with no nation and no friends, and that could have gotten her killed tonight.

I watched her from across the room as she closed her eyes in relief. She looked so peaceful, and for a brief moment, I wanted everything this interlude promised. The quiet, the peace, the intimacy. In our own secret hideaway with no one else around.

Except this isn't a hideaway. She's here because you lied, used her desperation, and kidnapped her.

Reality came crashing back in, reminding me that we couldn't stay here forever. We still had to figure out what to do with all the information we had

gathered.

I poured some of her favorite bath salts into the water, and the lavender scent quickly filled the room. I dimmed the lights and lit a few candles, creating a soft, romantic glow. I had to admit, I was pretty good at this pampering thing.

I walked over to Daphne, who was sitting on the edge of the bed, deep in thought. "Hey, beautiful," I said, trying to keep things light. "I've prepared a little surprise for you." I extended my hand, and she took it without hesitation.

She looked genuinely surprised as she stepped into the bathroom. "Drake, this is amazing," she said, her eyes shining. "Thank you."

I grinned. "You've had a long night. I figured you could stand to relax. The driving probably made you tense." We undressed and stepped into the bath together, the warm water soothing our tired bodies. As we settled in, I could see the tension in her shoulders start to fade.

We sat there in comfortable silence for a while, letting the steamy water work its magic. But eventually, I knew we had to talk about the elephant in the room. "Daphne, I've been thinking," I began, hesitating for a moment. "I'm going to turn all the information we have over to the Rogues."

She looked at me, her brow furrowing. "You're serious?"

I nodded. "I started this with my own agenda, but now all I want is you safe. Tonight, you were almost taken, and I can't risk that happening again."

Daphne reached for my hand, her fingers lacing with mine. "And what about you?" she asked softly. "I want you safe too, you know."

I couldn't help but smile at her concern. "Don't worry about me, kitten. I've got a knack for getting out of tight spots."

She raised an eyebrow, and her voice took on a teasing tone. "Oh, really?"

I snorted. "Okay, so maybe I've had a few close calls. But hey, I'm still here, aren't I?"

She laughed and splashed water at me playfully. "True. But seriously, Drake, we're in this together. I don't want you taking unnecessary risks for me."

I sighed, knowing she had a point. "I know, Daphne. But I can't help it. I care about you more than I've ever cared about anyone."

She leaned in, pressing her lips to mine in a tender kiss. "I care about you too, Drake. We'll figure this out together."

As we kissed, I could feel the weight of the world lifting from my shoulders. With Daphne by my side, there wasn't anything we couldn't handle. We had each other's backs, and that was all that mattered.

We spent about an hour in the bath, letting the warm water envelop us as we talked, laughed, and shared stories of our pasts. It was the first time in a long time that we'd allowed ourselves a moment of respite from the dangerous world we'd been navigating.

Eventually, the water grew cold, and we reluctantly climbed out of the tub, the night's events having left us both exhausted. As I wrapped a fluffy towel around Daphne, she leaned in for another kiss, and it was like electricity passing between us.

"Thank you," she whispered against my lips. "For tonight, and for everything."

I hugged her tightly, not wanting to let go. "I'd do it all again in a heartbeat, Daphne. As long as you're with me."

We moved to the bedroom, where I pulled back the covers and gestured for her to climb in. She obliged, curling up under the soft sheets with a contented sigh. I joined her, wrapping my arms around her as she drifted off to sleep, our bodies entwined.

As I lay there, listening to the steady rhythm of her breathing, I couldn't help but think about our future. The road ahead was still uncertain, and there was no doubt that we'd face more challenges along the way. But for the first time in a long while, I felt hopeful.

We were a team. And together, we'd take on whatever life threw at us, rogue or not.

Drake

THE MORNING SUN PEEKED THROUGH THE CURTAINS, CASTING A GOLDEN GLOW over the room. I stirred from sleep, a rare, dreamless sleep I had only been able to achieve with Daphne in my arms. It filled me with a sense of peace that I hadn't felt in a long while. Even the nightmares and half-forgotten memories that normally kept me awake had been silenced in her presence.

I opened my eyes to the familiar sight of her, her long curly hair peeking out from under her silk scarf, and her delicate features illuminated by the soft light. She looked so beautiful, so at peace, that I almost felt guilty for disturbing her. I stayed still and watched her, breathing in the moment, until finally she stirred and opened her eyes.

When her gaze met mine, her face lit up into a smile that seemed to fill the entire room. I couldn't help but smile back, and I felt myself melt into her embrace as she reached out and pulled me close. Her breasts pressed into me and I palmed one, loving the feel of her. She was so damn soft everywhere.

I knew by now, one taste wouldn't be enough.

I trailed kisses down her neck, nipping at her skin and eliciting a gasp from her lips. "You taste too good, I need more," I whispered against her throat.

She wrapped her legs around me, pulling me closer until I could feel the heat of her core against my erection. "Then take more," she moaned, her fingers tangling in my hair.

I didn't need to be told twice. I slid down her body, leaving a trail of kisses and bites in my wake. When I reached the apex of her thighs, I used

my hands to part her thighs wide, taking in the view of her pretty pink and brown folds.

Fuck I loved that she was bare. Being able to see the moisture on her folds would never get old.

She squirmed under my gaze, "I want you to part your lips for me, Daphne. Show me how you like to be touched, kitten."

She gasped as she complied, parting her plump pussy lips, revealing the delicate pink flesh beneath.

I leaned in until my breath was hot on her skin. "That's it kitten. Show me how you like it. It's okay to let me see. I like teasing you like this, knowing how much you want this. Knowing that you feel so wet, wetter than you've ever been."

Christ, her fingers were so wet. Seeing how she responded to my words, my gaze, her fingers, seeing the extra layer of wetness on her lips, making my cock throb painfully.

"Oh my God, Drake."

"Now you know what to do. I'm going to eat this pussy until you come and come. If you're a good girl for me, I'll eat this perfect peach of an arse too. But my rule is, you don't stop working that clit. Even if I choose to help you, I want your fingers on your clit. Do you understand me?"

She gave me a little whimpering moan, which was all I needed to dive in. This was what I needed. My tongue traced around her lips, featherlight, until I found the center of her pleasure. I growled as the taste of her burst over my taste buds. The sweet, salty tang of her desire, so sweet that I could feel it all the way down to my cock.

I didn't think I could get harder than I already was, but I could feel my cock throbbing as her taste hit my tongue, and I knew I was going to have the hardest damn time not coming in my pants right there.

It wasn't just her taste that had that effect, either. Her reactions drove me wild. She moaned and writhed under my tongue, gripping the sheets under

her.

She cried out as I licked her slowly, teasingly, using my tongue to lap up her juices and fuck her pussy deep. Her fingers combed through my hair, keeping me in place as she rocked her hips, grinding against my tongue.

I pulled back, assessing the situation.

She groaned. "Drake, please."

"Don't fucking stop. Work that clit."

"I-I need your mouth back on me," she whimpered.

"I'll always give you what you need, Kitten. All you have to do is ask," I said, before I leaned down, digging my fingers into her thighs, and started in again.

She cried out as I licked her slowly, teasingly, using my tongue to lap up her juices and fuck her pussy deep. I moved my lips to her clit, flicking my tongue against the hard little bud and her finger. She tugged harder now, pulling erratically as I ate her out.

I took that as my cue to slip my hands under her hips and pull her towards me. My tongue flickered out, sliding down her slit, dipping into her core, tasting every sweet drop of her arousal. I dragged my tongue to her entrance and lapped at her slowly, savoring the moment. I wanted nothing more than to pin her legs back and fuck her senseless, but I wanted this to last, to be something she'd never forget.

When I began to circle her entrance with my fingers, she went crazy. She was so wet and tight, and I could tell from the way she was rocking her hips against my finger that it wouldn't take much before she came.

I dragged my finger in and out of her, fucking her slowly, aching to feel what it was like to be inside her.

I added another and she cried out, her fingers biting into my scalp. I lapped at her softly, urging her on, fucking her with my fingers, so eager to feel her come apart around them.

It was only a matter of time before she was writhing under me, her hips

bucking wildly. "Oh my God, Drake, oh fuck!" She cried out.

I didn't stop, she was still too close, too worked up, her fingers on her clit were too frantic. I wanted to feel her come apart on my tongue.

With a cry, she stilled, her body stiffening as she gripped my hair and tried to fight against the orgasm I was forcing on her. She let out a long scream before her muscles relaxed, and her body collapsed on the bed.

But we were far from done. Shifting her legs back, I focused my attention on the pretty rosette. I leaned forward and swiped my tongue across it, growling when she gasped in shock and tried to buck out of my grasp.

I licked her again, focusing on making sure her arse was drenched before I began to press my tongue against the tight opening. Slowly, I pressed forward until I was licking deeply, savoring the way she trembled under me.

"Oh, oh my God, Drake," she cried out, and I growled against her, loving the way she lost herself completely. I knew how much she loved it when she reached down and tried to hold my head in place, rocking wildly against my tongue as I fucked her tight hole.

As her pleasure built again, I felt her leg muscles tense, and she began to grind her hips hard against my tongue.

I pressed my tongue against her again, this time pushing past her tight ring. I was rewarded with a sharp cry and the frantic flicking of her fingers between her thighs.

"Work your clit, kitten."

"Yes, oh my God."

Slowly, I teased the opening with my tongue, swirling it around her entrance before I pressed my tongue inside again. I slid my tongue in and out of her slowly, fucking her with it. She was panting and squirming under me, careening toward another release.

"Please Drake! I'm so close."

I increased the speed of my tongue, fucking her arse faster. "Oh my God," she sobbed. "I'm so close, I can feel it. Oh please!"

I felt her flutter around my tongue, and I knew she was close. I wrapped my arm around her thigh and spread her wide, so I could watch her face as I tongue-fucked her tight hole. I wanted to see her fall over the edge again.

I pressed my tongue deeper, as deep as I could, wanting to feel her come around me. With a low groan, she arched her back and screamed as she came. Her entire body shook violently as she writhed under me, grinding her arse against my tongue.

"Good girl," I growled against her skin, and she moaned softly, her fingers still flickering against her clit.

She panted softly as she came down, and I crawled up the bed to kiss her neck. She was still flushed and panting when I nipped her again and again, until she finally relaxed and let me take over.

I grabbed her chin, gently but firmly, and held it up so I could lick at her neck. She moaned and reached for my cock, stroking it through her folds.

I kissed the hollow of her throat again, loving the way her hand tangled in my hair and pulled me closer with her legs.

I slid inside her slowly, groaning as her heat closed around my cock, drawing me in.

She cried out and dug her fingers into my shoulders. I thrust my cock into her sweet, tight pussy hard and fast, the force of my hips driving me deeper inside her. Her fingers dug into my shoulders and she gasped, meeting my hips, slamming against me.

Daphne tightened around me and I growled. She pulled that trick again, all the while her fingernails bit into my shoulders.

With a feral cry, I came hard, pounding into her and roaring as I did, my come shooting hot jets of cum deep inside her.

Beneath me, she went limp and I rolled us to our sides. I gently kissed her forehead, before attempting to get up.

"Where are you going?"

"To get you a washcloth. I think the two of us have made quite the mess."

Daphne's cheeks were flushed, her eyes shining. "I don't mind."

"Is that so, kitten?"

Her smile was quick. "That's so."

"Fuck you are so sexy," I whispered brushing a curl out of her face. "But you've forgotten the cardinal rule. You're the first to come...and the last to come."

She started to shake her head. "I don't think I can take anymore."

"Shhh, let me show you." I started at her neck, determined to give her just one more. Slowly I kissed my way down. Pausing at her nipples for a not-so-brief detour, finally landing between her legs again.

"God, kitten, you look so pretty with my cum dripping out of you." She gave a small yelp then struggled and tried to close her legs once she realized what I intended to do, but I wasn't having that. I used my shoulders to keep her legs and pussy splayed open.

"Drake, oh my God. What are you doing?"

"I'm going to clean you up and make sure I observe the cardinal rule." Then I leaned forward and licked, certain I would never have my fill.

All I heard after that were muttered curses and my name on her lips.

DAPHNE



IN THE MORNING, DRAKE AND I WERE HUDDLED OVER THE LAPTOP, THE smells of French toast, cinnamon, and coffee permeating the air with a strong and pleasant aroma when Reginald strolled in and turned on the kettle. "I see you two are still set on using Daphne as bait."

"I appreciate the concern, Reginald, but we need Massimo gone," I said. "He'll keep coming if we don't do something. And he's already interrupted enough of my life. I'd like to get back to living, so the sooner we can get rid of him the better. Drake thinks it's best not to wait until the auction. Massimo knows I won't miss Willow's wedding, so he'll come for me."

Reginald pressed his full lips together, and I could tell he was not mollified in the least. "Drake?"

Drake sat back and met the older man's gaze. "Right now, it's the most direct line to keeping her safe. I need to take him off the board now that I know what he wants in Daphne's head. I know who he's trying to target. The auction is a bad move. It will end poorly."

Reginald narrowed his gaze. "I still don't like it."

I reached for his hand and squeezed his strong calloused fingers. "I'll be

okay. And I want to see my sister."

Outside the window, a lovely English countryside spread before Reginald's old red barn. Inside the kitchen, multicolored stone and ceramic pots hung from above, and under the window a table was set with a cheery yellow and red tablecloth. The sight was such a contrast to what we were talking about. The colors were warm and inviting and made me happy. They made me think of a loud, boisterous family.

Instead, we were headed into the lion's den.

Honestly, it felt like the beginning of a low-budget action flick. The only problem was that I had no clothes to wear to the wedding or the reception, thanks to my kidnapping adventure.

"Drake, I have nothing to wear for the rehearsal dinner or the wedding reception. I had a look at what was left in Jasmine's closet, but it's all too big," I said, rolling my eyes. Like, could this whole situation be any more absurd?

He looked me up and down, a mischievous grin on his face. "Well, we can't have that, can we?"

Drake suggested getting something from a local store, but Reginald thought that would be too risky. He offered to drive into town and find something suitable, but Drake declined and said he'd take me himself.

Before I knew it, we were zooming through the picturesque English countryside in his sleek, black sports car. Drake really had a thing for shiny toys, and I couldn't deny the thrill it gave me. Soon enough, we were somewhere near Covent Garden pulling up to a swank boutique. The kind of place with valet parking. The kind of place I'd only ever window-shopped before.

"Drake, I can't afford anything in here."

"Good thing you're not buying, then. I'm the reason you don't have clothes, and if I'm being honest, the reason you're in this situation in the first place. So I'm buying. Now come on."

I followed him nervously, glaring down at my black jumper and leggings and trainers.

I needn't have worried though. As we entered, a saleswoman greeted us with the warmth of a long-lost friend. "Welcome to La Rêverie," she said, ushering us in. "May I offer you some tea or champagne?"

"Champagne, please," I replied, not missing a beat. I was already living my best life, so why not indulge?

Drake and I sipped champagne as the saleswoman brought out dress after dress for me to try on. Each one seemed more fabulous than the last, but they just weren't hitting the mark. I could tell Drake was getting a little impatient, but he didn't say a word, just sipped his champagne and waited for the fashion show to continue.

Finally, the saleswoman brought out a stunning red dress. It had a deep V neckline and bell sleeves, and it cinched at the waist before falling to the floor in a graceful cascade. The soft jersey fabric was luxurious to the touch.

As I stepped out of the dressing room, Drake's eyes lit up, and I could see the approval in his gaze. I gave him a little twirl, and he raised an eyebrow. "That's the one."

I grinned, feeling like a million bucks. "I thought you'd like it. It'll be perfect for the reception."

I felt like something was missing. Drake just continued sipping his champagne and watched with an amused expression on his face.

Finally, the saleswoman brought out a beautiful fuchsia-colored dress, and as soon as I put it on, I knew that it was the one. It fit perfectly in all the right places, hugging my curves without being too tight or too loose.

Drake let out a low whistle when he saw me in it. "You look beautiful," he said softly, and there was something in his eyes that made me blush.

As I modeled the dress, I couldn't help but notice the way Drake's eyes seemed to devour me. "You look like you want to eat me whole," I teased.

"That's because that's exactly what I'm thinking about," he shot back, his

voice low and sultry.

We shared a moment, our eyes locked in a smoldering stare, and I knew this was more than just a shopping trip. This was a game of cat and mouse, and I was more than happy to play.

I changed back into my regular clothes, and as the saleswoman rang up our purchases, I felt a strange mix of excitement and apprehension. We were about to pull off a dangerous scheme, and I would be dressed to kill. Literally.

The sun was setting as we left the boutique, the sky awash in shades of pink and gold. Drake held the door for me, his face betraying nothing of the charged moment we'd shared earlier. If I didn't know better, I'd think he was made of stone.

As we cruised back to the house, my mind raced with thoughts of the upcoming evening. What if our plan didn't work? What if Massimo saw through our ruse? And what would happen between Drake and me once this was all over?

"Daphne, listen," he began, his voice strained. "About your mother being at this wedding. What do you need from me? How can I help? I know your relationship is strained."

My heart squeezed. In the midst of danger, he still wanted to take care of my heart. "Drake," I said, my voice soft, "You don't have to get involved in that. It's between my mother and me. I'll just avoid her."

He shook his head. "No, it isn't. We're doing this together. And dangerous or not," he said, gripping my chin between his forefinger and thumb, "you're not alone."

I had never asked Drake for help before, but now I realized that I needed him more than ever. He was strong and brave, and he had already proven his loyalty time and time again. With a deep breath, I finally nodded in agreement.

"Okay."

Drake's expression softened and he stroked my cheek tenderly with his thumb. "I'll do whatever you need me to do," he whispered, and there was an intensity in his eyes that made me shiver with anticipation.

Drake reached over, taking my hand in his. "I promise you, Daphne, you'll be safe with me. I won't let her hurt you."

His words brought me a strange sense of comfort, and I felt a warmth spread through my chest. Somehow, I knew he meant it.

"Thank you, Drake," I murmured, giving his hand a gentle squeeze.

He smiled, his grip tightening around mine. "You don't need to thank me. We're in this together."

As we sat in the car, hands intertwined, I couldn't help but think about how far we'd come. From strangers thrown together by circumstance to partners, plotting to take down a dangerous man and navigating the treacherous waters of my family dynamics. It was a wild ride, but there was no one else I'd rather have by my side.

The sun dipped below the horizon, casting long shadows across the countryside.

But as we walked toward the house, Drake's phone rang, and the tension level instantly spiked. He glanced at the screen, his face turning ashen.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

He swallowed hard and shook his head. "Nothing. It's not important."

"Don't do that. I thought we weren't keeping secrets. Tell me."

With a sigh he turned his phone around. It showed a photo of my sister and Travis. "Massimo wants me to know he's got eyes on your family."

My head spun and I listed to the side, but Drake caught me before I hit the ground. "I need to call my sister."

Drake

DAPHNE WAS UPSTAIRS ON THE PHONE WITH HER SISTER, SO I TOOK THE opportunity to call in reinforcements.

As I paced the length of the kitchen, I knew I couldn't execute this plan alone. I needed backup. I dialed Gabe.

It rang only once before he answered. "I know. You miss me already. One of these days we're going to have to tell Tabatha about us."

"Cut the shit, Gabe. I need a favor," I said, cutting straight to the chase.

Gabe's voice turned serious. "What have you got?"

I explained the situation to Gabe, and he let out a tired sigh. "Christ, Drake, shit has gotten out of hand. I hate to ask this, but my last mission taught me to ask all the questions. Are you sure you can trust this woman?"

"Yes," I said without hesitation. "She's been a pawn in this. I need some backup. We're trying to lure Massimo out at a wedding rehearsal dinner, and I could use a team of four," I said, trying to sound casual.

There was a long pause, and I could practically hear Gabe's disapproval radiating through the phone. "You're using Daphne as bait, aren't you?"

I hesitated for a moment, torn. "Yes, but it's the only way we can guarantee he'll show up."

Gabe sighed. "Drake, I don't like this. I don't like it one bit, but I understand why you're doing it. I'll assemble a team of four. But be careful. We don't want anything happening to Daphne."

"Thanks, Gabe. I owe you one," I said, relieved.

As I hung up the phone, I couldn't help but feel a twinge of guilt. I didn't like using Daphne as bait either, but I couldn't see any other way to bring Massimo out into the open. And the fact that Gabe had agreed to help me put me slightly more at ease. Now the only thing standing in our way was time.

With the Rogues on our side, I felt a bit more confident that we could pull off this plan and finally stop Massimo from hurting anyone else again.

I hung up the phone and went to find Daphne, who had just finished her conversation with her sister. She turned to me with a questioning look on her

face as if she knew something was up.

"Everything all right?" she asked cautiously, eyeing me warily.

"Yes," I replied confidently. "We have backup to help us out."

"Do you really think that's necessary?" she asked hesitantly. "Can we trust them?"

"Yes," I said firmly. "Massimo isn't going away unless we fight back. I trust Gabe with my life. He's as solid as they come. Besides, I can't control the room, protect you, and grab Massimo all at the same time. It's a numbers game. We need the extra hands.

She ran her hands through her curls. "God, I wish none of this was necessary."

"I'm sorry this is happening. I know all you wanted to do was go home and enjoy watching your sister get married."

Daphne sighed heavily and nodded her agreement. She trusted that I knew what I was doing, even if she wasn't sure what it would entail.

We discussed the plan of attack over the course of the next hour, then made a few last-minute preparations.

Later that day, Gabe called me back. He had assembled a team of highly skilled operatives to provide backup. As we went over the plan, I couldn't help but worry about one particular member of the team... Saffron. After what I'd done, I wasn't sure if she'd be able to put her anger aside to help me.

"Are you sure Saffron's going to be okay with this? I don't want any problems," I said, voicing my concerns over the phone.

Gabe's voice was steadfast. "You let me worry about Saffron. You'll have your team."

Feeling somewhat reassured, we continued discussing the plan. We'd set up an ambush around the venue, ready to swoop in at the first sign of Massimo. And with Gabe and his team backing me up, I felt more confident than ever that we'd be able to bring him down.

As the conversation wrapped up, I knew we had a solid plan in place.

Despite my lingering guilt about using Daphne as bait, I was determined to protect her at all costs.

With the plan solidified, I ended the call with Gabe and took a deep breath.

I had a feeling things might get worse before they got better.

DAPHNE



THIS WAS A MISTAKE. SURELY IT COULDN'T BE TOO LATE TO TURN BACK. I could walk away from this. Go back to my life. I didn't have to subject myself to seeing my mother after all this time. But it wasn't like I could not show up for Willow. And Drake needed me here to draw out Igno.

Remember, you agreed to help him so that he would pay for Gran.

But that was before we shagged. Before we knew what Massimo wanted from me. Before I'd started to see Drake as more than the assassin he was.

Yes, but does he see you as more?

That was the million-dollar question that I had no answers for.

I stood in front of the vanity mirror and stared at my reflection, my hands trembling. I had put on the dress Drake had chosen, the fuchsia one that I thought captured the spirit of the evening without being too ostentatious. It had a satin bodice that draped over my waist, and the skirt cascaded down in graceful pleats. When I tried the dress on, he'd hissed his approval. Just remembering the way his eyes drank me in was enough to make my skin flush even now.

I wanted everything to be perfect for tonight, but even the dress couldn't

hide my apprehension.

Drake sat on the edge of the bed, watching me. "You look breathtaking, kitten," he said, his voice gentle and reassuring.

I bit my lip, forcing down the wave of nervousness that seemed to take over my body. "Thank you," I replied, my voice barely a whisper.

He stood up and walked over to me, his arm encircling my waist. "It's going to be all right," he said, looking into my eyes with an intensity that made my heart flutter. "You don't have to be scared. Everything will be fine."

I turned to face him, feeling more vulnerable than I ever had before. Tears welled up in my eyes as I tried to speak but failed. Drake pulled me into his arms and held me tight, his warmth radiating through me.

"What if I can't do this?" I asked, my voice trembling. "I thought I could, but my mother..." I trailed off, not wanting to bring her up anymore.

"You're strong enough. I know you are." He brushed a few strands of hair away from my face and gently kissed my forehead.

"You don't know her," I said with conviction. "I've been scared my whole life of her, of what she could do when she was angry."

"But you're not that scared little girl anymore, Daphne."

His words brought a wave of understanding and acceptance over me, and for the first time all day I was able to feel something other than fear. I nodded as tears silently streamed down my cheeks.

"I hate that I'm free of her and I'm still afraid," I whispered between sobs. Drake pulled me closer and held me until the tears stopped flowing and I felt strong enough again to stand on my own two feet.

"You are brave," he said softly, wiping the remaining tears away with his thumb. "And tonight is the night you get to be the brave person you are." He smiled at me reassuringly before taking a step back and offering me his arm.

But as soon as he wasn't touching me, the anxiety seemed to take over again. "I don't know if I can," I said, my voice shaking. I felt guilty for

putting Drake in this position.

"You don't have to do this," he said, looking at me with concern. "I can get Massimo another way."

But I shook my head. "I need you tonight," I said. "And I need this to be over. When it is, I'd like to see if this could be something," I added, referring to our relationship.

Drake's eyes softened and he pulled me closer to him. "I'm here for you," he said, placing a gentle kiss on my forehead.

I took a deep breath and straightened my shoulders. I could do this. For my sister and for myself. I looked up at Drake, feeling grateful for his support.

"Let's go," I said, and we made our way out of the bedroom.

As we walked down the hallway, I felt a sense of unease settle over me. What if something went wrong?

Drake must have sensed my worry because he stopped and turned to face me. "I'll keep you safe," he said, his voice firm. "From anyone and everyone who tries to hurt you. Anyone who does will regret meeting me."

Daphne

THE REHEARSAL DINNER WAS HELD IN A LAVISH BALLROOM, THE WALLS covered in ornate tapestries and sparkly chandeliers. It was a grand affair, and I felt a bit out of place. Still, I felt a strange sense of comfort in the warmth and buzz of the room, the chatter and laughter of family, friends and strangers alike.

I was determined to give Willow the best possible night. Surveying the room, I noted who was where, who was absent and needed to be checked on. I made sure the bar had everything they needed. But mostly, I just watched

my sister smile.

It had only been three weeks since I'd seen her, but I missed her so much. Normally we talked almost every day. I was a bit nervous about my speech, but I wanted to make sure that Willow and Travis were happy and relaxed.

I spotted the two of them in the center of the room, surrounded by their friends. They looked truly happy, like they didn't have a care in the world. I couldn't help but smile. It was a beautiful sight.

I could feel my mother's presence as soon as I stepped into the room. She had a way of ruining any event with just one glance, and tonight was no exception. I moved across the ballroom toward her table, prepared for whatever might happen next.

When I reached the table, she was already deep into her third glass of Chardonnay. By now, my sister Willow had caught wind of the situation and quickly pulled me away before anything embarrassing could occur. I rolled my eyes and whispered to Willow, "Mum's already working on her audition for *Drunk History*."

My sister just laughed and nodded her head in agreement. Instantly, I felt better knowing that Willow understood how our mother functioned in such a situation. We wandered around the room together for a bit, saying hello to guests and making sure everything was running smoothly.

Eventually it was time for my speech. I nervously took the microphone and tried my best to focus on making an eloquent yet heartfelt toast to Willow and Travis. As expected, there were some chuckles when I stumbled over a few words here and there, but overall, everyone seemed pleased with my efforts.

As the evening progressed, my mother's inhibitions faded along with her sobriety. It was only a matter of time before the monster emerged.

"Drake," she slurred, "you seem like a nice guy. But I don't know what Daphne's told you about me." She waved her wine glass around, sloshing its contents precariously close to the white tablecloth. "She's got this wild

imagination, you know. Always making up stories about me."

Before I could react, Drake stepped forward and calmly said, "Actually, your daughter has never said anything bad about you." He looked into my mother's eyes and gently added, "She's the kindest, most selfless person I know."

My mother's face fell before she mumbled something incomprehensible and took another sip of her wine. Everyone else in the room seemed to be holding their breath while they waited for her next move.

Finally, after an eternity of silence, Mum looked up at me with tears in her eyes and acknowledged what Drake had said. Then she stood up from the table and pulled me into a tight hug.

I stiffened, but there was no way to extricate myself from her hold. And she knew that. This was a demonstration that she still had power over me and would always have that power.

Drake's grip on my hand tightened, and I could feel my face grow hot with anger. But he leaned in and whispered, "Focus on me. I'll protect you."

Despite my roiling emotions, I tried to keep my composure when she finally loosened her grasp. "Mum, don't do this," I said quietly, trying to keep the venom out of my voice. "I haven't said anything to Drake about you that isn't true."

Willow's eyes darted back and forth between us, clearly puzzled. She'd never heard the stories of how our mother had hurt me when I was younger. Willow had been spared the emotional and physical torment I'd endured.

Mum scoffed and took another gulp of wine. "Oh, please, Daphne. You've always been such a liar. I never hurt you, or poisoned you, or whatever nonsense you've made up in that twisted little mind of yours."

Drake had obviously heard enough. He stood up, towering over my mother with fire in his eyes. He began his dressing down of her, and it was a sight to behold.

"First of all," he said, his voice cold and unyielding, "You should know

that I've seen the scars, both physical and emotional, that Daphne carries because of you. She's not a liar, and it's beyond despicable that you'd try to gaslight her like this."

My mother tried to interrupt, but Drake held up a hand to silence her. "No, you're going to listen for once. I've watched Daphne struggle to come to terms with the abuse she suffered at your hands. She's worked tirelessly to overcome the lasting effects of your cruelty, and she's grown into an incredible, resilient woman in *spite* of you, not because of you."

Willow stared at our mother in disbelief, her mouth agape.

"Third," Drake continued, his voice steely, "You have no right to try to poison the one relationship that has brought Daphne happiness and stability. I am here to support her, and I will not allow you to tear her down any longer."

My mother sat there, her face red and her mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water. She had no retort, no defense.

"And finally," Drake concluded, his voice now soft but firm, "Daphne is not the one who's crazy here. It's you. You are and always will be unfit to be a mother. You never deserved her love, her loyalty, or her time. From now on, we are her family, the family she deserves."

The room had gone silent, everyone in the ballroom watching the scene unfold with a mix of shock and awe. My mother looked like she wanted to crawl into a hole and disappear.

Drake turned to me, his eyes full of love and determination. "Are you okay?" he asked softly.

I nodded, tears of gratitude and relief streaming down my face. "Yes, thanks to you."

He pulled me into his arms and held me close, whispering, "I'll always be here for you, Daphne. You'll never have to face her alone again."

As I clung to Drake, I couldn't help but feel a sense of closure. Finally, someone had stood up to my mother, exposing her for the manipulative, heartless woman she was. Willow, still stunned, reached out to take my hand,

and I knew she finally understood.

The rest of the night was a blur, but one thing was clear; my life was changing for the better. And with Drake by my side, I was finally free to let go of the past and embrace the love and support I'd found in him, the love I'd always deserved.

DRAKE

Once in the bedroom, Daphne was still riding high from the reception, looping her arms around my neck, she whispered, "Thank you."

I slid my hands into her curls, fisting gently, angling her head and I leveled my gaze on her. "I protect what's mine. Even when you don't need protection. I want you to know you have someone there to back you."

"I don't know what to say."

"You are mine. Do you understand that?"

"Somehow I think, I've always been yours." Her gaze met mine and lingered as if looking for something. Maybe she was looking for an assurance that I meant it.

The words eluded me. All I could do was show her, so I did.

When I pressed my lips to hers, I wasn't gentle. I tugged her body into mine, holding her in place and savaging her mouth, taking everything I wanted from her.

Daphne moaned against my mouth, her hands sliding up my chest and gripping the lapels of my jacket. She responded with a passion that equaled mine and suddenly I couldn't help myself.

I took control, pushing her down onto the bed and covering her body with mine. Her legs encircled me and she clung to me as the intensity between us increased. When our kiss ended she gasped for breath, still clinging to me desperately.

"You're mine," I said again, feeling the possessive words burn through me. "You have been from the moment we met."

Daphne opened her eyes and watched me for a few moments before nodding slowly in agreement.

"Yes. I know."

I crushed my mouth against hers once more, at a loss for words. My erection throbbed against the zipper of my slacks as I held her small body to mine. I never wanted to let go.

I wanted to fuck her. I wanted to strip her and fuck her until neither of us could move.

There was no doubt. I wanted *everything* with her.

When we broke apart, I dropped my forehead on hers, breathing heavily.

Daphne tilted her chin up, her lips coming into contact with mine. For some reason what should have been a sweet kiss, turned the fire banked inside of me to incendiary.

I couldn't wait, I needed to be inside her. Roughly, I gathered up the tulle of her dress, desperate to find out if my kitten was wet for me already. When my fingers encountered bare pussy, I growled.

I sank two fingers into her pussy, and she cried out as she arched against my hand. Daphne threw her head back, her body arching of its own accord, her soft moans filling my ears as I worked her body. The telltale flute of her pussy happened quick with one stroke of my thumb on her clit.

"That's my girl. Always ready to go off for me."

"Always," she breathed, arching against me. Her nails dug into the muscles on my shoulders as she clung to me, riding my fingers.

With one more stroke she was flying and I was swallowing her moans with a deep kiss. I knew enough to wait for those aftershocks. As she came down, I pulled my fingers from her body, then brought them to my lips. "Fucking delicious."

Clumsily, we fought with my trousers, then pushed my pants down and

freed my cock. I lined the head of my dick up with her slick opening and thrust forward, sinking into her tight heat in one stroke.

Together we cursed as we held onto each other desperately. I had to bury my face in her neck to muffle my groan of pure bliss when she wrapped her legs around my hips and urged me on with her heels against my arse. I held onto her, my face buried in her neck as if it were an anchor as I lifted my hips and pounded into her.

I might have even sworn I was having a stroke, it felt so good. I was too close. I could feel it coming as I fought for control. "Daphne, look at me."

Her eyes snapped open and caught mine. Her brow furrowed in concentration as she rode my cock, her moans loud in my ears. Her pussy clenched around me and I was undone. I let the pleasure claim me.

With one last stroke, I exploded deep inside her, my cum filling her pussy.

I could feel her second orgasm through mine and it was a heady thing as I fought to hold on for her. "Fuck."

Daphne threw her head back, her whole body arching into me as she rode that last wave of bliss.

"Holy shite."

Still fully clothed, I tucked her into me knowing exactly why it was so good with us.

She'd been made for me.

DRAKE



SO FAR, THERE WASN'T A SIGN OF MASSIMO.

I was tense and riding the razor's edge as I searched the crowd, watchful as I studied each guest, assessing them.

The mood at the wedding reception was a far cry from the night before. Much less tense and more celebratory. The late afternoon sun shone brightly through the ballroom windows, and the air smelled floral and fresh. Everyone was in high spirits, especially Daphne and Willow.

As the two of them twirled around the dance floor, laughing and smiling, I couldn't help but grin. It was a stark contrast to the tense atmosphere at the rehearsal dinner, where their mother's constant nitpicking had put a damper on the evening. But here, in the midst of wedding festivities, that all seemed to be forgotten.

The music filled the ballroom, providing a joyful background for the sisters' graceful movements. I couldn't take my eyes off Daphne.

You fucked up, Webster. You fucked up and fell for her.

If everything went right and we grabbed Massimo today, this would all be over. She was going back to her life. Because I didn't want the kind of life

that I led for her, where people like Massimo could scurry out of the woodwork. I wanted to give her everything. I hadn't told her I'd already taken care of her gran's care bill for the next two years and had set up automatic payments so they would just bill me after that.

I knew how worried she was about it. And to me it was just money that I might as well put to good use. Between her and Reginald, it made me happy to do things for them. And knowing she was happy and safe, that needed to be enough.

Their mother stayed by the bar, glowering at her daughters. Since I had told her off, in my own charming way, of course, she was now giving us a wide berth, probably afraid of getting burned again. Yeah, I may have been a little harsh, but come on, it was a wedding rehearsal dinner for crying out loud. Tension and family drama had no place there.

The music changed but the two sisters kept dancing, their faces lit up with joy. Soon, other guests began to join in, and a full-fledged dance party broke out. It was fun and light, just the way it should be. I leaned against the wall, watching Daphne and her sister from a distance, feeling a warmth spread through me that had nothing to do with the champagne I'd been sipping.

Gabe suddenly appeared beside me. He was one of the few people who knew about my line of work, and he had seen me through some pretty dark times.

Gabe chuckled and shook his head. "You've got it bad, man," he said, nudging me with his elbow.

I rolled my eyes, trying to remain cool and collected. "I have no idea what you're talking about," I replied, but I knew I wasn't fooling him.

He raised an eyebrow at me and smirked. "Come on, mate. I've known you for years, and I've never seen you look at anyone the way you look at Daphne."

I sighed and had to admit that he was right. I couldn't deny my feelings for her any longer. "I can't help it, Gabe," I said earnestly. "She's bloody..."

amazing."

Gabe clapped me on the shoulder in understanding. We stood together in silence for a moment as we watched Daphne and Willow sweep around the dance floor with their mother watching from afar with a sad expression on her face.

My heart ached for them all. It seemed as though every move they made was clouded by a deep familial tension that couldn't be ignored or erased easily.

At last the song came to an end, and Daphne looked up at me with a radiant smile that immediately set my heart racing. She had such an effect on me. We locked eyes for a single moment before she grabbed Willow's hand once more and they exited the dance floor together, laughing brightly as they went.

Gabe cleared his throat beside me, breaking the spell of her presence and bringing me back to reality with a bang.

Gabe nodded, his expression turning serious. "I know, man. And I want you to remember something. Our line of work takes a lot from us. You can't let it take love away too. Hold her close, cherish every moment, and don't let anything come between you two."

The only problem was that if I held her close, no doubt, I'd put her right in the path of danger.

Daphne

MY FEET HURT. MY BACK HURT. AND IF I WAS BEING HONEST, MY FACE HURT from all the smiling. Willow was so happy. And she got the day she deserved.

But I'd been so tense all day, waiting for Massimo to jump out from somewhere. But Travis had said that they'd uninvited him from the wedding.

And while I was glad he hadn't ruined their wedding, I was also terrified that Drake and I had gone through all of this for nothing and we'd still have to go to the auction in Italy. I would have much preferred getting this over with and being done.

I hadn't seen Drake's friends. But I had a feeling if they were anything like him, I wouldn't have seen them. Granted, I got the impression that some of them were there because Willow was talking about some very hot men she'd never seen before in her life. If Drake's friends looked anything like him, I assumed it was them.

Slipping my shoes off, I headed toward the dressing rooms. All I needed was a minute of peace. The last three weeks had been a whirlwind.

In the quiet hallway outside the bridal suite, I paused a moment to catch my breath, the music and laughter of the reception fading away. I could hear the hum of the air conditioner, the only sound in the otherwise empty corridor. Taking a deep breath, I opened the door to the suite and stepped inside.

I found myself helping Willow change into her honeymoon outfit. You know, something sexy but not too revealing. She had a plane to catch, after all. Between you and me, the girl had packed enough luggage for a month-long vacation, but who was I to judge? A sister's gotta have options.

As we sorted through the bags and clothes, Willow and I shared one of those heart-to-hearts that make you remember why you love your sibling so much, despite their quirks and occasional snarky comments.

Willow, being the sensitive soul that she was, took a deep breath and looked me straight in the eyes. "Daphne, I need to say something," she began, her voice barely above a whisper. "I'm so sorry I invited Mum to the wedding."

I sighed, not really wanting to talk about our mother. But hey, it was Willow's big day, so I let her continue.

"I had no idea what she put you through," she added, tears welling up in

her eyes. "If I had known, I never would have asked her to come."

I looked at my sister, her face a mixture of pain and regret. And in that moment, I felt my heart soften. I had spent so many years resenting my mother for the things she had done to me. But that resentment had also kept me from opening up to Willow, from sharing my truth with her.

"It's okay," I said softly, giving her a hug. "I understand why you did it. You wanted your day to be perfect and felt like inviting Mum was the right thing to do."

In that moment, I knew that it wasn't just about the wedding; it was about forgiveness and understanding. And although I couldn't bring myself to fully forgive our mother yet, I knew that I could forgive Willow for trying.

There was so much I hadn't told her. Where the hell did I even start?

"I should have told you," I admitted, my own voice cracking with emotion. "But I didn't want my nightmare to become yours. You had a right to your own story and relationship with her."

Willow hugged me tight, and for a brief moment, we were just two sisters, sharing a bond that couldn't be broken. But as they say, all good things must come to an end, and our moment of sisterly bliss was about to be shattered in the most dramatic way possible.

No sooner had we pulled apart than the door to the bridal suite burst open, revealing three masked men. My heart immediately raced into a gallop. I grabbed Willow and tucked her behind me before wrapping my hand around the bottle of champagne in the ice bucket.

One of the intruders came forward. Not saying a word, he grabbed for me, and I swung the champagne bottle in a wide arc, making sure the end met his temple.

He blinked at me for a second. Blinkered again, and then went down like a sack of potatoes.

Willow screamed behind me. "Oh my God. What have you done, Daphne?"

“What have I done? I’m pretty sure that they want to kidnap us. And one kidnapping a month is enough for me, thanks.”

“Kidnapping?” Willow whimpered behind me as one of the other two masked guys came for us.

The second guy tried to grab me, and I kicked him directly in the nuts. He groaned but kept coming, and I swung the champagne bottle again, cracking him over the head. He didn't go down completely, but when he hit his knees, I dropped the champagne bottle and grabbed him by the ears, bringing my knee up to his face, and that did the trick. He fell over.

Unfortunately, his friend had Willow. I scrambled on the floor for the bottle of champagne. And just as my fingers grasped around the neck of the bottle to swing it, he pointed a gun at Willow's head.

“Oh no you don't,” he said.

I dropped the bottle immediately. “We don't have anything you want.”

He laughed as he leered at me. “Why don't you let me be the judge of that.”

He pointed toward the door, and I had no choice but to comply. Just as I turned the knob, I heard him groan. I whipped back to find Willow scooting away from him. “I remembered Gran always said smack a man on the balls if he’s trying to hurt you.”

The guy waved the gun in her general direction, but someone came barging through the door and said, “Put it down if you want to live.”

Drake.

Relief flooded my veins, making me somewhat dizzy. I swayed a little on my feet. He'd come. He noticed I'd left the ballroom, and he'd come.

“You came for me.”

“Always, kitten. Always.”

DRAKE



I STILL COULDN'T SHAKE THE TERROR OF SEEING HER IN THAT ROOM WITH those men. Gabe and his team had searched the whole property, but Massimo hadn't been there. Instead, he'd sent his thugs to collect her.

I couldn't help but wonder how much of this was my doing. If I'd just gotten her to safety someplace where Massimo or the Syndicate couldn't have found her, she would be safe. Instead, I'd played a dangerous game with her life, and she was terrorized at her sister's wedding.

That's on you.

Regardless of what Gabe had said yesterday about our lives being so hard already and to grasp any happiness we can, I knew I couldn't risk her like that because I was such a selfish prick. I had done this to her all because I needed my life back. Because I needed vengeance and had a vendetta I couldn't let go of.

And now that vendetta was going to rob me of one of the last people I gave a shit about. I needed to get her away from me. Somewhere safe.

At this point, is anywhere safe?

She didn't know how to hide. She barely knew how to fight.

Though she'd fought well enough to keep her and her sister safe until I arrived. She'd taken out two full grown men. Gabe and the Rogues had done cleanup for us. He'd texted last night to let us know that they weren't dead. She'd been worried that she might have killed someone. But now, unlucky for them, they could be interrogated. The two she'd hit just had concussions. The last one, well, he had sore balls and was non-communicative.

"What do you want to do today?" she asked, her voice barely a whisper, like she was afraid of breaking the spell.

I thought for a moment, and then replied, "Let's just stay here and be together."

She smiled and nodded. "As if that's an option."

She was right. It wasn't. "We'll go with Reginald to a safe house," I said. "The men at the wedding made me nervous, so I'd rather we lay low for a while. Then I'll take the information we have to Rogues. Right now, my only concern is you."

Daphne searched my gaze and nodded. She rolled over and reached for her phone. "I'm going to call Willow and check in," she said, her voice still thick with sleep.

"Go ahead," I replied, stretching my limbs and tracing my fingers up her spine.

As she chatted with her sister, I couldn't help but smile. It was nice to see her reconnect with family, even if it was just a brief phone call. After she hung up, I decided it was time to make some moves. I dialed Reginald and filled him in.

"How bad is it?"

I hated that he could always tell something was wrong before I even said anything. "It's not good news. We'll be on our way back shortly, and when we get there we need to move. Just for precaution, I'll feel better if you go with us."

"All right. I'll be ready to go."

While I admired his ability to roll with things, I hated that he couldn't just live in peace.

When I hung up, Daphne climbed back into bed and nuzzled against me. "You okay?" Her dark eyes were impossible to escape. Like she was excavating my soul.

"Yeah. Brilliant. We should get out of here."

She watched me for a moment then shook her head slowly. "Yeah, okay. But first I want to try something."

I lifted my brow. "Does this something have anything to do with my cock?"

She laughed and gave me a teasing smile. "Maybe.

"Well, in that case, I'm all yours."

Drake

AN HOUR AND A HALF LATER AFTER DAPHNE SUCCEEDED IN LIFTING MY spirits, among other things, we were on the road again.

From the passenger seat, she watched me intently and chewed her bottom lip. "Go on, tell me, what are you thinking about?" I asked.

"You mean other than why I've never given a hummer before?"

I nearly swallowed my tongue. "What?"

She smiled shyly. "You know, a hummer. When I give you a blowjob while you're driving? I can't believe you never heard of it before."

My crotch twitched in response. The thought of her soft lips wrapping around my straining cock was almost too good to pass up. How did she expect me to focus when she was casually talking about hummers?

"I know what a bloody hummer is, kitten. I'm just wondering why you're taunting me with one right now?"

She shook her head. “Just curious. I have all kinds of things I want to try.”

I wanted to take her at face value, but I knew what she meant. We were running out of time. Every moment together was one we had to cherish and enjoy.

My hands shook against the steering wheel as I tried to focus. I let out a long breath, trying to calm the raging desire that had taken control of my body.

The thought of her hot mouth sliding over my dick, the sound of her moans as I fucked her face... My cock hardened, and the urge to pull over and take her up on her offer was overwhelming.

I looked at her from the corner of my eye, admiring how beautiful she looked in the soft light of the car. She was perfection... and mine.

“I must admit, I love this new naughty adventurous streak. And it's a proper shame that you've never given a hummer. It's something we will have to remedy.”

She nodded absently and turned to look out the window. I reached my left hand out, gripping her hand and twining our fingers together. Her dark brown skin contrasted to my light tan.

I liked this feeling. I wanted those things that Gabe talked about, the quiet moments.

You can't have quiet moments and be an MI5 deep-cover operative. It doesn't work that way.

As we drove away from Balhurst Castle, the streets were bustling with activity, and I couldn't shake the feeling that something was off.

My suspicions were confirmed when a black SUV appeared out of nowhere, tailing us closely. I could see the glint of gunmetal in the hands of the men inside.

Without a second thought, I slammed on the accelerator and launched us into a pulse-pounding car chase straight through Surrey. Running a multitude

of red lights and swerving between lanes of traffic, I used every driving tactic I knew to stay ahead and lose them.

We passed through narrow alleyways and shortcuts, evading our pursuers with superior driving skill and agility, taking a breakneck pace through busy highways and winding roads.

"Hold on," I warned Daphne, gripping the steering wheel tightly. I floored the accelerator, trying to lose our pursuers as we weaved through the narrow streets. The SUV was relentless, matching our every move.

A gunshot rang out, shattering the side window. I instinctively swerved the car, trying to avoid the incoming fire. But it was too late. One of the bullets grazed my shoulder, the sudden pain causing me to wince. The chase was getting more dangerous by the second, and I knew I had to do something before we were both seriously injured.

My mind raced as I scanned our surroundings, searching for any possible escape route. Up ahead, I spotted an alleyway that looked just wide enough for our car to fit through. With a quick, silent prayer, I jerked the wheel to the left and squeezed the car into the narrow space.

The SUV skidded to a halt, its occupants cursing and scrambling to follow us on foot. We were almost in the clear. We just needed to make it to the other end of the alley and lose them for good.

My heart pounded in my chest as I cautiously maneuvered us through the tight space, the sound of our pursuers' steps echoing in the alley. Daphne gripped my arm, her nails digging into my skin as she braced herself against me, urging me on with silent encouragement.

Finally, we emerged from the other side, unscathed and successful in our harrowing escape. I let out a relieved sigh, my shoulders slumping in exhaustion as Daphne cracked a relieved smile and held me securely against her.

Suddenly, another gunshot echoed through the alley, and a sickening feeling settled in the pit of my stomach. I glanced over at Daphne, my heart

dropping as I saw the blood spreading across her shirt. She'd been hit.

The full realization of what had just happened hit me like a ton of bricks. *She'd been hit.*

It was my fault. I felt like I'd been kicked in the chest. I wanted to scream, to cry. I hadn't been fast enough. I hadn't been able to protect her like I should have. I hadn't kept her safe from harm as I had promised.

I reached for her with trembling hands, barely able to keep my tears at bay. I tried not to panic and reminded myself that we were still alive. I could fix this.

"It's all right, Daphne. I'm here. Just stay with me, okay? I'm going to get you some help." I spoke reassuringly, willing her to stay with me.

We sped through the streets, my mind reeling as I tried desperately to figure out where to go.

"No, no, no," I muttered, my hands shaking on the wheel as I navigated the car out of the alley and onto the main road. My mind raced, trying to figure out our next move. We needed help, and we needed it fast. The Rogues were our only option now.

I pushed the car to its limits, speeding toward the Rogues campus as Daphne's breathing grew more labored. Every second counted, and I was determined to get her the help she needed, no matter the cost.

"Stay with me, Daphne," I whispered, my voice cracking with emotion. "We're almost there."

I'd fucked up. Beyond fucked up. I'd made deadly mistakes along the way, all in the name of queen and country. Or king and country now. It didn't matter. She was bleeding, and she was going to die. I had no safe houses, no money, no passports. All of it was gone, and I had nowhere else to go.

I drove up to the perimeter of the property, knowing full well I was being watched from the moment I passed the tree line. But I didn't give a fuck. I stepped right up to the gate. At the camera, I looked up and put my arms out wide, the rain splattering on my face and blood dripping down in rivulets.

Blood? Was I bleeding? Had I been fucking shot too? Jesus. I glowered at my arm, noting the graze on my arm. I'd live. Daphne was more important.

It doesn't matter. Just get her inside. He'll know what to do. He has people for this. He can help. Nothing else matters as long as she lives. None of it.

The gate opened, and I jogged back to the car. Or at least I thought I jogged, but my feet were dragging so much that they disturbed the gravels on the ground. Fuck. I was going into shock.

It didn't matter as long as she lived.

My heart squeezed. I had been so wrong about her, about everything. As I careened the car up the winding drive, I could feel the edges of my vision going. Fading. I was so close, so goddamn close. I had to make it. As long as she got help, that was all I cared about.

My life didn't deserve saving. The things I'd done, the people I'd hurt, all in the name of what was best for the global good. Well, it was bullshit. The lies that we tell ourselves. The lies we were told to tell others, all of it was such fucking bullshit. And now she was paying the price. The cost of my hubris.

I thought I could have it all. I thought that I could straddle that line, but I couldn't. I drove up the drive to the house at the top of the hill, slammed the car in Park, and raced to the passenger-side door. When I yanked it open, she almost fell out, her head lolling onto my shoulder. "I've got you. You're okay."

She mumbled, "I love you."

"Shh. I don't deserve it. Come on, let's get you help."

As I was running up the stairs with Daphne in my arms, Gabe stepped out onto the veranda of Abbott manor. "What the fuck?"

"I need your help. Save her. Please... I need you to save her."

DRAKE



MY HEART STOPPED AS I CAUGHT SIGHT OF SAFFRON STANDING IN THE corner of the room, her arms crossed over her chest. I'd been waiting hours for Daphne to wake up. She'd been patched up, but she'd lost quite a bit of blood.

Gabe must have finally told his sister I was here.

With her long braids and piercing dark eyes, she embodied the word powerful. Her stance was strong, yet her face held a hint of something else—sadness, perhaps, or a suppressed anger. For a moment, I couldn't move, my feet frozen as if rooted to the ground.

She looked like a completely different person. The person I'd met years ago was barely a woman. Saffron had really grown into her role. I was happy for her.

Finally, it was Saffron who broke the spell. "What are you doing here?" she demanded, her voice strong and clear.

I swallowed hard, unsure of what to say. "My... Daphne. She's my... mine. She was hurt. I didn't have a choice," I stammered, my throat dry.

Saffron let out a sigh then gestured for me to move closer. "You weren't

worried I would shoot you on sight?"

All I could think of was that I had played a part in her tragedy. I never meant to hurt her; I had only wanted the truth. But now, looking at her in that moment, I knew that I had failed her. I had failed myself.

A part of me wanted to go to her, to apologize, to try to explain. But the other part of me, the stronger part, was frozen in guilt. So I just stared at her for what felt like an eternity.

My heart clenched as I saw the pain etched on her face, a stark reminder of the damage I'd caused. I could feel her eyes on me, and as much as I wanted to avoid that confrontation, I knew it was inevitable. She approached me, her steps slow and measured.

"Drake," she said, her voice soft but tense. "I've talked to Gabe."

"Yeah?" I replied, trying to keep the conversation light despite the heavy atmosphere. "I'm guessing he filled you in on the whole deep-cover situation then?"

Saffron nodded, her gaze never leaving mine.

I grimaced, the memory of our last encounter still painfully fresh. "Saffron, I was deep cover, and I didn't have a choice. I never meant to hurt you."

Her eyes narrowed, a hint of anger flashing across her face. "You know, that's the problem, Drake. I can't tell when you're being sincere or when you're just playing a role. The hardest part for me was actually believing that you cared about me." She hesitated as my guilt clawed at my gut that I hadn't been able to do more for her parents. "I've known for a while that you didn't kill my parents, but I still can't let it go," she continued, her voice shaking. "I've held onto so much anger toward you. Hell, it defines me now."

"It was all fucked up. I wish I could have done more. This apology is years too late."

Saffron's expression softened. "It's exhausting hating you. And you did save my life once. I just—" She shook her head. "You let me try to kill you."

“Well, you had a right. I didn’t do enough to protect your parents. And I needed to play the villain so I could still do my job.”

“Well, at some point we all have to step into the light. Or at least take a torch into the darkness with us.”

“Some of our torches have dead batteries.” I said, shrugging.

“In that case, you borrow from a mate.” Her shoulders marginally relaxed. “The woman, she’s still asleep. The doctors say she’s stable though.”

She reached out and touched my arm gently, the contact conveying a reassuring warmth, and I felt myself relax, responding to the comfort of her touch.

"So will you help us?" I asked, still uncertain if she would agree.

Saffron paused for a moment before finally nodding. "Of course. Gabe trusts you. So for now, I won't shoot you. But I might let Tabatha stab you," she said with a wink.

“She’s already done that.”

“Ah, yes, she came clean too. I don’t like liars, Drake. Please don’t turn my family into a pair of them.”

For a moment she stared at me, her eyes searching my face for any hint of dishonesty. Finally, she seemed to find what she was looking for. "You really love her, don't you?" she asked, her voice softer now.

I nodded, unable to tear my gaze away from hers.

"Yes," I said quietly. "I do."

Saffron's expression softened. "That's good," she said softly.

I smiled slightly, despite the knot in my stomach tightening with every passing second. Saffron seemed to understand how complicated things were for me. She saw through all the lies and deception and still managed to look past them to find the truth beneath it all.

"Thank you," I said, my voice barely more than a whisper.

She nodded and gave me one last reassuring smile. As she walked away to join the others, I felt a strange mix of relief and sadness wash over me.

Saffron and I would never be what we once were, but perhaps there was hope for some semblance of a friendship, a mutual understanding born from the ashes of our past.

In the end, it was all I could ask for. That and Igno's head on a platter.

DAPHNE



I TRIED TO BLINK AWAY MY CONFUSION AND SURVEYED THE ROOM IN WHICH I found myself. I was lying on a small cot, surrounded by four gray walls. It was a sparsely adorned room, with a chair and a single window just big enough to catch a glimpse of the outside world.

I looked down at my body and saw that I had been bandaged up in various places. Whoever had found me and brought me here clearly had some medical experience, and they had done the best they could, given the circumstances.

Though my limbs felt like jelly, I managed to find the energy to bring myself to a seated position. My head spun and my vision blurred, but I felt a little better. I was still groggy, though, and it was all I could do to stay awake.

The room was sterile and cold, with that distinct hospital smell, a mix of disinfectant and despair. I blinked, trying to clear the fuzziness from my vision. I was hooked up to various machines that beeped and whirred, a symphony of noise that really didn't help my pounding headache.

"Where the hell am I?" I muttered, my voice croaky and weak.

"Ah, you're awake," said a voice that definitely didn't belong to Drake. I

looked up and saw a guy standing in the doorway. One of those absurdly handsome types with blond hair and a jawline that could cut glass. He stepped into the room, his blue eyes full of concern.

"Don't worry, you're safe. You're in the Rogues medical bay," he said, flashing me a smile that probably made girls swoon on the regular. Not me, though. I only had one person I needed to see and that was Drake. I wasn't accepting substitutions.

"Where's Drake?" I asked, trying to sound firm despite the fact that I was sitting on a cot, covered in bruises, with a bandaged shoulder and connected to about a million wires.

"Drake's fine," Hot Blondie replied, looking me up and down. "But right now, you need to focus on getting better."

"And who the hell are you?"

"You can call me Legend," he said with a grin.

I was in no mood for bullshit. Let alone a spiel about how I needed to focus on the important things. I needed to know how Drake was. I wouldn't be able to think about anything else until I knew. "Excuse me, but I need to see him. I understand you've been given your orders to not tell me anything that isn't wholly necessary. However, if you don't bring him to me, I will start screaming bloody murder." I spoke calmly but directly, adding enough steel to my voice to let him know I was serious. "Now, if you don't mind, please point me to someone who can actually tell me what the hell is going on and where the hell he is."

He opened his mouth to say something else while reaching for my IV button to give me another hit of whatever the hell was in the bag attached to my arm. I didn't want more drugs though. I didn't want a fogged-up brain. I wanted to think clearly.

Spotting the scalpel sitting on the tray next to my bed, I grabbed it and flicked my wrist to the side, brandishing it just how Drake had taught me. Sure, I was weak, achy, and disoriented, but I'd be damned if I was going to

let anyone keep me from getting to Drake. He'd saved my life. If he needed help, then I needed to figure out how to get to him.

"I might not be able to fight my way out of this fresh hell, but I can take a vital part of you with me," I threatened, trying to look as menacing as possible considering my current state.

Hot Blondie's eyes widened, and he took a step back, his hands raised in a placating gesture. "All right, take it easy. Let me see what I can do."

"Thank you," I said, still holding the scalpel. I had no intention of actually using it on him, but the threat seemed to do the trick, so I wasn't going to let go just yet.

He left the room, and I slumped back onto the cot, my heart pounding. I didn't have long to wait, though, because a few minutes later, the door opened again and there he was.

Drake. Like an avenging Angel out of the shadows with those piercing blue eyes that made my insides melt like butter on hot toast.

"Daphne!" he choked out, rushing to my side. I immediately dropped the scalpel, and he pulled me into a careful embrace, mindful of my bandaged shoulder.

The moment his strong arms were around me, cocooning me in his warmth and chasing away the fear, desperation, and worry, I let my body sag. "Thank God you're okay. I woke up and you weren't here, and then the hot blonde wouldn't let me see you."

He chuckled, the vibration of it like a hum against my chest. "Hot blonde, you say?"

"He was very attractive, but he wasn't you. Where are we?"

Drake only held on tighter, a shudder running through his body. "I'm so sorry. I should have protected you better," he whispered into my hair.

"It's not your fault," I murmured into his shoulder, inhaling the comforting scent of him. "I'm just glad you're here now."

He pulled away, his eyes searching my face for any sign of serious injury.

"Are you okay? Not in too much pain?"

I shrugged, wincing slightly at the movement. "My shoulder aches. But I didn't trust the meds. I turned off my IV."

Drake's jaw clenched. "That'll be from the surgery. You can trust the medications. We're somewhere safe. You had some bullet fragments in your shoulder that they had to remove, but then you didn't wake up for the longest time. You scared the shit out of me. You'll have to forgive Legend. He had strict instructions not to let you leave until I could see you again. He should have made sure you were comfortable."

"Hey," I said, grabbing his hand to keep him from storming out of the room. "To be fair, I did threaten to cut him with a scalpel and turned off my IV, so he couldn't really help me."

"You did what?" He was making his angry face with his brows drawn down and that muscle in his jaw ticking.

"It's okay. I'm here, you're here, and we're both alive. That's what matters, right?"

He sighed, his anger fading as he looked into my eyes. "You're right. I just... I can't stand the thought of you getting hurt. I made mistakes. I thought I was so fucking clever taking you off the board. I should have known the lengths Massimo would go to in order to get to you. You are here because of my hubris."

I snorted, rolling my eyes. "Oh, please. This whole mess isn't just because of you. A madman decided that he wanted more and could just take whatever he wanted, including me. You've been trying to end this. And we will. I'm going to help you. I'm tired of running scared."

Hot Blondie chose that moment to reappear in the doorway, looking sheepish. "Sorry to interrupt, but I, uh, just wanted to make sure everything was okay in here."

"It's fine," Drake said, his tone a mix of annoyance and relief. "Thanks for letting me know she was awake, Legend."

Hot Blondie nodded, his eyes flicking between the two of us before he retreated, leaving us alone once more.

"You really scared him, you know," Drake commented, a hint of amusement in his voice.

I smirked. "Good. He needed to know I'm not just some damsel in distress who can be pushed around. Except, apparently, by you."

Drake kissed my forehead, his lips lingering for a moment. "I never thought that for a second."

As we sat there, wrapped up in each other's arms, I couldn't help but feel a small sense of triumph. Sure, I was bruised, battered, and stuck in a medical bay in the middle of a Rogues facility, but he hadn't left me. We could face whatever fresh hell life decided to throw our way. And if that meant occasionally threatening hot blond guys with scalpels, well, so be it.

DRAKE



I HAD A FEELING THAT DAPHNE WOULD WANT TO TALK AT SOME POINT TODAY. Against my wishes, she had been read in on everything that had happened, and she'd met the whole team. She'd even spoken to her sister, and she'd insisted on calling Reginald as well. I was surprised by how she'd taken it all in stride and just nodded solemnly as if all of this was normal.

None of this should be normal to her. If I had just left her alone, none of this would have happened.

But Massimo would have her. And unlike you, he would not have treated her well. He wouldn't have cared about her. He would have taken what he needed and disposed of her.

It was so impossible thinking through all the steps that had led us here. Every mistake I made, every choice. There were a million other ways to go about it, but we would have still ended up here. We had always been inevitable. On this collision course for each other.

She'd been restless last night, tossing and turning. I'd held her tight, trying to calm her, but she could probably sense something was going on.

You know this is a bad idea.

I didn't want to leave her. Walking away from her was going to be the most painful thing I'd ever done. But I knew what happened to people who got close to me, and I'd already brought too much pain into her life. She would be safer without me.

Reginald's words kept trying to filter in. *You can choose. You can decide who you want to be. You can choose to have everything. Don't make Daphne's decisions for her.*

The problem was that even though I knew the complications, I had completely fallen in love with the woman. And watching her lay unconscious for a day and a half, knowing that I was the reason behind that, I couldn't do that again.

Still a selfish prick.

Daphne walked in. Saff had given her a few clothes for the interim to wear. Now she wore a fluttery skirt with a tank top. Saff was taller than her, so she had to roll up the waist. The tops fit well, though her breasts were bigger than Saff's, so the T-shirts accentuated that.

Mind out of the gutter. You've got to walk away from her, and you need to rip that Band-Aid off.

But when she walked in, she gave me that sweet smile, the one that made her dimples peek out. The one that made me feel like I was a thousand feet tall because she saw me. Not the monster I could be, but the man.

"Where have you been?" I asked.

She hitched her thumb toward the hallway. "I was hanging out with the girls. Saff is actually lovely. And Jesus Christ, she's stunning to look at. Not to mention Tabatha's hair. I could spend thousands of dollars in a salon and still not get that red color."

I shook my head. "Neither one of them holds a candle to you."

She bit her bottom lip. "Do you mean that?"

Immediately, like it was following a freaking siren's call, the blood rushed to my cock. I knew what she could do with that tongue. A shudder ran

through me as I thought about it, feeling the need to be buried deep inside her, to grip her arse with my hands, giving her no room for escape or reprieve as I fucked her raw.

I shook my head to alleviate the image. Thinking about how much I craved her was not going to help.

"Daph, I wanted to—"

She held up a hand. "I'm sorry. If you could just—" She paused, and this time her teeth grazed her plump lower lip, and I wanted to be the one biting her. Taking little nips. Making her whimper and moan. "I just, I feel like something's off," she continued. "Like there's this chasm between us. And—" She took another step toward me. I could feel the gravitational tug to be in her orbit, to let her be my sun. And screw the consequences of what could happen to her.

"Daphne, I'm not—"

"I want you, Drake. I even wanted you when I met you officially and I was irritated. The first day you walked into the office, you were so commanding, and the way you would look at me made me feel like I was naked all the time. It was raw, and terrifying, and alluring, and intoxicating. You were also infuriating and frustrating, but God, did I want you."

Hearing her say she wanted me was definitely not helping me make the right decision. Because I could think of all the ways I wanted her, and it was more than her body. Her scent was wrapping around me like the vines of a deadly plant. Enticing, alluring. Beautiful. But once you were caught in the trap, there was no escape. It was already almost too late. I needed to do this. I needed to make it fast and decisive. But she took one more step, and I was lost.

She kept talking. "I love you, Drake. I've never felt this alive in my entire life. And sure, you did kidnap me, handcuff me, and chase me through the woods, but you've never hurt me. You've done your best to keep me safe. And I really want to try it with you. I want *everything* with you. Not just the

words. The actions. I can almost feel you running away from me, and I don't want you to. I want you to talk to me. I want this to be real." She placed a hand on my chest then, and I knew she could feel my heartbeat racing.

I was a goner for this woman from the moment I saw her. "The day I walked into your office and you met my gaze and gave me that smile with those dimples, I knew I was keeping you."

She stood on her tiptoes, looping one arm around me, lifting her head and kissing me. Her tongue peeked out to lick my bottom lip, and I groaned low. My hands automatically slid down her back to her arse, picking her up so she would wrap her legs around me.

I held her steady, making sure that she tucked her injured shoulder into me as I deepened the kiss automatically, angling my head to get more of her, to lick into her mouth, to make her moan. All the while grasping her arse and dragging her pussy over the length of my cock.

Daphne owned me. I might have been the one who thought I was taking her. But with every passing day, she was locking me to her. She was the dangerous one.

The kiss grew more passionate, stealing all the air from my lungs. I couldn't breathe. My heart raced faster than ever before, and my stomach tightened with need.

I loved kissing her. Loved the way she sucked at my lips, the way she opened her mouth to mine. I loved how alive she made me feel. But always, I loved how she made me want to be a better man.

To be *worthy* of her.

I maneuvered her to the bedroom and eased her on the bed, telling myself that this was just a bit of snogging. That these kisses would need to last me a lifetime.

But even as I did my best to keep my hands in her hair and not her tits or her arse, or even more disastrously, her pussy, she reached for my cock and I couldn't bloody breathe.

"Fuck, I'm hurting here." I bent to kiss her neck. She stroked me through my cargos and I knew I didn't have any kind of strength to resist.

I knew what she was doing. Proving that I ached for her. Well it wasn't a secret. "Daphne. You know how much I need you. We—"

"Shhh. It's my turn to do the talking now, Drake."

She unzipped the cargos, reaching in and wrapping her hand around the length of my cock and God help me I considered passing out.

She knew exactly how tight to hold me. How I wanted it. How I liked it. Blood rushed between my ears, and I had no idea why I'd ever thought that this was the wrong thing to do.

"Fuck, Daphne," I whispered, trying to put a stop to what she was doing, but instead of releasing me, she squeezed. My jaw clenched, my stomach tightened, my shoulders tensed, and that's when she started to slide my erection through her fingers. I fell back onto the bed trying to seize back my sanity, but she stole it the moment she pulled my cock out and wrapped those oh-so-sinful lips around me.

"Daphne." I groaned, fisting my hand in her hair, unable to decide if I was pulling her off or holding her on.

She drew me deeper until she choked and her eyes watered. Bloody hell, watching her take every damn inch was the hottest thing I'd ever seen in my life.

Her hand wrapped around my base, she looked up and our eyes met. She pumped me twice, and then she was back at my head, her eyes never leaving mine as she sucked me deep.

"Daphne." I groaned again, not able to control myself.

My free hand gripped the sheets, my eyes squeezing shut as her head bobbed up and down, her lips sucking hard and a she smiled around me. She knew she was in control, and she was loving it.

The muscles in my legs tensed. My mind blanked. All the reasons why I shouldn't do this left me and all that remained was Daphne. It was Daphne's

mouth on me. Daphne's hand.

The electricity wound around my spine as Daphne drew my cock out until the tip of my erection was in her hand. She swirled her tongue over the head, and then she took me into her mouth again, swallowing me over and over, taking me deeper than I thought she could.

Fuck me.

I felt my cock swell and dig into the back of her throat. My balls tightened and the last thing I remembered was calling her name when I exploded down her throat. My hands fisted tight as I held her in place and I fucked her mouth with short digging strokes while she obliterated me.

"Shit. Shit. Daphne," I panted.

She sat back with a satisfied smug smile, but she'd broken cardinal rule number one. She came first. She really should know better. Lucky for both of us that my cock was nowhere near done with her.

I had a compulsive need to watch her as she came apart around me.

I pulled out of her mouth and gently grabbed her underneath the arms to sit her up and then I pulled her over on top of me. I needed her to fuck me as bad as she needed me to fuck her.

"Drake, but I thought..."

"You really think I'm not always desperate to fuck you? I only ever take breaks to give my pretty pussy a break."

Here eyes went wide as she eyed my still swollen, still pulsing cock.

I caressed her hips as I shifted her skirt out of the way and I settled her over me. Her knees gripped me tight and she looked down at me through hooded eyes as she sank onto the full length of me.

Fuuuuck. She was so tight. She was ready, but not as wet as usual. She hissed and I curse under my breath. "See kitten, this is why the cardinal rule is there. To take care of your pussy first. I want to make you sore for fun reasons, not because you weren't fully ready."

"Shhh, just give me a second. God, you're so big."

"Stroking my ego will get you nowhere," I muttered.

Even as she rocked over me, her saucy smile was intact. "Oh really, I could have sworn it was your dick, but I suppose that makes sense."

I swatted her arse so fast she gasped. "Oh my God, Drake."

I'd meant it as a small punishment for not being careful with herself, but that swat had made my perfect kitten nice and wet, easing her way.

When she rocked forward bringing her tits into biting range, I dragged down her tank, taking a blackberry tipped pebble into my mouth as I swatted her arse again.

"Oh Fuck."

What do you know, even wetter. "My kitten likes a spanking. Duly noted."

She was nice and wet now. Her previously pinched expression having morphed into one that was sublime, with her lips slightly parted and eyes rolled back into her head.

She started to ride me, grinding her pussy against my dick and I tried to resist. Tried to make it last.

The blood roared in my ears again, and I knew better than to get her to sit up. I knew better than to have her ride me. I knew better than to feel her tight little cunt bare over my cock, but I couldn't think. I couldn't help myself.

I didn't have the fucking strength to stop her.

She leaned over me and ground against me, and then I watched as her eyelashes fluttered, her pussy squeezed and she was coming. Just like that.

She leaned over me and bit my neck.

"Drake," she breathed. "Oh god, Drake."

Her pussy squeezed again as she rocked against me and moaned. I held tight onto her hips driving forward.

"Fuuuckk Kitten. I love the look on your face as you're falling apart around my cock."

The orgasm hit her quickly and she threw her head back, arching her

back, thrusting her gorgeous tits in the air.

She. Was. Perfection.

I gripped her hips and fucked her through her release, gritting my teeth to hold onto my control. But it was like my body knew the madness I was contemplating and wouldn't give me relief.

While she was still shuddering, I grabbed her around the waist and I lifted her up as I eased out of her clenching pussy. Daphne braced herself on my shoulders and hissed as I rolled her onto her hands and knees.

I pulled her skirt up around her waist quickly and dropped to my knees behind her. When I pulled her thighs apart and settled in between them, she whimpered. "Noooo. Please. I can't. I'm a little sore."

"Easy Kitten, I'm going to make it good I promise. I owe you more orgasms. You need to learn how to take your medicine."

"I *just* had an orgasm, Drake."

"Shhh. I know best. Besides, you need a bigger one. And you need to stop with all the excuses."

I leaned forward and licked her pussy lips. I was teasing her, but I was the one with the ached deep in my heart and my cock. She fucking owned me down to my soul. How could I not give her everything?

"You taste so sweet. How are you still so fucking tight?"

I licked her again and she moaned. "Ohhhh."

Smirking, I gripped her thighs tighter and pushed my tongue inside her sweet cunt. She couldn't move. She couldn't get away. She was pinned by my tongue. By my hands. By my words.

"Your pussy feels like it's trying to strangle me, Kitten."

I pressed my fingers against her clit as I drew my tongue across the tight stretch of skin between her cunt and arse and she stiffened.

I watched her head fall forward and I could tell she was on the edge. I fucking loved it when she lost control like that.

When I ran my tongue over her arsehole, instead of trying to escape this

time, she moaned loudly and her body relaxed.

"That's my good little kitten." Fuck, I loved her taste. I was a goddamn addict and I couldn't stop, desperate to make her beg me to fuck her again.

"I'm going to slide my cock in here." I pushed my tongue in. "I'm going to fuck you deep, kitten. And I'm going to fuck you slow, and then I'm going to fuck you hard. You want that, don't you? Nobody's ever fucked you in here before. You've never felt what it's like. Your arse is so tight and it doesn't stretch like your pussy. Do you want your arse to stretch around my cock?"

My only response was a moan from her. I pulled back deliberately and nipped at the skin of her left cheek.

With a whimper, Daphne wiggled her arse at me. "Oh God, yes."

She was so wet and swollen. I could see her pussy juices running down her inner thighs.

"Please Drake, I'm so close. I'm right here. I'll come. I'll come, please don't stop. Please."

I couldn't help myself. I wrapped my hand around the base of my cock and leaned over her, teasing her opening with the head. "I'm going to fuck you now, kitten. I'm going to take your arse, but I'm going to get some lube. Wait here."

I rolled over to the bedside table where I'd left some toys and lube. When I'd packed for the wedding, I'd planned to take her away for a weekend to spend some time together before returning her to her life. Our plans had obviously been put on hold.

I stripped off the rest of my clothes, then climbed back onto the bed and poured the lube down the length of my cock, pouring a liberal amount onto that tight, pretty hole.

"Oh my God. It's cold."

I kissed her lower back. "I'm sorry, love. If it's too much you need to tell me."

"Please Drake, please. I want it," she begged.

"Fuck, kitten." I spread her legs wider and pressed a finger against her tight hole. I slid in with ease up to the first knuckle and she gasped.

"That's it, kitten. A little more." I pressed my thumb against her clit and another finger against her hole.

When I eased the tip of my second finger into her arse, I felt her clench and went slowly, stretching her.

She grunted as I eased my fingers the rest of the way inside her. "That's it kitten. You're so tight and I love how your arse grips my fingers. I'm going to ease my cock in here soon."

Gently I stretched her, pulling back, gently sliding back in. Fucking her slowly with my fingers for a few minutes, waiting until she pushed her arse back onto them.

"That's my good girl. Let me know what you want."

I withdrew my fingers and immediately I felt her muscles clench. Her head fell forward and she was whimpering loudly.

"Just like that kitten, I need you to relax or it's going to hurt. I never want to hurt you."

I poured more lube onto my cock then eased into position. When I pressed the tip of my cock against her swollen entrance and pushed forward I felt her resistance.

She was so fucking tight.

Fuuuck me.

I slid in gently past the tight ring of muscle, and she hissed. I wrapped my arms around her waist and kissed her right shoulder as I pulled her torso up. She braced her arms against the headboard and sucked in a deep breath.

"It's okay, Kitten. Breathe through it."

She tensed for a moment, then relaxed and pushed back against my cock, and I slid in a little further.

"It's so big. I'm so full," she whispered.

I slid in a little more and she whimpered. "Take it easy kitten, don't

panic."

"You're so big it hurts but I like it. You feel good too. Dirty."

"Good kitten. My dirty girl gets what she wants. You're so fucking sexy. I love the way your arse feels around my cock." She relaxed and pushed back again as I pulled back a centimetre and sank back into the handle.

Oh. Fuck. Me.

I was never leaving. Her arse was fucking sublime. "Daphne, love. You okay?" Shit, how many times would she let me fuck her arse? I was going to need more of this.

She took a deep breath and nodded firmly, but her eyes were screwed shut. I pulled back and her eyes snapped open and she moaned softly.

"Oh, you like that?"

"Yes. Oh God. That feels so... wow."

I waited, listening to her breathin as I continued to kiss her back, shoulders and neck.

"I'm good now, Drake. It's so good." Her voice was so strained.

I left one hand on her hip and moved the other over her breasts, squeezing gently before sliding up to her throat. I squeezed gently and Daphne's tight arse squeezed my cock tightly.

"Fuck. Shit!" I yelled. I bit her shoulder. "Naughty hellcat."

"Sorry, sorry," she gasped.

"Oh, you will be sorry, but not for this. You'll come soon, crying out my name. I can feel it."

Her body relaxed and she began to move her hips back. "More. Please more."

"You're so good, kitten." I pressed my lips against her neck.

I shifted my grip to lightly choke her while my other hand moved to cover her mound and I thrust my fingers into her cunt, curling them against that swollen bundle of nerves. "Come on darling, ride my hand."

Daphne gripped my fingers and moaned loudly as her arse squeezed

around me. I felt her hot cream slide down my fingers, easing the slide.

"That's it, kitten. Come for me. I'm going to fuck you now. You're going to feel so good."

I pulled my fingers out of her and grabbed her hips, pulling her back, waiting for her to push back against me before I slid forward.

Her arse gripped my cock, pulling me forward as I slid in. I kept moving until my balls were flat against her skin and I was buried deep inside her. "That's my girl."

I kissed her neck and held my cock still, giving her a moment to get used to me.

I rocked my hips back before pulling out completely, then sliding back in.

"That's my girl."

Her arse shook around my cock and I could feel her muscles gripping me. "I can't. I can't. It feels so good."

I was going to lose it. I was going to lose control completely in less than a minute.

"Come on, kitten, come for me," I ground out as my thumb fluttered over her clit.

As she threw her head back and her body convulsed, I eased back and held her hips, watching as her arse tightened and quivered around my cock as the orgasm tore through her.

"That's my good girl. Come on my cock. Fuck yeah. That's it."

As she collapsed I eased deeper into her tight heat and fucked her hard and fast until I saw stars behind my eyes.

I pulled out of her arse almost completely, then slammed back in with a single thrust.

"Daphne." She pushed her arse back towards my cock. "Fuck, kitten, you feel so good." I grabbed her hips and squeezed gently as I pulled back, then pushed into her again. I thrust into her hard and fast. My brain shut down, my body took over and I slid my cock back into her arse.

"I'm going to come again," she sobbed.

I wanted to pull out and come on her back, but I held on for dear life, fucking her as I felt my body ready to explode.

My cock swelled. My balls pulled up. My cock pulsed and the orgasm tore through me. My pre-cum leaked from me and I could feel it coating her inside, easing my way. I wanted to watch.

But fuck, she had me under her spell and I started shooting into her arse. I filled her arse with spurt after spurt of my hot cum.

I could feel her body vibrating as the orgasm took her over.

I squeezed her hips and came several more times before collapsing on top of her. As the final aftershock went through me, I rested my forehead against her back.

"Holy fuck." My voice was hoarse.

"Holy fuck," she repeated, laughing. "I think my brain just exploded."

As the last of my cum spilled from my cock, I squeezed her arse. "So fucking sexy."

Warm cum dripped down her arse and thighs and I slowed my pace, planting soft kisses on her shoulders and neck.

I pulled out of her and collapsed on the bed next to her.

I wiped a hand over my forehead and exhaled heavily. "What was that?"

Daphne turned her head and smiled at me. "That was the best sex I've ever had in my life."

I stroked her back, careful not to miss any of the handprints I had left on her hips.

She looked up at me with hooded eyes and a quirk of her lips.

I nipped her lower lip in return.

"I am not done with you."

I carried her to the bathroom and put her on her feet. I turned the bath nice and warm as I removed the remainder of our clothes. We'd been in such a hurry, we hadn't even fully undressed.

I knew taking a bath with her wouldn't make any of this easier. But if I had to walk away, I wanted to give her everything before I left. Including making her feel special and not just desired.

"What are you doing?"

I climbed in first so I could brace her back. "We my love are having a bath. You'll be sore."

She took my hand and stepped into the tub with me, settle in in front of me. As I held her tight, I whispered all the words about how I felt hoping it would be enough to make her understand.

You're a fool. She'll never understand.

DRAKE



SO MUCH FOR TRYING TO LEAVE HER. THAT WENT WELL.

I stood outside one of the bungalows on the edge of Abott manor admonishing myself. The single-story structure fronted by a large veranda had been hastily kitted out by Gabe's team after we arrived.

I glanced at the fresh paint and ancient wood of the door, then took a deep breath and knocked. The sound reverberated through the stillness of the morning, like an omen of what was to come.

Reginald answered, his face tight and drawn but his eyes sharp and alert. "Drake," he said in greeting, ushering me inside.

When we were alone, he dragged me to him in a tight hug. I had to hurriedly blink away the unwanted tears.

"Lad, you gave me a scare."

I pulled back and nodded solemnly. "I'm glad you're safe," I said as we sat down. "But we need to talk."

I didn't waste any time, filling him in on the disaster that had been the wedding. I told him about Massimo's men and how they had tried to take Daphne, but Massimo himself was nowhere to be found. My fists clenched in

frustration as I recounted the story.

"I feel like I failed," I admitted, my voice raw with emotion. "I especially feel like I failed Daphne by not catching Massimo. He's still out there, and he's going to keep coming. Our last shot is the auction."

Reginald's eyes narrowed, concern etched on his face. "What do you plan to do, Drake?"

I exhaled, running a hand through my hair. "I fucking love her, Reginald. I fucked up and bloody fell in love. And now this twat is out there, and he could take her from me. Just like I took her from him. This is all my fault. If I'd just taken him off the board, she'd be okay. But I had to get my bloody life back, didn't I? I have to let her go."

Reginald shook his head, his gaze steady and unwavering. "No, Drake. Massimo was coming for her anyway. If you love her, tell her."

"I did," I replied, my voice cracking. "But this isn't going to end well. You know that. If it's not Massimo, it'll be someone else. That's the joke, Reginald. *I* was the monster. She made me human, and now I don't get to keep her because someone else dangerous will always be coming."

Reginald regarded me thoughtfully for a moment, and then spoke with a conviction that surprised me. "Drake, you're not giving yourself enough credit. Yes, there will always be danger. There will always be someone who wants what you have or who wants to hurt the ones you love. But that's life. It's unpredictable and messy, and sometimes it's downright terrifying."

I shook my head, my heart aching at the thought of putting Daphne in harm's way again. "Reginald, I can't do that to her. I can't ask her to live this life, knowing that she'll never be safe. She deserves better than that."

Reginald leaned back in his chair, his expression grave. "Drake, I understand your fears, I really do. But Daphne is a strong, capable woman. She made her choice to be with you, knowing the risks. You can't make that decision for her."

I sighed heavily, trying to process it all. "I know," I said slowly. "But

what if something happens to her? What then?"

Reginald's gaze softened as he looked at me with understanding. "Drake, if something were to happen to Daphne, you would grieve and you would find strength in it. That doesn't mean that you don't care for her deeply; it just means that life is unpredictable and sometimes things don't go as planned." He paused for a moment before continuing. "But more importantly, if something were to happen to Daphne because of Massimo or anyone else, you'd make sure that justice was served. Make sure whoever did it pays for their crimes."

A war raged inside me, a battle between love and fear. I wanted to believe that we could make it through this, that our love could conquer all the obstacles in our path. But the thought of losing Daphne, of seeing her hurt, or worse, because of me was too much to bear.

Finally, with a heavy heart, I made my decision. "Reginald, Daphne deserves better than this life. She deserves safety, happiness, and a future free from the constant threat of danger. And the only way to give her that is to let her go."

Reginald frowned but didn't argue. He could see the resolve in my eyes, the determination to do what was best for the woman I loved, even if it meant breaking my own heart in the process.

"But I'm not giving up on bringing Massimo down," I continued, my voice firm. "I'll do whatever it takes to make sure he never threatens Daphne or anyone else again. And once he's dealt with, she can go back to her life... without me. That's the only way she'll be safe."

Reginald's gaze softened, and he placed a hand on my shoulder. "I understand, Drake. And I'll help you in any way I can. Just remember, you're not alone in this fight."

I nodded, grateful for his support. "Thank you, Reginald. I don't know what I'd do without you."

As I left the bungalow, my heart was heavy with the burden of my

decision. Letting Daphne go would be the hardest thing I'd ever done, but it was the only way to ensure her safety. The life I led was too dangerous, too unpredictable, and I couldn't bear the thought of her getting caught in the crossfire.

I resolved to bring Massimo down once and for all, to protect Daphne and all the people I cared about. And when the dust settled, I would let her go, giving her the chance to live the life she deserved, free from danger and the shadow of my past.

It wouldn't be easy, and every fiber of my being screamed in protest at the thought of saying goodbye to the woman who had changed my life. But I knew it was the right thing to do. For her sake, for my own, and for the future we both deserved.

As I walked away from the bungalow, I knew that the road ahead would be long and difficult, filled with danger and heartache. But I would face it head on, fueled by the love I felt for Daphne and the promise of a better future for her, even if it was one I couldn't be a part of.

DRAKE

A week later, the Rogues team had everything in place. The air was heavy and charged with electricity as we all cast our eyes to the huge monitor in the control room. The lights from the city seemed brighter and more alive than usual as the storm brewed outside.

On the screen in front of us were satellite images and blueprints of Massimo's villa in Italy, which we had been studying for days. It was time to put an end to this, once and for all.

"We need to end this for her," I told Gabe, my voice low and determined. "Whatever it takes, Massimo goes down."

Gabe nodded solemnly, understanding exactly what I meant. But Saff,

now in charge of the Rogues, wasn't about to let me off the hook so easily. She crossed her arms, her gaze piercing as she regarded me.

"You know this isn't going to be easy," she said firmly. "The island compound is heavily defended, and our intel suggests he's expecting us. We need a plan that will get us in and out without being detected."

Gabe nodded in agreement, and Saff let out a long sigh then started mapping out the details of our plan. In addition, we would establish multiple safe houses around the area in case things went south during the exchange.

We discussed every angle and detail, ensuring we had accounted for every possibility before finally agreeing on our course of action. Now, all that was left was to execute it perfectly – or risk failing against one of the world's most powerful criminals.

We all looked at each other in the silence of the control room. I knew that if I said yes, it meant we would be going after him without Daphne.

Firmly, I said, "This is our best chance of apprehending Massimo and wiping out the Syndicate once and for all."

The truth was, I was terrified of what would happen if I didn't let Daphne in on this plan. But the idea of putting her in danger again, of seeing her hurt, was too much to bear. I had made my decision. I would keep her safe, even if it meant going through this alone.

Lachlan chimed in, his voice calm and steady. "All right, we've got the fake ledger ready. We need to find a way to make Massimo think he's getting the real deal."

Gabe grinned, his eyes glinting with mischief. "Leave that to me. I've got a few tricks up my sleeve that'll make him believe he's hit the jackpot."

Saff nodded, her expression serious. "Once we have him, we need to make sure he can't escape. He's slippery, and we can't afford any mistakes."

We spent hours poring over the details of our plan, refining every aspect to ensure it was foolproof. We knew we only had one shot at this, and we couldn't afford to fail. The stakes were too high, not just for Daphne, but for

all of us.

As the night wore on, the storm outside intensified, and lightning illuminated the room in brief, brilliant flashes. The tension in the air was palpable, each of us acutely aware of the danger we were about to face.

Finally, Saff stood up, signaling the end of our planning session. "All right, team. We've got our plan. Now it's time to execute it. Remember, this isn't just about taking down Massimo. It's about protecting the people we care about and ensuring that they can live their lives without fear."

I nodded, my resolve steeling itself. "Let's finish this."

DAPHNE



I KNEW THIS WAS COMING. STILL, I WAS FOOLISH ENOUGH TO THINK MAYBE, just maybe, I could change the inevitable. That I could put this off. He was leaving. After everything, he was leaving me. Walking away. I'd thought if we could just connect and he could feel that I was okay, that I was still here, he wouldn't leave. But that was just wishful thinking.

I watched as he packed his bags, folding each shirt with precise movements. His back was rigid, his face stoic. He didn't look at me or say a word. The silence was overwhelming, suffocating. I wanted to scream, to beg him to stay, to tell him how much I needed him. But my voice was caught in my throat, my body frozen. All I could do was watch.

As he finished packing, he turned to me. His gaze was cold, emotionless. My heart sank. I knew what was coming next.

When he met my gaze with those eyes that had seen more of the world than I could ever imagine, I saw unshed tears there. And it wasn't the wonders of the world he'd seen, but the dark, dangerous underbelly most people didn't even know existed. He'd barreled into my life, bringing the shadows with him.

But then the unexpected had happened. Together we'd created a place devoid of shadows.

"I need to go. You'll be safe here. Reginald will make sure you are safe . If something goes wrong, he'll keep you protected."

My heart was cracking in two. Why couldn't he see that? The gentle glow from the dimmed lights softened his rugged features. God, he looked good. Annoyingly good. "So you're just making this choice. You are deciding for me because you think I can't possibly choose for myself."

He sighed. "Don't do this Daphne. You know why I have to do this."

"I thought you said I was yours," I whispered, trying to keep the tremor out of my voice.

His eyes flickered, and I saw a shadow of regret. But then it was gone, replaced by that infuriating spy stoicism. He shrugged, a gesture so dismissive it was like a slap to the face. "Well, it's like you said at the beginning, love. I'm a liar."

My heart clenched. "Drake, we've been through so much. I can't just let it go."

His face softened for a moment, and he looked away, clearly at war with himself. "You were shot, Daphne. Because of me. I can't... I *won't* let that happen again."

God, he was so noble. It would've been endearing if it wasn't so damn infuriating. My life, my choices, and here he was deciding what was best for me.

"Who do you think you are, Drake, my savior?" I shot back, anger and frustration rolling off me. "I knew what I signed up for."

But he was adamant, shaking his head. "It's not your fight, Daphne."

"Whose fight is it if it isn't mine? This man stalked me, terrorized me, threatened my family, chased me, shot at me, twice actually, and you're telling me this isn't my fight. You realize that's ridiculous, right? I've never had a dad, and I don't need one now. You cannot make this choice. We make

these decisions together.”

“You see, that's where you're wrong. Only one of us has been killing people efficiently for the majority of their adult life. So that person gets to make all the decisions. You might not like them, but you have to deal with them. You're not listening, Daphne. This is a done deal. It's a fight you can't win. You'll stay here where you're safe. I can't do what I need to do if I'm worried about you.”

“And what if I'm worried about you?”

He shook his head. “Doesn't matter. I'm still going, so don't make this any harder than it needs to be. This whole thing between us, it's an infatuation. You only think you're in love with me. None of it was real. Now let me do my goddamn job.”

My heart cracked in two at his words. I only *thought* I was in love with him? After everything we've been through? Wasn't that the bloody point of all this? We were supposed to be a team. But here he was, doing the exact thing we promised each other we wouldn't do... going rogue.

I watched as he moved toward the door, my protests and pleas bouncing off him like bullets off a Kevlar vest. He paused at the doorway, his back to me. "Get as far away from this life as you can. When this is all over, forget you ever met me."

Then he was gone, leaving me alone in my bungalow on the Rogues campus. The silence left in his wake was deafening. But hey, who needs a symphony of heartbreak when you've got the symphony of betrayal on repeat, right?

Damn it, Drake. You were supposed to be the good guy.

DAPHNE



MY HEART WAS STILL HAMMERING IN MY CHEST AS I ENTERED SAFFRON'S office. You know that sinking feeling you get when your favorite TV show ends with a cliffhanger and you have to wait for the next season? Yeah, it felt like that, only a hundred times worse. Except my cliffhanger was Drake striding out of my life like he was late for a hot date with espionage.

Saffron looked up from her computer screen and raised an eyebrow at the disheveled state of my hair and clothes.

“Rough morning?” she asked.

“You could say that,” I replied, sinking into the chair opposite her desk. “It's just that Drake...” I trailed off, unable to put into words the feelings of anger and betrayal that were still raw in my chest.

Saffron leaned forward in her chair, her eyes fixed on me. “Drake? Did something happen with you two?”

I nodded, the words tumbling out of me. “He just said some horrid things and left, and I don't even know if he's coming back. Supposedly he's off to save me, but this doesn't have anything to do with me. He really is the villain.”

Saffron didn't say anything, but her expression softened, and she reached across the desk, placing a hand on mine. "I'm sorry, I know how much he means to you. But you can't let his leaving define you. You're more than just someone's partner."

Her voice was gentle but firm, and I felt a sudden surge of determination. She was right. I wasn't going to let Drake walking away break me. I could do something.

"I know," I said, feeling a slight smile tug at the corners of my mouth. "I just need to figure out what comes next."

Saffron nodded, her hand still on mine. "Exactly. And I'm here to help you do just that. We can arrange a safe house for you anywhere you'd like to go. You can probably work remotely at your job until we're certain the coast is clear, and then you can go back to your life."

As we continued talking, I felt a sense of hope begin to blossom inside me. Maybe Drake was gone for now, but that didn't mean I had to accept his decision.

"I'm going to the auction," I announced, putting as much steel into my voice as I could muster.

Saffron, the leader of Rogues, looked up from her desk, her long braids reflecting the sharp office lights. Her gaze was the visual equivalent of a *Do not disturb* sign, but I was not about to be deterred.

"You're nutters. No way in hell am I letting you go."

"It's not like you can stop me. I'm the one Massimo wants. He needs me. There's nothing stopping me from walking outside of these walls and making a phone call to my sister. One of his goons would come and pick me up in no time."

Saffron did the unexpected thing and sat back with a smile. "I like you. You have spunk. Drive. Determination. You don't quit, and you don't cry. But you're not trained. You're not an operative. I can't in good conscience put you in the field even if I wanted to. I need to protect the lives of my team. Well,

and Drake.”

“I’m thinking about them. I’m thinking about their lives. What they are doing is risky. I could end it all by walking in. That makes more sense than putting your people at risk. I can guarantee their safety.”

“I can’t guarantee yours.”

“I’m an adult. If I can do this without bloodshed and get you close enough to capture him, wouldn’t you rather do that?”

“This is a bad idea.”

“I’m going,” I said, lifting my chin. “With or without your help.”

“Fine. Kaya will be your backup on the ground. Before you say anything…” Saffron added, raising a well-manicured hand to halt any further demands. “Remember, you’re not there to play hero. You’re there to make Massimo *think* he’s won. To distract him. Kaya is very skilled in getting in and out, and you’ll be safest with her and Rook.”

I blinked, trying to process her words. No, no, no. That wasn’t the plan. I wasn’t some damsel to be used as a distraction.

“What about Massimo?” I asked.

Saffron merely leveled her gaze at me, a single brow arching elegantly. It was her signature move, and it made me feel like an unruly teenager. “As long as you keep your tracker on and follow what Kaya says to do, he’ll see you, you’ll distract him, then Kaya will walk you out. No heroics, Daphne. Those are my terms.”

“I just want to be useful.”

“Daphne,” she said calmly, “your feelings for Drake are clouding your judgment, and right now, you’re too emotionally invested.”

Emotionally invested? Well, wasn’t that the understatement of the century. I was heartbroken, pissed off, and hell-bent on proving that I didn’t need Drake to handle my life.

But as much as I wanted to argue, I knew Saffron was right. I was not in the best frame of mind for this mission.

But they did need me, and I wanted my life back.

I took a deep breath, nodding in agreement. "You're right," I said, trying to sound as composed as possible. "I'll stick to the plan."

Saffron gave me a small, understanding smile. "Good. I know it's hard, but try to keep your emotions in check. We need you to focus on the mission."

I nodded, feeling the weight of her words settling heavily on my shoulders. I knew the stakes were high and that I couldn't afford to let my personal life get in the way of what needed to be done. "Okay," I said, standing up from the chair. "I'll get ready."

Saffron nodded, and I turned to leave, my mind already racing with the details of the mission. As I walked out of the office, I couldn't help but wonder if Drake would be proud of me. If he would see that I was capable of handling things on my own.

But I pushed those thoughts aside, focusing instead on the task at hand. I had a job to do, and I was going to do it to the best of my ability.

As I made my way toward the locker room to change into my gear, I was resolute. Whatever happened with Drake, whatever the future held, I knew that I could handle it. I loved him, but I wasn't depending on him.

And deep down, I knew that this mission was about more than just proving myself to Drake. It was about proving to myself that I was capable of doing this. That I was strong enough to handle whatever the world threw at me, whether he was there to hold my hand or not.

DRAKE

Massimo's private island was off the coast of Italy, cut off and exclusive and guarded to the teeth.

Under normal circumstances, security forces patrolled the island. Coming

from the sea, you'd be seen on radar long before you got anywhere near. However, thanks to the auction, radar detectors were off. So Gabe, Lachlan, Saint, and I had essentially parked two hundred meters off the island and swam underwater to arrive here.

I climbed out of the water onto the rocks alongside the northwest corner of the villa. I disposed of my lightweight miniature oxygen tank and shed my waterproof suit, revealing a tuxedo and dress shoes underneath.

I had a microfiber towel as part of my kit, and I used it to soak most of the water out of my hair then smoothed my locks into a slicked-back style. When I was done, I not only looked the part, I embodied it.

Infiltrating the island was a challenge, but we knew the drill. Gabe and I had both pulled infiltrations like this before. The key was to stay silent and undetected. This could be over in no time.

Still, I knew it would take a certain kind of finesse to get inside without being detected. After all, twenty guards that we could see were not something to sneeze at. For each of those twenty, I knew there would be at least two we couldn't see. So there was no way we could turn this into a firefight.

But we had a plan.

I'd started by charting a route around the island. I used a map of the island that I'd acquired, along with a detailed list of where the guards were stationed. So far our intel had held.

When we'd chosen locations, I'd decided on the perfect entry point, a secluded and shallow cove that I could swim to undetected. I made sure to carefully note the location of the guards so I could avoid them if possible.

I removed the bag from my waist and zipped it open. I pulled out a small handheld device that would get me past the exterior electronic locks. Apparently the Rogues' resident tech-heads had whipped that little beauty up.

My approach to the back of the villa along the stone stairs had to be surefooted, confident, and unannounced. I needed to look like I belonged there, that I was merely a guest out for a stroll on the property.

At the back door leading to the gardens, I began to work on the lock of the gate that led to the main house. The device came to life in my hands, and I felt its power pulsing through my fingertips. Seconds later, the lock clicked open.

With a small smile, I slung the bag over my shoulder and slipped through the gate. I had made it.

I slid my comm unit into my ear. "Come in King, Saint, Spy. I'm in position."

"King here. Two hostiles down. Planting charges."

"Copy, King and Villain. Moving to Villain's position," said Gabe.

I took a deep breath, feeling the adrenaline pumping through my veins. I had to remain calm and focused if I wanted to succeed. I carefully made my way toward the mansion, staying low to the ground and keeping an eye out for any patrols.

The island was well-guarded, but we had planned for every possible scenario. The team was equipped with state-of-the-art weaponry and gear, and we were ready for anything.

As I approached the mansion, I saw several armed guards patrolling the area. I quickly took cover behind a large rock and observed them for a few seconds before devising a plan. I signaled my team to get ready.

"King, Saint, take out the guards on my mark," I whispered into my comm unit.

I counted down silently, waiting for the perfect moment. And then, with a nod, I gave the signal.

King and Saint emerged from their hiding places, their guns and silencers at the ready. In a matter of seconds, the guards were down and we cleared the way to the mansion.

Then, as I rounded the last bend, I could see the outline of Massimo's private villa illuminated in the moonlight. I had made it. I took a deep breath, steadied my nerves, and prepared to infiltrate the auction. Accessing the

auction would be like diving into a shark tank with a bunch of overzealous, heavily armed guards who got a kick out of snapping necks. But then, when you've made a career out of defying odds, twenty guards felt like a Tuesday.

I stealthily made my way through the lush greenery of the island's tropical shrubs, my heart racing with anticipation. The sound of the waves crashing against the rocks in the distance was the only thing to be heard.

I finally reached the villa where the auction was taking place and peered through the window to see what was inside. The interior was decorated with a vast array of luxurious items, from ancient artifacts to rare jewels, all of which were up for grabs to the highest bidder. But the real auction was the Ledger data.

I worked my way past the sprawling gardens and intricate topiaries toward the auction hall. It was a beautiful building, all dimly lit rooms and gleaming surfaces. I pressed my back flat against the wall, taking a deep breath as I ran my fingers along the cool steel of my wristwatch. The time read 9:45 p.m. The auction was scheduled to start at 10:00. I had fifteen minutes to get in and out with the goods.

I caught sight of one of the guards walking toward me, but I quickly ducked back into the shadows, my heart pounding in my chest. I knew I had to time this perfectly.

Finally, the guard passed me by, and I made my way to the door. I took a deep breath in and held it before I pulled the door open.

The ballroom was filled with some of the wealthiest people on the planet. There was a sense of exclusivity in the room that made my skin crawl. I spotted Massimo at the far end of the room, his beady eyes fixed on the stage.

As Gabe went about planting explosives like a kid on an Easter egg hunt, Lock and Saint kept their hawk-like eyes trained on the guards. My job? Lead the pack, navigate the chaos, and keep the gang from shooting anyone prematurely. Or at least not until the fireworks went off.

We were making good time, nearing our final checkpoint, when Lock

hissed, "Got Massimo's location. Ready to proceed."

It was time. I was about to give the order when I saw her, like an oasis in the desert.

"Daphne," I whispered as the world ground to a halt. My pulse hammered in my ears. The last person I expected to see on this island was her, my Daphne, standing beside Massimo like she belonged there.

There she was, my heartbreak, my regret. The one thing I never saw coming.



STEPPING FOOT ON THE ISLAND FELT LIKE WALKING INTO A LION'S DEN wearing Lady Gaga's steak suit seasoned to perfection.

The island itself was an ornate citadel surrounded by lush jungles and blue waters that stretched to the horizon. A light breeze blew, sending a chill down my spine as I surveyed the scene before me.

I heard the faint sound of laughter from the palace ahead. My heart raced as I contemplated what I was about to do, and I took a few deep breaths to steady myself.

As I made my way toward the palace, I saw two guards standing in front of the gates, their faces grim and their weapons at the ready. One of them stepped forward and asked me a few questions in a gruff voice. I responded as best I could, trying to keep my voice steady as I mentioned the name of my employer. The guard nodded, seeming satisfied, and gestured for me to enter the villa.

My hands were shaking as I stepped through the gates, and I took a moment to compose myself. Ahead of me lay a long, winding path, and I could feel the thrill and fear of the unknown as I began my journey toward Massimo's court.

Kaya and Rook were by my side, my very own backup. Rook was on my

arm looking every bit the billionaire misanthrope ready to drop a lot of money. Don't get me wrong, he was pretty and all, but he was no Drake.

Nerves gnawed at my gut, but Kaya, bless her heart, was having none of it. She pulled me aside, her eyes softening for a moment as she squeezed my arm.

"Daphne," she said, her voice a comforting anchor amid the storm of my nerves. "Remember who you are. You're a badass who's faced worse than this."

I had to laugh at that. Kaya had a way of making everything sound like it was just another day at the office. And I guess, in a way, it was.

I nodded, taking a deep breath and pulling myself together. Kaya was right. I couldn't let my nerves get the best of me. I had a job to do.

As we made our way toward the palace gates, my eyes scanned the area, taking note of the guards and potential threats. I could feel Rook's presence beside me, his hand resting on my back in a reassuring gesture.

We approached the guards, and I kept my eyes forward and my expression neutral as they checked our identification. When they finally granted us access, I breathed a sigh of relief.

The villa was a maze, and it took a moment for us to get our bearings. But as we made our way through the winding halls, the sound of music grew louder and the scent of sweat and alcohol filled the air.

We entered a crowded room, filled with people dancing and laughing, their bodies pressed tightly together. I spotted Massimo in the center, surrounded by a throng of admirers. He was even more dangerous and repulsive than I remembered.

I felt a thrill of fear and excitement ripple through me as I approached him. He turned toward me, his eyes sliding over me in a way that made my skin prickle.

I thought it was being near Massimo at first, but no. This was different. The hairs on the back of my neck stood at attention, and my body heated. My

gaze flickered around, and for the briefest moment, I saw the reason for that feeling.

Drake. He was over by the northwest gardens. I didn't see the other men with him, which meant they were about to inflict chaos on this merry band of billionaires. I forced myself to keep my attention on Massimo. The last thing I wanted was him seeing Drake.

"I'm surprised you came," he said, a smirk playing at the corners of his mouth. "I am very glad to know that you are a reasonable woman after all."

"I'm here to talk business," I said coolly, a note of defiance in my voice. I tried to think of all the ways that I should play this. Should I be conciliatory? Should I beg? Tell him I'd do whatever he wanted if he just left my family out of it? But in the end, despite the fear coursing through my veins, I knew I wasn't begging him for anything. I would, in fact, rather die.

That can probably be arranged.

Massimo raised an eyebrow, clearly amused. He clamped his hand on my arm, tugging me toward the exit. "Let me show you around, darling," he cooed, and he held up a hand to halt Rook, who tried to follow.

As I was led away, I couldn't help but glance back, once again locking eyes with Drake one last time. There was a warning in his gaze, but it was too late. I was in Massimo's clutches now. All I had to do was find a moment to plant the microscopic tracker on him, then run like hell. The team would pick him up. But I needed to be away from his guards first.

And as the crowd swallowed us up, I had to remind myself of Kaya's words. I was a badass. I could handle this. I *would* handle this. After all, who said heartbreak couldn't be a great motivator?

DRAKE

I was going to put a bullet between his eyes.

Rage built up inside me as I watched Massimo, his arm clamped tightly around Daphne's waist, dragging her away. My vision blurred with rage and my hands trembled with fury. I prided myself on keeping my cool no matter the situation, but this time all rational thought flew out of my head and wrath sucked me under its undertow. Before long I was sticking to the shadows, headed for the main hall, trying to intercept them.

I watched him pull Daphne into what looked like a private room at the end of the hall, then called in my coordinates. "Hold. I repeat hold. Kaya and Rook and Daphne are on location. I repeat, Kaya, Brooke, and Daphne are on location."

Like it or not, we were going to have to get the whole team out before we detonated. The whole team, including Igno.

I easily took out one guard at the end of the hall, wrapping my arm around his neck, bracing it with my other one, applying pressure along his trachea, and pulling him backward into the shadows before anyone else could see him.

When he stopped moving, I shoved him onto the balcony then headed back to the room where I saw Igno take Daphne. Then palming my gun, I strode in after them.

But Igno was already waiting for me with a gun to Daphne's temple. "Drake, you can't stop me from getting the information I need." Massimo's gravelly voice echoed through the room. He smirked, his gaze on me nothing short of challenging.

A ball of ice formed in my gut, the fear taking over. I couldn't lose her.

"Let her go," I growled in a low voice, leveling my gun at him and refusing to back down. I felt the heat of Daphne's gaze on me, and although I didn't turn to meet it, I could feel the appreciation in her eyes. Massimo, however, didn't seem fazed by my appearance.

"You think you can just shoot me and free her?" Massimo sneered. The air grew heavy with tension. Neither of us moved. Massimo's eyes were

trained on me as the three of us held our breath.

"Yes," I replied simply, staring him unflinchingly in the eye as I readied my gun. For a fraction of a second, I saw something flicker in his expression, a hint of fear. Then the look was gone, and he was once again the stoic figure he had been before.

"Go ahead then, pull the trigger," he taunted, breaking the silence that had descended between us. My finger tightened around the trigger, and I could feel my arm shaking with rage. In my head I was already pulling the trigger, already watching him fall to the ground as the bullet exploded from the barrel. But in reality, I kept my finger on the trigger and simply glared at him. In that moment I knew I couldn't do it. Not if it risked Daphne.

"Don't push me," I hissed. "Let her go, or I swear I'll shoot you."

The tension in the room was palpable, electric in its intensity. My stance seemed to be a reminder for everyone to remain still, and my finger kept its shaking grip on the trigger as I waited for Massimo's response. From the corner of my eye, I could see security guards on the perimeter balcony, but then both of them went down. I figured Lock, Gabe, and Saint were in position. Or maybe it was Rook and Kaya protecting their asset in Daphne.

"Dammit, Drake, focus!" Kaya's voice crackled in my earpiece, but I barely heard her. All I saw was Daphne, her usually fiery eyes filled with fear, but also a spark of defiance.

It was all the warning we had before the chaos hit. Her move was swift and unexpected, and it took us all by surprise. Massimo stumbled backward, doubled over in pain from the blow, while Daphne twisted away from him.

The chaos in the room amplified by a thousand when the first set of explosions ricocheted. But for me, everything fell away except for Daphne, and I lunged for her.

Massimo mirrored my movements, lunging for her as well.

Daphne's gaze locked on mine, her eyes wide but trusting. "Drake," she said softly, but there was a note of command in her voice. I knew that tone.

She was telling me to shoot.

Without breaking our eye contact, I squeezed the trigger. The bullet found its mark, and Massimo crumpled to the floor, a dark red spot growing on his chest. A shot from the balcony followed a second later, ensuring he wouldn't be a threat to anyone anymore.

Outside in the hall, everything erupted into a crescendo of terrified screams and shouts. But in the middle of it all, I saw Daphne, her chest heaving and her eyes still on me. The smoky chaos of the room seemed to fade around her, like she was the only thing that mattered.

The rage that had driven me moments ago had been replaced by something else. Something more powerful. Something that made me want to pull her close and keep her safe from the evil of the world.

I lowered my gun and she stepped forward, her arms going around me as she hugged me tightly. I closed my eyes and held her close. "I was so bloody scared. I didn't know what I would do if I lost you. What the hell are you doing here?"

"Drake." Her voice was muffled, and I could barely hear what she was saying. But still, I held on. The fear still gripped me tightly in my chest, roots taking hold of all the what-ifs.

"Thank you," she whispered into my ear. I didn't reply. I just stood there, feeling her warmth and the steady rhythm of her heart.

For that moment, it was enough.

It had all happened so quickly. One minute, I'd been standing there, my gun raised as Daphne faced off with Massimo. The next, Massimo was lying on the ground and everything had gone silent.

The next round of charges went off, and Rook came in from the balcony. "Time to go. Backup is on the way. We have to move."

Holding tight onto Daphne, I let Rook lead the way into the hall as pandemonium took hold. Everywhere we turned, guests were running and screaming. Others were still huddled together, scared and confused by what

had just taken place. But all I could focus on was Daphne. She didn't panic, just let Rook and I lead her to our egress route, her shoulders strong and her gaze unyielding.

Suddenly, something shifted inside me. It was an undeniable feeling that I couldn't ignore. One of admiration, awe, and love.

I stepped closer to her, and she looked up at me with her beautiful hazel eyes as if she could read my thoughts. The chaos seemed to fade away until it was only us standing there together in that moment of understanding.

My heart swelled as I realized just how courageous she was, how bravely she'd faced down danger to protect herself and others around her without even thinking twice about it.

Everything around us seemed to stand still as our fingers intertwined together naturally like we were meant to be this way forever, and I knew one thing for certain; from here on out nothing would ever be the same between us again.

She squeezed my hand tight then released me before following Kaya and Rook.

Now it was her turn to walk away from me.



ONE MONTH LATER...

“WILL WONDERS NEVER CEASE.”

I glanced up from the trainee files I was reviewing to find Gabe standing in the doorway with something in his hands. “What's the problem?”

He shrugged. “No problem. I'm just so confused that you're domesticated. Look at you. You haven't murdered anyone in weeks. You must be losing your touch.”

“Well, obviously your powers of observation need work. The new recruit, Reynolds. Pretty sure you haven't seen him in a week. He might be shoved in a wardrobe somewhere.”

“I know you're aware of how to dispose of a body better than that.”

I chuckled. “True. What's up? What do you need?” Gabe and Saffron had temporarily allowed me to lay low at Rogues, utilizing my skillset to assist with some of the trainees while we waited to see whether or not MI5 cleared me to come back to work.

With Massimo gone, his father behind bars, and the Ledger in the possession of Rogues, the Syndicate was imploding. Some members had tried to join to create smaller factions of their own, but Home Office had been swift. Those on British soil were now awaiting trial. The ones abroad were running for their lives, convinced that spies were coming to get them.

Gabe had a file in his hands. "We have word from Home Office."

My heart squeezed. This was the decision I was waiting for. The return to normalcy. I was grateful to Saffron and Gabe for allowing me to have a routine of some sort for the past few weeks. Otherwise, I would have torn out my hair thinking about Daphne.

Every night when I went home, Reginald made a point of telling me how badly I'd screwed up everything.

It was like I was a kid again, or like living with your father after years of being away. He was always on me about making my bed, tidying up more, and fucking calling Daphne.

It was bad enough that every night I went to bed excited to see her in my dreams. And every morning I wanted to slash out my own heart when I woke up without her. And that was if I slept at all.

That aching need in the center of my chest refused to go away. Matter of fact, it was spreading, metastasizing, taking on a life of its own. Determined to remind me I was a fool.

"Don't keep me in suspense. Give it to me straight."

Gabe handed over the envelope. I took it, and as I started to open it, he pulled another envelope out of his back pocket. I lifted a brow, but he waited for me to open the first one.

On printed Rogues letterhead, I found a letter from Saffron, officially offering me a position with the Rogues. Level 5 agent, code name, Villain.

I glanced up at him, surprised. "You're offering me a permanent spot?"

"Yes. We've had a very active year, obviously. We need good agents. And with Saffron running things now, we need more help with the trainees."

“I'm not a teacher, Gabe.”

“I'm not sure about that. But it's a fresh start. And stability.”

I could see what he was doing. “Did Reginald put you up to this?”

“He's worried about you. Why don't you just call her?”

“And say what? That I fucked up? I should have trusted you to make up your own mind? I'm sorry I tried to control you like your mother did? I'm sorry I lied to you and told you that we were nothing?”

Gabe winced at that. “Damn, and I thought I was an asshole.”

“You know how competitive I am. Biggest asshole award goes to me. I needed to make it stick. I needed to make her hate me. She's never coming back.”

Gabe folded his arms and rocked back and forth from his heels to his toes and back again. “Mate, I know you think that you need to honor your father and your uncle and the sacrifices they made. But they did that so you could make better choices than they did.”

“MI5 is all I've ever known.”

“And now there's a chance to know more. Do more. No one wants to take you out of the field. But if you want it, you have a place here at Rogues.” He laid down the other letter. The one from Home Office. As he strode out of the room, I stared at the envelope on the desk. My heart thrummed in my chest. I tried to force my breathing to even out, to take deep breaths and let the tension roll off my shoulders. All the things that I had been trying in stupid fucking yoga. None of that shit worked.

And it's not going to fucking work until you talk to Daphne.

I kept staring at the letter from Saffron. I had an opportunity to still do the thing that I loved to do but in an entirely different way. Over the last several weeks, I had watched Gabe and Tabatha go out on missions together and watched Saffron direct her husband in a firefight.

Kaya was working her way up in the organization. She was even allowed on some field missions, a fact that drove Saint insane. The thing was Kaya

was no shrinking violet. She could hold her own. Hell, I'd even seen Nissa, Rook's fiancée, being taught how to shoot by Saffron. She was a half-decent shot.

I was surrounded by women who pulled no punches. By women who were deadly. *Their* partners hadn't pushed them away. Hadn't abandoned them.

I looked at the Home Office letter again, and that thread of worry I had carried around for weeks suddenly dissipated. Because I knew what I had to do. I left the letters where they were and headed out.

None of this meant anything without Daphne. I was never going to be whole without her.

You don't have any right to her.

I didn't. But that didn't mean that I wasn't going to die trying.

DRAKE

To her credit, Daphne was smart. She had moved. After all, when a crazy man knows where you live, you move flats. Now she lived in the flats just above Vauxhall station. I parked my car and walked into the massive courtyard, clocking the view of the Thames.

I knew exactly where her flat was. Once she got settled, I looked in on her from time to time. From a distance, of course. But nothing could prepare me for seeing her dressed in fuchsia, a variant of the color she'd worn to Willow's wedding. The dress had a deep V neckline and was short, barely skimming her thighs. And there was a bloke walking with her, his hand proprietarily perched along her lower back. I ground my jaw as I watched them walk past me from the shadows. Who the fuck was that?

I wish I could say I was calm, cool, and collected and didn't follow them on their date. A rational human being wouldn't have watched them at the

restaurant. A sane person wouldn't have delighted in the fact that her date wasn't asking her anything about herself. A stable person wouldn't have been hopeful because Daphne looked sad.

As beautiful as she was, her features were drawn. Her smile didn't reach her eyes. But that didn't stop lover boy from trying to get a leg over when he brought her home.

I watched from the shadows of the hallway outside her flat. He walked her to the door like a gentleman. But then fire bloomed just under my skin as he slipped his hand into her hair and tried to pull her in for a kiss.

Daphne backed away, shaking her head. He scowled and tried to force the issue, pressing his lips to hers.

Daphne immediately kned him in the balls, bringing up her right arm quickly and stiffly against his trachea, shoving him off.

He coughed and wheezed, bending over and gasping, “What the fuck is wrong with you, you bi—”

“I would think very carefully before you finish that sentence,” I growled.

Lover boy scrambled away from Daphne. “Who the hell is this?”

“I'm the love of her life, and I have a very nasty temper. So if you don't like your nuts, keep fucking talking.”

It could have been my size or maybe something I said. Either way, lover boy blanched and, while still wheezing, let himself out the exit door.

I turned to face Daphne, who was staring at me as if she'd seen a ghost. She let out a shaky breath. “What are you doing here?”

I licked my bottom lip. “I'm here for you.”

She blinked at me once before turning around and opening the door to her flat. Then she went inside and quietly closed it behind her. I automatically reached for the door, but I heard her engage the lock. And if I wasn't mistaken, she engaged *several* locks.

I leaned my forehead against her door. “Daphne please, all I want to do is talk.”

I stayed like that for an hour before I realized she wasn't going to open the door.

What? Did you think this would be easy?

Even if she hated me, just seeing her would soothe my aching heart.

I'd been trying to stay away from her for weeks. That wasn't going to work. I needed her. I wanted her. She was the answer to the question I didn't even know I was asking all along.

And I was going to need help getting her back.

DAPHNE

“So how long did he stay out there?”

I shrugged as I passed Talia the bread bowl. “According to my security camera, an hour.”

“And what were you going to do if he was still there this morning?”

I would have given Talia the answer, but she would have thought I was insane. Everything that happened to me had taught me a lot about surviving on my own. A way to be safe and still live a full life.

Step one of that was having more than one way out of my flat.

“I would have figured something out.”

As she chewed on a piece of focaccia dripping in olive oil, she watched me carefully. “How did it feel seeing him?”

“Fine. I’m fine, Talia. You don't have to worry.” I lied.

“Worry? I'm trying to get you laid by the last man who ruined your vagina for anybody else.”

“He didn't ruin it.” He *totally* had ruined it. I had tried to go back to my life. And I also had to go back to therapy. Because apparently when a homicidal maniac tries to kill you, it is not conducive to sleep.

But somehow in those therapy sessions, I never mentioned how Drake

and I got together. The way he kidnapped me. The way he'd washed and deep conditioned my hair. The way he'd cared for me.

I couldn't talk about it. All I told the therapist was that I'd had a bad breakup. She could sense I was holding something back. But every time I tried to talk about it, my heart broke all over again.

And this fucker was back? Hell no. I did not accept it. I was not doing that.

“So you don't want to see him again?”

“I do not. I feel nothing Talia.” *Liar.*

She threw her head back and laughed. “Oh, please. This is the most animated you have been in weeks. Is he a bad boy? Yes. Is he a walking, talking red flag? Also yes. But does he make your body sing? It would seem so because just talking about him has put a little color in your cheeks.”

“I'm not doing this Talia. I'm not talking about him. He's out of my life. Besides, I'm running the London half marathon tomorrow. I just want to eat, spend some happy time with my bestie, go home, and crawl into bed. I've been training hard, but I've never run this long and I have a feeling it's going to hurt, so I want to keep my focus.”

I could tell that Talia wanted to argue, but she didn't. Instead, she let me sit in my delusions like a bestie should.

My delusions, however, did not allow me to sleep, and I tossed and turned on the night before the bloody marathon. When I woke up in the morning, I was exhausted. The only thing that picked me up was a text message from Reginald.

Good luck, dear. Have a good race. Remember to bring your own hydration. It'll make you feel better. And don't forget your Gu packs to help give you energy through the run.

After our ordeal, Reginald checked on me like a doting father. Never, not once, did he ask about Drake and myself. He only ever asked about me. Sending me congratulations and encouragement when I would conquer some

new fear or even just attempt it.

For the first time in my life, it felt like I had a father. He often checked in on Gran too on my opposite weeks. True to his promise, Drake had completely taken care of Gran's bill. I never had to think about it. Which I was grateful for and simultaneously annoyed by.

I had to focus on my race though. Luckily my adventures were one place he hadn't infiltrated.

At the race starting line, I was dressed and ready, or at least as ready as I was ever going to be. When the gun went off, I started with the thousands of other runners. I'd eaten a good breakfast and had my little snack pack. I also had my Gu energy packs. The texture was horrible, as was the taste, but for a quick hit of energy on the run, they couldn't be beat.

Three miles in, I was regretting my life choices. I still had nine bloody miles to go. Along the trail, I recognized the pack of runners I'd been at the starting line with. We'd been keeping pace along the way. Every now and again, they kept looking over at me. I wasn't sure if they wanted to run with me or if something was up, but it kept triggering the paranoia.

Halfway, at mile six, one of the girls from the pack started running right next to me.

I smiled over at her in what I hoped looked like a smile of solidarity, but her smile looked right through me. She was smiling at someone else. Someone on my other side.

I glanced over and nearly tripped over my bloody shoelaces, but Drake and his fast reflexes caught me.

"What the fuck?"

"Don't be mad. I'm not even here. You just run your race."

"How am I supposed to ignore you? How long have you been running with me?"

"I started behind you. I'm just here in case you need me."

The hell? I picked up my pace on purpose. "I do not need you. I needed

you once, and you abandoned me, so no. I don't need you.”

He said nothing, just kept silently running with me. At mile nine, the burn settled in. The pain of it. I knew I still had to get through Primrose Hill, and I wasn't sure I was going to make it.

There was a thing about wanting to give up. Once you planted the seed, it grew. You could make up all the excuses in the world to just stop and walk. To stop and hop the Tube and go home on the train. But I forced myself to take every single step.

At mile ten, I *really* contemplated giving up. Honestly, it seemed like the best course of action. But somewhere to my left, someone said, “You've got this. You're not a quitter.”

I had never felt so encouraged and pissed off all at once.

Sadly, he was right. I wasn't a quitter. I slogged through the last mile, and when we rounded the corner and I could see the finish line, I tried to pick up my pace, even though my legs felt like Jell-O. I pushed though I was sure my pace was barely beyond a walk. But damn it, I crossed the finish line.

After the race, I didn't see him again. Willow and Travis were there to give me flowers and cheer me on at the end, but no Drake.

I didn't see him again for a week. It was after work on Thursday. I'd just closed an account for Baines. I had a new manager, thankfully, who believed in promoting from within. She'd let me pitch a new client, and I'd landed them.

I was almost disappointed I didn't see Drake lurking about so I could tell him that I was fine without him. That I was thriving. That I was great.

Sure you are.

Well, great besides the fact that it had been five days since the half marathon and I could still barely move my legs. The point was I wanted him to know I was happy damn it.

On the way home, I stopped at Pappalecco for a gelato. When I went to pay, the girl behind the counter grinned and said a very good-looking man

had already come in and paid for everyone's gelato for the next three hours.

When I asked her to describe him, I knew for a fact that Drake had been there.

I arrived home to find him on the steps right in front of the Pret-A-Manger next to my flat.

“Don't. What you're doing is stalking, and I won't allow it. Go home, Drake.”

“I will. I just noticed you were walking today. You normally take the Tube. I just wanted to make sure you got home safe.”

Tears welled in my eyes, and I shook my head. “The time for trying to nurture me is over. The time to take care of me is gone. You threw that away. *You* did that, so it's too late for you to come back.”

He nodded solemnly, but he didn't move, forcing me to walk by him up the stairs to my flat. I locked my door behind me as soon as I was inside.

The tears fell freely and easily now.

Another week went by before I saw him again. I'd booked a kitesurfing adventure in Cornwall. I was terrified. I wasn't a strong swimmer under the best of circumstances, so kitesurfing in cold and choppy waters was not my idea of fun. But it was one of the things on my list.

After Massimo Igno tried to kill me, I had made my ultimate list of all the things I wanted to do to live a little. Some things were small, like stopping at Pappalecco once a month for gelato regardless of the weather. Then there were bigger things... like kitesurfing.

As it turned out, I *liked* to try new things. I enjoyed new experiences. And every now and again, I would see Drake lurking. Once in a while he would be exactly where I needed him to be if I was walking home from work. Never pushing, just hovering on the periphery. Always there.

It wasn't until the night I came home from a late client meeting when the company car had dropped me off that I almost wished I would see him on the stairs waiting for me. I didn't even know where that feeling came from,

because we were over. Still, I would have given anything just to see his face instead of the face I did see.

There was a woman on the stairs this time. An all too familiar one.

“Mum. How did you find out where I lived?”

“For fuck’s sake, Daphne, you're always so dramatic. You didn't even see me on the bus. You went to the museum this weekend. I followed you here.”

I shook my head and walked past her. “What is it with me and stalkers? I don't want to see you. If you don't leave, I’m calling the police.”

“Is that any way to talk to your mother? I took care of you.”

“No. You hurt me. Repeatedly. On purpose for your own gains. You were sick. And I do hope you get the help that you need, but I have nothing for you.”

“Oh, you have something I need, all right. Money. I remember your fancy boyfriend. Ask him for it. I need two thousand quid.”

“For what?”

She huffed as she followed behind me to my flat. “It's important. Someone's going to hurt me if I don't pay them, so you need to give me money.”

There had been a time when just even seeing her would make me crumble. But I turned on my heel to face her. “Did you already ask Willow and Travis?”

“You're my oldest. You need to take care of me. That's how it's done.”

“No, how it's done is you act like you’re a mother and look after me. Make sure I have food. Make sure the house is clean. Read to me. Play games with me. That's what a mother does. You did none of those things. You made me sick on purpose. So no, you can't borrow money. You can't be in my life. If I see you again, I’ll call the police.”

With that, I closed the door in her face. I leaned against the door and sank down onto my butt, the tears flowing freely and my body racked with sobs.

Fear was a sneaky culprit teasing up my spine. I didn’t even know why I

was scared. All I knew was that I didn't want to be alone. And shockingly, I made the one call I never thought I'd make again.

DRAKE



I DIDN'T EXPECT TO HEAR FROM HER. I WAS STILL WATCHING HER, OF COURSE. Every adventure she did, I was somewhere in the background. The kitesurfing nearly gave me a heart attack, but I watched her with such pride. I couldn't believe she'd done it, even though she was terrified.

When my phone rang, I was in the building on the other side of the Thames. Not that I was creepily watching her or anything. I just wanted to be available if she needed me.

“Daphne? Are you okay?”

The sob on the other end of the line was my answer. Before she could even articulate words, I was on the move.

“I—I shouldn't have called. I'm sorry. I don't know what I'm doing.”

“You needed me, so you called. And that's okay. I'm on my way.”

Through more tears, she muttered, “No, I don't need you. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—”

“Too late. Open your door.”

She hesitated, then several seconds later, the door opened and she stared up at me. “How close were you?”

“Doesn't matter.” I reached for her, waiting for her to take my hand. I was there for her, and I was going to give her what she needed, not take what I wanted.

She stared at my hand for a long time and finally placed her delicate palm in mine, and I squeezed her hand.

In a rush, the contact started to fill all those empty spaces in my body, in my heart, and in my soul. And for the first time in months, I felt like I could breathe again.

She drew in a shuddering breath, and the next thing I knew her face was planted in my chest and her lithe arms were wrapped around me.

I held her tight. I didn't know what was wrong. The most immediate thing I could offer was warmth. She was so tiny and so cold. Her tears soaked the front of my shirt, but I didn't care.

I didn't care because she had needed me and she'd called me. I wasn't sure how long I held her like that, but we stayed that way until her tears subsided and something cracked open inside me. The wetness rolling down my cheek was my first clue that something had gone wrong. I was crying too.

After two months without her, there was no stopping the emotions I'd buried. There was no hiding from it, no pretending.

I tucked her under my chin and smoothed down her curls. “What's wrong, love?”

“My mother. She turned up here asking for money. I thought I was okay. I thought I could let go of all the things she did to me. But I can't. Suddenly I'm a little kid again, and I feel alone and scared.”

I held her tighter, breathing in her scent. Doing my best to give her what I could.

Suddenly she shoved against me, her tears flowing freely again. “Why are you doing this to me? Why are you acting like you love me and coming when I call you? This isn't good for me.”

“I'm here for you, Daphne.”

“Stop saying that. What does that even mean?”

I tugged her back so she was in my arms. When she came willingly, I bent down and scooped her up and took her to the couch, seating her so she was in my lap.

“What it means is,” I said, gently wiping away the tears on her face, “that I know I messed up. I know I've been messing up in the last couple of months when I've been trying to see you. I just wanted to be available. You ran your half marathon and I just wanted to be there. I was there for the kitesurfing too. I wanted to make sure you were safe coming home on the Tube every night.”

“Yes, but why?” She shook her head, her eyes brimming with tears again. “Why are you torturing me?”

“I'm not trying to torture you. It's been torturing me trying to stay away. Trying to pretend that you aren't the other half of me. I was trying to keep you out of the darkness, trying to keep from hurting you more. But all it did was make me realize what an idiot I've been. From the moment I kissed you in the bar and then saw your little wrinkled nose when I walked into your office the next day, I have been fascinated with you. Not just your beauty, but the way you think. The way you throw yourself wholeheartedly into everything you do. It's the way you experience life. Your determination, your grit. It's terrifying but exhilarating, and it's a joy to behold. Daphne, you are an incredible woman. And I cannot believe I walked away from you.”

“Drake—”

“I said things to hurt you because I was afraid that you couldn't love me after everything I've done. I thought my life would tear us apart, so I preemptively did it myself. I told myself I was keeping you safe. But I was keeping *myself* safe. I was hiding a part of myself that I couldn't look at.”

“What am I supposed to say to that?”

“You don't have to say anything. I'm here for you. Whatever you need, it is my honor to give to you, whether you want to give me anything in return or

not. I had the most beautiful being in my arms that I could hold, then stupidly let you go. So now, if I even get to be near you and have a shadow of the kind of love I felt when I was with you, I'll take it. Whatever that looks like.”

“I just want someone to love me, Drake. I don't know what the hell happened to me after I met you. You broke me.”

“And I just pray for the opportunity to make it up to you for the rest of my life. Even if you don't want to give me a chance, know that you can always call on me. And I will always come for you.” I wiped her tears. “I will come for you and sit with you in the dark. I will come for you and hold your hand and fend off your demons. I will come for you when you want to skydive or jump off a bridge. I know you have no reason to believe my words, so all I can do is keep turning up when you need me. That is how I will prove it to you.”

She blinked up at me rapidly, her fingers tentatively brushing along my jaw. “Say it, Drake.”

“The words? The words are easy to say. I love you, Daphne Winslow. I have loved you from that first moment you called me a twat waffle. I loved you when I had to hold you against your will. I loved you as you were getting cooking lessons from Reginald. And I loved you as you fought back against your mother. It might have taken me a while to realize it, but I have loved you since the moment I set eyes on you. And nothing is going to change that, whether you choose to be with me or not. It just is.”

“Drake, I love you, too. That's why it hurt so much when you left.”

“I would love to shoot that version of me. I don't deserve a second chance, but if I get one, I'm never leaving your side again. I will never presume to make choices for you again. I will never discount what you want again. Reginald was always trying to teach me humility. I don't think I understood the lesson until I fell in love with you. I will humble myself so that I can truly see you and what you're asking of me.”

Her dark gaze searched mine, and my heart squeezed in my chest as I

waited for her answer.

“I love you, Drake. I don't think I ever stopped.”

With those ten little words, the tightness in my chest eased. I slid my hand into her hair, cupping her head gently as I leaned in for a kiss, our lips just brushing together. And I finally claimed her as mine forever.

EPILOGUE

DRAKE



I HELD ON TO DAPHNE. FINALLY, A BLOODY DATE. WE'D TAKEN DOWN Massimo and most of the Syndicate, but there were still stragglers vying for power, so that meant a lot of field work for me as we cleaned up the organization.

Unfortunately, that also meant time away from Daphne.

Lately it seemed that when I was off, she had a big project at work. And when she had a lull, I was out in the field.

Not that we didn't sneak in the time to connect, but I'd rather I didn't have to squeeze in the occasional quickie with my girlfriend. .

We'd had almost two weeks of bliss, waking up every morning with her in my arms, but things had gotten crazy. Tonight I wanted to make up for it and take her out on a date.

An actual restaurant in the city at the top of The Shard. I'd hired a driver and pulled out all the stops. Tonight, I was going to show her the London she always wanted to see with a helicopter tour. I might even let her fly for a while. My little adrenaline junkie was going to have the time of her life.

And then would come the surprise that currently burned a hole in my pocket.

Tonight had to be perfect.

And it will be. As long as she says yes.

As the car dropped us off in front of the Shard on London Bridge Street, I opened my door and walked around to Daphne's side to open her As for her. She gave me a mischievous grin and slid her hand into mine. As always, the softness in her frightened me a little. It triggered my protective instincts. I would always take care of her. As long as she let me.

OK, who is that pulling? Even if she wouldn't let me, I would.

"The Shard. This is Fancy Drake."

"Well, when I don't get to see my kitten very often, I have to make it special."

She leaned into me, pressing her much smaller body against mine. "I know it's been crazy lately. I'm just glad we get to spend a whole night together. Luckily, my project is winding down. So we'll get some normal time soon."

I kissed her on the top of her head as we walked into the building towards the elevator. "Gabe and Saff have promised a little more downtime as well, so you'll be stuck with me. We'll do farmers' markets and go to the country on holiday."

The sound of her giggle was sweet. "If you want to see Reginald more often, just say so."

I rolled my eyes and shook my head. "Okay, fine. I think it best not to let the old man stew alone for too long. I haven't been out there in a month. I want to make sure he's okay."

"And around here, everyone thinks you're this big bad killer." She leaned forward as she said the last word. "But really, you're just a big softie."

I tickled her sides as we stepped into the elevator. "Don't tell all my secrets now." I pulled her in for a kiss, sliding my hands down her asre, pressing her against my swelling cock.

"I see someone missed me," Daphne whispered against my lips.

"Ignore him. I've missed you. Think of him as a giant, intrusive thought."
Daphne pulled back with a grin. "Giant indeed."

I couldn't stop myself from chuckling. "Woman, I'm trying to be romantic here. And you keep trying to indulge my dirty thoughts."

"Well, to be fair, it is very fun when I give in to them."

The elevator slowed to a stop and I had to clear my throat and step away from her before the situation in my trousers became untenable. "Behave yourself, woman. Tonight, I'm going to woo you. There will be wine and drinks and food so delicious it will make you moan with every bite. I'm taking care of you."

She gave me another cheeky grin. "I mean, there are other ways to take care of me and make me moan." She giggled and stepped just out of reach as I aimed to swat her bottom.

"You keep teasing me and I'll forget everything I've planned and find a very dark corner where I can make you moan my name and I don't give a fuck if the whole restaurant hears you."

She looked up at me from her lowered lashes, "Promise?"

And that was that. My cock was steel in my trousers as I thought of all the ways I could make her moan. Quietly and not so quietly.

I had no choice but to follow her into the restaurant as the hostess led us to our table. The swaying of her arse in that vermilion dress that skimmed her knees was enough to make me drool.

She was teasing me. On purpose. My brain was trying to think of all the ways we could get to dessert first. I should have just fucked her before we left the compound.

No. I was going to propose, damn it. I wasn't going to get distracted.

She looked at me over her menu. "What's wrong? You seem off."

Shit. She knew me too well by now. "I'm fine, kitten. What wine would you like?"

"Forget the wine. I'll have a cocktail. But are you sure you're okay?"

No, I was not damn okay. I wanted to make this perfect. Instead, I was horny and she was suspicious. "Nothing wrong except I'm thinking of all the ways I can bend you over this table."

Her lips formed a small "O" shape as she hid behind her menu.

After the waiter took our order, I started to relax a little. I could do this. I just had to wait for the helicopter.

But when she leaned in and whispered sweetly, "I love you. Thank you for tonight," she shattered my resolve.

"I love you too. I should take you out every night."

"Nah, I don't need to. Besides, if we have limited time, I'd rather stay in."

"Daph. I-" Movement in my peripheral vision made me pause. The hairs on the back of my neck standing at attention had me looking for an exit for Daphne.

Her normally smooth brow furrowed. "Drake? What's going on?"

I turned to peruse the diners more closely. "Probably nothing, but love, why don't you go to the bathroom and lock yourself in."

Her raised eyebrow was basically the equivalent of saying, "The fuck I will. Absolutely not." She had to be crazy if she thought I was going to let her walk into this. "What's going on?"

"Honey. I'm not sure, but I'd feel more comfortable if you just-" The wine glass on our table shattered, stopping me in my tracks.

I wasted no time turning the table on its side and pulling her behind it. The serenity and quiet of the restaurant erupted into screams and more shattered glass as diners ran and ducked for cover as bullets flew.

"So much for a quiet dinner," Daphne muttered. "Is this a friend of yours?"

I grabbed her clutch from the floor and pulled out her compact, using it to check my lines of sight. and that was when I saw the bearded man making a run for the kitchen.

Salvador Gianni.

A Syndicate enforcer. One of the ones we still had to clean up. Was he here for me, or was it just a coincidence? And how the hell did he find me?

No such thing as coincidence. Move your ass.

"What are the chances of you staying here?" I asked Daphne.

She pursed her lips and shook her head at me. "You go I go."

I cursed under my breath. Of course she would refuse to stay. But I couldn't let her get hurt. I had to take care of Gianni first. "Fine. But stay behind me and do exactly as I say."

Daphne nodded but I could see the fear in her eyes. Why wouldn't she just stay here?

You helped her get strong. She won't hide now.

I hated to put her in danger, but there was no other way if she wouldn't stay. First I sent my SOS code to headquarters on my phone, then I took Daphne's hand and led her to the kitchen where I could hear the sounds of a struggle.

Fortunately, there was no more shooting, but the restaurant was still in an uproar.

I slowly opened the door to the kitchens, making sure Daphne stayed behind me as we entered. We were met with the sight of Gianni holding a chef hostage with a knife to his throat. "Back off, Webster. I'm not afraid to use this."

I raised my hands in a peaceful gesture, trying to keep Daphne safe behind me. "Let the chef go, Gianni. This doesn't have to end in violence."

He laughed, the sound getting on my nerves. "You've always been soft, Webster. That's why you'll never survive" He tightened his grip on the knife, drawing a bead of blood from the chef's throat.

I could feel my rage building, the need to protect my loved ones overwhelming any sense of caution. "Let him go or I'll make you regret it."

Gianni sneered, "You and what army?"

I didn't need an army. I was armed. I had my baretta hidden in the small

of my back. Not to mention the Rogues were on their way.

But the old way of doing things wasn't going to work anymore. I couldn't shoot him. Not with all these witnesses and looking like a civilian.

Fuck. Things were so much simpler when I was a spy. The shadows were easier.

When you stand in the light, there are more rules.

But the rules meant I got to keep Daphne. Which was more important. Over the course of a few weeks, she'd become my reason for living. Walking out of the shadows had not been a hard decision.

Keeping her behind me, I ducked behind one of the counters. "Find me something to throw. See if there are any knives in here."

"Are you any good at throwing knives?"

I grinned at her as she took off my jacket and threw it behind us. "I guess we'll see."

All we could find were pots in the bottom cupboard though.

"Shit, these will have to do."

"Where do I aim?"

Daphne didn't have the best aim when I'd tried to teach her cricket at Abbott Manor, so I figured to keep the chef safe, just making noise and aiming for his feet would be a good idea. "Aim for his feet."

She frowned. "His feet? How is that going to hurt?"

"It won't. It's going to distract. So start lobbing. I'll go around."

Her eyes lit up with understanding. "Got it."

I kept my hand on her shoulder and kept talking to keep Gianni occupied and distracted. "Why don't you let the man go. It's me you want. We can go one-on-one. Hell, if it keeps these people safe, I'll even let you take me out back."

Daphne frowned as if she had full plans to go after him if he did that, but I held her in place.

"You've always been weak and afraid. You think I'm going to fall for

that? You're not going to be left breathing when I'm done with you. I'm sure your pretty companion wouldn't mind warming my bed instead."

Daphne responded with a gagging face.

As he spoke I was already crawling along the cupboards. I turned back to her and gave her the signal.

She threw a pot in his general direction and to my shock and surprise, she managed to hit the arm he was using to point the gun at the chef.

With her compact open, I could see that he stumbled and the chef clambered away. Daphne threw another pot over her head with a wild swing, hitting Gianni's right in the skull.

With him momentarily distracted and firing a wild shot in Daphne's general direction, I jumped out from behind the counters and tackled him to the ground. I made sure to keep his gun arm away from Daphne as he tried to roll me off him, bucking wildly but I held on tight.

To my horror, Daphne came running around brandishing a pot. Gianni fired a shot and she screamed in alarm but she didn't back away. She didn't run, instead, she ran forward, raised the pot high above her head and brought it down hard on his arm. Over and over again until he let go of the gun, which she kicked away.

She raised the pot again, this time aiming for his head, but I stopped her. "Welll done, Kitten. I got it from here."

Grabbing a handful of his hair, I lifted his head up and slammed it back down onto the tiles, making him groan beneath me. I was able to pull one of his arms back and plant my knee on it to hold him in place just as Saffron walked in.

"Well, it looks like you two have this handled."

I lifted my head to glower at her to find she was grinning. "Really, Saff?"

She and several of the junior agents reached down and secured Gianni. "Honestly, Drake, when I said some time off would be a good idea, I meant it. Do I have to send you to some remote island somewhere?"

I rolled my eyes. "That's exactly what I was trying to do, and then someone shot at us. So you'll forgive me if I had to swoop in and save the day."

"Look at you, being the hero. Why don't you go back and finish what you started so you and Daphne can pretend to be surprised at the surprise engagement party Tabitha's throwing for the two of you tomorrow."

Daphne, who'd gone to get my suit jacket, came back to us. "Are you okay? You're not hurt are you, you really should have let me bash him in the head honestly."

All I could do was stare at her, her dark eyes, the way her lips were always turned up in a hint of a smile, she'd been so brave tonight. Absolutely refusing to leave me. Even though that would have been better for her. I would punish her for that later, but right now all I wanted to do was hold her.

I took a deep breath and stood up, dusting off my suit jacket. "I'm fine, Kitten. We both are. Let's go finish our date."

She wrapped her arms around me. "Maybe we should finish this at home. It's dangerous on these streets."

With a nod to Saff and the other agents, I bent down and scooped her into my arms. "Let's get out of here."

"Oh my God, Drake, what are you doing?"

"I'm not going to let you get cut by glass, Kitten."

She fussed at me until we reached the elevator and I set her on her feet. I didn't let her go though, I held her by my side as I needed to make sure she was okay. That she was safe.

As we walked out of the restaurant, my heart was pounding. I couldn't believe how close we had come to disaster.

I turned to her and took her hand in mine. "You were amazing back there. I don't know what I would have done without you."

She smiled, her eyes glowing with pride. "I told you I could take care of myself."

"I know you did, and you proved it tonight. You have no idea how much it means to me to have you by my side."

Her smile softened and she leaned in to kiss me. "I'll always be by your side, Drake. No matter what."

I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her close.

I had a whole plan. The helicopter ride, the wine, but I didn't want to wait another moment.

I slowly dropped to one knee and watched as her eyes went comically wide. "Daphne Marie Winslow," I began.

A hand flew to her mouth. "Oh, my God. What are you..."

"I have never deserved you. But every single day for the rest of my life, and from beyond the grave, I will try to be worthy of you in some small way. You are the bravest, most capable, most stubborn pain in the arse I have ever met."

"Hey!"

With a grin I added, "But you are almost always right. You keep me on my toes and I live for every one of your smiles. From the moment I first saw you, you captured a piece of my soul and I'll never give it back. Will you do me the great honor of agreeing to be my wife?" I pulled the ring box I'd been carrying around with me for the past week from my jacket pocket and opened the velvet lid.

Daphne's eyes gleamed. "It's too big."

Unable to help myself, I muttered, "So you've said."

She gave me a spluttering laugh as she nodded enthusiastically. "Yes. Absolutely yes."

I slipped the delicate pavé band topped with the three carat brilliant cut pink diamond onto her finger. Her hands trembled as I pushed it all the way, then leaned down to kiss her hand. Daphne cupped my cheeks and pulled me to my feet.

"I love you so much."

I held her close and kissed her lips softly. "I love you more."
"Doubtful, but maybe we can go home and you can try to convince me?"
I gave her a wolfish grin. "I warn you, Daphne, I can be very persuasive. I might even give you a head start."

As a special gift to my readers, I have a special bonus for you of Drake and Daphne. Click [here](#) to get your exclusive [bonus epilogue](#) for The Villain!
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The Villain, Book 6 in the Gentlemen Rogues Series

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