

A man and a woman are shown in a close embrace, nearly kissing. The woman is wearing a red lace dress, and the man is wearing a white shirt and a dark suit jacket. They are surrounded by a dense field of red poinsettias. The background is dark, making the red flowers and the couple stand out.

**THE WOMAN WITH THE TARGET
ON HER BACK**

the Grassi family

Jessica Gadziala

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The Woman with the Target on Her Back

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Jessica Gadziala

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“None of this book was written using AI tools. Each word was crafted with human hands.”

CHAPTER ONE

August

The chips clacked together as they were tossed into the pile at the center of the table, the black felt disappearing under the blue, red, gold, and purple. The lowest increment started at a hundred bucks.

You didn't go to an underground casino to fuck around with dollar bids.

"You need to get that?" the guy to my left, an investment banker with an ankle monitor under the leg of his thousand-dollar trousers, asked when my phone buzzed in my breast pocket for the fourth time in a row.

There were no secrets at this table.

We all knew who we were playing with.

A crooked investment banker, a madam of a very exclusive brothel, a drug dealer, and me. A member of the local mafia.

"There's a rule," I said, shrugging as the madam decided to fold.

Across the room, the owner of the casino seemed to be casually swirling his drink that he hadn't taken a sip of in the hour that I'd been sitting at the table.

I wasn't fucking with the rules about phones with him around and risking my chance of getting invited again. High rollers were a dime a dozen in Navesink Bank. He wouldn't miss my money. But I would miss the outlet that, for once, didn't involve hanging out with my family.

Who might very well be calling me.

Because who the fuck else would call that many times in a row?

But the hand was almost over. And once it was, I would excuse myself and see what the hell was so urgent.

Things with the *Family* side of things had been calm for a long time now. But that didn't mean my mother, sister, one of my brothers, or my cousins wasn't trying to get in touch with me about something else.

I was about to miss dinner at my ma's place.

And to her, early was on time. And ten minutes late meant we were dead in a ditch somewhere. So she could be ringing my phone. Or one of my brothers who wanted me there so she stopped talking about my absence.

"Fuck, not my night," I said as the investment banker pulled the pot toward him. A cool fifty thousand.

I'd won one hand when I first sat down. It had been a losing streak since.

Maybe I should have taken the incessant buzzing of my phone in my pocket as a sign.

"I'm out," I said, pushing away from the table, and reaching for my phone. "I know, I know," I said, nodding at the owner whose brow was quirked as he watched me pull it out.

But I was already out the door before he could say anything.

Outside, the air was a humid slap to the face, making me feel immediately sticky in my suit, especially after the shock from the cold casino.

I was just about to swipe to my missed calls when my phone started buzzing in my hand again.

With an unknown number.

The fuck?

I mean, yeah, sometimes we used burners on jobs and shit like that. But as far as I knew, there were no current jobs that would require that.

Curiosity piqued, I swiped the screen to answer the call, pulling it up to my ear.

“Yeah?” I said, hearing a sharp intake of breath.

“August?” came the squeaky, panicked trill of a female voice.

My stomach tightened, my mind running through the names of all the women in my life that could be in trouble, that could have been trying to get in touch with me for over half an hour while I played fucking cards.

“Who is this?” I asked, hearing a tightness in my voice.

And then came a name that I never could have guessed, not if given a fucking year to rattle off possibilities.

“Traveler.” Her own name sounded like the sound was being squeezed out of her, high and breathless.

“Traveler?” I asked, feeling my stomach tighten.

Because I knew one Traveler. I mean, of fucking course it was only one. Who the fuck was named *Traveler*, of all things?

But, yeah, the Traveler I knew would never willingly ring me up. In fact, she would call literally anyone else before me.

We’d only met briefly over the course of a job my brother was working on up at the State Capital involving some

criminal organization and a chick whose life he had fucked up inadvertently years before. A chick who was now his wife.

Traveler had just been the owner of a little coffee shop we frequented in the area. And she and I hadn't exactly been fast friends.

The only reason she had my number was in case Cammie, the woman we'd been working with, came to her for help.

I figured she'd purged my number from her phone as soon as the job was done and we left town.

Clearly, she'd been holding onto it.

There was a long pause, then another breathless sound, "Yes."

"What's going on?" I asked, already walking toward my car.

The Traveler I'd met had been irritating as fuck, sure. But she'd also been calm, confident, and fearless. This woman with the hysterical-sounding voice? That wasn't the woman I'd met. The one I'd snarked back and forth with for several days.

I mean, she'd known I was in the mob, but still nettled at me relentlessly.

A woman like that didn't sound this fucking freaked out over something small.

"I, ah, I... I think you need to pay me back for helping you guys out way back when," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

The car was already on, and I was pulling away from the curb.

"Where are you?" I asked.

"My shop," she whispered, and I thought I could hear some sort of crashing sound. "For now," she added in a smaller voice.

"What's going on?"

“I can’t... I have to go,” she said, then before I could even object, she ended the call.

“Fuck,” I hissed, heart starting to hammer.

It didn’t take a genius to figure that if she was in her own damn shop well after closing, whispering and sounding freaked the fuck out, that someone was probably in that shop with her.

And I was a goddamn hour away.

Well, doing the speed limit, I was.

And with a woman sounding that freaked the fuck out, I wasn’t about to be going the goddamn speed limit.

I knew there was a chain of command for shit like this.

I called Luca. Then Luca told me if I could go and handle this situation or not.

I didn’t get to do shit on my own. That wasn’t how the Family worked.

Which was why I wasn’t calling Luca. To get a firm “no” out of him.

Instead, I scrolled my contact list to find one of my brothers. Santo, the next youngest after me. The one who was probably going to give me the least amount of shit when I called.

“Mom’s already asking where you are, so don’t you come at me with some bullshit excuses about some skirt you are chasing,” Santo answered.

“I won’t be making it,” I told him, slowing down to toss some money into the change basket at the toll booth, then fucking flooring it again.

“Come the fuck on, Aug. You know you can’t just back out on dinner without a reason. Makes Ma mopey and shit,” Santo said, tone resigned. Because he already knew I wasn’t going to be swayed. I was known for being a stubborn-ass in the family.

“I have a reason. And I need you to tell Luca I’m not gonna be around for a bit.”

“The fuck?” Santo hissed, and the background noise was changing as he, I imagined, moved away from whomever he was near. “What do you mean you’re not gonna be around for a bit? Where are you going?”

“Traveler has something going on.”

“Traveler...” Santo said, searching for the name. I wasn’t surprised it wasn’t one easily brought forward in his memory. He’d maybe met her for a second at Mass’s wedding. Along with dozens of other people.

“Just wanted to tell everyone I’d be out of town,” I said, not wanting to get into it.

“August, you can’t just fucking go off and do shit you want to do. You have to ask—“

“I’m already on my way. I gotta go.”

With that, I hung up, then tossed my phone into the cupholder, where I went ahead and ignored it for the drive.

It wasn’t a long drive, but it felt like it took double the time I knew was elapsing.

I wasn’t overly familiar with the feeling of panic. From the cradle, I always knew my life was going to involve a lot of action and life-or-death situations. That had given me a high tolerance for stress. Shit usually just rolled off my back.

But there was no denying it was seeping in instead. My knuckles were white on the wheel, and my skin felt like it was crawling as my heart thumped an EDM beat in my chest.

I just barely resisted the urge to call her back.

But if she was hiding from someone, and she hadn’t turned off the ringer, or if the screen lit up, exposing her, I would be doing nothing but putting her at more risk.

It was hard to imagine the Traveler I’d met cowering and begging for someone else to help her.

She was, and always would be, a pill.

A horse pill, even.

Hard to fucking swallow.

She was sure of herself, strong, and almost painfully opinionated. She stood up to local criminal organizations, forcing them out of her coffee shop like they weren't packing and perfectly capable of putting several holes in her body.

What the fuck had changed things?

That was what I was going to find out as soon as I got there, I promised myself. Even as another part of me wondered why the fuck I was even answering her SOS call.

Wouldn't Massimo be the one to call?

The guy who owed her a favor?

Someone she got along with better.

I didn't owe her shit.

Maybe it was as simple as... she was a woman in need of help. And I'd been raised by my Ma, by every aunt and cousin, and every single man in my life to step in when a woman needed assistance.

Christ, my mom would beat me with a spatula if she found out I didn't hold open a door, or pull out a chair, or pull over when a woman needed a tire change.

If she knew I got a call begging to be rescued from a dangerous situation and I didn't do something, she'd have me digging my own fucking grave in the backyard.

I was going to catch never-ending shit from my older brothers—Massimo and Nino—about rushing over to help without first at least telling Luca I was going to do so.

But this definitely seemed like one of those "it's better to ask for forgiveness than permission" sort of situations.

A woman's life could very well be in the balance. So fuck protocol.

Traveler's shop was located in, well, a shitty area of town, a place overrun with different criminal organizations of varying degrees of worrisome.

You know how it is.

Some people just mind their own business. You weren't going to find pimps who were having wars in the streets with the drug dealers or shit like that.

But I imagined the last time my brothers and I were in the area to help free Cammie from the grips of a crime lord, which resulted in his death, had also created a vacuum of power.

If there was one thing I knew about lower-level criminal organizations, it was that they were often hungry for more power.

So who the fuck knew what had been going down in the neighborhood since we'd packed up and headed back to Navesink Bank.

Maybe, for once, Traveler's connections didn't protect her from some of these guys.

Why else would she be so scared if she had a break-in? Normally, she could just remind them who she was and why they couldn't fuck with her, and it would be all over.

Something had changed.

"Huh," I said aloud as I drove down the street that would lead to her shop.

When we'd visited last, Traveler said that she thought the place was going to start to gentrify eventually. And there were signs of that already.

There was construction on new luxury apartments. And the first few shops on the street had been sold, gutted, and changed into higher-end establishments.

A gym.

A spa.

You didn't have to go far down the road, though, to see the old neighborhood still had a stronghold on the area.

Chained windows on closed businesses residing in half-crumbling buildings lined both sides of the street. And far

down at the end, a plain-as-day drug deal was going on at the corner.

There were no cars parked out front of Traveler's store, but as my headlights shined on it, I could tell that the front window was shattered, all of Traveler's hanging crystals that created a rainbow of color inside the store in the daytime had been pulled down.

It was dark inside, but it looked as if tables and chairs had been tipped over.

"Fuck," I hissed, cutting my engine, and reaching in the locked glovebox for my gun, checking the clip, then grabbing an extra two to shove in my pockets as I climbed out of the car.

I grabbed my phone too, in case shit really went south and I actually needed to do the unthinkable. Involve the law.

I made my way toward the building.

There was an eerie silence as I reached for the door, finding it opening easily in my hand. Like they'd gone in through the window, then left through the door.

My pulse was pounding in my ears as my foot crunched on something a few steps inside.

Scanning my lit phone screen down, I saw one of Traveler's many colorful plant pots shattered, the green plant lying on its side with its dirt ball still attached.

If this was still the Traveler I knew, after she got over the fear, she was going to be fucking *furios* about the damage.

This was a woman who recycled everything and hated waste.

Trying to do my part in this capitalist hellscape to reduce, reuse, and recycle.

She'd actually said that to me once when I'd questioned why she was bagging up her spent coffee grounds to give away for free to anyone who wanted them for their garden.

So much waste, that's what she was going to say.

But if it was her planters or her bones being crushed to dust, I was pretty sure we could both agree that the plants' sacrifice was the better option.

I moved swiftly, but carefully through the store, checking under the counters and any nooks and crannies big enough to hide a human. Traveler was slim, but long-legged. It wouldn't be easy for her to fold herself into most of the small areas in the front of the store.

But I knew that she had a bathroom and a back room.

I moved into the bathroom first, but there was nowhere to hide. Just one big room. The ceiling didn't even drop, so she wasn't perched up there.

Back room it was.

If she didn't already get herself free and out of here, that is. The call was almost an hour ago, after all.

I pushed open the swinging door to the back, pulse skittering, some part of me thinking I might confront someone there, despite the almost eerie silence in the place.

But there was nothing.

A kitchen space, a work table, a desk to the side.

Confident I wasn't at risk by any madmen who'd broken in, I flicked on the light, then tucked my phone away as I moved through the space.

There was a big metal door to the side of the room. A refrigerator walk-in. Unlikely hiding space, but I made my way in that direction, pulling it open, and looking around.

The metal racks were lined with acrylic bins, displaying everything inside.

No hiding spaces.

"Traveler?" I called as I moved back out. "It's August," I added, just in case she didn't recognize my voice. "You can come out," I added, checking under her desk. Nothing.

Maybe she was gone.

But one look toward the back door showed me her purse and her keys still waiting for her. If she ran, wouldn't she have grabbed at least one of those on her way out of the door?

I mean, not everyone had their wits about them in life-or-death situations, though, so it was possible she just... ran for her life.

Still, I wasn't leaving until I was sure that was the case.

"Traveler, come on. Where are you?" I called, moving back toward the kitchen area.

Double ovens, countertops, big glass canisters full of various items. Sugar, flour, oatmeal, some sort of tiny black seeds.

There were upper and lower cabinets.

But all there was in the base cabinets were various pots, pans, and cookie trays.

Standing, I was about to go into the alley in the back when I remembered something. A video I'd scrolled past on social media where a woman evaded home invaders by folding herself into the minuscule corner bread box.

She'd been long-legged too.

So if she could do it, Traveler probably could have as well.

"Trav, come on," I said, reaching up into the cupboards, pulling open doors.

Nothing.

"Fuck," I hissed, looking around when I was done.

Then I saw them.

Four racks sitting on top of her big-ass industrial oven.

There was no good reason for all the racks to be out of it.

I walked back, sure I was crazy for thinking she could be inside. But, objectively, it was big enough. A tight pinch, but in an emergency, I could see it working for a smaller person like Traveler.

Grabbing the handle, I yanked it down.

And there she was, scrunched up so tight that I wasn't sure how she was breathing.

But there.

Alive.

Breathing.

Shaking like a fucking leaf.

“Hey, alright. It's alright,” I said. I wasn't great with comforting people. That wasn't something that I was generally left to do. “They're gone. But we gotta get gone too,” I said, placing my gun on the counter, so I could grab her and pull her out.

I wasn't sure how the fuck she got herself in, because getting her out wasn't easy. But, I guess, you could make yourself do all sorts of uncomfortable things in a pinch.

“Okay, you're alright,” I assured her when she dropped to the floor. Where she didn't even bother to unfold herself from her fetal position. “Traveler, come on. We have to go,” I said, trying to pry her arms down.

She had to get it together.

If people were after her, they would likely come back.

“Alright,” I said, striding toward the door, grabbing her bag, and tossing the long strap over my head, stuffing her keys in my pocket, then going back toward her, slipping my arms under her, and lifting her up into my arms.

She wasn't hurt that I could tell.

But, clearly, her mental and emotional state wasn't great.

I had nowhere to take her, but this was a big city. I imagined there would be an opening at some hotel somewhere until I could get her to calm down.

With that in mind, I tucked her into my passenger seat, keeping an eye on the random men suddenly around on the street who were clearly keeping an eye on me, then got in the car, and peeled off.

CHAPTER TWO

Traveler

“Why are those cookies called The Queen Mother?” a random man in a suit—likely one of the developers trying to take over the neighborhood—asked.

“Because they look like pussies,” I told him, barely holding back a smile at the way his eyes widened and his lips fell slightly open.

Oh, but it was so much fun to shock the menfolk.

But I was a little bored, so I went ahead and grabbed one of the cookies.

“See, here are the labia,” I said, pointing, watching his neck flush above the neck of his collar. “This little pink sprinkle here? That’s the clitoris...”

“Ah, yeah, right. I can, ah, see it,” he said, taking his to-go coffee, and turning on his heel to rush out.

“Something tells me he might have never *seen one* in his life,” I said, getting a chuckle from a couple of regulars seated

a few feet away. “Want this cookie now that I fingered it?” I asked, and the guy rose from the table to take it from me.

I hated waste.

And after spending years making these exact cookies, you could say that I had absolutely no taste for them anymore. Same went for most of the treats I baked for the shop.

“Lotta suits around here lately,” Sheryl, a local hippie chick who had an amazing booth at the farmer’s market where I happened to buy most of my personal produce, said from her position at one of the tables.

The distaste in her voice was clear and understandable.

We both wanted the neighborhood to change. But a systemic sort of change. Community outreach. With places for the teenagers to hang out with each other that might keep them off the streets. Somewhere with inexpensive child care, so the single mothers could work to lift themselves out of poverty, instead of running themselves ragged only to struggle to pay bills because their child care was two-thirds their income. Fixing the food forest in the area, so kids could grow up eating good food. That kinda shit.

There was so much to be done.

Things that could change this area from the inside out.

It didn’t need a fucking facelift that would drive up all the prices of everything and, inevitably, drive off all the residents to a different area, uprooting their whole lives, making it even more impossible for them to get out of the poverty cycle.

Twice in the past three months, I’d turned down offers to buy my shop from me because the people next door wanted to open one of those concierge medical offices up. You know, where you pay a high retainer fee to have twenty-four-hour access to a fancy-ass doctor and their all-inclusive medical office.

The offers had been insane, too. Life-changing.

But I was being a stubborn-ass about it.

Sheryl was as well, refusing to sell her sweet little hundred-year-old farmhouse on one and a half acres that she somehow managed to farm well enough to keep her stand going all summer long as well as donate to the local soup kitchen.

We could both take the offers.

Over a million for her place.

Half for mine.

Take it, set ourselves up nice and comfy somewhere else.

But that wasn't what we wanted.

We were on the forefront of change around here.

Though, yeah, we both probably had to accept that eventually, there would be no neighborhood to change. It would all be pricey businesses and luxury apartment buildings. And residents who wanted nothing of what we had to offer anymore.

The offers would be a lot less than, too.

“Yeah,” I said, sighing hard.

It was a sigh Sheryl could likely feel down to her soul. We didn't need to discuss it.

“How are the berries doing?” I asked instead.. We were tired of discussing it. Almost as tired as we were of talking about the ever-increasing drug issue in the area. And the new drugs around that were zombifying people.

“The raspberries and blackberries are coming along well. I'm so glad I decided to use the bushes as a hedge around the whole property. I should be able to supply you for your new drink,” she told me.

“That's great. No pressure if you need them for something else. I can always figure out a different recipe.”

“No, I got you. We've gotta stick together,” she said.

“Yeah,” I agreed, looking out the front window, watching one of the dealers hand off some of those zombie drugs—

Tranq—to a woman I'd seen passed out, bent forward, standing upright just yesterday morning. She had an open wound on her leg, oozing through her pants.

Eschar, one of the guys at the local halfway house had called it. A thick black scab full of dead skin that, left untreated, would lead to amputation. I'd asked him the first time I'd been handing out my old cookies to the local unhoused community and came across someone with the pungent wound on their leg.

It was getting worse.

Ever since the fuckhead who used to run this area died, a completely different crew moved in with this new shit full of life-ruiners mixed with fucking horse tranquilizer. And then... the “zombies.” And the wounds.

This crew dealing it wasn't local, either. They came over from Philly. So they were barely toeing the line about fucking with the local establishments.

They'd stashed some of their supply in the back of Sheryl's truck once when the cops came down the street.

God, she'd been furious about it, too.

Confronted some of the guys.

And they'd beaten the shit out of her for it.

Bastards.

They weren't welcome in my shop. They knew it. Sheryl knew it. That was why she still decided to come, even though the attack had made her much more of a recluse lately. Happy just to pitter around in the garden at the house her grandmother had left to her a few years before.

She was probably in her mid-forties, though I hadn't asked, with skin that got tanner as the summer burned on, dark eyes, and dark brown hair that she almost always had in a braid.

Anytime I saw her, she was in long, filmy skirts of bright colors—orange and yellow were my favorite on her—vegan

leather brown sandals, and a dozen or so bracelets on her arms, all made by her sweet little nieces.

“Unbelievable,” Sheryl grumbled as she followed my gaze. “They know they can’t come in here, so they do that shit out front, so people feel weird about coming in.”

“That’s okay. The locals know to come here,” I said. “Who cares if they keep the city guys away?”

“That’s true,” she agreed.

It was a mediocre day of sales.

I was actually glad to finally close up a bit early that night. If I stayed open later, people would just park for hours, not buying anything. My time would be better served doing my baking ahead of time instead of in the morning before work.

I wasn’t much of a sleeper anyway.

I locked the doors, dimmed the lights, and decided to do a deep clean of the front of the cafe for an hour or so before cutting the lights entirely, and moving into the back.

I’d just wiped down the surfaces when I heard it.

A hard crack that had my heart stuttering in my chest as my brain tried to figure out what it was.

But then it happened again.

A louder crack.

Someone was breaking in.

I should have pulled down the security gates before I moved into the back. But I never needed to. I had a certain amount of protection in this building. In my life in general.

That was the perk of having your dad as the chief of police.

Sure, he was as crooked as crooked got, but that also gave him the power to extend protection toward me. No matter how nasty I got to the local crews. And, yeah, I had never been good at holding my tongue when I crossed their paths.

This new crew, though, I had no idea if they greased my father's pockets. If they gave a single fuck about the rules.

I was about to turn and run toward the back door where my purse and keys were on a hook, and my truck was parked in the alley for a quick exit, when I heard more noise out there.

Male laughter.

And the unmistakable sound of glass shattering.

I'd heard that more than a few times in my life.

They were breaking my truck's windows.

I couldn't go out front.

Or out back.

I was trapped.

And it was only a matter of time before they got inside.

My gaze shot around, seeing possible hiding spots. All of which any halfway competent criminal would think to check. Which meant I would be found.

Then fuck knew what would happen to me.

A beating like Sheryl had gotten?

Worse?

Likely worse.

Stomach flip-flopping, my gaze landed on my oven.

I'd bought it because it was big, sturdy, and industrial with only one big compartment, instead of the two smaller ones that most units had. It let me fit six baking sheets in it at a time.

I mean, I wasn't going to say it would be an easy fit. But I'd seen girls squeezing themselves into suitcases before for social media challenges.

To save my damn life, I could cram myself into the oven.

I was reaching for my phone as I made my way over.

I could call the police.

Objectively, that was what you did in this situation.

But not in this town.

When the cops were all in someone's pockets.

Even if they came, they might standby and watch horrible shit happen to me.

Hell, they might even participate if they believed I wasn't going to live through the night and be able to tell my father about it.

Cops were out.

I could call my father.

But, well, we weren't exactly on speaking terms.

I don't know why, when my finger scrolled through my contacts, I landed on one name.

The last man in the world I thought I would ever call on for help.

August fucking Grassi.

A mafia capo from over by the shore.

I was hitting dial before I could think better of it, listening to it ring and ring and ring and ring.

I pulled out the oven racks and placed them on top of the range.

Most men probably wouldn't even think to glance in the oven, not even if they saw the racks out.

Ring. Ring. Ring.

Voicemail.

Over and over and over.

And then, finally, a voice on the other end of the line just as I started to fold myself into the oven. It was a task made even more difficult by the fact that my entire body had started to tremble uncontrollably as the male voices got louder, started to say shit I was trying not to imagine actually happening to me.

August must have picked up on the panic in my voice as I finally got into the oven, knees crushing into my chest, making breathing difficult as I grabbed the door and tried to ease it closed, knowing it was going to have a little snapping noise at the end no matter what I did.

He was short and demanding on the other end of the phone. But, God, the relief that washed over me when he said he was coming.

The organizations around here were tough, sure, but nobody fucked with the mob. Not if they wanted to live to see another year, anyway. They weren't as loud and flashy about their kills, but they took care of business. And they rarely got caught for it.

Even as I ended the call, I heard the men inside the shop. Heavy footsteps and the crashing sounds of things I loved and carefully curated over the years fell to the ground.

Motherfuckers.

I hated this.

Hiding and afraid.

I wasn't someone whose bark wasn't as big as their bite. I had, on more than a few occasions in my life, stood up to bullies. I'd even thrown some punches and kicked some groins. I'd broken a nose once.

But I wasn't stupid, either.

There was no standing up to what sounded like at least five or six men. All of whom were likely armed. And even if they weren't, every woman knew how much of a weapon a man's body could be. Sprinkle on that whole gang mentality guys got when they were doing shady shit together, and, yeah, you had to accept when it was time to hide instead of fight.

I turned off my ringer, and slid my phone under my shirt, so the light wouldn't give me away, then listened with my heart in my throat as the men ransacked my shop, then made their way through into the back room.

I didn't move.

I didn't even dare *breathe* as I heard cabinets opened and closed as the men described in horrific detail what they all planned to do to me.

The shaking intensified to a point where I was shocked that they couldn't hear the oven rattling from the inside out as their steps moved closer, as their voices got louder.

Pressing my hand over my mouth in case anything dared to escape, I braced myself for a hand grabbing the handle, pulling open the door, then reaching in for me, and dragging me out before August had a chance to get here.

He was an hour away.

Doing the speed limit.

I could only hope he was flooring it.

Even then, though, what could he possibly cut? Ten minutes? Fifteen, tops.

I'd maybe called ten minutes ago.

I had thirty or forty to go.

"Can't wait to shut that bitch up, if you know what I mean," one of the voices said. "Can't talk shit if she's choking on my cock," he added in case his friends were too dense to pick up on his innuendo.

Cabinets opened and closed again, items getting tossed around.

"She's not here, man," one of them said.

"We'll wait for her. Her bag is here. Keys too. Prolly just walked to the convenience store for some food."

They all seemed to mumble their agreement then amused themselves by continuing to discuss all the ways they would abuse my live body and my corpse once said body gave up on me.

Then, restless, they were at their search again.

I don't know what happened then.

It was like I went into some sort of emotional shock about the whole situation.

I was completely lost in my own heartbeat, the flip-flopping of my stomach, the way my skin felt like it was crawling, my quick, shallow breathing, and trying to fold myself tighter to ease the shaking of my body.

I hadn't even been aware of when the men gave up and finally left. Or when August arrived and started calling for me.

I only seemed to snap slowly out of it when I was safely tucked into his car, and he was driving like crazy out of the neighborhood and into the nicer parts of town.

I didn't know where he was going.

I didn't think I was capable of asking. There seemed to be a sort of disconnect between my mind and body right then as I slowly wrapped my head around the events of the night.

August said nothing to me.

Not even as he idled for a moment, doing something on his phone, then driving again until we pulled into the lot of one of the fanciest hotels in the area.

Eight floors of stunning limestone with gleaming windows and decorative stone accents that reminded you of castles.

“Trying to give you some slack,” August said, finally breaking the silence. “But I'm gonna need you to snap out of it a bit and walk into the hotel. You can lose your shit and get all hysterical in the room when we get to it.”

Yep.

That did it.

Made my wires between my mind and body, and especially my mouth, reconnected.

Who'd have thought all it would take August being his usual asshole self to do it?

“I'm not going to get hysterical,” I snapped, reaching for my door just as the doorman pulled it open for me.

“Seemed pretty fucking hysterical back there to me,” August said as he came around the car.

“Being worried about getting gang-raped and murdered by a bunch of assholes doesn’t mean I was *hysterical*,” I hissed under my breath as we made our way into the lobby.

It was all warm cream stone, glass chandeliers, and fussy furniture. All of it likely cost more than I would ever make in my lifetime.

I was suddenly acutely aware of how out of place I looked in my jeans, tee, and apron.

August, on the other hand, seemed to fit right in with his expensive-ass suit that he always wore. Which was why the employees were all smiles to him and pinched brows at me as they checked us in, then handed the keycards to August.

“I had to carry you out of there, shaking like a leaf,” he said, picking up the dropped conversation as we made our way to the elevators.

“You’re such an asshole,” I grumbled as the doors slid closed.

“Maybe,” he agreed, nodding. “But you don’t look like you’re going to shake out of your skin anymore.”

CHAPTER THREE

August

It was insensitive as fuck, but poking at her seemed to be the only way to snap her out of the fear that had wrapped her up in its web since the oven.

It wouldn't do any good for her to be stuck in that mindset. Not when I needed to figure out what the fuck was going on, who was after her, and why.

“Jesus,” she hissed as she stepped into the hotel room.

All they had left was the presidential suite.

Which meant it was going for a couple grand a night. However, one look around said it was worth every last penny of that.

We walked into a massive open room with a sunken living room space with seating for at least twelve, a massive glass globe chandelier, a framed television, and floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the lights of the city.

To the left appeared to be a full kitchen with a bar-height island and seats.

To the right was a half bath then the bedroom with more city views. And, I imagined, a spa-like bathroom, given the price of this place.

“There’s a bar,” I said, waving toward the cabinet in the living room. “Want a drink?”

“If I have to deal with you? Fuck yes,” she said, hugging her arms around herself, clearly still feeling vulnerable even if she was snarking at me.

“What’s your poison?” I asked, opening the cabinet, finding ribbed glasses and a collection of any kind of liquor she could want.

“Whiskey,” she said, making my brows raise.

“Whiskey?” I clarified.

“What? Because I’m a girl, I have to like wine or margaritas?” she asked. “I mean, I do. But this is a whiskey situation,” she added, shrugging.

I grabbed two glasses with heavy pours and walked over toward one of the couches, putting the drinks down on the coffee table, and waiting for her to do the same.

She paused, reaching behind her back to pull off her apron, then making her way across from me, reaching for her glass, but only cradling it between her hands.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she admitted, shaking her head.

“I thought you were protected because of your old man.”

“I usually am,” she said. “I don’t know what’s going on. The neighborhood has changed.”

“Power vacuum,” I murmured as I took a sip of my drink.

“Yeah. But then we had someone move in from Philly. Dealing Tranq,” she said, making me wince. “I mean, I’m liberal about some drugs. I’ve never shied away from a joint or some edibles. I even still buy from my dealer even though it’s legal now. And I’m all for mushrooms going legal. They’re killer for helping migraines and some psychological

conditions. But the shit that makes your flesh rot off?” she said, doing a little full-body shiver.

“Seen that firsthand, huh?” I asked, grimacing.

“Yeah,” she said, finally raising her drink to take a sip.

“So these guys dealing Tranq, they’re not under your father’s control?” I asked.

From what she said last time, her old man was a crooked as fuck. But in exchange for looking the other way to the actions of certain criminal organizations, he demanded safety for his only child. Even if, from the sound of things, their relationship was strained.

“The thing was... they seemed to be. They don’t seem happy about it. And do shit like deal close to the door to scare off my customers. But they stayed out. And these are real assholes. They beat the shit out of a friend of mine the other day because she confronted them about tossing their supply in her truck.”

“Have they ever threatened you before?”

“No. And I mean... I didn’t see anyone. I can’t say if it was even that crew.”

“You think it was just random guys?” I asked, dubious. “Doing it for, what, the thrill?”

“No. It had to be some sort of organization. Most of what they were saying was just... twisted. But one of them made a comment about shutting me up. Which makes me think I’ve smart-mouthed them before. And I really only do that to the criminals.”

“Present company included,” I said.

“Well, you *are* a criminal,” she said, rolling her eyes as she took another sip.

“Did you recognize any voices?” I asked, not taking the bait.

“Everything was a little muffled from inside the oven. And I don’t really make an effort to talk to them. No one used any

names.”

“Do you have any cameras?”

“Yes. In the alley and the front of the building.”

“If you saw faces...”

“I could definitely figure out what crew it was.”

“Okay. Good. Can you access the camera feeds remotely?”

“Yes.”

“Alright. Well, that’s the next step. But finish your drink first,” I demanded, not sure if seeing the guys again might trigger some panic about the event.

“How bad was the damage?” she asked between sips.

“They did a number on the place,” I told her. She wasn’t the kind of woman who wanted to be handled with kid gloves. I knew I could give it to her straight. “Window is broken, crystals are crushed. Potted plants are all over the floor...”

“I think they busted the windows in my truck too. I heard smashing sounds from the alley.”

“Really going all-out,” I said, ignoring my phone lighting up yet again in my pocket.

Santo.

Or, at this point, probably Massimo or Nino once Santo ratted me out to them.

Or, worst case, Luca. Pissed and ready to chew me out about doing shit without permission.

Whoever it was, they could wait.

“The fuck did you say to these guys to make them want your blood so much? Tell them about all your opinions on the hot-button political issues?”

“Right. That’s what I did. Bring up the benefits of strong social programs to the local drug dealers,” she said, shaking her head at me.

“Saw the new storefronts and apartments...”

“Don’t get me started,” she said, jaw going tight.

“Yeah, that’s the fucking last thing I want.”

“Charming as ever, huh, August?” she asked.

“Hey, beggars can’t be choosers,” I said, watching her ink black eyes flick fire at me.

Objectively, Traveler was hot. If you didn’t factor in her personality.

She was relatively tall, slight, with one of those faces that would always be attractive. Oval, with high cheekbones, almond-shaped eyes, and a slightly cleft chin.

Her hair that had been shoulder-length and light green the last time I’d seen her was now long and deep purple.

She had it pulled back, exposing an array of earrings up her lobes, industrials, and daith piercings. She also had her nose pierced, and some ink was peeking out of the sleeves of her t-shirt.

Yeah, she was gorgeous.

I just wasn’t supposed to think that since her alternative look she had going on wasn’t exactly my thing.

I had to admit, though, that the last time I was in town, and we were snapping at each other, there was no denying that I occasionally felt some sparks.

Not that anything would ever happen.

We could barely stand each other most of the time.

“Should have called Massimo,” she murmured as she took a sip of her drink.

“Why didn’t you call Massimo?” I asked.

There was a second of silence, long enough for me to conclude that whatever came after it was not the full truth, before she finally declared, “‘A’ comes before ‘M.’ I was pressed for time.”

“Sure, sweet cheeks,” I said as I got to my feet, watching as her eyes narrowed at me at the pet name.

Over the course of knowing each other the last time, I'd taken to giving her increasingly obnoxious pet names just to get a rise out of her.

"Want a refill?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, tossing back the last of her drink, so I could fill it again.

While I was refilling, she got up, walking over toward her purse near the door, and reaching inside, pulling out her phone she'd tucked inside on the elevator ride.

"What is it?" I asked as I walked back, seeing her brows pinch as she scrolled over something.

"Missed calls," she said. "A lot of them."

"Someone looking for you after they saw the window?" he asked.

"Ah, no. Um... no. No, this is an unknown number," she said. "And it started before the window. I was... I'd been cleaning," she said. "I don't really get any calls, so I wasn't watching it."

"Did they leave a message?"

"No," she said, looking over at me. But then it must have started ringing silently again in her hand because she stiffened, then slid her finger across the screen. "Hello?" she asked, a bit of a catch in her voice that you wouldn't normally find there. "This is she," she said.

The catch was gone. In its place was that serious voice people used on the phone when talking to someone important.

"What? When?" she asked, her whole body tensing.

I rose from the couch again, sensing shit had just gotten even more fucked up.

"Okay. Can I visit?" she asked. "Okay. Thank you," she said, sounding numb as she lowered the phone from her ear and ended the call.

"Hey," I called, as her shoulders fell, as she seemed to curve into herself while still upright. "Traveler," I tried again

as I got in front of her. “What happened?”

“My dad was attacked,” she said, gaze lifting, and her eyes were shining.

“Attacked?” I repeated. “When?”

“About three hours ago,” she said, voice hollow.

Three hours.

Not long before the invasion of her store.

That was... not a coincidence.

“What happened?” I asked, reaching out to put a hand under her arm, pulling gently until I coaxed her to sit back down.

“I, ah, he... he was getting in his car and was attacked from behind. Beaten within an inch of his life. He’s... he’s in a coma,” she said.

“Fuck,” I said, reaching to place a hand on her knee, giving it a squeeze. “Do you want me to take you there?” I asked.

“I, ah, yeah. I have to go. I’m... I’m his emergency contact.”

“That surprises you?” I asked.

“We haven’t talked in a year. More, maybe,” she admitted.

I couldn’t pretend to understand her relationship with her old man, but it was hard for me to imagine not being in contact with my family.

That was just not how shit worked with the Grassis. You might have a fucking knock-down-drag-out on a Tuesday, but you were going to be sitting across from each other on Sunday night, so you had to work your shit out. The elders in the family would never stand for members not getting along for any length of time.

But who the fuck knew.

Maybe Traveler’s old man had been abusive or something like that. Or a deadbeat when she was growing up. She’d never

mentioned a mom, but she obviously had one somewhere. Or had one in the past tense.

“Think maybe you’re the only family he’s got?” I suggested.

She let out this weird-ass sound. Like whimpering and choking at the same time. And even with her head ducked, I could see the way she was squeezing her eyes shut, likely trying to keep tears from streaming out.

“Yeah,” she agreed, sucking in a deep breath. “Drink,” she demanded, pointing toward it.

I handed it over, watching her chug it down.

“I have to go see him,” she decided.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “When you’re ready,” I added.

She said nothing to that, not for a long time.

Then, “That’s why it happened.”

“Hm?”

“The break-in at my place. It happened because someone thought they’d finally taken out my father. Maybe they did,” she added, voice hollow.

“Hey, don’t think like that. Coma doesn’t mean dead. Was he *in* a coma? Or did they put him in a coma?”

“I, ah, I didn’t think to ask that,” she admitted. “Does it make a difference?”

“Maybe. I’m no doctor. But I would think it would be better if they put him in it, just so his body could heal than if he was just... in one when he came in.”

“Yeah,” she agreed, nodding. “He’s in intensive care.”

“That makes sense.”

“That’s bad,” she said.

“Depends on how you look at it. Yes, it means that he’s hurt pretty badly. But it also means he’s getting the best possible care he can get there. Lot fewer patients to each doctor.”

“You know a lot about this.”

“I’ve had a lot of family members in the hospital,” I said, shrugging. And a cousin who ran her own sort of trauma medicine center for all the criminals in the area. You sort of picked shit up over time of hearing medical jargon all around you since you were a small kid.

“Right. Yeah. I, ah, I’ve never been in a hospital,” she said. “You know, as a patient.”

“Well, let’s try to keep it that way,” I said, getting a nod out of her.

“Who would try to kill my dad?” she asked aloud. “If he’s the one keeping all of them out of the cells they should rightfully be occupying?”

“I don’t know, babe. When he wakes up, hopefully he can tell you that. You want to go see him now?” I asked, even if my stomach tensed at the idea of taking her out of the hotel when the streets could very well be dangerous for her right now.

“Yeah,” she said, nodding, then following me numbly toward the door.

I wasn’t allowed up to the ICU with her, and she visibly tensed at the idea of having to go alone.

“I’ll be right here,” I promised her, waving toward the seating area. “When you’re done, come right down to me, okay?”

“Okay,” she agreed, nodding, then turning and walking stiffly toward the elevators just a few feet away.

Then and only then did I pull out my phone.

I ignored the calls and texts from my brothers.

But immediately opened the one from, of all people, Aurelio.

Aurelio was Lucky, Sofia, Milo, and Elisa's brother.

A cousin.

Not someone I typically heard from on some random day out of nowhere.

Where are you? Luca and Nino sent me.

Fuck.

I guess I was going to have to face consequences a lot sooner than I'd anticipated.

Hospital, I texted back.

Then waited.

It wasn't long before he made his way down the hall toward me.

There was no mistaking the family resemblance between Lucky, Aurelio, and Milo.

All were tall, black-haired and fit. Aurelio had warm brown eyes and lashes that chicks were always commenting on. The last few years had put a small bit of gray in his hair and chiseled out his jawline even more than usual.

"Tell me she's worth all the shit you are going to get for this," he said, dropping down in the chair next to mine.

"She was in trouble. I had to help her," I said.

"She in here?" he asked, waving around at the hospital in general.

"No. Her old man."

"This sounds like a long story," he decided.

“It is,” I agreed.

“I’m getting coffee first then,” he said, moving down the hall toward the machine.

Then when he came back, I launched into it.

“I see,” he said when I was done recounting everything that seemed pertinent. And quite a few things that definitely weren’t.

Like the pussy cookies.

And how she bristled when I ordered a to-go coffee then sat in the cafe to drink it. *That’s a waste of a paper cup. You could have gotten a ceramic one instead.*

“Alright,” Aurelio said, nodding before taking sip of the bitter coffee. “Well, you’re stuck with me now until you figure this shit out.”

“As what? My babysitter?”

“How about we call me a... mentor?” he suggested with a smirk. “Less degrading for the both of us.”

“Mentor,” I repeated, and was about to say something else.

When the stairwell door opened and slammed.

And there she was.

Looking like she was seconds away from breaking into a million little pieces.

CHAPTER FOUR

Traveler

I was a little... let's go with 'overwhelmed.'

It was the closest I could get to explaining how I felt as I walked on shaky legs into the elevator, and had the doors close me in, creating an unexpected surge of adrenaline.

My mouth went dry as my throat started to tighten enough for my hand to move there, pressing against my neck as my heartbeat started to hammer relentlessly against my ribcage.

What the hell was going on?

A cold sweat broke out on my arms, back, chest even as I started to feel a little light-headed.

The door chime nearly made me jump out of my skin.

But then the doors were sliding open, and the pressure on my throat and the relentless thrumming of my pulse eased back like the fog when met with daylight.

I stepped back out of the elevator and onto the intensive care unit. Two steps out of the elevator, it was like the event never even happened.

A panic attack.

That was... new.

I'd always been pretty laid-back, go-with-the-flow, the proverbial duck with the water sliding off its back. I wasn't even sure I'd ever felt anxiety before, let alone an actual panic attack.

Over nothing.

Well, no. Not nothing. An enclosed elevator.

It didn't take a genius to conclude that I seemed to suddenly have a bit of a fear of small spaces.

Claustrophobia.

Because of the oven and the men outside of it.

Great.

Just great.

A shiny new phobia to go with the rest of the shit I was already dealing with.

"Can I help you?" the nurse standing at the station a few feet from the elevator, but before the door leading to the unit, asked.

"I, ah, I'm Traveler. My father, James Moon, is here," I said, the words feeling strange coming out of my mouth.

My father.

In the ICU.

My father, a man I'd never seen have so much as a cold, was in a coma in a bed in the intensive care unit.

The nurse rattled off the same things I'd heard on the phone, then led me into the unit where I was given one of those paper onesie things, gloves, and a mask, and allowed inside my father's room.

"Talk to him," the nurse encouraged, then left me to go inside by myself.

I paused, taking a deep breath, then forced my feet forward.

This wasn't how it was supposed to be.

The first time I saw my father in over a year, and he had tubes sticking out of him.

I pushed back those thoughts, knowing they were a little selfish. This wasn't about me and my discomfort. This was about my father.

I always heard people say that hospital beds made their loved ones look small. That wasn't the case for my father. James Moon had always been an impressive figure of a man. Tall, solid, with broad shoulders that echoed back to his high school and college football days.

As in all things, my father has always been fastidious about his appearance, dedicated to hitting the gym five days a week, no excuses. It didn't matter that he was well into his fifties, he was still strong and muscled enough that I could see the outlines of some of said muscles even in his blue and white hospital gown.

I'd never seen much of myself in his features. I always had the softer face that came from my mom, while my father had a wider, chiseled jaw, a strong forehead, stern brows, and a nose that was slightly crooked from getting broken twice in high school.

Never could keep my hands off of girls who already had boyfriends, he would joke. Which always caused me inevitably to clap back, *Yeah, that was exactly the problem*.

But that was baggage to be unpacked another day.

The thing was, I couldn't even make out my father's features anymore. His entire face was swollen with bruises—black, blue, purple—smattering every inch of skin.

His nose was splinted. Broken again, I figured.

And his lip was split badly enough to require stitches.

It would scar.

If he woke up.

My heart squeezed in my chest at that thought.

No, we weren't close.

But I was accustomed to having him around. And a part of me kind of liked the idea of there being a chance for us to finally work through shit.

Him dying would ruin any chances of mending things.

"Ah, hey," I said, feeling like I was talking to myself. "Um... the nurse said I should talk to you," I said, moving the chair closer to the bed, and sitting down, suddenly feeling almost impossibly tired. "I guess they think you can hear me. But it sounds like you're pretty drugged up."

My gaze slid to his monitor, watching his steady heartbeat, his oxygen level which controlled, seeing as they had him intubated.

"I guess they'll have you on a feeding tube too," I mused aloud. "You're still going to waste away if you're kept under for a long time," I added, figuring if he could hear me, knowing that his perfectly maintained physique slipping away from him might give him the motivation to heal and fight.

"Who did this to you? I thought you had this town locked down tight. Nothing and no one has ever touched you. What went wrong?" I asked. "They came for me tonight too," I added. "They ruined my shop. And my car. I had to hide in the oven and call the fucking *mafia* to come save me. I'm never going to forgive you for making me deal with that asshole August over this," I added.

Though, I had to admit, he'd been pretty nice to me when I'd been all freaked out. Picking me up and carrying me to the car. I'd never been picked up by a man before. You could say I tended to have... trust issues when it came to guys. If a guy tried to pick me up, he'd probably get sucker-punched in the ribs.

That was my mom in me.

Don't let a man sweep you off your feet, honey. They're only going to drop you on your ass. Sooner or later.

I wasn't an idiot. I knew she was talking about my dad.

Should I call my mom? Did ex-wives who were jilted by their husbands for much younger women want to know that their ex was in the hospital, fighting for his life?

I guess I was just going to put a pin in that for the time being. Maybe ask August his opinion. The guy might have been a dick, but he had a much more stable family life than I did. He would be a decent person to ask about things like this.

"I guess I have to learn to watch my mouth now, huh? I don't have you to protect me anymore," I added. Because even if he did wake up from this, clearly someone had a target on his back. Which meant there was now one on mine as well.

A nurse came in to check on my father at one point as the awkward silence stretched on, giving me a small smile and kind eyes as she looked at the monitors, then quietly excused herself back out again.

"Listen," I finally said some unknown time later. "I need you to wake up, okay? Summon that stubborn-ass spirit of yours that I may or may not have inherited, and wake up. I don't think I'm going to handle it very well if I don't know you are one phone call and shouting match away, okay?" I said, hearing the catch in my voice, and knowing it was time to go.

I wasn't going to break down in the hospital.

"I'm going to go... try to figure some things out. But, ah, I'll be back," I told him, then walked back out of the room.

"Miss Moon?" the nurse from the desk called as I was about to head toward the stairwell.

"Yeah?" I asked, turning back.

"We're not really supposed to do this, but since he's unconscious, we can't ask him. Your father's wallet..." she said, producing a bag with it inside. "It's just that... there's a lot of money in it," she said. "I saw it when I looked for his

emergency contact. And, well, things do tend to disappear in a hospital.”

“Oh, right. Of course. Thank you so much,” I said, reaching for the bag. “I will hold onto it for him.”

“That’s the spirit,” she said, giving me an encouraging smile.

I didn’t stop to consider what that might mean as I turned and took myself into the stairwell. I didn’t open the wallet as I rushed down the stairs.

Whether I wanted to admit it or not, seeing my father like that—a strong, formidable man brought so low—yeah, it was scaring the shit out of me. If they could do that to him, they could do infinitely worse to me.

I wanted to get back down to August.

As much as I hated relying on anyone, least of all some random man, I had to accept that I was too weak to be alone in this. Physically, at least. Mentally, I could run circles around these assholes. Which was what I planned to do. To figure out who was the mind behind this attack on my father and the attempt on me.

Then, well, I don’t know.

Ask August how much it is to hire a hitman?

I don’t know.

I needed coffee. And some time to think.

I pushed open the door to the right floor, walking out in the opposite direction of the elevator that I should have been emerging from. The elevator that August was staring at, body tight.

What was more surprising was that there was another man beside him.

Tall, dark-haired, wearing a suit.

It didn’t take a genius to figure out that he was another mafia guy.

The crazy thing was, they all looked like that. Handsome and polished. I'd met dozens of them at a wedding a while back. Almost all of them had a name that ended in a vowel too. It was insane.

All except August.

Well, no, even him.

He told me once his full name was Augustine. After the saint.

"Can we get out of here?" I asked, making both men jolt slightly. Which, yeah, I had to admit brought me a little joy. Big, strong mafia guys startled by the sound of a woman's voice.

"Hey," August said, getting to his feet. "Yeah. You alright?"

"Well, just saw my dad with tubes sticking out of him and his face beaten beyond recognition. So... somewhere on the not alright scale," I admitted, glance moving over toward the stranger with the slight bit of gray in his hair. Which I had to admit just made him hotter.

"This is Aurelio. My cousin. Aurelio, Traveler."

"Hey, angel. You look like you need a cup of coffee."

"I do," I agreed, glancing down at his hand. "But not that shit," I said, getting a small smile out of him.

"Let's get back to the hotel where we can talk," August suggested, holding an arm out toward the elevators.

"I, ah, okay," I agreed, following him.

I wasn't about to admit that I'd picked up a handy-dandy new phobia to August, of all people. But with each step toward the doors, I could feel that panic settling in again.

The cold sweat, the pounding pulse, the tight throat and heavy chest.

By the time the doors slid closed, I felt ready to climb the walls to escape through the emergency hatch.

I was just thankful that August was standing near the doors with his back to me.

Aurelio, though, was practically shoulder-to-shoulder with me on the back wall.

Just when I was sure I was going to pass out from the panic, Aurelio's hand shifted, two of his fingers tapping out a strange beat right on the front of my hand that had a death grip on that silver rail thing that wrapped the sides of the elevator car.

I glanced over at him, but found just his profile as he stared ahead, but continued the little beat.

Which distracted me long enough for the car to stop dropping, and the doors to slide open.

Then and only then did he catch my gaze, giving me a little wink, then waiting for me to move ahead of him, so he could flank my back.

I wasn't a mafia dude, but I was pretty sure that was a tactical move on their part. One in front of me, one behind, as we moved through the hospital and outside into the lot.

Hell, even my head was on a pivot, some part of me sure that there were a bunch of shadowy men lying in wait, ready to take me out.

But the walk toward August's car was uneventful.

"I'll follow you to the hotel," Aurelio said, getting a nod from August who was holding the door open for me.

"What?" August asked, making me realize I was staring at him with my brows drawn down. Because, well, the kinds of guys I'd been around, yeah, they weren't exactly hold-the-door-open types.

"Nothing," I said, sliding inside, then watching him close the door for me before going around the car.

Old-fashioned manners.

I wouldn't normally think I'd like those. But I had to admit this particular one was kind of nice.

“Mind if we take the stairs?” Aurelio asked when he joined us in the lobby. “Little restless after being seated for so long,” he added to his cousin’s questioning glance.

Thank you I mouthed to him after agreeing to take the stairs, and following August up.

To that, he shrugged.

Okay.

Yeah.

There was something inherently charming about these mafia guys.

“What you got there?” Aurelio asked as we got back into the suite, and August made a beeline for the coffee pot as we stood in the kitchen with him.

“My father’s wallet,” I told him. “The nurse said she wasn’t supposed to release it, but wanted to give it to me because it was full of money,” I told them as I opened it, and pulled out the cash inside.

A little over a thousand.

I had to imagine it was all dirty money. Provided from all the local criminal organizations.

I’d looked it up once. The chief of police in our area got a salary of one-hundred-forty thousand. Not chump change, for sure. But not the kind of money that would provide him with his little mansion, sports cars, expensive suits and watches, and his love of fancy restaurants.

He had a bunch of credit cards too.

His license.

Then one of those little cards that had emergency contact information. My information.

And, finally, a picture.

Just one.

Of him and me when I was a little girl. Maybe five or so, back when I still believed my daddy hung the moon. I was

sitting on top of a giant pumpkin in a patch, him standing beside me with a hand behind my back.

Always got your back, Travy.

And, I guess, no matter what went on with us, that was true.

He could have easily written me off after one of the many shouting matches we'd shared over the years. But he didn't. That had to count for something, right?

"Can I see that?" Aurelio asked, motioning to the wallet.

"Sure," I said, handing it to him, and reaching for the coffee August pushed toward me instead.

The whiskey had been a bad idea.

All I had to thank for it was a pounding behind my eyes.

"What's that?" I asked when Aurelio yanked a small square out of one of the card pockets, holding it up toward his cousin whose face went a little dark.

"A tracking device," August said.

"Shit," I murmured.

August and Aurelio shared a long look, seemingly having a fucking silent conversation that I wasn't allowed to be a part of.

"Shouldn't we destroy it?" I asked.

"Is the story of his attack on the news?" Aurelio asked.

August and I glanced at each other.

"I have no idea," I said, taking my coffee into the living room to try to find the remote.

"It's the tablet," August said, coming up behind me to grab it, clicking around like he was accustomed to the things, and bringing up the news station.

We all stood there silently for a few moments, watching the story and the crawl at the bottom of the screen. But... nothing.

“That’s weird, isn’t it?” I asked.

“Not if they’re trying to keep the local crews from acting up,” Aurelio said. “Chief of police is a major target. The cops are probably trying to keep this from the news cycle for a while.”

“They’re going to think he’s here,” I said, looking at the tracker. The men did that looking-at-each-other thing, making perfectly rational—in my opinion—frustration bubble up and pour out. “Um, could you guys, I don’t know, talk about this aloud? Since it involves me and my safety. And my father.”

“Right,” August said with a sigh. Like wanting to be included was *so* irritating to him. Jerk. “We’re trying to decide if it is better for them to think he’s still alive or not.”

“We need to decide what to do with the device,” Aurelio added. “We could bring it back to the hospital. And he is relatively safe in the ICU, compared to the rest of the hospital...”

“Or we could take it to the morgue,” August said. “Let them think they accomplished their mission.”

“Why?” I asked.

“To keep them away from the hospital,” Aurelio said. “While he recovers. I was allowed to come down here, but the boss was pretty clear that it’s just us,” he added, giving August a look that held a lot of weight.

Was he in trouble? With the boss?

Did I care?

Just a second of introspection said that I kind of did.

I mean, he’d come. He didn’t have to. But he came. And he got me out of there. He got me safe. He waited for me at the hospital. He was sticking with me, even though he was getting the gist of how fucked this situation really was.

He didn’t deserve to be punished for that.

“So, we can’t spare someone to protect him,” Aurelio added. “And it seems like we are going to be busy.”

“This isn’t your war,” I said, looking between them, but landing on August.

“No,” he agreed. “But you’d put up a pretty shitty fucking fight with just one soldier against a whole army.”

“That’s not your problem.”

“Are you always so fucking impossible?” he grumbled, sighing hard.

“Yes,” I said honestly, getting a snort out of Aurelio.

“Can I just... throw out an idea here?” Aurelio asked.

“Sure,” I said, nodding.

“Leave. Come with us back to Navesink Bank. Let this blow over.”

It was August’s turn to snort.

“What?” Aurelio asked.

“She’s the most bull-headed, stubborn-ass woman I’ve ever met. She talks shit to the local drug dealers and pimps for kicks and giggles. She’s not going to run away from this.”

“He’s right,” I agreed.

“I’m sure you’re not...” Aurelio started to say, much more gracious than his cousin.

“I am,” I cut him off. “I am bull-headed and stubborn. I do talk shit all the time. I provoke them for fun. Because I’ve always had protection. I never had to worry about the consequences before. But now... all bets are off. And if all the crews think my dad is dead...” I said, trailing off.

“Even the ones in his pocket might want to... have a word or two with you,” August finished for me.

“Yeah,” I said, wrapping my arms around myself, suddenly cold.

“Hey, that’s not gonna happen,” August said, shaking his head.

“Don’t worry. I wasn’t going to get all ‘hysterical’ on you,” I said, bristling just with the memory of him throwing

that word at me.

“Alright,” Aurelio cut in, sensing things about to get out of hand. “So, we don’t want this at the morgue?” he asked, holding up the tracking device. “Where then?”

“The police station?” I suggested. “If he was attacked and recovered, that’s where he would be, plotting to take down who did this, right?”

August and Aurelio looked at each other and nodded.

“Alright. I’ll take it there,” Aurelio said. “Stick it somewhere it won’t get disturbed. Then I think everyone needs some sleep,” he said, a little pointedly looking in my direction. “We can come up with steps in the morning.”

With that, he was striding out the door, leaving the two of us standing in the living room with nothing but the droning sound of the local meteorologist talking about a heatwave coming. Like we weren’t already in one.

“What’d they—“ August started even as I spoke.

“Can I ask—“

“Yeah,” he said, nodding.

“Do you think I should call my mom about my father?” I asked. “I, ah, I don’t have as much experience with complicated family feelings as you probably do.”

“Figure things didn’t end well?”

“He fucked a twenty-year-old on their bed. Several twenty-year-olds, actually,” I said, watching August’s brows go up.

“Did she move on?”

“I mean... she moved away. As soon as I was old enough to live on my own. My dad hired lawyers to make it so she was stuck here until I was eighteen and he didn’t get visitation anymore. But, ah, no. She’s... pretty bitter about all of mankind actually.”

“Then I think maybe leave it be for now. Hopefully, he recovers. Then you can talk it out. If the worst happens, then I think she would want to know.”

“Yeah. You’re probably right,” I agreed. I probably only wanted to tell her because it would give me someone to talk to, to dissect my messy feelings about it. But I knew exactly what she would say.

Why are you so worried about him after he blew up our family?

“Why don’t you try to sleep?” August suggested, waving toward the one and only bedroom. “Aurelio and I will be fine out here.”

“Yeah. I, ah, yeah,” I agreed.

I wasn’t going to sleep.

But I did want a couple of minutes away from an audience to get myself together. Or fall apart, if that was how this was going to go.

“Hey, Traveler?” he called as I was in the doorway.

“Yeah?” I asked, looking over my shoulder.

“We’ll figure this out.”

We had to.

Or my life was pretty much over.

CHAPTER FIVE

August

“Fuck,” I hissed, dropping down on the couch across from Aurelio.

“Yeah,” he agreed, nodding.

“We’ve got, what? Potentially a dozen criminal organizations to look at for this?” he asked, raising the scotch I’d gotten for us. It was the kind of night that called for it.

“I’m hoping that when Traveler accesses her cameras, that we get some faces. That will make shit easier. Especially since she seems to know all the players in this town.”

“How she doing?” he asked.

“I dunno. She’s the stiff-upper-lip sort,” I said.

“She seems to have some issues with you. Did something happen that you didn’t tell me about?”

“No. We’re just... oil and water is all.”

“She’s pretty.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, taking another sip. “You didn’t meet her at Massimo’s wedding?”

“I don’t think so.”

“She had green hair then.”

“You know, I vaguely remember someone with green hair, but I didn’t talk to her. So if she’s close enough with Mass to go to his wedding, why the hell did she call you?”

Yeah, that was the question, wasn’t it?

“She said it was because my name was first in her address book.”

“Yeah, sure,” Aurelio said, shaking his head.

“Maybe she just didn’t want to invite Mass into a dangerous mess when he’s got a woman and kids at home.”

“And, given her dislike of you, if you died...” Aurelio said, smirking.

“Yeah, exactly,” I agreed.

“Why’d you come?” he asked. “If you don’t get along?”

“She was in danger,” I said, shrugging. “I would have come if it was a stranger calling.”

To that, he nodded. We were in agreement there.

“I’ll look around to see if there’s a handyman or someone I can hire to board up those windows at her shop first thing. Then pull down the security gate. I doubt they’re done with that place. Might as well at least try to keep them from fucking any more of her shit up.”

“Thanks, man. I’m worried about her place.”

“Where does she live?”

“Fuck if I know,” I said, shaking my head.

Was it a house? An apartment? Did she have neighbors who would give a shit and call the cops if they saw something suspicious?

Was it already too late?

“Guess we can add that to the itinerary tomorrow too,” Aurelio said, rolling his neck. “I’m gonna run downstairs and get my suitcase.”

“I got a bag in my trunk, if you can grab that too,” I said, tossing him my keys.

There wasn’t much in it. Travel size toiletries, pajama pants, a spare suit. I would need to hit the store to get more than that.

Aurelio had time to pack.

I had left in an emergency.

I’d have to adjust.

“Yep,” he agreed. “I’ll be back.”

We took turns getting changed and making up the couches as best we could.

Aurelio dropped off pretty quickly, but I was still buzzed. And, judging from the noises coming from the bedroom, I wasn’t the only one.

Getting up, I made my way to her door, listening to make sure she wasn’t crying or something like that before I rapped lightly.

“Yeah?” she called.

Opening the door, I found her pacing in front of the windows, sans her jeans, leaving her in her tee and a pair of red panties with a little lace trim. And, fuck, they were showing off a tempting amount of ass. And those long legs of hers too.

“Can’t sleep?” I asked.

“Don’t sleep,” she corrected. “Much,” she added. “I would normally be cleaning my house or watering my plants right about now. Then catching three or four hours right before sun-up when I head to the shop to bake.”

“Every day it’s like that?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why would you want every day to be like that?”

Her chin angled up and her eyes slit.

That was the wrong thing to say, apparently.

“Because it’s my life?”

“You could hire help at the shop, so you have some time to yourself.”

“To do what?” she asked.

“Hobbies. See friends. Live your life.”

“I see my friends at work,” she said. “And my ‘hobbies’ are more along the lines of community service. Which I do find time for. Why do you care what my schedule is like?”

“I’m not trying to start a fight. But not sleeping isn’t great. Especially when things are... going to be dicey for a while.”

“Dicey,” she repeated, dropping her arms with a deep exhale. “Yeah, that’s a nice way to put it, I guess.”

“Can I ask you something without you biting my head off?”

“Probably not,” she said, but her lips twitched slightly. “But you could try.”

“Is it so important for you to stick this out here?” I asked. “Those developers have got to be sniffing around, throwing out some nice bids on your store. Why not take the money and run somewhere that you can start over without all this grief?”

“I was asking myself the same question while I paced,” she admitted. “I never gave a second thought to selling. You know... before. I believe in change, in trying to build up this community. But that was... that was when I was under my father’s protection.”

“Hey,” I said, seeing the sadness creep over her face. “There’s no saying that you won’t be under that again,” I reminded her.

“I know. But this has been a reality check. My father won’t live forever. He won’t *work* forever. And then what? Everyone takes out their years or decades of anger on me when I no longer have any protection?”

“That’s... definitely something you need to consider,” I agreed. “Are the developers offering a lot?”

“Half a million,” she told me. “It’s enough to start over somewhere else. And get myself a house. Likely a small house, in this market. But still. Something that’s mine.”

“Would you stay in Jersey?” I asked, finding myself a little too invested in the answer to that question.

“It’s what I know, so probably. Maybe I’d move closer to the beach or something. Summer traffic would be great for business.”

“Navesink Bank is beach-adjacent,” I heard myself saying, wishing I could fucking suck the words back in as soon as they were out of my mouth.

“Right,” she said, smiling now. “Trading one area teeming with criminals for another.”

“Hey, at least most of us have codes and wouldn’t fuck with innocent women.”

“Oh, yes. The old mafia code of conduct.”

“Hey, don’t forget that we have the bikers, the loan sharks, the drug dealers...”

“I would probably want a business closer to the actual beach,” she said. “It was like fifteen or twenty minutes from Navesink Bank to the beach, if I remember correctly.”

“You do,” I confirmed. “Close enough to go as often as you want. Far enough to avoid most of the shore traffic.”

“Hey,” she said, lips twitching.

“What?”

“We’re actually having a conversation without snapping at each other.”

“Miracles do happen,” I said, nodding.

“I really must need sleep,” she added. “I usually find you pretty intolerable,” she added, goading me just for fun.

“You should at least try,” I agreed, making my way back toward the door. “Aurelio is getting your store boarded up in the morning. Then we need to hit up your place and check shit out.”

“Right,” she agreed, and I wasn’t exactly sure why her eyes widened like they did. “Yeah, of course,” she said, banking the look back down before I could really analyze it.

Eventually, I caught a couple of hours, waking up to the smell of freshly brewing coffee and bacon.

I hadn’t woken up to coffee and food since I lived at home. Even before I was fully awake, I could suddenly see the appeal of having a significant other, someone to share the task of getting up first and brewing some coffee.

Even as I folded up on the couch, though, Traveler’s door was sliding open, and she was moving into the doorway, sniffing at the air.

Aurelio.

Of course he’d gotten up first. He’d passed out earlier than us.

“That coffee actually smells really good,” she said, tying the sash of the fluffy hotel robe tightly around her waist.

Her hair was wet from the shower and pulled back. But she wasn’t puffy like she’d been up all night. That was good at least.

“Yeah, it does,” I agreed, getting up off the couch and rolling a crick out of my neck from sleeping on the uncomfortable-as-fuck thing.

When I looked back down, though, I caught Traveler’s gaze moving down my chest and torso, then shooting guiltily back up and away.

“There you are,” Aurelio said, as I followed Traveler into the kitchen, trying to act like I hadn’t caught her eye-fucking me. Because, well, this shit did not need to get more complicated than it already was.

“How did you shower?” I asked, brows scrunched at his perfectly put together appearance.

“My gym has a branch here. I got in a quick workout and shower before meeting the guys at Traveler’s shop,” he said, handing her a cup of coffee. “I stole a bag of your ground coffee while I was there,” he told her.

“That explains why it smells so good,” she said, taking a long sniff before sipping. “Does it look as bad as August said?” she asked.

“It’s... not pretty,” he said, pushing something round and wrapped toward her. “I have an extra one with meat, if you eat it, but that one is just egg and cheese,” he explained.

And, yeah, Aurelio would pick up on the hippy-chick vibe at her shop, and likely draw conclusions about what she did or didn’t eat.

“We swept up the glass and crystals,” he went on. “I saved the chunks that were big enough to,” he added. “And I grabbed the plants that had broken pots. They’re in my car. I figured you could toss them into dirt when we drop by your house.”

“You’ve thought of everything,” she said, giving him a smile without a hint of sarcasm, something I wasn’t sure she’d ever given me. And I found myself jealous of my fucking cousin for the attention he was getting from a woman I thought I didn’t like.

“They didn’t go for your cash,” Aurelio added, handing me a bagel with egg, cheese, and bacon.

“I think it has less to do with money, and more to do with me,” Traveler said, her head shaking. “How’s my truck?” she asked, looking up quickly enough to catch Aurelio’s wince. “That good, huh?”

“I think it’s at the point where you will need to question if it’s worth what it’s gonna cost to fix it. All new windows, new

tires, some body work...”

“I love that truck,” Traveler said, looking down at her food, seeming to suddenly lose her appetite.

With her head down, I caught Aurelio’s gaze, tapping my chest. He knew me well enough to know what I was saying. *Get it fixed. I’ll pay for it.*

To that, he nodded.

“I would have driven past your place to scope that out,” Aurelio said. “But I don’t have your address.”

“I’m hoping they don’t either,” Traveler said, taking a small bite of her bagel. “I’ve never seen anyone following me home before. I mean, I guess that kind of thing is public record, but who knows if they’re invested enough yet to look into that.”

“Hopefully we get there before they do,” I said. “Grab anything valuable or sentimental. Board shit up if we need to. You got a house or apartment?”

“I’m on one side of a duplex,” she said. “With an elderly neighbor on the other side. He’s nosy. He would call the cops if he saw anything suspicious. But...”

“But what?” I asked when she trailed off.

“But I don’t know what the situation is with my father and the rest of the police force,” she said, shrugging. “Or with the organizations and the force for that matter. If they would even come if they knew it was my place. That kind of thing. I’m gonna go get dressed,” she said after trying to eat one more bite, but giving up.

Aurelio reached for the bagel and re-wrapped it.

“There were a lot of fucking eyes on us at the shop,” Aurelio said. “Not a single set of ‘em seeming purely curious.”

“Great,” I said, sighing. “This is a clusterfuck.”

“Let’s hope her old man wakes up. Sounds like he’s the one with enough power and pull to fix this and reinstate order.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, making a mental note to have Traveler call and ask about him if she didn’t want to go and visit again. “Anything on the news about him today?”

“No,” Aurelio said. “They’re keeping it under wraps.”

“I guess that works in our favor. I want to get done with her place early. Figure her out there anywhere visible is a bad idea right now.”

“Yeah. She’s better off here,” Aurelio agreed. “But we’re going to need to hit the streets and get a feel for what’s going on around here.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Hopefully, she can recognize the guys from the cameras and make our job easier.”

Traveler emerged as Aurelio and I were finishing our food, wearing the same outfit as yesterday, sans the apron.

“If you want to shower, it’s all yours,” she said to me as she went to the coffee machine for a refill.

Half an hour later, we were all in my car, heading out.

Traveler lived on the very edge of town, in an area slightly less rough than where her shop was located, but not by much.

The corner lot duplex was enclosed by a crooked chainlink fence with multiple *No trespassing* and *Beware of dog* signs.

At my raised brow, Traveler shook her head.

“Ethan, my neighbor, he has a dog. It’s a half-blind, overweight Shih Tzu, but he has a dog,” she explained. “You have to park on the street,” she told me, pointing toward the road along the side of the property.

The house itself was in better shape than most on the street, likely thanks to the fact that it was made from red brick that didn’t require much maintenance. But the yard was mown and the flowerbeds were weeded and full of various flowers and bushes I wouldn’t pretend to know the names of. Even though my Ma was a pretty avid gardener, and I probably should have known that shit.

There was a large front porch to each side of the steps. One set up with two old wooden rockers, likely belonging to the old man Ethan. The other had a newer-looking swing with colorful cushions, a bunch of plants, strings of fairy lights, and several different hummingbird feeders.

It had Traveler written all over it.

“Got a thing for hummingbirds, huh?” I asked as we all made our way up the front steps.

“I try to feed all the pollinators. Hence the flower beds. There’s more out back too. All native flowers.”

“Of course,” I agreed.

“What?” she asked, giving me small eyes again.

“Nothing. Just... that makes sense for who you are.”

“Someone who cares about the planet?” she asked, turning fully to face me, arms crossing.

“Alright, kids,” Aurelio said, coming up behind us. “Let’s keep shit civil.”

Traveler rolled her eyes at me, but said nothing as she turned and made her way up the steps, pausing to unlock her door, then moving inside.

I was expecting it to be similar to her shop.

I wasn’t wrong.

We moved into the living room featuring a brown couch across from a big brick fireplace with small plants placed across the mantle and much larger ones in pots near the windows.

There were several canvases on the walls, and if I knew anything about Traveler, they were all from local artists, not something you could buy in a store somewhere.

“Everything looks alright,” she said as she walked through the living room and into the kitchen.

Everything was narrow, what with it being one house split in two, but the kitchen was a good size with white cabinets and

appliances and a stand full of what looked like potted herbs in front of another window.

She didn't have a dining table, choosing instead to utilize that space with a rolling island pushed against the wall for more prep space, and an old armoire she'd taken apart and painted a light sage color.

"Well, that's just inviting trouble," she mumbled to herself as she turned away from the kitchen and moved into a small bedroom dominated by a bed that couldn't be bigger than a full and covered in a bright patchwork quilt in green and yellow.

It was the only room without plants. There wasn't room. Even though there were big windows, one of which she was slamming closed and locking.

"Nothing looks out of place?" I asked as she looked around.

"No," she said, moving toward her nightstand to pull open a drawer. "Even my laptop is here," she said as she placed it on the bed with the charger, already starting to gather up the important things to bring with her. "And this is an expensive one," she added, going into her closet to grab a suitcase. "How much should I be packing?" she asked, glancing back at me.

That was a good question.

I didn't have a satisfactory answer to it.

"Pack for five days and nights, just in case," I said before she could object.

She didn't seem as though she was going to, though. If anything, she seemed oddly numb as she started grabbing yoga pants, shorts, and tees. She packed her laptop on top of those before moving near me to open her dresser, pulling out PJs, then socks, before getting to her underwear drawer. Which was full of fancy, tempting shit like I knew she had on under her jeans.

"What? No snarky comments about my girlie underthings?"

“Baby, no jokes can be made about panties and bras like those,” I said as I actively tried not to picture her wearing them.

I failed.

And when she looked up, I could see in her eyes that she knew exactly what I was thinking.

“Stop picturing me without my clothes on.”

“That’s kind of rich coming from someone who was checking me out without my shirt on this morning.”

“Oh, get over yourself. I was not,” she said, small-eyeing me.

“You absolutely were,” I countered, lowering my voice as I leaned slightly closer, enjoying watching the way she swallowed hard.

“Please,” she said, rolling her eyes, but her voice was just a touch more breathless than it had been before. “Someone looking in your general direction doesn’t mean they are checking you out.”

“No,” I agreed, leaning over her. “But you were.”

“I locked up all the windows,” Aurelio said, coming up behind me, prompting Traveler to jump backward with her hands full of lacy and silky bras and panties.

“What’s this?” Aurelio asked, sensing the tension in the room but misinterpreting it. “He teasing you about your underwear?” he asked, shaking his head. “Like a fucking child,” he added with a pointed look in my direction.

“I’m gonna go dump your perishables,” I said.

“No!” Traveler snapped, making me pause mid-stride.

“Why not? You want it to go rancid in your fridge while you’re away?”

“No, but I don’t want to waste perfectly good food either. We can bring it to the hotel. There’s a full-sized fridge.”

I may or may not have mumbled something about her being a *crazy hippie chick* under my breath as I started away.

“What was that?” she barked.

“I said *Whatever you want, honey bun*,” I lied, turning back to find her slitting her eyes at the pet name.

“Snookums?” I asked, getting a grumble out of her. “Sugar tits?” I asked, and this time, she picked up a book from her nightstand and hurled it at me, whacking me on the side of the head. “Hey, that wasn’t very *peace and love* of you,” I said, handing the book to Aurelio whose brows raised at what was obviously an abstract pussy on the cover and a title that included the word *Come* on it.

He placed the book down before following me out.

“What?” I asked.

“Am I going to be babysitting the fucking two of you this whole trip?” he asked, grabbing one of Traveler’s many reusable bags that were hanging from a hook behind her back door.

“Probably,” I said, pulling out almond milk, eggs in a carton that was hand stamped with a label claiming they came from ‘happy free range hens,’ some veggies, and several almond-based yogurts into bags.

She didn’t keep much in her fridge, actually. Probably because she spent most of her time at work.

“You know what the two of you are like?” Aurelio asked as he grabbed the bananas, pears, and apples out of a bowl on the counter and put those in another bag.

“What?” I asked, having a feeling I wasn’t going to like his answer.

“Like two grade school kids with a crush. But to cover it up, they tease each other and put gum in one another’s hair.”

“It’s not like that,” I insisted as I heard Traveler zipping her suitcase in the other room.

“Yeah, sure it’s not,” Aurelio said, shaking his head as he took the bags of food, and made his way toward the front door.

Traveler moved out of her room then, glowering at me, but not saying a word as she moved toward the front of the house.

I found myself watching her ass as she went.

Okay.

Maybe it *was* like that.

CHAPTER SIX

Traveler

“I don’t understand,” I said back at the hotel when I powered up the laptop to access my saved camera feed from the night before.

The ones facing the front of the store and in the alley were all static. The ones inside had all been turned to face the walls.

I could sense August and Aurelio sharing a look over my head from either side of me.

“Out loud, please,” I grumbled.

“Seems like they knew what they were planning and likely knocked out the outside cameras. Likely from above, so the camera didn’t catch it. Then had someone go inside and fuck with those ones,” August said.

“But I would...” I started, then stopped. Maybe I wouldn’t have. Sure, I knew a lot about the local crews, but that didn’t mean I knew everything.

It was entirely possible that if one of the members came in wearing something similar to the developers, I wouldn't have looked twice at them. Or they could have come inside when I was in the back, or taking out the trash, that kinda thing. And because this area was very "mind your own business," if there wasn't a friend of mine like Sheryl in the store at the time, no one would have said anything.

"Damn it," I grumbled, slamming the lid of the laptop closed, and pressing the palms of my hands into my eyes.

I was tired.

Bone-deep tired.

Despite having gotten my usual couple of hours of sleep.

Sheryl told me all the time that the chronic lack of sleep was going to 'catch up to me' someday. Maybe that was what this was. I finally wasn't running around busy all day long, and my body had a chance to realize how worn out it was.

Then again, I also had a busted up business, a target on my back, and a father in a coma in the ICU. So, yeah, maybe the stress was just getting to me.

"Hey, look. This isn't the end. It would have made life a fuckuva lot easier if the cameras were working, but there are other ways to figure out information," August said.

"How? This isn't your town. You don't have contacts all around that you can go to for information."

"No," August agreed. "But you do."

"I get to actively be involved?" I asked, looking up at them. "This doesn't fall under that mafia 'protect the little lady' rule?"

August snorted at that.

"We can still protect you and have you participate," Aurelio said.

"Besides, if we left you alone in the hotel too long, you'd likely get us kicked out after bitching to the staff about all the waste here."

This time, it wasn't just me annoyed by August's constant need to needle at me. Aurelio sighed and walked toward the kitchen.

"By any chance, would your head explode if you kept in some of those nasty-ass remarks about me?" I asked.

"Nasty-ass, or completely accurate?" he shot back.

And, fine. I could be a pain in the ass. I did sometimes lecture people about the surplus of waste in things like hospitality or just general businesses. I mean the amount of food that gets thrown away instead of donated...

"I mean, you're thinking it now, aren't you?" he asked, smirking down at me.

I half-sighed, half-laughed at that.

"I was thinking about the food waste," I admitted.

"Isn't it against the health code to donate it?" he asked, likely knowing about that since some of his cousins ran restaurants and event venues.

"And that's where you say *Fuck the law*, pack up the food, and hand it out to the homeless. Guerrilla charity is better than no charity at all."

"I have to agree with you on that, I guess. But I wasn't wrong on the original point."

"I'm not *that* insufferable," I said, actually finding myself a little insulted. Which was weird. I never really gave a damn what people thought about how dedicated I was to my causes. What the hell was the point of a life if you didn't, in some small way, try to make the world better?

"I wouldn't say insufferable," August said. "You're... passionate."

"Then why call me a pain in the ass?"

"Because you are," he said, smiling. "Two things can be true at the same time."

"Right. Like you being halfway decent but also a dick."

“Exactly,” he agreed, still smiling. Which was irritating. “Oh, snickerdoodle, you’re gonna have to do better than that if you want to get a rise out of me. I grew up with four brothers; I’ve heard a lot worse.

“I mean, they have so much material to work with,” I teased, but this time, I was smiling too.

Do you ever consider that you’re just prickly in an attempt to keep people away who are too sensitive to be in your inner circle?

My father said that to me once.

And, you know, it was valid. Even if I, yes, prickled at the suggestion.

“That they do,” he agreed. And, damn him, you had to appreciate a man who was capable of owning up to his flaws.

“Angel, your phone keeps lighting up,” Aurelio called, making me jump to my feet, thinking it was the hospital. That my father was awake.

Hope swelled, a weightless, easily deflated thing.

I learned this when I reached for my phone and saw Sheryl’s number there.

“I’m okay,” I answered, knowing she would have seen the store when she came by for her usual morning coffee after she fiddled in the garden for a few hours.

“Oh, my God!” Sheryl exhaled. “What happened?”

“The shop was closed for the night. I was in the back getting ready to do some baking. And... they broke in.”

“Did they... are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“Physically,” she clarified.

“Yeah,” I agreed, aware of eyes on me and ears tuned to me.

“Emotionally...”

“Hanging in. My father—“ I started, but got a head shake from Aurelio and a cut-it-out motion from August.

“He’s got to be furious!” Sheryl said, saving me from having to backpedal.

“Yeah, we don’t know what is going on,” I said.

“Are you safe? Are you home?” she asked.

“Yes and no,” I said. “We figured that, for the time being, it might not be smart for me to be at my house.”

“I get that. So long as you’re safe. What about your cameras? Didn’t you catch them?”

To that, I sighed. “No. They were tampered with.”

“Those bastards,” Sheryl grumbled.

“Yeah. I’ll figure it out and get back on my feet, though,” I assured her. I wasn’t exactly rolling in money, but I could get by with the shop being closed for a week or two.

“Of course you will. No one can keep your stubborn ass down.”

“Exactly,” I agreed, but I suddenly had the urge to crawl into bed, and not come out again for several weeks. “You should make other plans for your berries, though,” I told her.

“I hate that, but we can’t let them go to waste.”

“No,” I agreed. “Hey, you be safe out there, okay? These guys... they... you don’t want to fuck with them, okay?”

“Okay,” she agreed. “I promise.”

“If she’d seen or heard anything, she would have mentioned it,” I said, turning my ringer back on in case the hospital called. “So, what’s the plan for today?” I asked, looking between them.

“Depends on you,” August said. “What are some of your local haunts or places you go to talk to people?”

“The farmer’s market, but it’s not open today. Ah, the soup kitchen. The halfway house...”

“Angel, you really are making the rest of us seem like slackers with all the do-gooding,” Aurelio said, shaking his head at me.

“Just doing my part,” I said, shrugging it off.

Though, honestly, I wasn’t just doing my part. I was doing my father’s part too. Some part of me felt guilt about him taking bribes from the very people who were tearing our community apart. I kind of did what I could to try to... undo some of that damage.

“Why don’t you and August hit one of your places?” Aurelio suggested. “I am going to see someone our Family knows about the local crews,” he said. It clearly came as a surprise to August too, judging by the way his brows were pinched.

“Yeah. Let me just change into clean clothes,” I said, getting up, and making my way into the bedroom, knowing the boys wanted to do some super secret mafia dude talking.

Maybe I should have felt left out, but I had to accept that there were parts of their life that I wasn’t going to be able to know about, even if this whole situation had to do with me.

I changed into some yoga pants and a fresh tee, then made my way back out to find Aurelio gone, and August waiting for me.

“Where to first?” he asked.

“The grocery store.”

“The... why?” he asked.

“Because there’s no reason for me to show up at the soup kitchen or the halfway house randomly in the middle of the day unless I am bringing something to drop off.”

“Right. That makes sense,” he agreed, leading me out into the hall and toward the stairwell.

“Can we take the stairs instead?” I asked. I usually had Aurelio to make the request for me, and I felt awkward making it myself.

“Is this a ‘elevators waste energy’ kind of thing?” he asked, but went toward the door for the stairwell without any more fuss.

“It’s a ‘I like to move my body on occasion’ kind of thing.”

“You’ve heard of gyms, right?” he asked as we started down.

“In longevity studies, people whose lives are simply more active live longer and healthier lives than those who just workout on occasion,” I said. “What?” I asked, catching a look that crept across his face.

“Let me guess, you’re a documentary fan.”

“And podcasts. Is something wrong with that?” I asked, glaring at his profile.

He turned so fast that there was no stopping the gasp that escaped me as we stood at one of the landings.

“Everything isn’t a fucking dig at you, Trav. Why do you have to take everything I say with offense?” he asked, pinning me with those delicious eyes of his.

Delicious?

Ugh, yeah, they were.

I couldn’t even lie to myself and say they weren’t.

The man was uncommonly good-looking.

And there was nothing wrong with me noticing that. I was a human with eyes, after all. It didn’t mean I was, you know, attracted to him.

Except, God, he was really freaking close. And for some reason, it felt like he was sucking all the air out of the enormous stairwell.

“Are you really going to stand there and act like you don’t constantly poke at me?”

“Maybe if you didn’t rise to the bait each time...” he said, shrugging.

“So, you start shit, and I’m supposed to be the sweet, demure, non-confrontational proper lady and take it?”

To that, August snorted.

“No, baby, no one is ever going to call you any of that.”

“Then why—“

“Maybe I just like fighting with you,” he said.

“That’s completely ridiculous,” I said, narrowing my eyes at him.

“Is it?” he asked, suddenly towering over me, backing me against the wall, forcing me to crane my neck up to keep eye contact with him.

“Yes,” I said, but my voice came out oddly breathless. “No one likes fighting with people.”

“Well, that can’t be true since I like fighting with you.”

“Clearly, you are a little out of your... what are you doing?” I asked when his hand lifted, his fingertip teasing over my cheek.

“You get flushed when you’re pissed off,” he told me. “Makes a man wonder if you flush when you’re a different kind of passionate too,” he said, his voice going lower, smoother. Goey, creamy chocolate, that was what it was. And I’d always had a sweet tooth.

“Well, you’re never going to find—“ I started to object.

But then his hand was moving, framing my jaw, his gaze holding mine. Just for a beat. Two. Then his lips were claiming mine.

There was nothing soft or sweet about it, either.

It was hard and rough, almost punishing, bruising.

And, well, that was exactly how I liked it.

Damn him.

I could have resisted if he was all soft and unsure.

As it was, though, desire pulsed through me, igniting my blood, making a fire burn through me as my hands rose, grabbing the back of his neck, holding him close as his tongue moved inside, teasing, claiming.

It retreated before I was done, though, dragging a grumble out of me as mine moved into his mouth. But then his lips closed around it, sucking slightly, making a jolt of desire shoot straight to my core.

The moan that escaped me was loud and primal, echoing back through the open space.

August's answering rumbling sound met my ears as his free hand went down, sinking into my ass for a second before moving down my thigh, hiking it up to the side of his hip, so he could press into me, crushing me to the wall as his hard cock rubbed against me.

Hooking my leg around his lower back, I shifted slightly so his cock was against my pussy, dragging another moan out of me at the friction, at a hint of what I wanted most.

Taking the cue, August ground against me as his lips deepened the kiss, as his hand snuck up under my shirt, teasing over the skin of my belly, then tracing the underside of my bra before his hand closed around one of my breasts, squeezing.

His lips muted the sound of my moan as I suddenly grabbed his hand, pulling it out of my shirt, and pressing it under the waistband of my pants.

There was no hesitation as his hand slipped into my panties, stroking up my cleft.

"Fucking drenched for me," he murmured against my lips before his thumb was tracing over my clit, making that fire burn hotter as I rocked against his touch.

My own hand moved between us as well, cupping his cock through his pants, thinking of it inside of me as his fingers slid into me, stroking, driving me up.

My lips ripped from his as the whimpers escaped me.

“Don’t stop,” I begged, hips rocking against his touch as his thumb circled and his fingers thrust.

“Not until you’re fucking screaming my name,” he agreed.

But then, right fucking then, there was the sound of the stairwell door somewhere above us slamming closed.

Moving on instinct, my hands slammed into his shoulders, pushing him back as my cheeks flamed at the idea of getting caught with someone’s hands down my pants in a stairwell.

August didn’t object, just pulled his hands out of my pants, and watched me with heart-stuttering eye contact as he slipped his fingers into his mouth, tasting me.

Steps were getting closer as they descended, and I seemed to snap out of it long enough to push past him, and start to rush down the steps myself, not pausing even as my heart started to pound and a fine bead of perspiration met my hairline.

I had to get some distance.

Because some part of me wanted to rush back up to him, grab him by that tie of his, drag him back upstairs, and demand he fuck me up against every surface of that fancy-ass hotel room.

And that, yeah, that would be a terrible idea.

The problem was, I was sometimes drawn to those.

The cool air of the lobby seemed to snap some sense back into my overheated system as I waited for August to appear at my side.

“You’re gonna have to point me in the direction of the grocery store,” he said, tone calm as can be. Like he couldn’t still taste me on his tongue, like I couldn’t still feel his fingers inside of me.

“Right,” I agreed, following him outside where we waited for his car to be brought around, then climbed inside in what could only be described as awkward silence. Uncomfortable enough for me to reach for the dial on the radio, turning it up until some classic seventies music filled the car as I gave him the occasional directions to the grocery store.

Glad for the distraction, I grabbed a cart, and started filling it with the shit I knew the halfway house was always in need of. Paper products, cleaning supplies, shampoo, conditioner, soap, and deodorant.

“We’ll need to stop here again before the soup kitchen,” I said, the first words that weren’t directions either of us spoke since the lobby.

“Looks like it,” he agreed as he brushed me out of the way, so he could load up the belt, then paid for the supplies himself.

Maybe I should have objected.

But he was donating it to a charity.

And he clearly had the money.

“Go sit,” he demanded as we got to the car, and I reached open the trunk.

“I can load a trunk,” I said, reaching for the twelve-pack of paper towels under the cart, only to have him try to yank it from my hands.

“Sure you can. But you’re not going to. So go sit.”

“I’m not your dog, August. You don’t bark sit commands at me,” I said, pulling the paper towels.

“Are we really fighting over paper towels in a grocery store parking lot?” he asked, sounding a mix of amused and frustrated.

“No, we’re fighting over you barking demands at me like I’m actually going to follow them,” I said, but I let go of the paper towels because we did look pretty fucking ridiculous tugging the pack back and forth.

“I always—“

“I’m sure you do. And now you’re not,” he said, grabbing one of the bags, and putting it in the trunk. When I crossed my arms and glared at him, he sighed as he grabbed another bag. “It’s how I was raised,” he said. “Ma always did a lot for us, so when we were with her, we did all the heavy lifting.”

“Oh,” I said, arms falling. “Okay then. You could have just said that instead of barking orders at me,” I said, making my way toward the passenger side.

“Hey, snookums,” he called, making me turn back with slitted eyes.

“I swear if you insult me one more—“

“Can’t fucking stop thinking about the taste of you,” he said, effectively stealing all thought from my head and words from my mouth.

While he just smirked as he slammed the trunk, then walked the cart back to the return.

For the rest of the day, he kept his hands and sexy comments to himself.

Which I was glad for.

Or, you know, so I was telling myself.

While my body spun a completely different tale.

The whole drive back to the hotel, I felt like I was buzzing, like that naughty little part of me was imagining us being able to sneak into my bed, and fuck this sensual tension right out of our systems.

We said nothing, though, as we walked into the lobby. I tried to veer off to the stairs, but August grabbed my hand at the last possible moment, and pulled me into the open elevator doors.

They were closing before I got a chance to rush back out.

Then, yeah, I went ahead and lost my shit.

CHAPTER SEVEN

August

I understood her logic about a healthy, active lifestyle. But, for fuck's sake, we walked a solid five miles, all said and done, over the course of the day. Taking the stairs again after all of that was overkill.

Besides, the doors were open.

So I grabbed her and pulled her in with me before she could hightail it to the steps.

I mistook it for a faulty AC vent for a second, this strange hissing sound. But when it was joined with a tapping, I found myself turning.

And there she was.

Shoved into the corner of the elevator car, hands clutching the metal bar that spanned the length of it, her knuckles white, as one of her fingers tapped an odd beat.

One look at her face—huge eyes, sweaty brow, and mouth open, gulping in breaths—said the stair thing had less to do

with physical health, and a lot more to do with mental health.

As in she seemed to be having panic attacks in elevators.

That was why she wanted to avoid them.

“Hey, whoa,” I said, reaching for her hands, prying them off of the bar, and slipping my fingers in between instead, feeling them start to crush my bones. “You’re alright,” I told her. But, clearly, that was a lie. Glancing over, I watched the screen ticking off the floors. “Almost there, okay?” I said instead. “Take a deep breath,” I suggested.

She tried, but it caught on a strangled sob instead.

“Okay. Three more floors,” I told her, disentangling one of my hands from hers, so I would wrap my arm around her back, and pull her against me instead. “Two,” I counted down, feeling her body relax the tiniest bit. “One,” I read. “And we’re here,” I told her as the car did that little dip as we arrived at our floor.

The elevator dinged as the doors slid open, and I pulled her with me out of the car.

She relaxed almost instantly. I could have released her. But I kept her close, my hand stroking up and down her back as hers went around me, holding on, taking the comfort she clearly needed but had been too proud to ask for before.

She pulled away first, walked toward the door, then waited for me to find my keycard.

“The oven?” I asked, voice low, as we moved inside.

“Yeah,” she said, walking away from me, going toward the kitchen. “Happened the first time going up to see my dad,” she admitted. “That’s, ah, new for me. I’ve never really had anxiety before.”

“I can’t claim to know a fuckuva lot about it, either. But I think maybe avoiding the things that trigger you might make it worse,” I told her, going toward the liquor cabinet, and pouring her a drink.

“I can see that logic,” she agreed, taking the drink, and I noticed her hand was still shaking a bit as she brought it to her

lips.

She was about to say something else when the door beeped then opened, revealing Aurelio who was coming in with bags of food.

“If you guys have had a day like I have, I figure you need some comfort food too,” he said, shaking his head at me.

Our people, whoever they were, had nothing.

And after spending all day talking to Traveler’s connections, all of whom seemed to be a lot like her—dedicated to the neighborhood, knowledgeable about the issues facing it, and trying to look out for one another—and coming up with nothing useful, I was feeling pretty fucking defeated.

Things would be different if we were in Navesink Bank. We’d have connections who would have connections. We’d have cops on *our* payroll who would look into it.

I felt fucking useless here.

“You got nowhere too, huh?” Traveler asked as August pulled containers out of the bags on the kitchen counter a moment later.

“I got a whole history lesson about the players in the area. But no one seems to know anything about who would want to take out your old man, and then further punish him by hurting you,” August said.

We’d gotten similar answers after Traveler’s gentle probing when people inevitably asked what happened to her shop.

I had to give her credit, she was really good at getting people to talk without making it seem like she was probing for information. I guess maybe that came from her close relationships and good reputation in the area.

But it didn’t change the end result.

We hadn’t narrowed anything down.

The problem was, her father was shady as fuck. But she wasn’t close enough with him to know who he was in good

with, and who he might be on the outs with.

Unfortunately, the only person with that information was in a medically-induced coma.

Traveler had called the hospital for an update. According to them, her father was doing well. His scans were “promising,” and they were thinking they could reduce his medication and extubate him in a few days when the swelling in his brain had gone down more significantly.

I was saying a silent prayer that the man woke up, that a little time and therapy would get him back on his feet, and then he could tell us who was after him.

If he knew.

Because if he did know, wouldn't he have been more careful?

Who the fuck knew.

All I knew was we were all feeling pretty fucking defeated as we stuffed ourselves with pasta and garlic bread.

“Alright, kids,” Aurelio said a while later, taking the bag full of now empty takeaway containers with him as he moved out of the kitchen. “That’s it for me. I managed to get myself my own room,” he said, making Traveler’s head shoot over so fast she must have seen fucking stars.

“What? Why?” she asked.

To that, he gave her a bit of a self-deprecating smile. “As much as I hate to admit that I’m not as young as I used to be, that couch has had my back fucking killing me all day,” he told her.

“You could take the bed,” she offered, then seemed to remember it would mean she would be stuck in the living room with me, because she winced a little at the idea of him taking her up on the offer.

“It’s all settled,” he said, shaking his head at her. “I’m down two floors and I don’t have my own kitchen, but as nice as this suite is, I think it would start to pinch a bit if we all were staying together any longer.”

There was a false note to his words.

Granted, I didn't know Aurelio as well as some of my other cousins, what with him being older, and me being closer in age to his brother Milo, but I knew him well enough to know when he was bullshitting someone.

And he was bullshitting Traveler.

Likely not about his back. I'd seen him wince when he'd moved to stand before. But about... something.

He was gone before I could question him on it, though, wishing Traveler a good night, and saying he'd be by in the morning to talk about next steps.

"I want to see my shop," Traveler said, pulling me out of my thoughts.

"What?"

"My shop. I want to see it."

"Why?"

"Because it's practically my second home, and its been fucked with. I want to see what they did."

"Alright," I agreed, nodding. "We can do that tomorrow. With Aurelio," I clarified.

"You really think it's that unsafe?" she asked.

"I really think it's that unsafe."

"But..."

"Baby, they attacked, and meant to kill, the chief of police. Take it from a criminal, that's a big fucking deal. Organizations, they might take out a cop, maybe a detective here and there. But when you start getting up there in the chain of command—chief of police, district attorney, judges—that's serious shit. It brings a lot of heat. And we are hardwired to avoid that kind of thing.

"So if someone is going out of their way not only to try to take him out, but then attack his daughter too? Yeah, this is not

something we should be taking lightly. It is very fucking unsafe for you out there right now.”

Traveler let out a shaky breath, but nodded.

“Okay.”

“Okay?” I asked, brows raising.

“What?” she asked.

“You’re just... agreeing with me? Going along with what I’m saying?” I asked, dubious.

“You’re more of the expert in this,” she said as she got to her feet, stretching long as a cat; I tried not to think of the curves of her body as her clothes strained against her with the movement.

I’d done a decent enough job not thinking about the stairwell. I’d go a solid five minutes in between my mind flashing back. Which was a pretty big feat, to be honest.

Because I’d been right about my thoughts regarding her.

That hard and prickly outer shell was hiding something a lot softer and sweeter underneath. And being able to experience that side of her? Fucking priceless.

Then some other idiot had to get ideas about being healthy and using the stairs, cutting things short that I knew would have progressed.

My face between her thighs.

Her legs wrapped around me as my cock surged inside.

Her walls squeezing me, her voice in my ear as she came.

“I’m going to need you to repeat that,” I said, looking up at her.

“You know more about this kind of thing,” she said.

“Fuck, did you just feel that?” I asked, faking a shudder. “I think hell just froze over.”

“Listen,” she said, narrowing her eyes at me. “If you want
—“

She didn't finish that sentence.

Because I reached up, grabbing her hand, and yanked until she was forced to move to stand right in front of me.

My hands went to her hips then, pulling her down.

She didn't even pretend to fight it.

She just placed her legs on either side of mine, and straddled me, her dark gaze holding mine.

“There's a lot of things I want to do,” I told her. “Argue over shit once again is not one of them.”

“I thought you liked arguing with me,” she said, giving me a knowing little smirk. Likely because she could already feel my cock pressing against her.

“I do,” I said, my hands sliding down her back to sink into her ass, dragging her closer. “But I found something I like doing even better with you,” I said as my hand tracked up her back.

“Oh, yeah?” she asked, playing innocent. “What's that?”

My hand closed around the back of her neck, pulling her down toward me. “This,” I said, then sealed my lips to hers.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Traveler

It was inevitable.

I mean, ever since the stairwell, I knew that this was going to happen again.

If I were being completely honest with myself, it had always been there, this sizzling undercurrent constantly belying all the so-called distaste or hatred between us.

Ever since we'd met, he enjoyed poking at me, because the fire he got in turn reminded him of a different kind of passion. And I'd—whether I would even admit it to myself at the time or not—always found his ability to constantly question or even downright goad me appealing.

What can I say? Guys who didn't challenge me never stuck around long in my life. Maybe they'd be good for a short fling, but honestly, likely not even that.

I liked stronger energies. I needed someone who could match my own.

August could do that.

August had *been* doing that since we'd met that first time.

I'd actually been disappointed when he'd left town, and we hadn't at least hooked up. Then, when I'd gone to his brother's wedding, I'd found myself looking for him in a room full of other equally as attractive men.

Why?

I dunno.

I guess I felt what he'd insinuated he'd felt as well.

Sparks.

And I'd been interested to see what kind of flame they could be stoked into.

Once I'd gotten a hint of it, I'd been hooked.

I'd been talking to old neighborhood friends all day, but my mind kept drifting to the stairwell, to his hands and lips on me, to the promise of something more.

It was only as we were back at the hotel eating dinner with Aurelio that I started to remind myself what a stupid idea it was.

I mean, I wasn't naive.

August and Aurelio were literally the only thing keeping me alive right now. If they weren't around, I wouldn't have the funds necessary to stay at a hotel for an extended period of time. If I was stuck at home, how long would it be before these guys realized that the Beware of Dog signs were about a little ankle-biting dog, and that my neighbor was old and struggling with mobility issues, and there would be nothing stopping them from breaking in and doing whatever they wanted to me?

Nothing.

There would be nothing stopping them.

They would keep coming until they got what they wanted from me.

There would be nothing I could do to stop them. Short of rigging my house up like Kevin from *Home Alone*. And, let's face it, those burglars were just plain dumb. There was no way those traps would work in real life.

So I was as good as dead without August and Aurelio. And if I fucked August, and things went sideways, he would leave. I'd be all alone. And dead.

I needed to keep things from going too far.

Hence the mild panic attack when Aurelio said he wouldn't be around any longer to stand in the way of me and his cousin from getting all... glandular.

But he was gone.

We were alone.

And he was looking at me with those molten eyes, then pulling me closer, then down, until I was straddling him, and his hands and lips were on me again.

Everything—including my very valid reasons not to get physical with him—flew out of my head.

His fingers were kneading the back of my neck as his tongue slipped between my lips to claim mine.

I scooted closer on his lap before lowering down, his hard cock pressing against me, giving me the friction my body was crying out for.

I rocked against his hardness as his teeth nipped my lower lip, as his fingers shifted up to free my hair from its ponytail, then sink his fingers into the strands, massaging my scalp for a moment, then wrapping it around his hand, and tugging.

The pain mixed with the pleasure already blooming through my system, making me grind harder against him, frustrated that I couldn't feel him better with layers of clothes between us.

Seeming to sense the need, August's hands slid down, snagging my t-shirt, and drawing it up.

My lips ripped from his in a pant, allowing him to remove it completely.

“Fuck,” he hissed, looking at the black lace bra with a tan underlining, giving it a peekaboo effect.

Had I been thinking of him when I changed into it? Yeah, sort of. Especially after his comments about my panties.

He didn't stay frozen for long, though.

His hands slid up, slipping the straps off of my shoulders, then drifting down my back to unclasp the hooks, before drawing the material away completely.

I couldn't really tell you if the way I shivered was in response to the cool air in the room on my bare skin, or the way he was looking at me as I sat there topless.

But then his hands were moving again, closing over the swells of my breasts. And, yeah, that shiver was everything to do with him.

His fingers squeezed before his thumbs and forefingers found my nipples and started to roll them.

My head fell back, my breaths coming in shallow waves as the pleasure grew.

My hips rocked against him, driving myself up.

When he leaned forward and sucked my nipple into his mouth, I swear I just about came right then and there, the white-hot pleasure exploding through my system.

But my hips kept rocking as his tongue traced, sucked, then moved across my chest to continue the sweet torment.

Then his hands were on my hips, pushing me away, off his lap. I moved on instinct, standing before I fell on my ass, as my mind tried to catch up with what was going on.

Before I could muster a single rational thought, though, his fingers were grabbing at the waistband of my pants, yanking them roughly down, pulling my panties with them, until the materials moved on their own, sliding down from my knees to the floor.

I stepped out of them as I watched August's hungry gaze moving over every exposed inch of me.

When I started to plant a knee, ready to straddle him again, though, he grabbed me turning me, then yanking me back so I landed with my back to his chest, my ass nestled against his groin, his hardness still thick and aching.

One of August's hands planted just under my breasts, holding me against him, while the other drifted down my belly, then lower.

My thighs parted for him, and his hand slipped between, stroking up my cleft, finding my clit, and working it with slow circles.

My head fell back on his shoulder, my eyes drifting closed to the feel of him as his thumb moved to my clit, so his fingers could slide inside me again.

Picking up exactly where we left off.

Only this time, there would be no interruptions.

So I let myself really drift down into the sensations, let the feel of his hard body behind mine, his strong hand on my chest, the spicy scent of his cologne, the steady thump of his heart, all of it, overwhelm me.

I was lost in him.

And myself.

And the moment as a whole.

I wasn't pulled back out until August's hands were moving away from me.

"No," I whimpered, having been so close.

But he was grabbing me, turning me, tossing me back onto the cushions as he moved over me.

"I have to taste you," he growled as he spread my legs wider, then lowered down between.

He kissed up one of my thighs until they were shaking before I finally felt his tongue on my clit, teasing, as his

fingers slipped back inside, turning, stroking over my top wall as he continued to circle my clit.

My hands were in his hair, then crushing his skull as he drove me up.

I wasn't even sure he could breathe when my thighs tightened on each side of his head, and my hips rose to meet his touch as he pushed me closer and closer to that cliff, then threw me over, leaving me to crash down into an orgasm.

My cries echoed out in the open space as shudders moved through me, as my whole body seemed to writhe and ride the waves of pleasure.

He barely let me come down before he was pulling out of my grips, his lips crashing down on mine.

Hard.

Hungry.

I met him in kind as his body shifted over me.

My hands grabbed his jacket, yanking it down and off, then reaching around to free his tie, then each of his shirt buttons until he shucked off the material with the same impatience I felt, and his bare chest pressed to mine, his hard lines meeting my soft curves.

My hands turned greedy, moving up and down his sides, back, shoulders, sinking into his ass. Then they were moving around, slipping between working his belt free, then his button and zipper.

"August," I grumbled when I couldn't get his pants down with him pressing so hard against me.

On a rumbling sound that vibrated through me, he shifted back, reaching for his wallet in his pocket before removing his pants and boxer briefs.

I was partially aware of him going into his wallet, but my focus was, well, somewhere else entirely.

My hand moved out, closing around his hard length. A shudder moved through him, and he hissed as I stroked him

once, twice, my thumb teasing over the head.

Only then did he push me away, too far gone to be teased any more than that.

He slipped on the condom before coming over me again, his body crushing down on mine, stealing my breath, but I somehow relished in the pressure as my arms and legs went around him, pulling him closer still as his lips landed on mine.

My hips shifted, until I felt the length of him pressing against my cleft, then shamelessly ground against him as his lips and tongue and teeth toyed with my lips.

“August,” I groaned, fingers digging into his hips, desperate to feel him inside of me.

His lips released mine. Then he pushed up to look down at me, eyes molten.

Shifting back, his cock moved, pressing against me, then surging inside with one deep thrust, making both of us suck in our breaths at the sensation.

“Fuck,” August hissed as he settled deep. “You feel so fucking good,” he added as I wrapped my legs around him, my hips already doing desperate little circles.

There was no more hesitation after that.

He started to fuck me the way we both needed.

Hard and fast.

Driving us both toward oblivion at a break-neck pace.

“There,” he hissed, feeling my walls tighten around him as I rocked against his thrusts. “Come for me,” he demanded.

And just like that, I did, crying out, my body shuddering hard as I did so.

August fucked me through it before slamming deep and coming at the tail-end of my orgasm.

His body crashed down on me after, both of us breathless and boneless for what felt like an eternity.

We both seemed to come back to ourselves slowly, then all at once, untangling our limbs in tandem, then both getting up.

August turned and walked toward the bathroom while I gathered my clothes in my hands, and rushed into the bedroom, then through to the bathroom, stopping running only when I caught sight of myself in the mirror.

Cheeks flushed.

Eyes heavy-lidded.

Completely satisfied.

That was how my body felt.

But my mind?

My mind was restless.

Looking for an excuse not to go back out there and face him, I went toward the soaking tub, turning it on, and dropping in one of the complimentary bath bombs.

I watched the red bubbles and dried flowers float across the water, looking a bit like blood, and finding myself unsettled by that as I lowered myself into hip-height water.

It was fine.

Fine.

August was not the kind of jerk who would hightail it out of town just because we'd had sex.

I mean, even if he was that big of a douche, Aurelio would never let him go.

So it was going to be okay.

We were adults.

Neither of us were starry-eyed virgins.

We could chalk it up to a heated moment and move on.

There wouldn't be any more fuck-ups like that.

We had to focus on the situation, not our hormones.

By the time the water cooled, and I climbed out of the tub, I had myself almost convinced that it had nothing at all to do with August.

I had just been overdue for sex. For an orgasm.

I'd been busy lately. I wasn't even sure I'd taken things 'into my own hands' in weeks. Months? God, maybe. I was usually at work late, and by the time I got home, I barely had energy to shower before I fell into bed.

There'd been no time for dating.

And, honestly, I'd never been any good at relationships anyway.

It usually went one of two ways: I was too prickly and difficult, or the guy was too much of a pushover and I lost interest.

Either way, things always fizzled out within a couple of weeks. I really didn't even try anymore.

I had work.

If I needed a hook-up, I had exes to text.

And I went ahead and let myself believe that was enough. Because, quite frankly, there just didn't seem to be another option, and I figured it was useless to want something that didn't appear possible for me.

I got myself changed, then climbed into bed, telling myself I was glad when August didn't knock or barge in.

But, as I drifted off to sleep, I have to admit that some little part of me was disappointed.

Luckily, the stress and frustration of the past few days had caught up with me, and I was out before I could really get in my feelings about it.

I woke to sunlight streaming in through the windows, muted slightly by the mirrored tint on them, but way too bright to be my usual wake up time.

A glance at the clock on the nightstand told me it was a full three hours after my usual rising time.

Throwing off the covers, I rushed through brushing my teeth and running a brush through my hair before moving into the rest of the suite, sure Aurelio and August had been waiting for me to emerge and figure out the plan for the day.

I was met with the scent of brewing coffee, but it was only August in the kitchen as I walked in.

He hadn't dressed yet either, standing there looking way too freaking tempting in his low-slung pajama pants and nothing else.

"Was about to stick a mirror under your nose," he said, back turned to me as he poured coffee into two cups.

"I never sleep this late," I admitted, glad he was letting things go.

"Figure maybe you never let your body tell you it wants to sleep this late," he said, passing me my coffee.

"That's... probably true," I admitted instead of saying something snarky like I might have before.

For years, my pace had been breakneck. There was always something that needed to be done, so I was constantly doing it. Cleaning, baking, community outreach, trying to drum up more business, balancing the books, taking care of my house. And that didn't include my usual workday tasks, making coffee, clearing tables, restocking supplies.

I didn't have free time.

And I'd long-since convinced myself that I just didn't *need* as much sleep as everyone else did.

But given the chance, my body clearly wanted more. Hell, even with a few extra hours, I was still tired enough to crawl back into bed and get another ten hours.

“Was Aurelio here already?” I asked.

“If Aurelio had been here, there’d be food,” August said.

“He does always bring food,” I said, shaking my head.
“What’s up with that?”

“Probably something he picked up from his mom. Our moms are forever bringing tons of food places. Even if my mom is just stopping by to say hi, she’s got three dishes for me to put in my freezer.”

“That’s kind of nice, though.”

“Your mom like that?”

“My mom was the queen of the prepared food aisle at the grocery store,” I admitted. “She said she hated to cook and after doing it for my ‘ungrateful’ father for years, she decided she never wanted to do it again.”

Was that a hint of bitterness in my voice?

Maybe.

I loved my mom. But everyone has flaws. And everyone unintentionally does things that bother their children. My mom never cooking when I was growing up was the thing that bothered me. Not even for holidays. When everyone else was sitting down to these giant meals their moms or dads toiled over for hours on Thanksgiving or Christmas, we were having Chinese. Or maybe hitting a twenty-four-hour diner.

“Do you cook?” he asked, not pressing, and I was glad. I was already feeling a little too vulnerable with him after the whole elevator thing and now, you know, getting all physical with him.

“I enjoy cooking, but I don’t always have time for it,” I told him. “I bake a lot for work. But over time, you kind of lose your taste for things you’ve been baking day in and out for years.”

“I get that. What about your dad? Did he cook when you visited with him?”

“He... barbecued,” I said. “If I wanted anything that couldn’t be grilled, I had to prepare it. But he tried,” I admitted. And, in retrospect, that was nice.

“You want to go see him today after the shop?” he asked. And what I appreciated most was the casual way he said it, like if I answered no, he wouldn’t judge me for it.

“I think that’s probably a good idea. I will get a better update if I am there to talk to the nurses and doctors. So... so it seems like we are kind of in a waiting pattern now, huh? To see if my dad wakes up?” I asked.

“Well, he would be the easiest way to figure this shit out, for sure. But I’m curious to be at your shop today, see if anyone seems to be showing us too much interest.”

“I’m sorry this is taking so long,” I said, knowing he had his own life to get back to.

“It is what it is. You can never know how long shit like this is gonna take to figure out.”

I nodded as I walked to the sink to rinse out my cup. “I know I’ve been difficult, but I appreciate you and Aurelio coming over to help me out,” I said. “I know you have lives and family and—what?” I asked when I caught him watching me with drawn together brows.

“By any chance, did you knock your head before you went to sleep?” he asked.

“What? Wh—“

“Maybe slam your head a little too hard in the bath you were taking to avoid talking to me last night?”

“I was not avoid—“ I started.

“Oh, you absolutely were,” he cut me off.

“Oh, get over yourself. It was just sex. You’re making it out to be like it was some big deal,” I said, avoiding eye contact because I knew he would see the lie there if he looked closely enough.

“If it was no big deal, you wouldn’t have run the fuck out of there as soon as we got off the couch,” he countered.

I made a show of rolling my eyes at him.

“It was a one-time thing. I don’t even know why we are disc—“

I lost the rest of my sentence.

Because one second, I was about to brush past him and put an end to the conversation.

The next, August’s hand was grabbing me, turning me, and pressing me back against the island, his lips sealing over mine, silencing any more bullshit I was going to try to feed him.

CHAPTER NINE

August

That was about enough of that.

My hand shot out, grabbing her hip, turning her back, and pushing her against the island.

My hips ground into her as my lips landed on hers, silencing any more of that crap she was going to try to sling at me.

She didn't run away because it was a 'one-time thing.' She ran away because she was worried it wouldn't be a one-time thing.

Which was ridiculous as fuck.

I was stuck here in town with her until this whole mess was cleared up. There was no way we weren't going to get physical again.

The second my body was against hers, she melted into me. Her hands slid up my arms, then wrapped around the back of

my neck, holding on as my lips slanted over hers again, getting hungrier, needier.

You'd never know we'd just fucked hours before with the way my body was aching to be inside of her again. My cock was already rock-hard and straining against the thin material of my pajama pants.

Reaching down, I grabbed her leg, yanking it up to my hip, spreading her for me as I pressed my cock against her pussy.

She hadn't dressed for the day yet, and I could feel the heat of her through her silky pajama shorts. There was no bra yet, so her tits were crushed to my chest, her nipples hardening against me as my hips rocked my cock up and down her cleft.

It didn't take long for her hips to meet my movements, for her hands to start exploring over my shoulders, then down my back, to finally sink into my ass and pull me more tightly against her.

My hands were equally as greedy, grabbing the hem of her shirt, and yanking it up and off, my palms closing over the swells of her breasts. My lips swallowed her moans as my thumbs and forefingers did tight little rolls of her nipples.

"August, please," she whimpered, rocking impatiently, needing more.

Reaching across the island, I found my wallet I'd tossed there after picking it up off the living room floor when I realized she wasn't going to come back out, finding my last condom, and slipping it on.

I had to pencil in a trip to a store to get more.

I barely had the foil in my hand before her hands were yanking down my pants, freeing my cock, and wrapping her hand around it.

I let her work me for a moment before I was pushing her away to slide on the protection.

Finished, I grabbed her, turning her, and pressing her forward over the island, her ass sticking out at me.

My hands slid up to the waistband of her shorts, snagging it and her panties, then dragging them down her legs.

I couldn't resist a quick slap to her round ass before I was stepping closer, teasing my cock up her cleft to rub against her clit before sliding back down, and slamming deep inside her.

Her moan echoed across the kitchen, making my cock twitch as her tight walls closed around my cock.

A feral sort of groan escaped me as I tried to take a deep breath, to keep myself in check.

There was no taking it slow, though, as her ass started to slam back into me, her hips rocking, trying to get relief from the ache inside.

Deciding there would be time for slow and sweet some other time, I grabbed her hips and started fucking her.

Hard and fast, my hands dragging her back into me as I thrust forward, the sounds of our fucking filling the kitchen, mingling with her moans and my labored breathing.

"Fuck, don't stop," she begged, walls getting tighter. "Just like that," she added, her hands curling into fists on the countertop.

One of my hands left her hip, slipping between her thighs instead, working her clit as I continued to fuck her, driving her toward that edge.

It was right about then that I heard it.

A knock on the room door.

Aurelio had finally made it up for a visit.

Great timing.

When my cock was buried inside of Traveler, and we were both about to come.

Traveler heard it at the same time, her body tensing.

But we were too close to stop now, I decided.

My other hand went around, slapping over her mouth, keeping her sounds muffled as I fucked her faster still, my

fingers teasing her clit at the same time.

Her pussy was a vice grip around my cock as Aurelio knocked again, a little louder this time.

But just like that, I could feel the beginnings of her orgasm, her walls tightening around my cock over and over as her body trembled at the pleasure.

Even with my hand covering her mouth, her moan was music to my fucking ears as I slammed deep, coming with her as Aurelio knocked a third time.

“Oh, God,” Traveler hissed as soon as her orgasm subsided. “He can’t know,” she said, whipping around to look at me, eyes round.

I said nothing, just watched as she stooped to grab her clothes, then ran gloriously naked back to the bedroom.

Did I watch her ass as she went?

You fucking bet I did.

“One sec,” I called to Aurelio as I tossed the condom, burying it under the old filter and grounds from the coffee pot as I dumped the contents into the sink, figuring that smell might cover up the sex smell in the kitchen before I made my way to the door to open it for him.

“I left my key for Traveler,” he said as he moved inside, carrying a brown paper bag inside with him. “She still sleeping?” he asked, brows furrowed.

“No, I think she just got up,” I said, waving toward the room. “Seems like she needed the sleep,” I said.

I wasn’t lying, not really.

And it was better for everyone if we didn’t have Aurelio knowing we were fucking.

“What’d you get?” I asked as I followed him into the kitchen.

“There’s a breakfast place down the street,” he said, pulling out cartons of food. “So I just got a serving of almost everything. Pancakes, hash browns, eggs, sides of bacon and

sausage... oh, and a bowl of mixed fruit,” he said, producing that. “I can practically hear our mothers bitching about us not eating anything healthy the past few days,” he added. “I figured we could all just pick at everything. There she is,” he said as Traveler came walking out.

She’d dressed for the day in a pair of jeans and a simple blue tee. Her hair was pulled into one of those claw clips. She looked perfectly put together.

But I knew exactly what put that flush on her cheeks and that guilty look in her eyes as she moved into the kitchen.

“Good morning, angel,” Aurelio called to her as he put out the little packets of plastic silverware and napkins.

Traveler eyed the plastic, but, surprisingly, said nothing about them. She was probably too flustered from getting fucked silly with my cousin just a few feet away to get on her ‘single-use plastics are evil’ kick this morning.

“Hey. How’s your back?” she asked.

Conversation became light and easy, but it didn’t escape my notice that her gaze kept slipping to the exact spot where I’d fucked her just moments before.

“Okay. So the shop?” Aurelio asked after cleaning up the mostly eaten breakfast.

“Then the hospital,” I agreed.

With that, we headed out, with everyone just naturally walking toward the stairs instead of the elevator.

“Nervous?” I asked, watching her jiggle in her seat as we got closer to her street.

“A little,” she admitted.

It didn’t escape me that, just a few days ago, she never would have admitted that to me.

And it seemed to matter to me more than I could have anticipated that she was letting her guard down with me, was letting me in a bit.

“Nothing’s gonna happen to you,” I assured her as I parked out front, right behind Aurelio.

I let her climb out first, going toward the door to unlock it, before I leaned into the car to grab my gun, tucking it into the waistband of my slacks.

I caught the glint of Aurelio’s gun as he tucked it into a shoulder holster, and gave him a nod.

Sure, it was the middle of the day. People were milling around. Witnesses could be anywhere. But that didn’t mean we weren’t going to be prepared.

“Feeling really fucking watched right now,” Aurelio said as my own gaze moved around the street, catching a lot of fucking eyes pretending not to look in our direction.

“Yeah,” I agreed, making my way toward the door.

Inside, we found Traveler standing in the middle of the ruins of her workplace.

“It’s all fixable,” I said, watching her empty expression, wondering if she was going to burst into tears at all the damage to the hard work and love she’d put into this place over years of her life.

It wasn’t tears I got, though.

No.

What she did was even more unsettling.

She threw her head back and laughed.

Deep, shaking her whole body.

“You’re acting a little nuts right now,” I told her, watching her turn toward me, smile still on her face.

“Yeah, I guess. It’s all just so... cliché, isn’t it? Just pure neanderthal. *Me, big scary man, smash the pretty things. Scare the little lady.* Just... ridiculous. It’s all replaceable. They accomplished nothing.”

“I don’t think their intention was just to ruin the store,” I said, voice quiet.

“No, I know,” she agreed, sighing. “And I guess, if they accomplished their true goal, this would serve as a reminder to anyone else who would think to start shit with them. But, still, how juvenile, right?” she asked as she stooped down to pick up a chunk of crystal that Aurelio must have missed when he’d been trying to clean up the place.

That was the thing with groups of people who operate outside of the law. If there wasn’t a code, an expectation of acceptable behavior, then people would lean into their baser instincts.

You could judge almost any crew by their leader. And whoever this leader was, he had to be a real shit if his men were allowed to destroy businesses and try to beat, rape, and kill women. Regardless of what she may or may not have done to goad them in the past.

“And it really wasn’t about the money,” Traveler went on as she opened both the cash register, then the safe, pulling out money, and placing it into one of her reusable bags.

Aurelio stood by the door, keeping it cocked open with his foot, so he could see thanks to the boarded-up glass.

Trusting him, I followed Traveler as she moved into the back, knowing there was another entrance there, even if Aurelio had it boarded up too.

She strode confidently in for several feet before she froze, her whole body tightening. My gaze followed hers to the oven.

“Hey,” I said, moving up behind her, and placing my hand on her hip.

The touch seemed to jolt her out of her thoughts.

Then she was rushing across the kitchen, yanking open the oven door, and shoving each of the racks back in.

Finished, she exhaled a deep breath, then made her way to the walk-in, grumbling as she had to toss out the fresh fruit that had already gone bad.

“You don’t have to do all of this yourself,” I told her.

“What else do I have to do?” she asked. “Could we stop by the soup kitchen on the way to the hospital?” she asked. “All these different milks are going to go before I get a chance to open back up,” she told me as she gathered them all on the island.

Almond, oat, coconut, soy, and even hemp. And all of one kind of dairy.

“Do you actually use all those plant milks?”

“Forty percent of Americans are lactose intolerant. And even more than that are just sensitive to milk, so they go with plant-based ones. I go through more soy, almond, and oat than dairy.”

“Interesting,” I said, genuinely meaning it as I grabbed one of the stacked milk crates she had under a table, and helped her pile them up. “Anything else you want to pack up?”

“We should bring more coffee to the hotel. We’ve got to be running low,” she said, and I went out front to shove some into the bag with the cash. “What’s going on?” I asked.

“More eyes,” Aurelio said, a little more tense than he’d been a few minutes ago. “Think we should be moving out soon,” he added. “I did manage to snag some pictures without being obvious about it,” he added.

“We have some milk to drop at the soup kitchen,” I told him as Traveler came out with the first crate.

“Everything okay?”

“It’s looking a little dicey out there,” I told her.

“Oh,” she said, tensing again. “Okay. I’m done. Just help me get these crates out,” she said, handing one to Aurelio.

I took the next one and the bag of money, and Traveler brought the final one out.

We moved in quick, clipped movements, piling the crates in my trunk, then each getting into the cars, and driving off.

I didn’t relax until we were at the end of the street and around the corner.

“What?” I asked when Traveler’s head whipped to the side.

“Nothing. I thought I saw someone,” she said, shaking it off.

“Was that a normal amount of guys on your street?” I asked as we drove toward the soup kitchen.

“No, that was easily double what I typically see out there. And they are usually doing deals and such. Not just standing there staring at my store.”

I wasn’t going to tell her right then, but we weren’t going to be coming back to this neighborhood. It was too risky. Aurelio and I might have been experienced criminals, but it was just the two of us against possibly a dozen or more of those guys.

It wasn’t worth the risk.

Not even to keep Traveler happy.

“Let’s make this quick, okay, angel?” Aurelio said, eyes still on the street as we grabbed the milk crates from my trunk where we were parked on the street outside of the soup kitchen.

“Yeah,” she agreed, picking up on our tension, and getting tighter and tighter by the moment herself.

Normally, she would have stuck around, bullshitted with the people who ran and volunteered at the place. Likely, knowing her, even help out with the cooking or cleaning.

But she was quick to make excuses even as we were walking in, promising to be back ‘soon’ to help out some more.

She was met with a chorus of *You do so much. It’s good to take a break and Take some time to recharge. We’ll be here when you’re ready to be back.*

Clearly, everyone had heard and was worried about her shop. And, by extension, her.

Aurelio walked out ahead of us, and I was just opening the door to let Traveler walk through when his voice rang out, loud, clear, *panicked*.

“Get down!”

I didn’t stop to think, I shoved Traveler back and to the ground.

“Get down!” I called to everyone inside as I crawled over Traveler’s body with my own just as the shots rang out.

Screams rang out at the loud pops, the sounds of glass shattering, the thuds as bullets lodged in walls and furniture. And hopefully nothing and no one else.

Traveler’s fingers were digging into me, her breathing fast and uneven. I knew if I pulled up, I would find her eyes wide and panicked.

But I couldn’t push up.

I kept my body pinned to hers until the last bullets had flown, and there was nothing but labored breathing and quiet cries.

Only then did I lift my weight.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Are you?” she asked, eyes a little watery.

“I’m fine,” I assured her, scooting backward so she could sit up. “Aurelio,” I said, heart seizing.

“Go,” she said, scrambling up. “Is anyone hurt?” she called, going toward them even as I rushed outside, my gun in my hand before I even stepped onto the sidewalk.

“I’m alright,” he called.

There he was, crouched down beside his rear tire, his gun out, but he was pressing it and his hand to his shoulder.

“Are you hit?” I asked, checking the street.

“Graze. Anyone in there hit?” he asked.

“I don’t know yet. Traveler is checking,” I said. “Did you see anything?”

“Black car. No plates. Dark tint. Nothing,” he said, shaking his head.

And this street wasn't the kind that had cameras all around.

“Everyone is okay,” Traveler called from the doorway. “Shaken but okay. Oh, God. Are you shot?” she asked, blanching as she looked at the blood on Aurelio's hand.

“Hey, we're headed to the hospital anyway,” Aurelio said, trying to lighten shit during a very fucking serious situation.

“We gotta go,” I said, checking out my car. Bullet holes lined the side, the windows were spiderwebs, but not completely shattered.

It would drive just fine.

“Yeah,” Traveler agreed, rushing on unsteady legs toward the passenger side, and climbing in.

“Come on. I'll drive,” I told Aurelio.

“Nah. We're putting innocents at risk keeping our cars here,” he reasoned, walking toward his driver's side, then disappearing inside.

We booked it out of there, and I was sure none of us breathed easily again until we were out of that area and on more main streets.

“You alright?” I asked, my hand landing on Traveler's thigh, giving it a squeeze as we sat in the hospital parking lot.

“I'm... numb,” she admitted. “And during the short periods when I'm not numb, I'm worried about Aurelio.”

“Aurelio is fine. It's not the first time or worst he's been shot.”

“That... doesn't make me feel any better.”

“This isn't your fault,” I assured her.

“Isn't it?” she asked, finally looking over at me.

“Trav, no,” I said, brows pinching. “You haven't done anything to deserve this. Smart-mouthing people doesn't give

them the right to try to murder you, for fuck's sake. And, let's be real, if there is anyone to blame for this..."

"I know," she said, sucking in a deep breath as she glanced up at the hospital.

We didn't say it out loud.

But, clearly, the person to blame was her father.

"Let's get this over with, so we can get safely back to the hotel, yeah?" I asked. "We can talk about it over a shitton of takeout."

"It's a plan," she agreed.

I tucked my gun back into my waistband, not wanting to be without it after a fucking drive-by, then Aurelio and I flanked Traveler as we moved inside.

"Please go get checked out," she pleaded before taking up the stairs to the ICU to see her father.

"I'm fine," Aurelio told me as we both dropped down into the waiting room seats.

"I figured," I agreed. He'd even managed to clean the blood off his hand on the ride over. "What the fuck, man?" I asked, exhaling hard.

"Yeah," he agreed. "Shit is even more serious than I thought if they are willing to shoot up a soup kitchen full of innocent people."

"Yeah," I agreed. "It's a miracle no one was hit."

"I'm gonna have a car service pick us up from here," Aurelio said, reaching for his phone. "We can't have those cars parked at the hotel looking like they do. They're too easy to spot. The hotel might have some semblance of security, but we could easily be picked off there too."

"Yeah, I guess that's true. I'll find someone to come tow the cars and work on them. Preferably out of town," I said as I grabbed my own phone to look around.

Neither of us spoke again until we worked on our separate tasks. Aurelio went down to get the bag of cash and coffee

from my car as I tacked on one extra one for myself, hoping my timeline all worked out, or I was going to have to send Aurelio ahead to handle it for me.

“How was she in the car?” Aurelio asked.

“Numb,” I told him. “And seeing her dad is... complicated for her, so I think it’s not really gonna sink in until we’re back at the hotel.”

“I’m sure you can find a way to help her feel better,” Aurelio said, making me turn to look at him, finding a small smirk on his lips. “Oh, come on. You think it’s not written all over the two of you?” he asked, shaking his head at me. “I don’t care what you two have going on. Just don’t let it get messy, because this girl needs us now more than ever.”

That was true.

And it had been something on my mind too.

Because Traveler was someone who would tell me to get lost if things went south with us before she was safe again. When it would be impossible for me to leave her unprotected.

But, things were fine.

And I, for one, wanted to keep them being fine.

Was it smart when there was no long-term future for us? No. This whole thing just seemed inevitable, though. So I wasn’t going to sweat it too much.

“Hey, angel, how’s he doing?” Aurelio asked, snapping me out of my thoughts, and turning to find Traveler approaching on stiff legs with slumped shoulders.

She looked exhausted.

I couldn’t blame her.

“He’s getting better,” she said as she approached. “They are weaning him off of his meds tonight to see if he wakes up on his own, so they can extubate him. Then... then we see what he’s... what’s left,” she said.

“Well, that sounds like good news,” Aurelio said, checking his phone. “Our car is here,” he added.

“Ours are in the shop,” I said, answering the question in her gaze. Only a partial lie. I just didn’t think I wanted to give her any more bad news about these guys possibly tracking us right that moment.

“Right,” she agreed, crossing her arms over herself. “No, can we just... I’m too tired,” she said when we started for the stairwell.

We made our way to the elevator instead, and I let my arms go around her as there were no more secrets between us, and held on as the panic gripped her then eased as we got to the main floor once again.

The ride back to the hotel was silent save for Billy Joel’s greatest hits quietly crooning from the speakers.

“You want to meet us in our room for dinner later?” I asked Aurelio.

“I think I’m going to do some... research then crash,” he said, shaking his head with a pointed look toward Traveler. Who clearly needed a little extra care.

“Breakfast then,” I said.

“I’ll be there,” he agreed, as he got off on his floor, and we rode up.

“Hey, why don’t you go take a bath?” I suggested. “I will sort out food.”

“Okay,” she agreed, walking slowly toward the bedroom.

Half an hour later, the order I placed had arrived.

And I was going to do something I knew Traveler would appreciate.

I was going to cook her a meal.

CHAPTER TEN

Traveler

I'd been in the middle of a drive-by.

A drive-by.

I was having a hard time wrapping my head around that even as I listened to the bath fill as I pulled off my clothes, watching my reflection.

I wasn't sure that had fully 'clicked' yet.

I'd been dropping off food to a charity when strangers came driving past and *opened fire* with the intent to kill.

Me.

Because, let's face it, there was no one else inside that building who could be considered a target.

It wasn't the first time there'd been a drive-by in the neighborhood. But in the past, the targets had been men standing out on the street, or even the buildings where certain crews lived or congregated, lessening the chance of hurting innocent people.

But to shoot up a soup kitchen?

Jesus.

There could have been little kids inside. The elderly who weren't getting by on their fixed incomes and needed a hot meal.

They didn't care.

What kind of monsters acted like that?

And what if someone had been hit? A kid? An old lady? One of the men and women who devoted their lives to feeding the lesser fortunate in our community?

How could I live with myself, knowing those bullets had been meant for me?

Was I being selfish by staying?

Should my next move be hightailing it out of the area? Going somewhere else?

Would my absence make my community safer?

Those were my thoughts as I lowered myself into the too-hot water. It burned at my skin, turning it pink, but still, a shiver coursed through me as I sank down.

The shivers continued as, it seemed, the numbness wore off, and the reality sank in.

It had all happened too quickly for me to truly experience the moment before, but I felt like I was reliving it in the tub.

Aurelio's yell.

August's lightning speed as he shoved me to the floor, then covered my body with his.

He crushed me into the unyielding floor, covering me from head to toe, making it so that a bullet would have to rip through him to get to me.

He had been willing to take a bullet for me.

Aurelio had been shot. A graze, sure, but he'd been bleeding pretty bad for a while there. It must have stopped on

its own, though, because he clearly hadn't gone to the ER like I'd begged him to do.

"Fuck," I said, pressing the heels of my hands to my eyes as I felt the stupid, useless tears start to slide down my cheeks.

There was no winning against them, though. It seemed like I just needed to let them flow, to empty out.

Only afterward did my mind seem capable of moving forward in the day, thinking about the hospital, about the nurses and the doctor, about the scans and the medical jargon I'd been trying my hardest to keep up with.

It all boiled down to... he was a fighter. He was recovering. The swelling was better. And they wanted to wake him up to be able to run different sorts of tests on him. For his memory and his mobility and stuff like that.

Apparently, there were chances of him not having the same mental capacities as he used to, or having to relearn how to feed himself and walk and things like that.

I was having a hard time wrapping my head around the idea of my big, strong father who'd always been annoyingly on-the-money and sharp-witted suddenly not being able to hold a conversation, or needing me to remind him of things from his life before the coma.

But if that was what he was like, well, I would help him get the best possible therapy to get him as back to his normal self as possible.

That, at least, I felt like there were steps to take, a future to work toward.

My shop, my life, my very safety? That felt a hell of a lot murkier.

I couldn't reopen if guys were going to break in and hurt me, or drive by and kill me. I couldn't go home for the same reason.

Okay.

Enough.

I had to hope that my father woke up, that he knew who'd done this, and that the police could handle it from there.

Then maybe I could go back to my life.

But if that happened, what was going to go on with August?

Would he just leave town?

Isn't that what I wanted?

This was always meant to be casual, right?

I didn't do anything other than casual anymore?

But then why did the thought of him leaving make my chest hurt?

"God, get it together," I grumbled to myself as I opened the drain, then climbed out of the tub, drying off, and changing into pajamas, even though it was only the afternoon.

Enough had happened for one day.

I planned to eat the takeaway August said he was going to order, then go to bed and try to sleep this whole day away.

With that in mind, I walked through the bedroom.

I didn't smell it until I pulled the door open.

But the main area of the suite was filled with the tang of tomato sauce, with spices, fresh cheese.

"You ordered ahead—" I started as I walked through the living room, but then cut off as I moved into the doorway of the kitchen.

Where I found August with his jacket off and his sleeves rolled up.

Cooking.

He was cooking.

I stood there for a moment, transfixed, watching him squeeze cheese—ricotta?—out of a piping bag and into oversized shells.

“You cook?” I asked when he finally looked up, looking surprised, then pleased as I stood there.

“Ma always does the cooking, but she taught all of us. It’s a life skill, she says. What?” he asked, head cocked to the side, watching me.

“I don’t remember the last time someone cooked for me,” I admitted. And a man had never cooked for me, but I wasn’t about to admit that.

“I figured,” he agreed. “That’s why I wanted to do it. To be honest, though, I haven’t done this in a long time. I don’t know if this is gonna be as good as I hope.”

“It smells amazing,” I told him, pulling up a seat on the other side of the island.

Maybe I was supposed to offer to help, but I was enjoying watching him a little too much.

Then this stupidly handsome, sometimes obnoxious, but good at his core, man put down the bag, wiped his hands, and poured me a glass of red wine from a bottle he had breathing.

“Feel better after the bath?” he asked.

“I feel less numb,” I admitted. “I don’t know if better is the right word, though,” I said as I took the wine glass from him. “This food might make me feel better, though. Is that garlic bread?”

“No, sweet cheeks, that is *cheesy* garlic bread,” he said, giving me a smirk when a very suggestive-sounding moan escaped me.

“Is Aurelio coming?” I asked, only seeing two glasses.

“No. He wanted to get some rest.”

“Is he okay?” I asked. “His arm...”

“He’s fine. I’m sure he treated it before he decided to get some sleep.”

“Maybe we should take him a plate,” I said, looking at the food he had spread out. There was more than enough.

“Baby, I think the only mom more obsessed with cooking than mine is Aurelio’s mom. Trust me, he’s had stuffed shells before. Better ones. He isn’t missing out. In our world, ordering takeout is more of a treat than homemade since homemade is the standard.”

“In that case, I am happy to have extra,” I told him as he picked up his bag again and got back to work.

“Do you enjoy cooking?” I asked.

“It’s kind of meditative,” he said, shrugging. “Gives you something to physically do while you think shit through.”

“I feel that way about baking,” I told him. “What shit are you thinking through?” I asked.

“The fact that it sounds like you haven’t had a proper Thanksgiving in years.”

“You’re... not wrong. I vaguely remember some when my parents were still together, but the cooking was usually overshadowed by their arguing, so that’s what I remember best. For the past few years, I’ve been volunteering on Thanksgiving. Save for last year.”

“Why not? Did you have plans?”

“They turned me away,” I admitted. “People tend to get more charitable around the holidays. They had more volunteers than they needed.”

“What’d you do instead?” I asked.

“Went to the shop and baked. Black Friday is usually a huge day for coffee and fast foods, so I got prepared ahead of time. Don’t give me that look,” I said when his eyes went sad.

“Sorry,” he said, shaking his head.

“What was your last Thanksgiving like?”

“Hectic,” he admitted. “Loud. Packed,” he said. “With a ridiculous amount of food.”

“Okay, I’m curious. What does an Italian Thanksgiving look like? Is it all pasta dishes and stuff? Or is it more traditional?”

“It’s a mix. We have the turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, yams, all that shit. But because my mom and aunts are who they are, we also have caprese, antipasti, meatballs, and lasagne.”

“There must be leftovers for a week.”

“They send us home with platters of everything and then there’s *still* leftovers,” he agreed.

I didn’t mean to be envious right then.

But I couldn’t help but imagine what it would be like to sit down at a giant table loaded down with food prepared with care from people who loved you.

A dozen conversations going on at once, playful arguing, kids running around being crazy, a football game on in the other room. Sitting down after cleaning up the meal to have pies and coffee.

It sounded amazing.

“You have a sister, right?” I asked, trying to remember the complicated Grassi family tree.

“Yeah. Valley. Valentina,” he clarified.

“Is she like your mom and aunts? With the cooking?”

“She cooks. I don’t think she’s fully at their level yet, but I figure maybe that comes when you have a family you really enjoy cooking for. That’s what my mom says anyway, that she really gets a lot of joy out of watching us enjoy the food she made for us.”

“I can see that,” I agreed. It wasn’t exactly the same, but I loved watching people enjoy the cookies or sweets I baked.

“Do you want a family?” I asked before I could think better of it.

“Yes,” he answered immediately, surprising me. No hedging. No *Maybe if I meet the right woman*. “What?” he asked.

“You’re so sure,” I said.

“Yeah. I don’t know if it’s because I come from a family that is very... family-oriented or what, but I’ve always known I wanted my own. Wife. Kids. The whole thing. I think all my brothers and cousins feel the same.”

“It’s kind of refreshing how sure you are about it,” I said.

“You’re not?”

“I honestly just haven’t thought much about it. It never seemed likely. I haven’t exactly had successful relationships in the past.”

“I haven’t had any relationships in the past, but that doesn’t change what I know I want,” August said, shrugging as he turned to mix the sauce on the stove that I was reasonably sure he’d made from scratch.

“I guess I always liked the idea of having a kid. Doing it right, y’know? Home-cooked meals. Big holiday meals. No bitterness and arguing with the kid’s father. What?” I asked at his pinched brows.

“The way you said that. The kid’s father. Like he’s not in the picture.”

“You said it yourself,” I said, shrugging as I took a sip of the wine. Which was leaps and bounds better than anything I’d ever bought before. “I’m a pain in the ass, a pill, difficult...” I said, rattling off various things he’d called me, unsure why I had committed them all to memory when I generally didn’t care that much what others thought of me.

“You know what, you’re not that bad after all,” he said, giving me that cocky smirk of his.

“Gee, thanks.”

“No, I mean it. You’re easy to rile up, sure, but only when someone is trying to get a rise out of you. It’s not like you’re walking around snapping at everyone over nothing. We’ve established that I purposely poke at you. Kinda my own fault if you snap back and wound my pride,” he admitted.

“I mean, you usually do have it coming,” I said, giving him a smile.

“Think maybe you sell yourself short, Trav. I don’t know if I know anyone who gives a fuck as much as you do. About everything. Your community, the planet, mental health, recovery programs. It’s got to be fucking exhausting at times to give a shit about so much all at once.”

“You called me *sanctimonious* once,” I said, bringing it up simply because that one had hurt when he’d said it.

“Yeah, that was out of line,” he admitted, surprising me. “Because it implies you’re a hypocrite,” he added. “When you really do live, eat, and breathe this shit. I think *holier than thou* was what I meant,” he said, chuckling when I reached over for a cooked, but empty, shell, and tossed it at him. He caught it and plopped it into his mouth. “I think I might get up on my soapbox too if my arguments for a better world were constantly falling on ears that refused to listen.”

“It’s exhausting,” I admitted.

“I bet,” he agreed.

“Do you... care about anything?” I asked. “Sorry, that didn’t come out like I meant,” I added when he snorted.

“No, I get what you meant. And, I dunno. Maybe just my family,” he admitted. Known a lot of people in my day, enough of them to know there’s no talking them into change. They gotta care in the first place. And people have a hard time giving a fuck about anything outside of their close circle.”

“That’s really cynical.”

“That’s the world we live in, though.”

“So... the answer is to do nothing?” I asked, getting a little riled even through the slight buzz I was feeling from the wine.

August reached across to give me a refill.

“No. That’s not what I’m saying. It’s good to give a shit and give back. But I’m not gonna waste my breath trying to talk other people into giving a fuck.”

“What do you care about?” I asked.

“Guess it’s my upbringing, but I care that people eat,” he said. “I always pay for a couple thousand of those meals delivered to old people. My cousin Smush knows when she does my shopping for me to do shopping for the food pantry too. And all my brothers and I get together and clear all the student lunch debt. Fucked up that exists in the first place,” he mumbled to himself as he tossed a few bay leaves into his sauce.

“I’m sorry. We have to back up. Did you say when your cousin Smush shops for you?”

“Sofia. We just call her Smush because she was a chubby baby.”

“Yeah, no. That’s not the part of the sentence I was talking about. You make your cousin do your shopping?”

“I can see those gears turning. Relax. We’re not fucking misogynists who make the girls do all our chores. Smush has a business going for herself. She will do our shopping and put it away and shit, and we pay her for it. She’s making bank doing it.”

“Oh, okay. Well... good for her. It’s a good business model. I know the stores will do your shopping for you and stuff, but you risk getting some random person who will substitute your tampons with Q-tips.”

“Tell me that didn’t actually happen,” he said, dangerously close to laughing.

“Oh, it happened. And, apparently, the store was completely out of *all* chocolate bars too. I was ready to beat that man up and down the street,” I admitted.

“My only complaint with Smush was she changed my cologne on me claiming my old one gave her a headache.”

“I think Smush and I would be good friends,” I decided.

“You would be,” he agreed. “So, are we being responsible adults who make a salad for dinner, or...”

“And have less room for stuffed shells? I think not,” I said, getting a chuckle out of him.

“I like how you think,” he decided.

We chatted then about his family, with me piping in almost every two minutes to clarify who the guys were.

“It’s not my fault all their names end in vowels,” I said when he shook his head at me.

By the time the shells and cheesy garlic bread were coming out of the oven, I was pretty sure I had a decent grasp on his family tree as well as some stories involving them.

For just one night, I almost felt like I was a part of it. And, God, it was nice.

“Does Aurelio not want to get married?” I asked as we ate.

“I think he just hasn’t found the right woman,” August said. “He’s always wanted to settle down too. But I think in his twenties, he focused on getting his career and life going. Creating something stable for a wife and kids. Now, he’s got that.”

“Is that what you’ve been doing?” I asked, knowing he was one of the youngest of the Grassi men. Him and Aurelio’s youngest brother Milo.

“I’ve been working, yeah. And looking around for the right house. I want my life in order too before I have a wife and kids.”

“What is the right kind of house?” I asked because my mind immediately flashed to images of him with some gorgeous dark-haired woman in a white dress with a ring on her finger. And, yeah, I felt immediately queasy.

To that, his brows went up like I’d really put him on the spot.

“Fuck,” he said, shaking his head. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “Somewhere with the vague feeling of *homey*, I guess. That’s how I feel when I go to my mom, aunts, or cousin’s houses. It feels like a family lives there.”

“What’s your mom’s house like?”

“Cozy. Lots of art, pictures, plants. She’s a big gardener. Decorates for every holiday. Makes us come over to haul all the shit out of the basement and attic. On Thanksgiving, getting things out for Christmas, Christmas for Valentine’s Day, on and on.”

“I think the stuff is what makes a home too. My father is a bit of a minimalist, and his place always felt like being in a museum when I went to visit. Everything echoed. There was no personality on display.”

“What about your mom’s place?”

“My mom was *very* into pink. We had pink appliances. It was a little over the top, but it screamed her. Which I appreciated.”

“Where is she now?” he asked.

“Washington State. She opened a spa there. A lot of pink,” I added, shaking my head.

“Married?”

“God, no. I don’t think she’ll ever marry again. I don’t know if she’s ever even really dated anyone seriously since my father. But she’s happy without a relationship, so I’m happy for her.”

“And your dad?”

“What about him?”

“Does he date?”

“I’m sure he does. But he’s never had anyone around when I’ve been around. So, I think you should cook every night we’re staying here,” I declared as we both moved into the living room, leaving the clean-up for later. We were both too stuffed to do it.

“I can do that,” he agreed, reaching for me when I tried to go to the other couch, and pulling me down beside him as well.

“I’ll have to find a way to pay you back,” I told him as he fiddled with the tablet to turn on the TV.

“I actually know of a way,” he said.

“Oh yeah?” I asked, tone a little suggestive even though his hadn’t really been.

“Let me share the bed tonight,” he said. “I hate to echo Aurelio, but my back is starting to bother me,” he admitted.

“I think we can arrange that,” I agreed, letting myself snuggle in because it felt right, because he seemed to want that as well.

“Okay. So what kind of movie can I put on that won’t have you complaining about?” he asked, teasing me, and getting an elbow to the stomach for it.

Given how heavy things had been lately, we opted for a comedy, then settled in to watch.

I was out cold within minutes listening to the steady thump of his heart under my ear.

I woke up alone on the same couch some unknown time later, a different movie playing on the TV, and a blanket pulled over me.

I slow blinked at the TV for a moment before I realized the words didn’t seem to be lining up because it was August’s voice I was hearing, coming from the kitchen.

He wasn’t whispering or trying to keep his conversation quiet, so I didn’t feel guilty for eavesdropping.

It sounded like he was talking to one of his brothers, judging solely on the somewhat exasperated tone he was using when said sibling even gave him a chance to speak.

“No, I’m not gonna be back for it,” he said. “Yeah, I know she’s not gonna be happy. But not doing it on the actual day will let her throw me a surprise party that is actually a surprise,” he said.

His birthday was coming up?

And because of me, he wasn’t going to be home with his loved ones for it.

I had to get Aurelio on the side and ask him when August's birthday was. Then maybe get Aurelio to sneak me in some supplies, so I could make him a cake.

It was the least I could do.

Decision made, I curled back up under my covers, just listening to the soothing sound of his voice as he talked and cleaned up the kitchen.

"You're not getting out of me sharing the bed tonight," he informed me, making my eyes slit open.

"You can have it. I can't move. I'm too comfy," I told him.

"Nah. Want you next to me, sugar tits," he said, scooping his arms under me, then lifting me up before I got a chance to object to that pet name.

He carried me into the bedroom, placing me on the bed, then standing off of the foot as he peeled off layers of clothes until he was in nothing but his underwear as he came to the bed.

We didn't have sex.

But once he was settled, he reached for me, pulling me to his side.

I went ahead and let myself shift upward to rest my head on his chest, sharing his warmth, and listening to his comforting heartbeat as his fingers sifted through my hair, then up and down my spine.

It seemed impossible, especially after such a rough day, but it was the best night of my life.

And I didn't know what the hell to do with that information.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

August

We got three perfect days after that.

Which sounded crazy, with all the shit going on.

But we were stuck in a holding pattern since Aurelio and I both didn't have a car, and we couldn't exactly hire car services to do shady shit with us. Talk about a fucking trail leading right back to us.

So we all collectively decided just to... hunker down for a few days.

Aurelio still came by every morning with breakfast, but then headed out for the rest of the day. Likely hitting the hotel gym, then catching up with his business via his phone.

As for Traveler and I, well, we just continued the peace and comfort we'd been having since I'd cooked for her.

Did we still disagree on shit? Yeah. Of course. But the arguments didn't have much heat anymore. And the only reason I even leaned into them was because the sex afterward was fucking top-notch.

We had an argument over recycling—you know, since I claimed that most of that shit ended up in the landfill anyway, and she claimed that it would mostly get recycled if people recycled *properly*—that led to some fast and hard sex up against the windows overlooking the street that had her coming four times from the impression of being seen even though the windows had mirrored film.

We'd also gotten into it over my soap bar compared to her soap bar that ended in slippery shower sex where I was genuinely worried we might break the glass enclosure we'd been going at it so hard.

In between sex, there were meals shared full of conversation, movies, and even a trip to the hotel pool to swim laps because she was restless.

Did she tell me about the benefits of salt pools versus chemical ones? She sure did. But I had to admit that I thought it was sexy both how informed she was and how much she cared.

I never cared about anything—save for my family—the way she cared about *everything*.

I had to admit that I wasn't surprised by my attraction to her heart and brain.

In school, while the other guys were lusting after the cheerleaders, I'd always had a thing for the chicks who were focused on their GPA, their connections, their futures, the girls with their extracurriculars and 'causes' who were always trying to get the rest of us to stand up for something.

Maybe because I didn't have that kind of passion for something, I was drawn to those who did.

I didn't have the energy to care so much all the time, but Traveler did. And I liked being close to that. And, to an extent, I liked learning about the shit she cared about. I mean, I started to glaze over a bit when she started talking about every ingredient in the cleaners the hotel used, but, hey, she was pretty as fuck when she was talking about something she knew a lot about.

“What’s that look for?” she asked as she walked into the living room after showering, wearing a tee, but not bothering with a bra or pants.

She seemed to have an aversion to pants as a whole.

Which I was fully supportive of.

Leaning forward, I put my coffee cup on the table.

“Get over here,” I demanded, watching her eyes heat at my tone as she put a little extra shimmy in her walk as she approached, stopping only when she was standing between my spread legs.

My head angled up to her as my fingers glided up her legs, reaching to slide her panties down her thighs.

She stepped out of them, her gaze on me as I reached for her knees, spreading them wider, then leaning forward, and running my tongue up her clit.

Her legs shook as I worked her with my tongue and lips, and all but lost all their strength as I drove her up through one orgasm before snagging her, and dropping her down on the couch to continue devouring her.

I never got enough of going down on her. She was so in the moment, so wrapped up in the sensations. Her hands dug into my neck. Her thighs crushed my head. Her hips rocked against me. Her moans filled the room.

I pushed her through a second orgasm, and was working toward a third when she pulled suddenly away, then dropped down on her knees in front of me, working at my fly and zip, then fisting my cock as she lowered down to suck me into her mouth.

She gave head the way she did everything.

With energy and passion, throwing everything she had into it.

I was fucking lost in it, in her.

I was barely even aware of what she was doing as she slid on the condom with her *mouth* before climbing on top of me,

and taking me inside of her.

I was fucking mesmerized by her as she rode me with the same intensity and passion, watching me at times, at others, with her head thrown back and eyes closed, lost in the sensations.

Reaching up, I grabbed a handful of her hair, forcing her gaze back down to me as I felt her pussy tighten.

“I want to see you as you come around my cock,” I growled, making her pussy spasm hard with her orgasm, her cries so loud that I almost missed the sound of her phone as it started ringing.

She missed it completely, though, lost in her orgasm. She took me with her in the end, leaving us both boneless and breathless after.

“Wasn’t about to tell you while you were coming, but your phone was ringing,” I told her.

It wasn’t uncommon for her to get a call. She seemed to be on the phone trees for every organization in the tri-state area. People were always calling about events or donation drives.

It didn’t escape me, though, that she didn’t seem to have a lot of personal calls or texts. Not a single one from her mom in days. My mother had been up my ass day and night since she found out I left town. And even more so when she learned I would miss my birthday.

But you need to have a cake and make wishes!

I did.

The night before, Aurelio had come over to distract me, bullshitting about some leads he had for Traveler’s situation. While Traveler herself baked me a fucking amazing birthday cake.

They lit candles and sang.

I made a wish.

It was different than if I’d been at home, but, somehow, it felt even more meaningful. Trav didn’t have to celebrate my

birthday. I wasn't even sure how she knew it was coming up.

But she'd baked me a cake and she... gave me a different kind of present that we both enjoyed until we were dead tired.

But, yeah.

Her mom didn't reach out.

She did get one text from Sheryl who seemed to be her only actual friend. And even that seemed to revolve more around common interests—the coffee shop, the farm, the market—than an actual close connection.

I wondered if she knew that, or if she was simply so accustomed to being on her own that she didn't realize what she was missing.

What about her birthday?

Did anyone bake *her* a cake? Did they sing to *her*? Did they get her presents?

That was what was on my mind as she yanked up her panties, and walked lazily through to the kitchen where she left her phone.

I ducked into the bathroom, but came back out to find her eyes huge as she *yessed* someone on the other end of the phone to death.

“Yeah, ah, I'll be right over,” she said, then ended the call.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

We'd gotten updates on her dad.

They'd extubated.

But he was slow to come off of the drugs they'd given him. Then when he did, he still seemed a little ‘far away.’

We'd been meaning to call a service to go and see if he'd respond better to her, but we'd... we'd gotten caught up in our own little game of playing house.

“He's awake and talking,” she said, sounding breathless. “The nurse said he's... being difficult.”

“Well, the apple didn’t fall far from that tree, huh?” I teased as I walked up to her, putting my hands on her hips. She didn’t even rise to the bait at all. “This is a good thing, right?” I asked, confused by her lack of a reaction.

“Yes. Yeah, of course,” she agreed, but something seemed off as she pulled away from me. “I, ah, I have to get dressed. Can we get a car on this short of notice?”

“Yeah. I’ll handle it,” I assured her, still confused by her behavior as I texted Aurelio, and he said he would get the company to send someone right over.

Forty minutes later, Traveler was dressed in jeans and a black tee, her hair pulled back, her face bare, and her gaze far away as we all sat in the car and rode to the hospital.

Aurelio sensed the shift too, catching my gaze over the top of Traveler’s head and pinching his brows.

I shrugged.

Because I had no answers to give.

“I should have brought something,” she said, stopping mid-stride across the parking lot. “Right? That’s what you do. You bring people things in the hospital.”

“Yes,” Aurelio said, tone calm, patient. “But he’s in the ICU. The rules are different about what you can or can’t bring in. So until they move him to a lower floor, it’s better to play on the safe side and not bring anything in that you shouldn’t.”

“Right. Okay. Good. I... okay.”

We waited for Traveler in our usual spot as she took off toward the stairs.

“She’s off,” Aurelio said.

“Yeah,” I agreed.

“Did you guys fight?”

“What? No. She was completely fine until she called the hospital back. I missed the beginning of the conversation. I walked back into the room when she was about to hang up, so I don’t know what might have set her off.”

“Her relationship with her dad is strained, right?” he asked.

“Yeah. But still. She’s never hesitated about him before. Even when he was full of tubes, and that shit usually freaks people out.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, sighing. “Maybe she’s just worried about telling her dad what happened to her,” he said. “Especially if he’s as protective of her as it seems.”

“That could be it,” I agreed.

I mean, how did you explain to a man you were mostly on the outs with, but who worked hard to keep you safe, that he’d failed? That you were nearly beaten, raped, and murdered? That you’d been in a drive-by shooting meant for you?

That was a lot to load on a man who just woke up from a coma, who was probably still trying to process his own attack.

“There’s time, though,” Aurelio said. “We should have reminded her of that. We don’t have to be anywhere. She can take her time explaining things to him. Maybe when he’s getting closer to being discharged, so... hey,” he said, jumping up.

I followed when I noticed Traveler walking toward us.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“They’re ah, they moved him. The nurse said it could happen at any time now that he was fully awake. And, I guess, they got tired of him being ‘difficult,’ so they decided to move him to a lower floor. They gave me a floor and number,” she said, wiggling a sticky note.

She still seemed really strange.

Aurelio took the note.

“Down three floors,” he said. “You want to go now, or grab some coffee first?” he asked, clearly better at this sort of thing than I was.

“I guess we should give them a few minutes,” she said, clearly glad for the brief reprieve.

So we went to the machine and got shitty coffee, then drank it mostly in silence for an exaggerated length of time before she sighed and slapped her knees before standing.

“I guess we should make our way down,” she said.

I reached outward, but she must not have noticed because she rushed ahead of me toward the stairs.

There was another small sitting area on this floor, and I was about to follow Aurelio toward it when she called out.

“August?” Her voice was tight, a little choked sounding.

“Yeah?” I asked, turning back.

“Can you come with me?” she asked. “I just... can you?” she asked.

“Of course,” I agreed, feeling weird as fuck about it. I looked toward Aurelio who gave me a nod as he reached for a magazine. Then I followed Traveler toward her father’s room.

We weren’t two feet into the room before we heard some grumbling sounds.

“This fucking thing,” his deep voice hissed.

Traveler paused, taking a deep breath, then moving fully in.

“Hey, Dad,” she said in that same choked voice she spoke to me in.

“Travy,” her father said, most of the tension leaving his body as his gaze landed on her. “Thank God,” he said, exhaling hard, like he’d been holding a breath. “You’re okay.”

“You look better,” she said, moving toward the side of his bed while I stayed back. Her dad hadn’t noticed me yet, and I was okay with that.

I didn’t know what I expected of her old man. But he was a big, solid guy. He clearly hit the gym a lot to be that fit still. He had a wide, strong jaw and stern brows.

I couldn’t see a bit of Traveler in him. Except the eyes. She had his dark, almost black, eyes.

“You saw me?” he asked.

“Didn’t the nurse tell you?” she asked, sounding a little hurt. “I was here a couple of times. I meant to come yesterday, but I just... I didn’t get here,” she said.

Because she’d been celebrating my birthday.

“You’re okay, though?” he asked, gaze moving over her.

I had no idea what he’d looked like that first day, but one side of his face was still swollen. His nose was crooked enough that it must have been broken. And one of his eyes wasn’t opened as much as the other, bruises smattering all around it.

In fact, the bruises all over him were still pretty intense. And there was a cast on his arm.

But he had good color.

And, clearly, his brain was working pretty damn good.

“Yes,” she assured him, but there was that false note in her voice again.

I caught it.

So did her old man.

His eyes narrowed at her.

“What happened?” he asked, voice brooking no fucking argument. I knew that voice. It was the one our fathers and uncles had used on us as kids when we were fucking around or trying to bullshit them.

“Dad, we can talk about that when you’re—“

“Traveler,” he barked. Then, softening a bit, “What happened?”

I was close enough to see her throat move as she swallowed hard.

“Guys broke into the shop. They smashed the window and most of the stuff inside.”

“When it was closed?” he asked, the cop in him clearly strong, trying to get all the facts.

“Yes.”

“You were there,” he said, reading between the lines. He went to shoot up on the bed. “I swear to fucking—“

“Dad,” Traveler said, pushing a hand into his shoulder, forcing him back down. “I’m okay. I hid. I’m okay.”

“Hid? Hid where? There’s nowhere to hide. You should’ve run out the back,” he said, voice soft as he gave her the rebuke.

“They were in the alley too. Smashing my truck,” she said, still bitter about that even though we’d told her we’d gotten it fixed. “I hid in the oven and called August,” she said, motioning toward me.

“The oven?” he asked, brows pinching. “August?” he went on, following her motion toward me.

It was time to step closer.

“Chief Moon,” I said, nodding at him.

His gaze moved over me, keen, observant.

“You called the fucking mafia?” he asked.

To that, Traveler’s lips twitched.

“How did you know he was mafia?”

“Look at ‘em,” her father said, rolling his eyes a bit. “Nice suit. The slicked back hair. The cocky posture,” he said, waving a meaty hand.

“This is August. Augustine Grassi,” she added.

“Grassi?” he asked, even more confused. “The fuck you doing around here?” he asked, looking at me.

“Looking after your daughter,” I said. Because it was the truth. “Pulled her outta that oven. Got her somewhere safe.”

He swallowed hard at that and gave me a nod. “I appreciate that. But why? Why do you even know about my daughter?”

“Remember that shithead Colin?” she asked.

“Yeah. Remember ‘em all,” he said.

“Well, I sort of helped the Grassis save a woman who was caught in his world. They... they made it clear that we were friendly. I just... I don’t know. That’s who I called when they broke in.”

“I feel like you need to know that it doesn’t stop there,” I said when Traveler didn’t say anything else.

“No?” James asked, tensing. “What else?”

“We were dropping a donation of her shop’s milk off at the soup kitchen a couple days ago. And there was a drive-by. There’s... there’s no way it was a coincidence,” I told him, watching his jaw go tight.

“No, there’s not,” he agreed.

It was then, though, that his monitor started beeping faster, issuing a warning to the nurses, one of whom came rushing in.

There was some fussing then, the nurse *suggesting* we leave, so he could settle back down. Her dad getting increasingly agitated because he wanted to keep talking to us. Then the nurse getting more firm.

“Dad, it’s okay. I will come back in the morning, okay? Just rest. Relax.”

“I’ll continue keeping an eye on her until you can do so for yourself,” I told him, and that seemed to make him relax just a bit.

“Make sure you do,” he said, a little threat mixed into the words. And, hey, I couldn’t blame the guy. This was his little girl, and he’d worked hard to make sure his shady dealings didn’t negatively impact her. You had to respect the guy.

“That was a lot,” Traveler said to my silent question as we made our way down the stairs.

“Yeah, I bet,” I agreed. Especially since she hadn’t seen the man in a long time. “It’ll be less intense next time, since he already knows about all the shit. And will have had time to process it all.”

“True,” she agreed. “I want ice cream. And sleep,” she declared.

“Ice cream and sleep it is, then.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Traveler

I was a terrible person.

I mean, I usually prided myself on the fact that I believed I was a pretty good human.

But when the call came through from the hospital telling me that, basically, my father was up and back to normal, the dominant feeling I got was... dread.

It didn't take a genius to understand why, either.

Because if my dad was up, and he was his usual self, then I knew he was going to sign himself out of the hospital as soon as possible, then get to work on making the guys who attacked him—and me—pay.

Which meant I would be safe, and didn't need outside protection anymore.

That meant that August was going to leave.

Go back to Navesink Bank.

Get back to his real life.

And I would never see him again.

I should have been okay with that.

Happy, even.

Since I didn't want anything serious. I didn't *do* serious. I liked my life exactly how it was.

Or, at least, I did.

Now? Now I wasn't so sure.

I don't know if it was simply that I'd always kept myself so busy that I didn't get a chance to slow down and realize my life felt incomplete or what, but that was suddenly how it felt.

Away from the shop, I got a chance to relax, to unwind, to actually get some sleep.

I watched TV and movies.

I had long, lingering meals with August and Aurelio sometimes.

I got to snuggle into August in bed then wake up in his arms the next morning.

On top of all of those experiences, there was the idea of other things.

Listening to August talk about his family had opened me up to my own desire for one. I couldn't tell you if it had been hidden before, or if it just hadn't existed. All I could say for sure was now it did.

I wanted big, loud Christmases.

I wanted people to call and check in on me.

I wanted someone to give a shit that my birthday was coming, or that I was under the weather.

I wanted to have people that I could bake cakes for and make soup for when they were under the weather.

I wanted a good man to fall asleep with at night.

And maybe a couple of babies to continue the tradition on with.

So once August was gone, some part of me felt like he was taking all of that with him.

I knew me. I knew exactly what would happen once he was gone. I would throw myself back into work and my causes. I would drive myself into the ground until I was so physically and mentally exhausted that I didn't have time to think about what was missing.

That cycle would continue until the clock ran out on those things I now realized I wanted.

Then what?

I would be a lonely, bitter old lady in a nursing home with no one to come visit me, and no one to carry on my memory.

What a depressing thought.

The Grassis never forgot anyone.

Just the other morning, Aurelio had both August and I almost in tears with a story his father had told him about his great grandfather.

That was a nice thing to have.

A family.

A legacy.

And my dad being better meant all of that was slipping through my fingers. I could try to hold onto it. But it would only slip away faster. Until there was nothing left.

I knew I was off after the visit with my father.

I could see it in the way that August's gaze kept sliding to me, brows furrowed, curious or concerned, but not wanting to push me.

For a guy who was all about poking and prodding and pushing, he did seem to know when to just let me have my mood, allow me to process.

I needed it.

If this was the beginning of the end, I had to start to wrap my head around it. I had to steel my heart to it.

That heart?

Yeah, it had started to get all kinds of ideas about August. Things that could never be.

My life was here.

His was in Navesink Bank.

Besides, he would never want me for any length of time. Sure, he found me amusing now. Pressing my buttons, getting a rise out of me that inevitably ended with us being sweaty and spent.

But no man wanted that forever. I would grate on his nerves. Then he'd begin to resent me. Then want me gone.

It was always going to end.

I just hadn't anticipated that it might end in heartache.

That was what this was, too, I realized as I rubbed a hand over my chest in the tub. Heart ache. It ached.

Because somehow this thing with August had turned from harmless fun, just a way to waste some time during a frustrating situation, to... something else entirely.

Now it was ending.

And it hurt.

And I didn't know what to do about that.

I walked into the kitchen to find August washing out the milk carton. Then, gaze on me, he opened the drawer where the garbage was located, and tossed it in.

"Alright, what the fuck?" August asked, making me jolt at his tone.

"What?" I asked, distracted by my own sadness.

"I just tossed a *plastic* milk carton in the *trash* and you didn't lecture the shit out of me about it," he said.

"Oh, right. I'll get it," I said, moving toward the trash, only to have him snatch it out and put it in the recycling bin instead.

“The point is I should be getting a tongue-lashing right about now for being so careless,” he said, ducking his head. “What’s going on?”

“I, ah, I think I’m a little frazzled from the visit with my dad,” I said. It was mostly the truth.

“I don’t think you’re telling me the whole truth,” he said.

“Can we maybe just talk about it tomorrow?” I asked. Hopefully after I got a hold of my feelings. “I just want tea and sleep,” I added, opening the small box I’d grabbed from the shop when we’d packed up the coffee.

“Yeah, alright,” he agreed, but his brows were still pinched as he watched me heat up water in the microwave since there was no kettle, then drop in my teabag.

I drank it in silence.

“Let’s go to bed,” I said, walking toward the bedroom, brushing my teeth, then climbing into bed.

“Baby…” August said when he was under the covers with me, clearly wanting to try to broach my mood again.

“No talking,” I said, sliding over him, my hair curtaining our heads, then sealing my lips to his.

We were slow and soft then, hands exploring without the usual urgency, stoking slowly spreading wildfires through us.

I ran my hands and lips over his face, neck, chest, stomach, then back up again, trying to memorize the feel of every inch of him.

My lips were on his as I took him inside, inch by inch, before moving backward and riding him.

Slowly, as his hands moved over me, as he told me how beautiful I was.

We came together a long time later, bodies spent and warm.

As I curled up at his side, I couldn’t shake the feeling that we were never going to do that again.

That this, for all intents and purposes, was goodbye.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

August

I had a sister, girl cousins, a mom, aunts, and nieces.

I knew what a girl looked like the morning after crying over something.

The red eyes, the swollen lids, the splotchy cheeks.

That was exactly how Traveler looked as she moved out of the bedroom after getting dressed for the day.

The problem was, Aurelio was there, and I didn't want to put her on the spot in front of him.

I could tell from one look at him, though, that he came to the same conclusion about Traveler.

“What did you bring?” Traveler asked, putting a little too much pep into her voice, making it sound extra false.

“I found a bakery that had some cool shit,” Aurelio said. “Chocolate croissants, cinnamon rolls as big as my palm...”

He didn't even get to finish explaining before Traveler was reaching into the box, grabbing one of each of those, and taking big bites.

And when she was done with those, she reached for a coffee roll as well.

"I, ah, I picked up some parfaits too, for something healthy," Aurelio said, pulling three out of the bags. He might as well not even have said it as Traveler devoured her coffee roll, then looked at what was left, trying to decide her next target.

Before she could, though, her phone was ringing, and her whole body was tensing.

With a small sigh, she wiped her hands, and reached for her phone, squinting at the number before answering.

"Hello?" she answered. "Dad? What number... oh. What? Did the doctors... that's probably not a good... of course you did," she sighed, shoulders slumping. "I, ah, yeah. We're at a hotel," she said, rattling off the name.

That explained it.

Her dad signed himself out of the hospital.

"No, I have your wallet," she said. "Yeah, okay. Ah, sure. Yeah the presidential suite," she said. "Okay. Yeah."

She hung up, placing her phone very deliberately down on the counter, then pressing a hand to her stomach.

"I feel sick," she admitted.

I had a feeling it had more to do with her father, for some reason, than the copious amount of sugar she'd just consumed.

"Here," Aurelio said, going into the fridge to grab a soda. "Oh, don't curl your lip," he chastised. "Soda is good for nausea," he told her as he popped the top and handed it to her.

Traveler wasn't a stickler about food per se, not even the super processed shit. But she had an aversion to soda.

She grimaced as she sipped it, but she kept going, clearly not feeling great.

“So, your dad is coming,” Aurelio said.

“Yes.”

“He signed himself out against doctors orders?” he asked.

“Yep. He’s a pain in the ass,” she grumbled. “And, yes, I know,” she said, slitting her eyes at me, knowing I was about to say something about it being a family trait. “He’s been out for over an hour. Already has a replacement phone and his car. So I guess he took a ride back to his house for a bit to get cleaned up before coming here.”

“At least we have some food,” Aurelio said, turning to put another pot of coffee on.

“Trav,” I tried, reaching out toward her, but she jerked away, crossing her arms over her chest.

And just like that, a weeks’ worth of progress disappeared.

That arm-crossing thing? That was how she treated me right at first. She didn’t do that to me anymore, now that she knew I typically only ticked her off out of fun, not malice or because I didn’t like her.

It wasn’t more than ten minutes before we heard a knock at the door. It wasn’t loud, but Traveler damn near jumped out of her skin at the sound.

I was the one who strode toward the door, though, looking out, then letting him in.

He looked like a different man than the one we’d seen in the bed the day before.

Out of the hospital gown and without all the shit connected to him, he seemed taller, wider, and with better coloring. His dark eyes were sharp as he looked at me, then from me to the suite.

He’d definitely stopped long enough to shower away the hospital, then carefully dress himself in a suit. He even put on cologne and an expensive-ass watch.

“How the hell you’d get her to let you put her up in a place like this?” he asked, voice low enough that his daughter didn’t

hear.

“I didn’t really give her a choice,” I admitted, shrugging.

To that, his lips pursed, but he nodded, and his eyes seemed bright. Like he approved.

“Dad, you needed to let yourself recover,” Traveler said as James moved inside the suite with me following behind. Where I noticed the unmistakable bulges of holsters under his jacket and around his calf.

The man was prepared for anything.

“I did recover. In a coma. Don’t know if you’ve ever been in a deep sleep for days on end, but it makes you not want to lie around on your ass all day when it’s over. Besides, I got shit to do. Like take my city back. And protect my daughter,” he said.

I saw it then, the way her face tightened at his words. Like she was upset by them.

But why?

Didn’t she want to get her shop back?

Get her life back?

Her father getting himself back on track would secure that for her once again.

James’s gaze slid to Aurelio who was reaching a hand out toward him. “Aurelio Grassi,” he said. “August’s cousin.”

“Massimo’s brother,” James said, making my brows raise.

“Yes,” Aurelio said.

“I know a little bit about every organization in the state,” James admitted. “Even if they don’t technically belong in my town,” he added. “You guys took out Colin’s organization.”

“Are you mad they cost you money?” Traveler asked, tone sharp.

She really was in a shitty mood, and it was bothering me more than I would have thought that I didn’t know why, that she wasn’t sharing it with me.

James, clearly accustomed to his daughter leveling those kinds of remarks at him, shrugged. “I never said I was angry with them,” he said. “But they know as well as I do that certain organizations operate in certain areas. This isn’t theirs. Though I appreciate them bending the rules to look after you while I couldn’t.”

“I don’t—“ Traveler started to object.

“Let’s not,” her father cut her off. “You can get back to being angry about how I conduct my business once I get you safe again,” he added. “For now, what we really need is to get along.”

“Alright,” Traveler agreed, arms still crossed over herself, and I was starting to think that it was a self-defensive gesture when she was feeling uncomfortable or upset. “Coffee?” she asked.

“Your coffee?” he asked, taking a deep breath. Like he knew her shop’s coffee by scent. Which was pretty fucking telling about his feelings for his daughter if that was true.

“Yeah,” she agreed, nodding.

“Always, then,” he said, and she moved to make him a cup.

“There are pastries and parfait,” she offered him as she passed him his mug.

“I ate. But thanks. Now, what was on your cameras at the store?” he asked. “What?” he asked when her face fell a bit.

“Her cameras were tampered with before the attack,” I told him. “The outside ones, from above somehow, since the feed never caught anyone fucking with them before they went to static. The store ones, someone just knew how to avoid being seen screwing with them, I guess.”

“But they were in your store?” James asked, frowning. “How? You don’t let any of them in your store.”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “Maybe they dressed up like the developers or something. I’ve been racking my brain, but I can’t figure it out.” She paused for a second before looking up

at him. “Wait... you don’t know who attacked you?” she asked.

To that, James’s jaw went to steel. “They came up from behind. Knocked me out cold. I never saw anyone.”

“Why wasn’t it reported?” she asked as she gave him his wallet. “We watched the news, but it was never on there.”

“We have a protocol for if something happens to me. Being how... things are,” he said, not wanting to openly admit to being dirty and in the pockets of the local criminal organizations. “We can’t have it getting out that I am in a coma or dead, or there would be fucking chaos in the streets. Why do you keep looking at that?” he asked when she stared down at his wallet.

“It had a tracker in it,” I told him.

“*What?*” James barked, loud enough that the often unflappable Traveler jolted.

“Yeah,” I said. “It was in one of the pockets when the hospital gave it to Traveler. We debated what to do with it before ultimately deciding to bring it to the police station and leave it there. Figuring that if these people were tracking you, they would think you were at the hospital for quick treatment, then back to work to try to figure out who attacked you.”

“Smart,” he said, opening and closing his wallet a few times, pausing to glance at the picture he had in it of himself and a young Traveler.

“What are you thinking?” Traveler asked, watching her father.

“I’m thinking not many people would have access to my wallet for long enough to stick a tracker in it,” he said. “Except for someone at the precinct,” he added, jaw twitching a bit. “I leave my wallet in my desk,” he added, working things out aloud.

One would imagine that he had his own office. Which meant that none of the local criminals would have access to it.

“That leaves, what? Three hundred suspects?” Traveler asked, exhaling hard.

Did knowing how many cops there were in the district have more to do with her dad, or her community outreach work?

“More or less,” James said, voice tight. “There are some men I know to be loyal,” he went on, and I assumed he knew that because he had dirt on them to keep their loyalty.

There wasn’t usually a way for any criminal, and James Moon, despite being the chief of police, was undoubtedly a criminal himself, to have such certainty in someone’s loyalty unless there was the potential for blackmail involved.

You could get a lot of ass-kissing from people whose lives you could implode with one picture, video, or recording.

“But it still leaves a lot of others,” James went on. “I’ll know soon enough. I’m heading there after this.”

“Shouldn’t you be avoiding that place if there are people there who want to kill you?”

“They only managed to get the jump on me because I didn’t know there was a threat. They won’t get the better of me now.”

“That’s ridiculous. There’s always a chance—”

“I will have five of my best men stationed at your shop from now on,” he cut her off.

“Dad, that—“

“We are not discussing this,” he cut her off again. “I need to know you are safe. You will be safe with these men. Your uncles, plus three other men I would trust with my life.”

James was an only child, so I assumed that these “uncles” were very good friends of James’s, likely all the way back to his Academy days. Men Traveler would be comfortable with as well since she likely grew up around them.

“Dad, I can wait to reopen until things are... settled,” Traveler said.

“Absolutely fucking not,” James said, shaking his head. “I will not have your life on hold because of this. That’s unacceptable.”

I could see why Traveler had a complicated relationship with her old man. He seemed like the kind of person who was used to getting his way, to having his demands obeyed. And to a headstrong and independent woman with many of her own strong opinions and feelings, attempting to reason with someone like James Moon must have felt like screaming at a brick wall to try to get it to move.

Granted, it was clear that the man absolutely had her best interest at heart. But Traveler clearly bristled at the way he wanted to take charge and make decisions for her.

The thing was, her dad was right.

She couldn’t have her life on hold forever.

Even from a financial standpoint, she had to know that. I wouldn’t pretend to know everything about her finances, but she shared a duplex. She drove an ancient truck. She never closed her shop to have time off. You had to assume that she was likely not more than a few weeks away from ruin if she didn’t get things going again.

“He’s right,” I said, watching as her gaze cut to me, her gaze unreadable. “You have to be able to get back to your life,” I said, shrugging.

Then I watched as a hardness came over her face.

But, for the life of me, I couldn’t figure out why.

“Yeah,” she agreed, tone cool. “What about home then?” she asked. “I have to go back eventually,” she added.

“Tonight. You can go back tonight. I will have it arranged within a few hours.”

“Okay. Good,” Traveler said. “I should pack up then,” she added, turning and striding off to do just that.

I avoided Aurelio’s gaze, knowing what I would find there. Confusion at her tone. Concern about my reaction to her declaration.

I should have been fine with it.

This was always going to be temporary.

We were just passing the time until she could go back to her life, and I could go back to mine.

Why, then, did it feel like there was a fucking black hole in my chest?

“I appreciate you two taking care of my little girl. As difficult as I’m sure she was,” he added with a smile that said he actually enjoyed that about her.

“She can always rely on us,” I said, meaning it. “If you ever need a hand...”

To that, he nodded.

“I appreciate that. But so long as I am breathing... and conscious,” he said, shaking his head at needing to add that caveat now, “she will be safe. I expect you two will be heading back to your lives as soon as Traveler is ready to leave?” he asked.

It was a question. But also a bit of a demand.

Get out of my town.

Maybe I should have been offended by that since I dropped my entire life to protect his daughter when he couldn’t. But, coming from another criminal, I had to understand him not wanting outsiders in his business.

“Of course,” I agreed, nodding.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Aurelio’s hard look, but pretended not to see it.

We shared a little more conversation between James texting, likely setting up security for his daughter, as Traveler slammed around in the bed and bathroom before emerging with all of her shit.

“Alright. I’m ready,” she said, her face a blank mask.

I couldn’t read anything.

I couldn’t tell if she had the black hole in her chest too.

“Yep. Let’s go,” he said, striding over to take her things, then heading toward the door. “Thanks again,” he called to us, nodding.

“Yeah, ah, thanks, guys,” she said, not making eye contact with either of us as she looked in our general direction before following her father out.

I wondered if she would tell her dad that she was scared of elevators now. Or if she would grin and bear it.

“You’re a fucking moron,” Aurelio said into the silence that followed their departure, shocking me enough to make me look over at him.

“What?” I asked, brows pinched.

“You’re just going to let her leave like that?” he asked. “After what has been going on with you two since we got here?”

“It was... a way to pass the time,” I said, but I couldn’t look at him when I said it. I busied myself with starting to clean up our morning mess instead.

“Bullshit,” Aurelio said, voice angrier than I usually heard it. “You two are the most fucking stubborn-ass human beings I have ever met. Both too fucking chickenshit to admit you have feelings, so you just act like it meant nothing.”

“Maybe it didn’t mean anything,” I said, doing a casual shrug that I didn’t feel as I filled the trash with random shit we’d brought in to keep in the fridge.

She’d hate that.

Me throwing away perfectly good food.

Not recycling the containers that the perfectly good food was inside of.

“I’m gonna finish cleaning, then pack up. Want to share a ride to the repair shop to get our cars?”

Aurelio stared at me for a long minute, sighed, then said, “Sure.”

With that, I moved into the bedroom, trying to ignore the smell of Traveler around, the little bits of evidence that she'd been around.

A hair tie she'd forgotten.

Her wet towels from her bath.

The messy bed neither of us had bothered to make.

I rushed through packing my things, checked around to make sure I wasn't leaving anything, checked out on the TV, then made my way down the elevator to meet Aurelio in the lobby.

That strange feeling in my chest seemed to stretch wider the whole ride to the repair shop.

I tried to tell myself it was just some lingering concern about Traveler's safety, even if her father did seem wholly capable of taking care of her now that he was out of the hospital again.

I knew it wasn't that, though.

Our cars were parked next to each other, and we packed our trunks in unison then walked toward our doors.

"I'll see—" I started.

"For the record, you're a fucking idiot," Aurelio said, getting in his car, slamming the door, and pulling off before I could even process what he'd said.

I climbed in my own car numbly, pulling out of the lot, then out of the town, leaving Traveler further and further behind with each mile driven.

And that black hole in my chest?

It felt like it had swallowed me whole by the time I pulled into Navesink Bank.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Traveler

From the outside, it seemed like my life went right back to usual the following day.

If there was one thing you could say about my father, it was that the man could hustle.

Not only was one of my “uncles” at my house when we got there, but a patrol car was parked on the street as well.

And, apparently, guys were already down at my shop repairing all the glass, and installing a more rugged security system.

I should have cared that all of those things were being paid for with dirty money handed over from the very organizations that were tearing our community apart with drugs and violence.

But, honestly, for the first time in my entire life... I didn't care.

I didn't care about the criminals, the dirty money, the shop.

I didn't care about *anything*.

“You alright, Travy?” my Uncle Chuck asked as I walked zombie-like through my house the following morning.

I hadn't slept.

Just lay in my bed, staring at the TV screen, disassociating for hours on end, trying my damndest not to feel anything at all.

“I'm fine,” I said as I made a beeline for the coffee pot.

According to my father, I was opening my shop again this morning.

He *informed* rather than *asked* me.

And since I was desperately trying to keep my mind and body occupied, I didn't even argue for once.

“Honey,” Uncle Chuck said, shaking his head at me, “if there is anything three marriages *and* divorces have taught me, it's that a woman is never ‘fine,’” he said.

Of my “uncles,” Chuck was probably my favorite.

He, like my father, had an atrocious personal life. Three divorces, three alimonies, and a whole trunk full of baggage. Like my father, he also had one child. A son who was several years younger than me, and following in his father's footsteps, working his way through the Academy.

Also like my father, he was tall and kept himself in shape, though he had more of a swimmer's build. He had dark hair in a buzzcut style, light blue eyes, and a mustache that I normally would have hated, but I found charming on his face.

Unlike my father, though, Chuck was a lot more easy-going. And he was more apt to listen than just tell you what you should and shouldn't do, think, or feel.

I had to assume that he was dirty too. That he accepted bribes to look the other way. Money he desperately needed to write those alimony checks every month. But he never flaunted fancy clothes, jewelry, or cars like my father did. His house was even really modest.

I'm never there. What do I need a big house for?

“You know those weeks that feel like they go on for months?” I asked.

“Sure,” he agreed, nodding.

“It’s been like that.”

I didn’t specify that it had actually been in a good way.

He would assume I meant the shop, my dad’s injuries, the drive-by, all the stress associated with those things.

There was no way to know that what I actually meant was that I’d had a week of ease and happiness. And now it was gone. And everything felt... shitty.

“Work will help,” he said, taking a coffee cup that I passed toward him.

That was the answer with men like my father and Chuck. They were workaholics. Which, arguably, caused a lot of the problems they were trying to overwork themselves to get through.

But I understood the desire to just... get lost in something. I’d been getting lost in my work for years.

Whether it was healthy or not, that was exactly what I planned to do now too.

“Know what I find, kiddo?” Uncle Chuck asked as we finished our coffee.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“That everything kind of... works out given enough time,” he said.

“Yeah,” I agreed.

I mean, that was probably true.

My heart felt like it had been crushed in my chest. But if I gave it a few weeks, months, even years if that was what it took, it would eventually not hurt as much.

It wasn’t necessarily that the pain got smaller, but life grew bigger around it. Until, eventually, the pain was just a very small part of a much bigger life.

At least, that was the hope.

I didn't quite believe it as my uncle drove me down the street toward work.

I felt myself tensing as we made our way past the soup kitchen.

"Don't worry. A few of us helped them clean up and repair," he assured me.

I couldn't claim my father or my uncles were big on community outreach, but everyone supported soup kitchens, right? I mean, you'd have to be a monster to believe people deserved to starve to death. I'd even seen some local drug dealers and pimps drop off food donations, claiming that the soup kitchen was the only thing that kept them fed sometimes when they were kids, and they wanted to make sure other kids had the same chance.

"Hey, look at that. Good as new," Uncle Chuck said as we parked out front of my shop. Right behind a marked police cruiser.

My dad was pulling out all the stops.

For all his flaws, he really did care.

He might often show it in a bossy and even condescending way, but it said something that he was going all out in protecting me. Even after almost a year of not speaking. And most of our interactions before then ending in bitter arguments.

"Better, even," I said, seeing the hand-painted store name on the glass. Way nicer than anything I could have afforded. "Are you coming in, or is it Uncle Don's turn?" I asked, seeing the man standing just outside the door.

"I'm coming in until Stan can get here too," he said, cutting the engine, and climbing out of the car.

It didn't escape me the way his eyes scanned the street as he came around the car, or how Uncle Don moved closer to me, shielding my body with his own after giving me a hug.

"Heya, kid. Been a while," he said.

Uncle Don was slightly less concerned with his fitness as my dad and Chuck. He was still a tall and strong man with deep skin, warm brown eyes, and a hairline that gave up a few years ago, so he started shaving his head bald. But he had a slight hangover waistline that I'd always found charming. When he stopped in the shop, he always got sweets when my other uncles always only got black coffees.

"I missed you," I told him, meaning it.

Don was the odd-man-out of my uncles. He had been married to his high school sweetheart for ages. They had one kid in college, two in high school, and one later-life kid who'd just graduated elementary school.

I had to imagine he was on the take too. Even if it seemed to clash with everything I knew about him. But why else would he be such close friends with dirty cops if he wasn't one himself?

That said, he didn't need the money. His wife had spent her days child-rearing, and her nights working on her education. Which meant that by the time her youngest was in school full-time, she was raking in six figures.

They, like Uncle Chuck, lived more modestly, too, using their extra money to educate their kids.

So maybe it was possible he wasn't a dirty cop, but that he had a hard time letting go of buddies he'd known his whole life.

"I hope you like what we've done with the place," Don said as he led me inside, Uncle Chuck following behind.

I tensed at the idea of anything being changed.

But it wasn't that it was changed, per se.

It was that they'd fixed what had been broken.

My uncles had been to the shop enough times over the years to know what the style was. Lots of plants and crystals, canvases from local artists. All things cozy and bohemian, I guess.

The shelves that had once been home to my plants that were now trying to recover at my house, were lined with new ones. In brightly-colored pots in a style I knew was from this local lady who had a stand at the farmer's market.

Crystals that I assumed came from the new age shop a few blocks away were sitting between the planters as well as hanging in the windows to create those charming rainbows all around the shop that I loved so much.

It wasn't stuff that I'd personally picked out over weeks or months. But it was stuff that people who cared about me had picked out for me in my style.

That meant something.

"This is amazing," I said, giving them a smile I hoped felt as genuine as the gratitude I felt.

It wasn't them.

My heart was just... not in good shape.

It was hard to feel as happy as I knew I should have been.

"Your old man also dropped off supplies before he got to work this morning," Don said, following me into the back where I automatically went to turn on the oven, trying not to think about it too much, hoping that the strange knot in my stomach about it would fade in time. "Got you all those different milks you like. Some fresh produce. More sugar and flour, just in case you were low..."

"That's great," I said, moving into the walk-in to check.

My father had some very strong opinions on dairy-free alternatives.

They shouldn't call it milk if it doesn't come from a cow.

We'd had that argument more than a few times.

I'd countered about goat's milk.

Then, to make him extra uncomfortable, breast milk.

Eventually, he dropped it.

So I didn't have high hopes about what he'd dropped off.

But he'd gotten it all. Save for the hemp milk. And, honestly, very few people wanted that anyway. Those who did, would be willing to accept oat or almond for their drinks.

“Okay,” I said, reaching for my apron. “Time to get to work.”

And, I hoped, try to forget about August.

And that crushing sensation in my chest caused by his absence.

Baking, unfortunately, for me was something that had become so routine that it had long since become meditative, allowing my mind to wander.

The only thing keeping me halfway sane was Uncle Don catching me up on the lives of his kids and his wife, their latest vacations, their extracurriculars.

Then, like nothing at all had ever happened, I turned on the machines and the register, I brewed the coffee, I stocked the sweets cabinet, and then... I opened the doors.

The thing was, it felt different.

Years of running this store had made me accustomed to how it felt to go through my day. But every smile felt forced. My movements felt sluggish.

For the first time ever, my heart simply wasn't in it.

I went through the motions, but somehow, it no longer felt like this was my purpose, my dream, what I wanted to do forever.

“What's going on, kiddo?” Uncle Don asked when he caught me between lines of customers. “Is—“ he started. But then the door was opening and there was Uncle Stan.

Stan was the most like my father than the others, I guess. I never doubted that he was dirty, what with his expensive suits and cars, his fancy penthouse apartment. He was also my father's gym buddy, the two of them keeping each other accountable fighting off that later-mid-life weight gain.

He was blond-haired, though it was mixed with some white these days, with green eyes, and a distinctly cleft chin.

In their pictures from their Academy days, it was clear that Stan was the ladykiller of the group, though all the others didn't seem like they'd have trouble finding women, either.

"You're late," Uncle Chuck said, finally standing from the table he'd been occupying closest to the side of the counter. Presumably, so he could rush behind and pin me to the ground if something went down.

"I had some things to take care of," he said, shrugging. No apologies. In his world, that was a sign of weakness.

It was no wonder he and my father got along so well.

"You can head out," he said to Chuck. "I got it now," he added, moving over toward Chuck's table. "Traveler," he said with a nod.

Never married with no kids, Stan had been the one of my uncles who interacted with me least. I'd heard him once telling my father that he didn't know how to talk to me. Which had rubbed me the wrong way at the time since I'd been twelve and mature for my age. He could have talked to me like he would anyone else. He just... didn't.

"Coffee?" I asked, waving toward the pots.

"Black," he agreed, nodding. "You want one for the road?" I asked Chuck as he came up to the counter.

"I think I've had too much already. I'm gonna be buzzing all day. Thanks though. I'll be seeing you tonight," he added, giving me a smile, then moving out of the shop.

The lunch rush led to a lull where Stan and Don both scrolled and texted on their phones as I busied myself with cleaning and restocking.

It was when dinner came around that Don's body language changed. He jumped up, body stiff, and rushed over toward Stan, where they talked in hushed whispers with serious faces.

Was it about my father?

Was he okay?

“No, you should go,” Stan said, voice firm.

“I promised James...” Don said, clearly conflicted as I relaxed a bit, figuring this had nothing to do with my father then.

“He’ll understand. Family has to come first,” he added.

And I wasn’t, by any of their estimation, family. As much as my father insisted that I call them all ‘uncle,’ and the fact that they had been around my entire life. I wasn’t blood. I was just an extension of my father that, because of their love of him, they had to care about.

“I hope everything is okay,” I said to Don when he turned to look at me, his gaze already a hundred miles away.

“I hope so too,” he agreed, rushing out the door. I watched his car peel away a moment later.

I turned a questioning glance toward Stan, but he was focused on his text again. Likely telling my father that Don had needed to bounce, and he was here alone with me.

I expected to see my father stroll in twenty minutes later, but he never came. Not as the dinner rush met the early evening rush.

“Closing up?” Stan asked as I rolled a crick out of my neck.

Everything hurt, actually.

I guess even a short break had set me back years.

I remember this from when I first opened. The sore feet, back, shoulders, neck. Even my *arms* hurt.

Normally, I would close and then spend a few hours baking before I went home. But I was just so damn exhausted. All I wanted to do was fall into bed, drift away, and forget about everything for a few hours.

I tried to convince myself that after some sleep, I would wake up feeling more like myself, more into my old passions, and less crushed by August’s absence.

He hadn't even texted or called.

And I was angry at myself for even noticing that, let alone being upset about it.

"Yeah," I agreed, walking toward the door and closing up.

Then I did the quickest clean I'd ever done in my life, not even bothering to prepare a single thing for the next day.

"Ready?" Stan asked as I pulled off my apron.

"Yes. Are you going to be staying with me?" I asked.

"Until Chuck comes back, yeah," he agreed, holding open the door for me, then following me out to his fancy two-seater sports car.

It wasn't a long drive back to my place, but it felt twice its usual time as we drove in silence.

"Are you hungry?" I asked as he followed me up the porch. "Neither of us really ate anything today," I added, unlocking my door as I saw the squad car roll up and park on the street.

"Sure," he agreed. "But I'm not eating tofu or anything like that."

Of course he wasn't.

My father had said the same thing when I'd invited him to dinner once. Yet again, it led to an argument and a canceling of plans.

I hadn't even been planning on serving tofu.

A sigh escaped me as I moved into my house.

"What are you in the mood for?" I asked.

I wanted something deep fried and unhealthy. But I knew that was never going to happen with Stan.

"Morton's," he said, naming an expensive restaurant in the nicer area of town that was famous for very small, but high quality steaks with basic sides like asparagus or green beans. And... that was it.

“Okay,” I agreed, bringing up the menu where I decided on a salad, got Stan his steak and beans, then went to take a shower to try to wash my bad mood down the drain.

I changed into yoga pants and a tee, tied up my hair, and moved out into the kitchen, smelling the food already.

There it was on the counter in the kitchen.

But Stan wasn't around.

“Stan?” I called, walking into the living room, but not finding him there either. “Stan?” I asked, walking back toward the kitchen. “Where'd you go?” I mumbled to myself as I reached my back door, wondering if he stepped outside for a phone call or something.

I realized my mistake just a second too late.

When something slammed into my head.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Traveler

My head turned quickly, making the blow slam into the top of my cheek rather than its intended target.

Still, the pain screamed through my skull, disorienting me for just a second too long.

Long enough for another blow to come at me, this time hitting my chin with enough force to send me flying to the side.

My heart plummeted as I felt the side of my foot against the edge of the top step. But there was no saving myself. No railing to stop my fall. Nothing to grab onto.

I was going to fall.

Then I was.

There was barely enough time to throw out my arms to prevent my face from whacking off the ground.

The impact still stole my breath, making me gasp over and over like a fish on land, but completely incapable of drawing in a breath.

The pressure on my chest overwhelmed my senses, made my brain not work properly.

Because, clearly, if I was thinking straight, I would have forced myself to get up, would have scrambled away.

The lack of oxygen must have been to blame because a hand was grabbing my ponytail, yanking so hard that white-hot sparks of pain spread across my scalp.

Only as my chest pulled from the ground did I seem capable of drawing in a deep breath. I did, the ache in my chest intensifying as I did so.

But I had to force it.

I needed to take a deep breath.

Then I needed to scream at the top of my lungs.

If Stan was around, he'd hear. Or the cop in the squad car.

If they were somehow taken out of commission, though, it could still alert my neighbor.

He wouldn't come.

But he would call the police.

Someone would hear the call and tell my father.

At least, that was what I had to believe.

Because if I was on my own, I didn't have a lot of hope.

I liked to think that I had street smarts and good instincts. But I wasn't a fighter. I'd never needed to be.

I thought sometimes that if I were ever to be attacked, that some innate instinct would kick in, some feral desire to claw, bite, kick, scream, fight my way out of it.

In reality, though, it all felt like it was happening too quickly to think, let alone move.

I felt as helpless as a baby as I was dragged back up onto my back porch, my back knocking against each step as we went.

My hands shot upward, grabbing at the fist wrapped around my hair, trying to claw his fingers off. When that failed, I scraped my nails against skin.

There was a hiss of pain, but the grip only tightened.

I was vaguely aware of the screen door whacking against the side of the house it was thrown open so hard before my body was moving into the kitchen.

The kitchen was good, though, right?

A kitchen meant knives, forks, heavy pots and pans. Things I could use to defend myself with.

In a moment of clarity, I threw out my hands, grabbing the doorway of my bedroom as I was pulled past it.

My shoulders ached as my attacker tried to keep pulling me.

I held tight, though, even as the screaming across my scalp intensified.

Then just like that, the pain stopped as the hand dropped my hair.

I curled toward the doorframe, pulling myself into my bedroom.

My only clear thought was getting away, slamming the door, then... I don't know. Climbing out the window? Finding my phone and calling my father? Something. Anything.

I pushed up onto my hands and knees, and was halfway into my room when a kick landed to my hip, sending me flying, my head whacking off of my dresser.

Before I could even push up again to try to scramble away, though, a weight pressed down on me.

The full weight of a man on my hips, pinning me to the ground.

I thrashed and writhed to no avail, feeling freedom slipping away by the second.

My heart was hammering, pounding in my chest, throat, and ears.

I sucked in a breath, ready to finally scream for help.

And that was the exact moment hands closed around my throat, squeezing, cutting off my ability to scream, to breathe.

No.

No.

This was not going to be how it ended.

Strangled to death in my own bedroom.

Fear surged through my system as I tried to suck in a breath and failed.

I wasn't sure what the rankings were of the worst ways to die. But being slowly strangled to death was completely fucking terrifying while you were experiencing it.

I struggled with everything in me as my face started to feel hot and tingly, as my chest burned from lack of oxygen.

Focus.

I had to focus.

There had to be a way out of this.

I wasn't exactly a big consumer of true crime. My life had enough of that all around. I didn't want to indulge in it for "fun."

But I was a woman in the world.

And the daughter of a cop.

I knew some things.

Like strangulation took a lot longer than people realized.

Four or five minutes.

It was a long-ass time.

Most people had no idea what five minutes felt like while doing something.

Decision made, I forced my entire body to go lax, sinking into the hard floor.

The movement screwed with his hold on me, allowing me to suck in one last, deep breath before the pressure came back.

It was enough, I hoped, to sustain me as I faked my own damn death right there on my own damn bedroom floor.

To distract myself from the pain in my neck and chest, I counted.

One to sixty, then back down to one.

I only got back and forth once before the pressure released on my neck. Then there was a short pause before the weight lifted from my hips.

I had to focus to keep myself perfectly still, to not release my held breath and suck in a fresh one as soon as his body was off of mine.

I stayed there, body stick still, as my attacker backed into the doorway, seeming to stop, watching me, making sure the deed was done, before moving away.

I listened to make sure the footsteps were moving toward the front of the house before I sucked in a breath so deep it hurt.

But I didn't move.

I didn't dare.

I didn't even breathe normally, just in case he rushed back and looked in.

I was dead, damnit, dead.

I listened as the footsteps came back, paused, then made their way out back, the screen door smacking against the wall again.

I still didn't move, barely breathed.

My bedroom had windows.

I couldn't remember if the blinds were all the way down, if someone could look inside to make sure I was good and dead.

I started counting again.

Up to sixty, back down to one.

Twice.

Three times.

It wasn't until I got to five that I sucked in another greedy breath, and tilted my head to look around.

There was nothing.

Just my room.

My clothes from before my shower half hanging out of my hamper. My cup of coffee from earlier still on my nightstand.

What I didn't see, though, was my phone.

I left it on my bed.

Hadn't I?

Maybe I brought it into the bathroom?

I didn't remember doing that, but I felt like I'd been a bit in a daze since I got home. I was trying to blame the lack of sleep, not the niggling grief that was trying to drag me to bed.

I pushed up onto all fours, then sat back on my feet for a second, my head spinning hard enough for my hand to shoot out, grabbing the edge of my bed to steady myself.

It was okay.

It was going to be okay.

I just... had to get to the bathroom to get my phone.

Call my dad.

Then hide and wait until he showed up.

Likely with half of the police force in tow.

With that in mind, I forced myself to stand, to walk unsteadily toward my bathroom, closing the door behind me as an added source of security.

One glance at the sink vanity said there was no phone, though.

I *knew* I had it in my hand when I went into the bedroom.

And I knew I hadn't brought it out into the kitchen with me when I went to find...

"Oh, God," I hissed, heart sinking.

Stan.

Uncle Stan.

Where was he?

Was he dead?

How the hell else had someone gotten to me?

What about the cop in the cruiser?

Too many questions.

No ways to find answers without my phone.

With nausea creeping up my throat, I turned in a circle, looking for something to grab to use as a weapon.

But it was a bathroom.

It wasn't like my safety razor or shampoo bar could do any damage.

I reached for the top of the toilet tank, cringing at the clanking sound it made as I freed it.

It wasn't much.

But with a good enough swing, it could do some damage.

Just to get me to the kitchen, where I could get a knife and a frying pan.

From there, I could creep around, trying to peek outside, see if my attacker was still around.

I had no landline.

So without my cell, I was just a sitting duck.

I could try to sneak next door to use my neighbor's phone.

Anxiety prickled across every nerve ending as I moved into my bedroom, side stepping the floorboards I knew would creak.

The house was silent, save for my clock in the living room that ticked loudly enough to drive me half-crazy sometimes.

My pulse seemed to beat in tune with it as I stepped out of my bedroom.

Tick-tock.

There was no one in the kitchen.

The wooden back door was open, but the screen was still closed.

I moved toward the drawer holding my knives, and pulled out the biggest chef's knife I owned.

Tick-tock.

I put down the tank lid, grabbing a cast iron skillet instead. Easier swinging, I figured.

Now the question was... front or back door?

My neighbor locked both.

It was late.

He was likely in bed.

He had the upside part of the duplex, where the main bedroom was located. But with his mobility issues, he started sleeping in a small room toward the back by his kitchen.

It took him a bit to get moving, but he would be closer to the back door.

I felt an automatic knot in my stomach at the idea of going out my back door, my mind flashing back to the beating, the fall, the dragging by my hair.

A shiver coursed through me even looking at the door.

Tick-tock.

I had to move.

My gaze whipped around the kitchen once again, trying to find my phone. But it wasn't there. What was there, though, was Uncle Stan's key fob.

If I couldn't rouse my neighbor quickly enough, I could run for the car. Wherever Stan was, he wouldn't approve of me taking his car, even if he was... incapacitated. But he would understand. My father could make good on it if I scratched or put a ding in it.

I placed the knife down to stick my finger through the keychain part of the fob, then grabbed the knife again, and made my way toward the back door.

My side hurt.

My face hurt.

My throat hurt.

Swallowing was miserable.

My head was pounding.

But overwhelming *all* of that was the panic that got stronger with each step I took toward the back door.

Tick-tock.

I almost wanted to yell at the damn clock to shut the fuck up.

Taking a deep breath, I pushed open the screen door with my shoulder, gaze scanning the darkened yard.

I usually opted against light pollution, so I didn't have a bunch of lights around. I suddenly wished I had a bunch of motion lights on all sides of the house. If I survived this, I was going to put some up. Light this fucking yard up.

I moved toward the other side of the back porch, careful not to knock over the pooper-scooper leaned against the wall of the house.

I knocked lightly at first, praying maybe he was up, or the dog would alert him.

But nothing.

Wincing, I knocked louder.

Then louder still.

My heartbeat was thudding in my ears as I stood there waiting, feeling way too exposed, too vulnerable.

I took a few steps toward the edge of the deck. But I stood there for what felt like hours, battling against my own panic.

Finally, I forced myself to look over.

I saw nothing at first.

But then a car turned down the street, their headlights momentarily lighting up the yard.

And right there, just a few feet from the police cruiser, was a body.

Oh, God.

Was that the cop?

Uncle Stan?

Where was the other person?

I rushed back toward the door, hammering my hand on it this time.

I heard nothing inside.

But I did hear something else.

Footsteps.

Coming from the yard on my side of the house.

I didn't stop to think.

I rushed off of my neighbor's back porch. Then, at a dead fucking run, rushed across the front yard as I frantically bleeped the unlock button on Stan's key fob.

My chest, already so abused that night, ached and burned and made breathing hard as I rushed toward the door, opening it, and throwing myself inside.

I was quick enough to lock the doors before slamming my foot on the brake, then hitting the push start.

The engine came to life almost silently.

But the screech of the tires as I peeled out of the spot was loud as fuck.

It was okay.

I was okay.

Alive.

Safe, for the moment.

But there was no phone, no way to contact anyone.

I drove toward the police station, looking through the lot, but not seeing my father's car.

I could just go in.

Tell them I'd been attacked.

Tell them one of their own had been attacked.

Which was true. Whether it was the uniformed cop or my uncle.

But my father was worried his attack had been at least assisted by someone on the force.

What if I went in there, and it only made things worse for us?

Stomach clenching, I drove out of the lot, making a few turns, then heading toward my father's house instead.

But all the lights were off.

And his car wasn't in the drive.

"Fuck fuck fuck," I whimpered, turning the car again, this time going back toward the modest area of town, driving toward Uncle Don's house. But like my father's the lights were out and no one was home.

Same went for Uncle Chuck.

What the fuck was going on?

Panic welled up again, until I tried to remind myself that Uncle Don had had some sort of situation going on with his

family that he needed to deal with.

And there was a very good chance that Uncle Chuck was with my father somewhere, working on this case.

What was my next move?

Where did I go when everyone I had to rely on was missing?

But, this wasn't everyone, was it?

There was still one person left I knew would protect me, who had protected me before, would do so again if I was in need.

Regardless of how he'd left town without another word.

I had no purse, no money, no IDs.

If I got pulled over, I was in big trouble.

But I couldn't seem to make myself give a shit.

All I could think about was him.

So I turned my car in the direction of Navesink Bank.

I was going to ask August again for help.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

August

I woke up the morning after leaving Traveler in the care of her father to find my mother already in my kitchen.

Coffee was fresh.

The sweet scent of pancakes mingled with the more hearty scents of eggs and sausage.

And she was already hard at work at some sort of pasta-based meal. Knowing my mom, likely more than one. To have in my fridge or freezer while I “settle back in.”

“There’s my boy,” my mom greeted me when she sensed my presence, turning with her arms raised, and a lifetime told me I was meant to approach her, so she could frame my face, then slap my cheeks a little hard, then kiss each of them. “Oh, no,” she said before her hands even touched me. “Are you sick? Did you pick something up on your trip?” she asked. “You have no color. Foreign food will do that,” she went on, as if I’d been out of the country, not an hour away. “You don’t

have a fever,” she concluded after pulling me down toward her, so she could press her lips to my forehead.

She didn’t trust her hands for telling temperatures.

Giulia Grassi did things her own way.

Including breaking into her sons’ homes to fuss over them.

“I’m fine, Ma,” I assured her. “Just a little beat,” I said, making my way toward the coffee machine.

“It’s hard to sleep well when you’re not in your own bed,” she said. “Are you home for good now? We need to do your birthday.”

I heard the hint of hurt in her voice at that.

“I’m sorry I missed it, Ma,” I told her. “I did get a birthday cake, though. Baked just for me.”

Her curiosity clearly piqued, she turned, dark brows raised. “Really? How was that? I thought you were away on business.”

“Not really, actually,” I said. I knew I really needed to talk to Luca first about this whole situation, but even Luca would understand how the women of the family could drag information out of us purely out of guilt. Or a practiced look of curiosity.

“No?” she asked, pretending not to be interested as she mixed something on the stove.

“It was a favor for a friend,” I told her. “You know Mass and Cammie’s story, right?”

“Of course,” she agreed.

“While helping get Cammie out, we had a local coffee shop owner helping us.”

“Yes, Traveler,” she said, nodding. “She was at the wedding. Pretty girl,” she said, eyes brightening.

“Sure, yeah. Anyway, she was having the kind of issue that required protection while things... got sorted out. So Aurelio

and I went down there to do that. She baked me the cake when she found out about my birthday.”

“That was very nice of her to do for her... protection detail,” she said, and I knew my mom well enough to know she was probing.

“Yeah, it was,” I agreed, sipping my coffee, suddenly disappointed with the taste after over a week of drinking the coffee from Traveler’s shop.

“So, she’s safe now?”

“I wouldn’t be home if she wasn’t,” I said, hearing the edge in my voice, knowing my mom would pick up on it as well.

But she said nothing as she fixed me a plate of breakfast foods.

“So, about your birthday party...”

“Something small, Ma,” I pleaded. “I don’t want anything crazy right now. Just my siblings, maybe?” I suggested.

My mom loved planning and executing a big party. But something in my voice must have gotten through to her, because she didn’t try to talk me out of it.

“Of course,” she agreed, nodding, bringing her own plate over to the kitchen table to eat with me. “Just let me know when your schedule is clear.”

“I need to talk to Luca, but after that, I can give you a date,” I told her.

“Perfect. Do you want me to call Smush to give you a full restock around here?”

“Seems like you got things covered,” I said, waving toward the stove.

“Oh, just a few meals to get you back on your feet,” she said, as if my freezer wasn’t full of meals from her. But that was how my mom showed her love. And I guess I was in need of some of that.

Sleep hadn't done a single thing to ease that black hole sensation I'd brought back to Navesink Bank with me.

"Honey," my mom said, reaching across the table to place her hand on mine. "You seem unhappy," she said.

You could never lie to this woman.

I swear she knew we'd pulled some shit before anyone even called her to tell her that we fucked up. She could just look at us and know.

"We can't be happy all the time, right?" I asked.

To that, she nodded. "I guess that's fair. But when you hurt, I hurt," she said, pressing a hand to her heart.

"I'll be fine, Ma. I just need to reacclimate to being home, is all."

"Okay. I won't press," she said, giving my hand another pat, then launching into a conversation about my brothers and sister. Then my cousins, aunts, everyone.

A week away from a family as big as ours, and, yeah, I missed some shit.

By the time my mom headed out for the day, I had a lasagne and chicken parm in my fridge, and a promise to talk to her about my birthday after I met with Luca.

I knew that was meant to be my next stop.

I could head right across town to Famiglia, get a private audience with him, apologize, then take my punishment for not coming to him first.

I just couldn't bring myself to leave.

So I cleaned up after my mom's cooking. I unpacked my shit from the trip, setting up the new suits to go to the dry cleaner's.

Smush would handle that.

I paid bills and checked in on some jobs I'd been working on before I left town.

I did some laundry.

I did anything in my fucking power to keep myself busy, to not think about the way Traveler left with her father like it was no big deal.

Was that an act?

Or was it actually no big deal to her?

And why the ever-loving fuck did it seem to be a big one to me?

“Fuck,” I hissed, shaking my head at myself as I laced up my sneakers to run to the gym, where I planned to kick my own ass for an hour or two, then run back home again.

Hopefully then, I would be too fucking tired to do anything other than take a shower, fall into bed, and crash.

So that was what I did, getting home around eight that night, and taking a long, cold shower to ease the aching in my muscles, before sticking the lasagne in the oven.

One hour at three-fifty. Maybe a little extra, depending on your stove.

That was the note my ma had left on the top.

I was standing there in the kitchen drinking a scotch when I heard it.

Frantic slamming on my door.

“The fuck?” I hissed, putting my glass down with a clink, then moving through the house, pausing only to grab a gun out of my closet, then making my way toward the door.

“August! Open up!” a borderline hysterical voice called.

But a very familiar voice.

Traveler.

My fucking hands fumbled with the locks before I finally started to slide it. But I barely got it fully open before Traveler was launching herself at me, catching me off-guard enough to stumble back a foot or two as my arm went around her instinctively.

“Trav, what’s,” I said, putting down my gun.

She didn't answer though.

She couldn't.

Not with her entire fucking body trembling.

Not with how a sob caught, then broke free as the tears started to wet my shirt.

“Okay. It's alright,” I said, kicking the door closed, and wrapping her up tighter, knowing there was no getting anything out of her until she calmed down a bit. Even if my mind was racing with all the possibilities of what happened. “Everything's gonna be alright,” I said, rubbing my hand up and down her spine as she let herself fall apart for a moment.

But this was Traveler.

It was just a moment.

Before she was trying to pull the pieces back together, sniffing hard, removing her hands from around me, and scrubbing at her eyes and cheeks.

“Okay,” I said, hands going to her upper arms, pushing her back slightly, then reaching for her hands that were hiding her face, and pulling them down. “Why don't you tell me what—what the *fuck*?” I snapped, not meaning for the words to come out as loud and angry as they did. But when I saw the bruises across her throat, there seemed to be no other way to react.

“I was attacked,” she said, voice small. Whether that was from shock, upset, or the fact that the woman had been fucking *strangled* was anyone's guess.

“I see that,” I said, trying to force my voice to be calm. “Are you hurt anywhere else?” I asked, seeing bruises forming on her face, but there wasn't enough swelling that I was worried about anything being broken.

“I need your phone,” she said, clarity finally breaking through her gaze. “Mine was missing. *Please*,” she begged.

I wasn't going to get anywhere with her if I pushed her.

“Okay,” I said, turning to rush back into the kitchen, coming back with my cell, and handing it over.

She dialed with shaky hands, and lifted it to her ear.

“Come on come on come on,” she hissed. But the call clearly went to voicemail. She wasn’t giving up, though, dialing again. Then again. Then, finally, leaving a message. “Dad, it’s me. Please call me back.”

Then she tried a text.

Then another.

“Hey, tell me what’s going on, so I can help,” I demanded, reaching to cover the phone and her hands with my own.

Taking a deep breath, she winced, then coughed a little, but nodded.

“I went home after work with my Uncle Stan—“

“I didn’t think you had family,” I said. It wasn’t the time for family trees, but I couldn’t seem to help myself.

“My dad has friends that he went through the Academy with. Chuck, Don, and Stan. They’re taking turns keeping an eye on me while he does... whatever he’s been doing. Chuck was with me all night, then we met Don at the store. Don was supposed to stay with me, but he had a family emergency. So it was just me and Stan going back to my house. And a patrol car.”

“Okay,” I said, nodding when she paused.

“I went to take a shower while we waited for food to be delivered. When I came out, the food had been delivered and was on the counter, but Stan was missing. I walked out back to call him, to see where he went, and that’s when I was attacked,” she said.

“Baby, details,” I demanded softly.

“I was hit,” she said, motioning toward her face. “Then I fell off the porch, and was dragged back up and into the house by my hair,” she said.

“Did you see the attacker?” I asked, knowing that getting the details when they were as fresh as possible was key.

“No,” she admitted, jaw going tight. “He pulled me into my room by my hair, then climbed on my back and started to strangle me. I, ah, I assumed that he wouldn’t know how long it actually took to strangle someone to death, so I kind of... played dead.”

“Smart,” I said, stomach twisting, making bile rise up my throat. “What then?”

“Then he... left,” she told me. “I waited for a while to make sure, then I grabbed a knife and moved out back to try to wake up my neighbor and have him let me in since my phone was gone.”

“That didn’t work?” I asked.

“He’s old and was probably asleep. And then... then I looked around the house. And I saw a body on the ground. I don’t know if it was Stan or the cop. Or what happened to the other one of them,” she said, words tripping over each other now. “Then I heard footsteps. And I just... ran. Stan’s car was on the street. I had grabbed the fob. So I just got in it and sped out of there.”

“Good. That was smart. And then?”

“I drove around looking for my dad and my other uncles. But no one was home or at the station. And I just... I didn’t know where else to go,” she said, looking up at me with big doe eyes that seemed to immediately make that black hole inside my chest close up and disappear.

“No, of course you should come here,” I said, reaching out to tuck some of her hair behind her ear. “Come on,” I said, reaching to take her hand, and leading her over to sit. “The question now is what do you want to do?” I asked.

“I... I need to find my father,” she said, nodding at that decision. “I don’t know why he’s not answering. What if something—“

“Let’s not go to the dark place just yet, okay?” I suggested. “Maybe he’s busy knocking down doors or knocking heads together,” I said. “Especially if he is with one or more of your uncles. Do you know their numbers by heart?”

“No,” I admitted. “We haven’t really been very close. I only ever saw them when I was with my father. I only saw him two weekends a month, and saw them maybe every three or four months when I was visiting. Then when I grew up, even less. They stopped into the shop more when it first opened, but not so much since my dad and I had a falling out.”

“Baby, you don’t have to explain it to me. I don’t know anyone but my mother’s number by heart,” I admitted. “And my siblings, but only because our numbers are all just a digit apart,” I added.

“What are we supposed to do?” she asked.

We.

Fuck.

I liked the sound of that way more than I could have realized.

“I would like to call a cousin of mine to see if she can look at you,” I told her.

“I’m fine.”

“I know you feel fine right now, but a lot of that could be adrenaline and shock,” I reasoned. “It won’t take long. She can come here. Please,” I added, watching her defenses slip a bit. “We can’t help your father and uncles, if they need our help, if your shock wears off, and you collapse or something, right?” I asked.

To that, she exhaled hard.

“Okay. But only if it’s quick,” she said. “It’s an hour back there again,” she added.

“I need to get Aurelio too,” I reminded her.

“Right. Okay. Alright,” she agreed, nodding.

“Hey,” I said, reaching to put my hands over hers again. “We are going to figure this out. We just need to give it forty minutes, an hour. Then we will be on our way.”

“Yeah,” she agreed, swallowing, then wincing.

“How about I get you something to drink while I make the calls?” I asked. “You want cold or warm?” I asked.

I’d never been strangled. I had no idea what would feel better for that.

“Warm,” she said.

“Coffee work? I don’t think I have tea.”

“Yeah,” she agreed, pulling her legs up onto the couch, and wrapping her arms around them.

“I’ll be right back,” I said, patting her knee before I made my way out of the room.

“Aren’t you sick of me yet?” Aurelio answered.

“Get over here,” I barked as I brewed a fresh pot of coffee.

“What’s going on?” he asked, all the humor gone.

“Traveler is here. She was attacked. I need to call Lettie. Then we need to go back to her town to see what the fuck is going on.”

He didn’t ask a million questions.

“Do you want me to get Milo to come with us?” Aurelio asked.

I heard sniffing coming from the front of the house.

“Yes,” I decided.

We were going to end this.

Once and fucking for all.

Traveler had been through enough already.

I had to get her safe.

“We’ll be there in ten minutes,” he said.

I hung up and called Lettie who, thankfully, wasn’t busy, and would likely roll up around the same time as Aurelio and Milo.

Grabbing the coffee, I moved into the living room to sit and wait with Traveler.

As she moved in at my side, stealing comfort from me, I thought the most insane thing.

I wasn't sure I was going to be able to let her go again.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Traveler

I hadn't given my plan much thought past *Get to Navesink Bank*.

I had no address for August.

I had no phone to try to look it up myself.

All I had was a vague memory of him saying he was looking for a house, which made me think he had an apartment, and that he once made a comment about him having a view of the river.

With that in mind, I drove toward the river, finding exactly two apartment complexes only. One seemed small and cramped and less expensive. The other was new, shiny, and costly-looking.

I could see him there with all the stucco and glass.

I took the jug handle and pulled into the lot, making my way toward the front doors, finding some fancy-ass new fangled intercom system with a camera and digital screen.

I moved my finger to the log of residents, finding the name Grassi listed there.

I was about to press the button when the door flew open.

I rushed in that direction, catching the door before it could close, then making a beeline for the elevator. For once, not even giving it a second thought, finding myself too consumed with different anxieties.

“Come on come on come on,” I grumbled as the elevator car climbed slowly before finally stopping on the top floor.

Rushing out, I made my way toward the number associated with his name on the log below.

He barely got the door open before I flew at him.

I hadn't realized how close to breaking I was until he was there to try to hold me together.

When I finally calmed down, and August went to get me a drink for my sore throat, I started to look around.

The inside of the apartment was much like the outside.

Modern.

Kind of sterile.

Not a whole lot of personality.

Don't get me wrong, his furniture was nice. And, knowing him, expensive. But it was all devoid of personal touches, anything that told you what August was like.

I was sitting on the short side of a large sectional in an airy living space. A framed TV was on the wall, and I wouldn't have known it was a TV at all if not for the fact that the art on it had shifted when I was looking at it.

Across from the living space was the bedroom, the door open, so I spied the bottom of the bed.

I couldn't see past the half wall that cut off the living space and the kitchen/dining area, but I could hear the rumble of August's voice as he called Aurelio and his cousin.

I probably should have asked more questions about said cousin. I'd been a little too overwhelmed to think straight.

But with a bracingly strong cup of coffee in my hands, my brain was starting to work right again.

The sound of footsteps moved down the hall a few minutes later, making me tense, but August just rubbed my thigh.

"It's Aurelio," he said.

"Right," I agreed as he got up to open the door.

It wasn't just Aurelio who walked in, though. Behind him was an equally as tall and handsome man, albeit a bit younger. The familial resemblance was clear. The same bone structure, hair, eyes.

This had to be one of Aurelio's brothers.

If my memory of their family tree served me right, this had to be Milo. The "baby."

"Angel," Aurelio said, voice tight as his gaze moved over me.

"I'm okay," I assured him, even if all the pains around my body seemed to be intensifying by the moment. "Hey, Milo," I greeted the other man standing a few feet back in an all-black suit.

"As the handsomest Grassi, I'm not surprised my reputation precedes me," Milo said with a charmingly devilish smile.

"I'm sorry if my presence is pulling you away from something important."

"Hey, this gets me out of helping my sister haul mulch tomorrow," he said.

"Smush?" I asked.

"Elisa," he corrected.

She was the girl Grassi that I knew the least about.

"Don't worry, Lucky will do it," Milo said. "Is something burning?" he asked, taking a deep breath.

It was right then that all of us smelled it too.

“Shit,” August said, starting to stand, but Aurelio was already striding toward the kitchen. “My ma made me a lasagne. I was heating it up when you came in.”

Despite the insanity of this night, my stomach still grumbled at its emptiness as I raised the coffee cup to my lips, taking a long drink, hoping it would suppress my appetite for a while.

“That’s gotta be Lettie,” Milo said when a buzzer sounded in the room, making me jump so hard that I spilled coffee onto my hands.

Walking over, he buzzed her up, then opened the door to the hall, holding it open as a gorgeous dark-haired woman moved in with a big duffle bag.

“Thanks for coming, Lettie,” August said, standing.

“You know me,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m always on call. Hey,” she said, giving me a warm smile.

“This is Traveler,” August said. “Trav, this is Lettie. She’s a doctor. More or less,” he added, making my brows raise.

“I dropped out like a semester short of graduation,” Lettie explained. “Will you come with me to the bedroom, so I can look you over?” she asked.

“Sure,” I agreed, handing my coffee to August with a small smile as I followed Lettie.

“Does your side hurt?” she asked, picking up on my strange gait.

“I was kicked in my hip area,” I said, motioning to where it had landed as we walked into August’s bedroom.

It was a lot like the rest of the house.

Very sleek.

White walls, dark wood floors, with big windows, the views unencumbered by drapes or blinds. But there was a heavy tint on them.

The bed was large and covered in black bedding so lush that I wished I could climb in and take a much-needed nap.

Lettie closed the door, and placed her bag on the dresser.

“If you’re not comfortable taking off... okay then,” she said, smiling as I reached to pull off my shirt.

“I’m not shy,” I told her. “Just a little... in shock,” I admitted. “Hence the...” I said, waving in the air toward my head.

“Seems like you were hit in the head a few times,” she said. “That might have something to do with feeling off.”

“I was punched twice,” I said, gesturing toward my cheek and temple as Lettie folded down my pants to see my hip better. “And my head whacked off my dresser,” I recalled, touching the side of my head.

“Well, at least you didn’t break it open,” she said as her fingers probed around my stomach. “And tenderness here?” she asked as she kept probing.

“No. It hurts like a bruise hurts,” I said.

“Okay. What about here?” she asked, pressing on my ribs and chest.

“It’s okay. My chest feels kind of tight, but I think it might have something to do with this,” I told her, pressing a hand to my sore throat.

“Yeah, this isn’t pretty,” Lettie agreed, tilting my chin up slightly. “Swallowing feel a bit like choking down glass?”

“Yes.”

“I recommend icing this from the outside, as well as some warm tea and honey for the upcoming soreness and hoarseness. Alright, are you ready for the list of things I want you to look out for?”

“Yes,” I said, nodding.

“Any breathing difficulties either standing or lying down, loss of consciousness, trouble swallowing, drooling, swelling in your throat, weakness, numbness or tingling on one side of

your body, bad headaches, lightheadedness, loss or blurred vision, seizures, little red or purple dots on your face or in your mouth, drooping eyelids, any inability to think clearly. And, this likely sounds crazy, but issues with your bladder or bowels,” she said as she rummaged in her bag for one of those pen lights. “Open for me,” she asked.

Finished looking in my mouth, she checked out my eyes, made me follow the light path, all the usual stuff.

Then I did something I could only call close to a field sobriety test, likely looking for any issues with my balance or whatever from whacking my head.

“This might sound crazy, but you got really lucky tonight,” she said. “If you are going to be around, I do have a facility where you could get scans if you get some more symptoms.”

“We, ah, we are leaving tonight.”

“I figured with Aurelio and Milo here,” she said, nodding. “Well, if anything seems worse, wherever you are going, I want you to go to the emergency room right away, okay? You don’t want to fuck around with the aftermath of strangulation. I’m not super worried about your hip. And I don’t see any current signs of a concussion. But just... stay aware, okay? No matter what is going on with all that,” she said, waving toward the living room.

“I will,” I assured her. “I’ve had several brushes with death now. I’d really like to survive this, so I’m not going to ignore a medical emergency.”

“That is good to hear. If you find yourself back in Navesink Bank in the next few days, I would like to see you at my office. Just to make sure you’re healing like I think you should be.”

I wanted to be back in Navesink Bank.

That was a startling revelation.

But it was the most clear, the most certain, my mind had been about anything in what felt like ages.

I wanted to be in Navesink Bank.

I wanted to walk the beach, try the coffee place Aurelio raved about, eat at Lucky's pizza place and Famiglia. I wanted to try Adrian and Giulia Grassi's food. I wanted to have a girls night with Smush, Elisa, and Valley. I wanted to meet August's other brothers. I wanted to sit around their tables at Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter. I wanted to curl up with August in bed every night.

I wanted all those things more than I think I ever actually wanted my coffee business.

That was... startling.

I'd worked so hard for so many years building the business and my life that went along with it. It was insane to think I would be willing to give all of that away for the warmth and family that August had been so blessed to have just been given.

"Are you having some symptoms?" Lettie asked, watching me with careful, but concerned eyes.

"What? No. Sorry. I'm just... thinking," I said. "Very, very clearly," I added, getting a little laugh out of Lettie.

"Okay then. Well, I think we can put August's worries to rest," she said, but pulled out a bottle of acetaminophen. "You can take these as needed, but avoid NSAIDs for the next two or three days, just as a precaution," she instructed. "Andddd... here," she said, producing several small instant ice packs. "I have a feeling you aren't going to get a chance to lie around and ice like you should. So use these until that can happen."

"Thank you," I said, meaning it.

"Oh, one more thing," she said, but this time, she reached into a side pocket. "This is not part of my medical kit," she explained, producing something rolled up, and spreading them wide. "But I am on my feet a lot, and they hurt easily, so I keep some of these one-time-use ballet flats on me. You have no shoes," she explained.

"Oh, right," I said, looking down at my dirty feet. Had I tracked dirt all over August's perfect home?

“We look close enough to the same size for these to work until you can get something better.”

“Thank you so much. Truly,” I said. “How can I pay—“

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous,” she said, rolling her eyes. “I’m charging August. Believe me, he can afford it. I might also be taking that lasagne with me, since it seems like you guys are all heading out,” she told me as she zipped her bag, and hauled it back up on her shoulder. “I hope I can do a re-check in a few days. Try to take care,” she said as she moved out.

I could hear her softer voice mingling with the men out in the living room before the door was pushing open again, and August was moving inside.

“Seems like you got the mostly-clear,” he said, moving toward me.

“I got little ice packs and mediocre pain medicine,” I said, shaking the bottle.

“What? No bitching about single-use ice packs?” he asked, trying to lighten the mood. “I’m disappointed in you,” he added.

“I know, right?” I said, sighing a bit. “I’m sorry if I got your place dirty,” I told him. “I forgot about my feet.”

I was actually a little worried that I’d managed to drive an hour in bare feet without realizing it. Was that one of those cognitive dysfunction things Lettie had mentioned?

“No one fucking cares about that,” he said, brows pinched. “You got some temporary shoes?”

“Yeah. I, ah, yeah,” I agreed. “Can I wash my feet before we go?” I asked, gesturing toward the primary bathroom.

“Yeah, of course,” he agreed, moving in that direction to turn on the light.

It was as expected.

A glass shower stall.

A pristine soaking tub that I was sure he’d never used.

Lots of windows and gray tile.

Sleek. Modern. Cool.

It could use some plants in the window, soaking up the sun that had to beam in during the day from the giant windows, maybe some mats on the floor to give the space some texture.

I moved into the shower stall, reaching for the detachable shower head, turning on the hot water, then plopping my ass down on the built-in seat to rinse my feet.

I felt his presence even before my peripheral caught him standing in the open doorway.

“I can’t convince you to stay here, can I?” he asked, seeming resigned, even if I knew he wished I would stay.

“No,” I said, rubbing his bar of soap between my hands to create a lather before scrubbing my feet with them. “You won’t even know who to call, or where to look, or... anything,” I said.

“I hate that you’re right about that,” he admitted as I rinsed the soap, then accepted the towel he handed to me to dry off before I stepped out.

I moved toward the vanity, catching sight of myself for the first time, almost jerking back at first.

The bruises were setting in on my face, purple and blue with yellow around the edges. But that was nothing compared to the bruises on my throat. My hair was mostly out of the ponytail, and I reached instinctively to fix it, even though it didn’t do much to improve my overall appearance.

I looked like I’d been beaten up.

I had.

There was no reason to worry too much about that. Not with my father and uncles in the wind.

And, of course, my attacker.

I slipped on the flats, then looked at August.

“Let’s go. So much time has already passed. Has my father responded?”

“No,” he said, voice soft as he broke the news that, well, couldn’t be good. Right?

It had likely been another hour since I called, give or take. Even if he was busy, wouldn’t he be checking his phone for possible leads or whatever? He’d have seen my texts and voicemail if he had.

“Hey, don’t get too up in your head about all of this right now,” August demanded, pressing a hand into my lower back as we moved into the living room. “We don’t know what we are going to be walking into. Maybe nothing,” he added, but he didn’t sound too convinced of that.

The churning feeling in my stomach said that there was more to this than we could know, that there was no way we would go back to my town, and find that my father had somehow put things to rights while I was in Navesink Bank.

“We heading out?” Milo asked as he held the door open for Lettie to leave, carrying a cookie sheet holding the hot, possibly burnt, lasagne with her.

“Yep,” August said.

“Ah, what about my uncle’s car?” I asked.

“We’ll drive that down,” August told me as we all filed out.

Aurelio and August went automatically toward the stairs, leaving Milo to catch up with a furrowed brow.

“Listen, if you told me it was *this* car, I would have insisted on driving it back,” Milo said, shaking his head. “What does this go for? One-fifty? More?” he asked, clucking his tongue as he climbed into Aurelio’s car with him.

August was eyeing the car with a strange look in his eye as he held open my door, then climbed in with me.

“What?” I asked as we started to drive.

“Milo is right. This car is expensive as fuck.”

“Oh, ah, yeah. I’ve... I’ve never doubted that Stan is on the take. He lives lavishly like my father.”

“Right,” August agreed, but he seemed distracted and restless as we drove in silence back toward my town.

The drive there felt twice as long as the one to Navesink Bank, back when I was running on fear and adrenaline, and likely a healthy dollop of shock.

This ride felt torturous, with my brain bouncing from one terrible outcome to another, each more gory and horrific than the last.

I was momentarily saved from my thoughts as August handed me his phone, and told me to call Milo, and put it on speaker.

“Yo,” Milo answered.

“We’re going to drive to Traveler’s house first, see what is going on there, what she might have missed. Then we will figure out where we’re going from there. Keep this line open, though,” he said.

I kept his phone in my lap as he drove toward my house with a pretty impressive sense of direction, given that he’d only been there once.

I saw it a split second before he did.

I knew that because he pulled to a stop before I could even widen my eyes at the scene.

Lots and lots of cop cars.

“Fuck,” August said, trying to decide what to do.

Because, on the one hand, the cops meant that someone was working on my case.

On the other, though...

“My dad is worried someone on the force set him up,” I said. “Maybe...”

Before I even finished, August was turning the car down a side street with Aurelio and Milo in tow.

“We’re gonna ditch this car,” August said as he parked and cut the engine.

“But wh—“ I started. He was already climbing out, though, so I moved to do the same, following him to Aurelio’s car, where we piled into the back.

I remembered to end the phone call as Aurelio pulled away, no one wanting to get caught with a very expensive car that may or may not have been reported stolen. And that depended largely on if Uncle Stan was alive, conscious, or not.

“There was an ambulance there,” Aurelio said, breaking the silence. “But I didn’t see the medical examiner,” he added.

That was a good sign, right?

Stan and the cop were probably still alive then.

“What are we doing now?” I asked.

“Let’s make another round,” August suggested. “Police station, your uncles’, and your father’s place,” he said, waiting for me to rattle off directions.

There was a palpable tension in the car, and I was once again under the impression that these three men were having some sort of telepathic conversation that I wasn’t tuned into the frequency of.

“That’s Don’s wife’s car,” I said as we drove past his place, since his was the closest to the police station.

“But his isn’t here?” August asked.

“No,” I said, not sure if that was a good or bad thing.

“Okay. Let’s put a pin in talking to the wife,” August said. “She probably doesn’t have any idea what is going on. She might send up an alarm we don’t want sounded right now.”

“Right,” I agreed.

I didn’t know Don’s wife as well as Don. But she was a strong, intelligent woman. Someone with a good moral compass. If Don was on the take, there was no way she knew of it. And she wouldn’t approve of him associating with my

father or other uncles if she knew they were dirty either. Regardless of their lifelong connections.

I rattled off the next closest address next.

Chuck.

But his place seemed abandoned too.

“My father’s is next,” I said, giving Aurelio the address to his modern stucco home that kind of reminded me a lot of August’s apartment, save for on a bigger scale.

I had to give my father credit on some things. And the man kept a very nice home. The lawn was meticulously cultivated. With chemicals I constantly begged him not to use, and sprinkler systems that I reminded him were a huge waste of natural resources. But you had to admit that it looked nice, even if grass lawns went against everything I believed in.

The whole property was enclosed by a wrought iron fence. Yes, the ones with the pointy things on top that I’d begged as a child for him not to use.

They kill deer, I’d insisted.

There are no deer here, he’d replied.

That’s because we keep taking away their land, I’d reminded him.

And then, yeah, as you can imagine, that spiraled into a pretty epic argument. One where I’d begged my mother to come and pick me up early. But she was too worried about my father dragging her back to court to negotiate visitation again if she did it, so I sulked in my room for a whole day, glaring at the stupid spikes on top of the fence panels.

My father wasn’t one for flowers. No matter how many times I’d told him as a teenager that the native pollinators were dying en masse, and we needed to feed them. He was all about his evergreen hedges that he kept meticulously trimmed so they never got too big, never overtook the general grandeur of the home itself.

He did give in on one thing.

A small flowerbed in the back on the side of the porch. Where no one from the street would see it. He let me fill it with native ferns, butterfly bushes, and even some coneflowers.

I imagined he had it yanked out the day I stopped visiting.

“Swanky place for the chief of police. If I knew crime prevention paid this well, I might have gone into that instead of crime,” Milo said as we parked out front.

“He’s on the take,” I said as we started to climb out.

“Milo, stay here, keep an eye,” August demanded. “Aurelio, around the back,” he went on.

“And us?” I asked.

“Walking through the front door. Just a daughter visiting her father,” he said, putting his hand to the small of my back. “Do you have a key?”

“I have the code. If he didn’t change it,” I said as we approached the door with its expensive security system that reminded me a lot of the one at August’s apartment. Video capabilities and all.

Heart hammering, I went to plug in the code, but realize the system wasn’t engaged.

“What’s up?” August asked, having turned away either so he didn’t see the code, or simply to watch the street.

“It’s not locked,” I said, watching him turn, brows raised. “Is that unusual?” he asked.

“My dad is a nut about security,” I told him.

“Okay, I go first,” August said, reaching for his gun, then positioning himself in front of me.

One glance toward the street told me that Milo had picked up on August taking it out because his hand was positioned inside his jacket too, likely holding onto the gun to pull it out at a moment’s notice.

August moved into the foyer, and I kept close to his back.

There was a grand center staircase leading up with large doorways on either side of the foyer leading to the study and the dining room.

It was decorated in a sort of timeless style which I hadn't hated growing up because at least it had some natural wood and stone elements to make up for the fact that he seemed allergic to softer materials or art of any kind.

He kept the interior as pristine as the exterior.

There was never a spot on a counter, a smudge on the wall, a fingerprint on the windows. Thanks, of course, to a twice-weekly cleaning service.

As a kid, I used to test his anal tendencies by leaving little messes around and seeing if or when they were cleaned up. A pencil mark, barely visible, on the wall by my desk? Gone by my next visit. Same went for a towel I wedged in the back of my sink cabinet in my bathroom. It took a full two months of visits, though, for someone to finally find the little pencil mural I drew on my closet wall, cleverly hidden on that small wall on the side beside the door.

That was why this was so shocking.

"What is it?" August whispered when my hands grabbed the back of his jacket as we stepped into the empty kitchen, all stainless steel and empty counters. My father didn't even keep his small appliances out, preferring the toaster, air fryer, and blender to be tucked in the cabinets when not in use.

There was a to-go container overturned on the counter, the contents spilled all over the floor. Along with a shattered coffee cup.

"Fuck," August hissed, moving away from me to open the back door to let in Aurelio.

"What's go... oh," Aurelio said, seeing the mess.

"Is that blood?" I asked, pointing toward the edge of the counter.

August stooped to look.

He didn't spare me from the truth.

I appreciated that.

“Yes.”

“There’s some drops here,” Aurelio said, pointing toward the path he’d just walked in from the back door.

“Do you know if you can access the security system here?” August asked. “There’s cameras everywhere.”

There was.

There always had been.

Even if I wanted to, I never would’ve been able to get away with anything as a kid.

“Maybe,” I said, walking on numb legs toward the study at the front of the house.

No bookshelves to get dusty.

Just a desk and chair.

There was a all-in-one computer on the desk, a cup with exactly three pens, and a picture of me.

But not one from when I was a little girl.

No.

This was from the opening of my shop.

I hadn’t been aware of him taking it.

It was of me smiling up at my sign before I officially opened my doors ten seconds later.

It wasn’t until I was looking at that picture that I realized I hadn’t felt that way—blissfully happy—about my life in a long time.

The closest I had gotten lately was when I was playing house with August at the hotel.

I shook those thoughts away as I moved behind the desk, powering up the laptop, and trying a couple passwords before I finally got it.

My birthdate.

In reverse.

My father could be such a cold, detached man. But I was seeing more and more that there was a lot of love buried deep in there.

Hopefully, it wasn't too late to try to repair things.

I doubted we'd ever be the kind of family that August and Aurelio got to have. But we could be better than we were.

If he was still alive.

I fiddled around on the laptop for a minute, finding that he kept absolutely everything buried in folders upon folders. Even the icon for his security system. Most of said folders were password locked.

Thankfully, the one with the security system wasn't locked, and the feeds came up relatively easily.

I watched in reverse as I moved into the study, as we talked in the kitchen, as August and I first came in.

August's footsteps moved toward the study, coming around the desk as I rewound through nothingness.

And then, movement.

People in the frame.

Men.

My father fighting with someone, then whacking his head on the way down, where he landed unconscious.

"There," August said as I made the image freeze.

As all the blood left my body.

"What is it?" August asked. "Traveler?" he asked, but it wasn't until he touched me that I seemed to snap out of it. "Do you know who it is?" he asked.

Yes.

Yes, I did.

"That's my Uncle Stan."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Traveler

It made perfect sense.

Had I more time to really go over the events of the night, I would have likely come to this conclusion even without the footage of his betrayal.

Of course it had been Stan.

The man in my house, entrusted with my safety.

He had access to my phone while I'd been in the shower, stealing it so I couldn't call for help, couldn't tell my father what was happening.

Because killing me was just the first phase in the process.

The timestamp on the video from my father's house put it about twenty minutes after I stole his fancy-ass car and went for reinforcements.

"Trav, come on," August said, grabbing my hand, and physically pulling me away from the desk, forcing me to go

with him into the foyer, out the front door.

I paused numbly to lock the system.

Force of habit.

Then I followed August and Aurelio to Milo's car.

"What's his address?" August asked as my head spun.

My "uncle" betraying my father.

How long had it been going on?

Was it just him, or were Don and Chuck in on it too?

Did it bother Stan to have to beat the girl he'd watched grow up?

Did he feel guilty for trying to strangle the life out of me?

So many questions.

And I was going to get some goddamn answers.

I rattled off his address and I swear my rage grew with each block we drove in that direction.

"It's an apartment?" August asked, shocking me out of my swirling thoughts.

"What?"

"Stan lives in an apartment?" August asked.

"I, ah, yeah," I said.

"He couldn't bring your father here," August said.

Right.

Duh.

"I, ah... this is the only address I know," I told him, shaking my head.

"Okay. We'll go up," he said, nodding toward Aurelio who climbed out. "Milo, keep the car running," he demanded as Milo moved around the car to climb in the driver's seat.

"Have you ever been here before?" August asked as we walked up the path to the door.

“Just once,” I said.

“Does he have a system like your father?”

“Not when I was here. Just the usual door lock sort of thing. It’s a penthouse, though.”

“Tell me he doesn’t have a private access,” August demanded.

“He doesn’t,” I said, moving toward the elevator, my rage overpowering my anxiety as I stabbed a finger into the button for the penthouse. “There are two penthouses,” I explained. “One on each side of the hall.”

“His neighbor nose?” Aurelio asked as he reached into his pocket, producing a little leather pouch with tiny tools inside it. A lock pick kit.

“I think my father said they don’t live here full-time, just come in for work sometimes.”

“Good. No witnesses,” he said as the door opened to the long, empty hallway.

“To the left,” I said, following behind Aurelio with August at my back.

We stood there for less than a minute as Aurelio worked the locks.

There was a click breaking the silence, making me jump.

Aurelio tucked the kit away as he reached for his gun, then pushed the door open.

There was no reason for the guns, though.

The apartment was empty.

Stan preferred lots of black when it came to decor. Black leather couch, black end and coffee tables, black countertops, black cabinets. Even surrounded by windows, I was sure the black swallowed up the light in the daytime.

At night, it created a lot of dark corners. Ones that Aurelio and August checked out before putting their guns away.

“Okay,” August said. “Let’s look for anything that might point us in a direction,” he added.

Aurelio nodded, moving down the hallway toward the extra bedroom that was set up as an office.

August started looking around the living room.

“Baby,” he called when I just stood there, frozen, in the kitchen. “You okay?”

“No,” I admitted, making him straighten. “No, I’m fucking furious,” I admitted. “I don’t know what to do about that.”

“Use it,” he suggested. “Rip this place apart. You would be the best person to find anything that is really off,” he reminded me.

“Right,” I agreed, nodding. “I, ah, I’ll check the bedroom.”

My numb legs did manage to carry me in there, but I stopped just inside the door, leaning against the wall, taking a few steadying breaths as my mind started to spin again.

Was that just because this was all just... too fucking much?

Or was this the cognitive issues Lettie had warned me of?

Was there really any way to tell the difference at this point?

I didn’t think there was.

The only thing I could do was try to focus through it, figure out what Stan was up to, where he might be hiding my father.

Once we rescued him—and my mind refused to focus on any other reality than one with him making it out of this clusterfuck of a situation—then I could determine if I was having side effects or not.

Until then, I was just going to have to deal with it.

I walked through the bedroom and straight for the closet, knowing that people tended to hide important documents in the primary bedroom, typically tucked away in a closet in some fireproof bag or safe.

Stan's closet was reminiscent of my father's with tons of expensive suits, leather shoes, silk ties, and watches. He also had an impressive collection of exercise clothing and exactly *one* set of sweats. For, I dunno, the one day of a year he would allow himself to just chill out, I guess.

I moved all the clothes out of the way, looking for any boxes or bags. I felt along the walls, looking for a seam for a hidden compartment, even if I felt like a complete lunatic for even thinking such a thing might exist.

But there was nothing.

On a grumble, I went into the bathroom, but that obviously had even less to go on. Except the fact that Stan had a strange compulsion to have three of everything. Three toothbrushes, three extra tubes of paste, three mouthwashes, and three bars of soap.

I got wanting a small backup supply so you didn't run out of something, but the three thing was odd.

I moved back into the bedroom, going through the contents of one nightstand. Three notepads. Three pens. Three little packs of tissues.

I was about to check the other nightstand, sure I would find nothing but more threes of other things. Breath mints, condoms, remote controls.

Then I saw it.

The one thing in this entire apartment that was not only out of place, but didn't belong to Stan.

"What the fuck?" I hissed to myself as I reached for the shiny, colorful thing, pulling it out from where it was half-wedged under one of those charger station things where Stan could power up his phone, tablet, and smartwatch all at once.

My fingers closed over it as I pulled it out.

I wasn't even aware of my legs giving out on me until I felt myself bouncing on the edge of the bed.

All I could focus on was the thing in my hand.

The shiny, multi-colored bracelet in my hand.

The women's bracelet.

“Did you find—what is it?” August asked as he came in the door, seeming to sense something had just gone really fucking wrong really fucking fast.

I was vaguely aware of him moving into the room and Aurelio in the doorway as I turned the bracelet over and over in my hand.

It couldn't be.

Could it?

My mind was flashing through memories so quickly that I felt nauseated and dizzy.

My free hand moved out, pressing onto the bed like I could keep myself from spinning.

But it was impossible.

Not as I was looking down and seeing what I was seeing.

“Trav,” August said, squatting down in front of me, his hand grabbing the wrist of my hand holding the bracelet.

“What is it? What does this mean?”

It meant a lot.

A fuckuva lot.

It meant my father wasn't the only one betrayed.

It meant I was a terrible judge of character.

It meant I'd been swallowing lies spoon fed to me for years.

Years.

“Traveler,” August's voice barked, trying to snap me out of it. “Your father's life is on the line right now,” he added, and that seemed to penetrate. “What is that? Do you know who it belongs to?”

I did.

God, I wished I didn't.

I wished it could be anything else but what my mind had settled on.

But I did.

I'd seen that bracelet a hundred times.

A thousand.

More.

Every single goddamned day for years.

"This belongs to Sheryl," I said, looking down into August's eyes. "This is her bracelet."

It had been right there, tightly wrapped around her wrist the last time she handed me cash for her tea. It had been there when I helped her cart her produce out of her trunk to set up her stand at the farmer's market. It had been there when she stood next to me at the soup kitchen, scooping out meals to the less fortunate. It had been there, patting my hand and telling me I'd made the right decision when I'd told off the developers for the second time.

It had been there, day in and day out, on the wrist of a woman who was a friend.

My only friend.

"Sheryl," August repeated, mind rolling through the names of people I may have mentioned over our time together. "The farmer?" he asked.

"Yes."

But... Stan and *Sheryl*?

They made no sense.

Sheryl with all of her loud, colorful, and gaudy ways. Stan with all of his black and neutral, all of his understated and carefully curated ways.

They didn't work.

But here it was.

Her bracelet.

Proof that she had been here.

Right?

Wait... no.

It didn't *prove* anything, did it?

Just that Stan was in possession of it.

Stan who was clearly more in someone's pocket than my father could have realized. Stan who was maybe sick of Sheryl sticking her nose in his business, causing problems.

Did Stan have Sheryl too?

Or was she in danger?

"We have to go," I said, jumping up fast enough that I almost knocked August on his ass before he could react and stand as well.

"Wait, okay," he said, following behind me as I charged into the hall. "Go where, Trav?" he asked as I stormed through the apartment, then out into the hall.

I didn't have the patience to wait for the elevator. I took off down the stairs at a dead run.

"To Sheryl's," I said, all but rolling my eyes at him. "She might be in danger too," I told him.

"Let's stop and think—"

"No," I said, voice tight. "No. There's no time to stop and think about anything. My dad is out there. Bleeding. Sheryl clearly has the attention of Stan. We need to be *doing* something, not thinking."

I threw myself into the car, slamming the door to cut off any more objections.

I was rattling off Sheryl's address as August and Aurelio climbed into their seats, and Milo took off, seeming not to understand that there was any debate about where we were going.

Anything August might have been thinking right then, he kept to himself, and we drove in painful silence back across

town, almost to the shop.

Where Sheryl's farmhouse was located on a roomy corner lot with a tall fence to keep anyone from throwing garbage or peeing into her carefully tended flower beds.

I'd been to her farm more times than I could count, had walked the rows of tomato plants that would have been hanging over with the weight of their ripe fruit if not for the pole system she'd set up to keep them upright.

I'd run my hands over the tops of the herb beds, my hand coming away smelling of dill and basil and rosemary.

I'd knelt down beside her at night with headlamps on, both of us picking off hornworms before they destroyed her crop. I'd pulled weeds and picked beans and helped her haul dirt after she'd come into the shop with an elastic bandage wrapped around her head from some mishap or another.

My mind flashed to her coming into the shop with a nasty black eye from the altercation with the local crew.

Was that it?

Was Stan in with that crew, and he had some vendetta against her for sticking her nose in their business?

Had she filed a police report about the attack?

I didn't remember.

I remembered debating out the pros and cons, but not what she ultimately decided to do.

Milo parked down the street past the house, hidden from view thanks to the stockade fence.

"Now what?" Milo asked, turning to look at us. "I'm sitting in the car again?" he asked.

"No," August said, voice tense, and I was too consumed with my own feelings to ask why. "No, you're coming with us this time," he said, and there must have been an undertone I missed, because all three men were tense as they reached for their weapons.

We were cat-like as we walked up the rear, then side of the property. The street was relatively quiet, save for the occasional sounds of traffic passing.

As we approached the front, the guys hid their guns behind their backs or in fronts of their suit jackets. Hidden. But ready at a moment's notice.

Sheryl's house had always been proof of her occupation. A small, old, little rundown farmhouse that had been there for generations.

She didn't have the money to replace anything substantial, but had lovingly tended to the front flowerbeds that were teeming with native flower species to attract the bees and butterflies that would go into her backyard and pollinate her plants, so they would bear fruit.

"You can't just break in," I insisted in a whisper as Aurelio reached for his little kit again.

"Yes, we can," August said, not giving me any further explanation, just nodding at his cousin, who stooped to work the lock.

It gave much more quickly than the one at Stan's apartment.

Aurelio's hand went to the knob, turning it silently, then waiting for August's nod before throwing it open.

The guns were out then as they moved inside.

I stuck to August's back as Milo came in behind me, closing the door silently.

Sheryl's place was exactly how I remembered it.

Mismatched antique furniture, lots of blankets, plants, and old framed art on the walls.

The kitchen cabinets were ancient, in need of yet another sanding and painting, like she had to do every two or three years, with peeling laminate floor, and piles of veggies all over that she was keeping for herself, or going to pack up for the farmer's market.

There was a half bath and one bedroom on the lower floor, but she used it as a dehydrating and freeze-drying room for her surplus foods, so she had something to sell over the winter for additional income.

We were just about to head up the stairs when the back door in the kitchen flew open, and footsteps moved into the house.

Heavy and confident, not Sheryl's almost floating steps.

August's arm shot back, flattening me to the wall as he and Aurelio raised their guns.

But before either of them could react, Milo was rushing out into the doorway as the man's body appeared, pressing his gun to his temple.

"On your knees," he demanded, voice low and ruthless. A chill moved through me at it.

The man stiffened but did as he was told, lowering to his knees.

"Hands on the back of your head," Milo demanded, then tucked his gun away to frisk the guy, finding a gun, and pocketing it. "All good," he said to August who moved away from me to stand in front of the man.

"It's not him," I murmured, getting a curt nod from him.

It wasn't Stan.

But it was a dealer from one of the neighborhood crews. I couldn't tell you which, though. Tall, a little on the stocky side, his pale skin ravaged by cystic acne, his face not having lost that pudginess around the jaw that usually happened in your mid-twenties, so he was younger than that. I would put him at no older than eighteen or nineteen.

"Where is Sheryl?" August demanded as he stood in front of the kid who looked equal parts defiant and scared.

There were three of them and only one of him. And he had just been divested of his weapon. It wasn't looking good for him, and he knew it. But he was also pissed about it.

“Fuck you,” the guy snapped.

I didn't know what I expected in this situation. I guess I'd never really given much thought to what mafia dudes were like in situations like this.

But I jerked back as August's hand shifted on his gun, holding it by the muzzle, then pistol-whipped the guy with it.

The crack made my stomach turn over, but the guy jerked his head back up, his jaw tight.

“Let's try that again. Where is Sheryl?”

“Fuc—“

“Before you finish that,” August said, glaring at the guy with cold eyes, “I'll remind you that I've got all night. And if I get tired, I got two other people here ready to step in.” At that, the guy glanced nervously at Aurelio and Milo who both angled their chins up, looking very capable and willing to beat the shit out of him if necessary. “Now, where is Sheryl.”

“At the warehouse,” the guy grumbled, head hanging.

“What warehouse?” August asked.

“The one on Fourth,” he said, making August's head turn to me, silently asking if I knew what he was talking about.

I gave him a barely perceptible nod, and his attention went back to the kid.

“Word to the wise, kid,” August said, sighing a bit. “You're not cut out for this lifestyle. Get out while you still can.”

And with that, he cocked back and pistol-whipped him hard enough to have him out cold before he even hit the ground.

“Lock him in the basement,” August demanded, tucking his gun away as the other two did the same, then came to fetch the guy under his arms, dragging him down the stairs, then rigging the door.

He would be able to get out eventually. But likely not quickly enough to thwart our plan to descend on the

warehouse.

“Let’s go,” August said, leading us back outside. “What is this warehouse?” he asked when we were in the car, and I’d given Milo directions.

“It’s an old mini meat mart. Not a giant warehouse or anything. It’s been abandoned as long as I can remember.”

“Seems like someone has co-opted it for their drug business,” August said, reached over to give my thigh a squeeze.

I placed my hand over his, trying to silently convey that I wasn’t upset about what I’d witnessed.

I would do anything to get my friend and my father back. I probably would have done worse than hitting the guy twice just because my emotions made me volatile in this situation.

“Is there a way to get to it without parking in front of it?” Milo asked, glancing at me in the rearview.

“I, ah... yeah, I guess. You can park the next street over. There’s an old chainlink fence but it’s broken in a section. We can just walk right through.”

“About that,” August started.

“I’m going with you,” I snapped, glancing over at him, fire in my eyes. “If you try to make me stay, I’ll just follow you.”

To that, he sighed. “Stubborn ass,” he grumbled, but he seemed like he knew that was going to be my response.

“Nothing would keep you in the car if it was your father and friend in there,” I reminded him.

“It looks kind of dead,” Aurelio said.

“It’s pretty prime-time for the dealers to be out,” I said, knowing their schedule better than these guys did.

“Still, we’re likely to be outnumbered,” August said. “Gotta stay sharp.”

We moved as silently as possible through an alley between buildings, coming up to the aforementioned broken fence.

It didn't escape me that everyone tensed by the moment.

August gave Milo and Aurelio a nod, and each took off in different directions. He reached for me, placing me behind him.

Then we moved forward.

To the back door.

We couldn't speak, but I swore I could feel the mix of confusion and unease when the handle just... pushed inward without resistance.

Maybe they didn't have to worry about security. And I imagined the dealers had to come and go often to get more supply and drop off money.

Still, my stomach twisted itself in a million little knots as August took a deep breath, then opened the door.

"Well well well... look who finally figured it out," a voice called as soon as we moved into the big, open space.

One where my father was strung up with chains from his wrists, his toes barely touching the ground.

Beaten.

Bloodied.

With Uncle Stan at one side.

And Sheryl at the other.

Not chained.

Not harmed.

And wearing the most hollow-eyed, evil smile I'd ever seen...

CHAPTER NINETEEN

August

I was glad the second we were inside that I hadn't decided that we all go in at once.

Sure, maybe they had cameras and would see Milo and Aurelio coming too, but if they didn't, at least we had an element of surprise.

They were smart.

They would wait for the right opportunity to move in and help.

The space was long and mostly empty, save for some folding tables lined against the walls, piled high with cash and drugs.

But there was no one else around.

They were either out dealing like Traveler thought. Or Stan and Sheryl didn't want witnesses to their torture and possible murder of the chief of police.

I heard Traveler's sucked in breath, and couldn't tell if it was because of her father's state, or her friend's betrayal.

I, for one, wasn't exactly surprised by what we were looking at.

I couldn't think of a single good reason for the woman's bracelet to be at Stan's place unless he was literally in bed with her.

I had no idea if Traveler's insistence on her friend's innocence and possible abduction was just because she wanted it to be true, or because she was too far removed from the criminal world to understand how shit worked.

Like how you didn't take tokens home from people you kidnapped, leaving it carelessly on display in an otherwise meticulously organized apartment.

Stan's takeout menus were organized by food type and then alphabetical order in his drawer.

Guys like that didn't leave evidence of their crimes sitting on their nightstands.

Traveler didn't want to hear that, though. And standing with her, feeling her almost vibrating with emotion, I wondered if that was the wrong move. Not telling her my thoughts. Especially after the kid at Sheryl's house. Who walked in confidently. Like he belonged there. Like he was completely comfortable with the layout and his right to be there.

I'd given that kid good advice.

Get out while you can.

Because anyone who cracked under so slight of pressure was not going to live to see their twenty-first birthday.

If Traveler had any concerns about Sheryl's involvement in this situation, they were wiped away by her friend's words.

Well well well... look who finally figured it out.

There was so much fucking condescension in her tone, too.

I'd never wanted to slap a woman before, but I wanted to smack that smirk off her face as she stared at a woman who just had her whole world pulled out from under her.

The thing was, Traveler *wasn't* someone who necessarily saw the best in people. Daughter of a dirty cop, running a business in an area overrun with dealers and other criminals, she didn't get the luxury of naïveté about the human condition.

So the fact that she did let her guard down and befriend someone, someone she thought she had so much in common with—something evidenced by Sheryl's hippie home that looked like the kind of place Traveler would feel right at home—and then found that said friend had been doing nothing but lying to her for years, yeah, that sucked.

And this woman was fucking gloating about it.

“Travy, go,” her father demanded, voice rough and raspy.

He looked... rough.

Stan and Sheryl had their mitts on him for hours, and clearly had spent most of that time torturing him.

His face was bloodied, bruised, and swollen.

His chest was a mess of cuts and blood, of bruises over his ribcage.

I imagined his back looked similar.

Had to give the man credit, he was a tough old fuck. He wasn't giving in, giving them whatever it was that they wanted from him.

“And you brought a friend,” Sheryl said, her gaze moving over me, stopping on my gun. “You can put that down now.”

“No fucking way,” I said, my free hand moving out to Traveler, trying to tuck her behind me, but she wasn't cooperating.

“I knew you were a traitorous shithead,” Traveler said, surprising me with how strong her voice was as she addressed her ‘uncle.’

“Not until it was too late, you didn’t,” he said, his gaze going to her throat.

“I’m surprised,” Traveler said, acting like he hadn’t spoken at all as she turned her gaze toward Sheryl. There was venom on her tongue as she spoke.

“By what?” Sheryl asked, seeming to enjoy this, judging by the little smirk toying with her lips.

“By your associating with fuck-ups like Stan,” she said. “Who doesn’t even know how to strangle a woman half his size to death,” she went on, and, fuck, was I proud of her in that moment. There was no emotion there, no way for them to know they’d gotten to her, even if I knew they had. She was cool. She was fucking *ice-cold*. “I never figured you for such a fool,” she added.

That cut through Sheryl’s unbothered facade like a hot knife. All that humor fell, leaving her instantly uglier as her jaw tensed, as her eyes slitted.

“Look who is talking. Someone who had been fooled for *years*,” Sheryl shot back.

“Maybe,” Traveler agreed. “But at least I associate with people who know what the fuck they’re doing,” she said, and this time, it was Traveler who smirked. “You might need to be looking for a new acne-covered lackey, by the way,” she added, leaving off that the guy was likely just running for his life when he got free, letting her old friend think I’d killed him.

Sheryl’s eyes flared for a moment before she banked down the emotion. “Yes, you are an interesting development, aren’t you?” she asked, looking at me. “You’re not from around here,” she added.

“No, I’m not,” I agreed, wondering how long we were going to have to have this fucking conversation before it would be safe to shoot.

But Stan was way too close to Traveler’s father, a nasty-looking serrated knife in his hand. Strained relationship or not, I had to make sure that man made it through this night.

“You don’t look like a drug dealer,” Sheryl said, trying to read me.

“Because I’m not,” I said, nodding.

It was Stan’s lifetime on the force that had him putting the pieces together much more quickly.

His gaze cut to the woman who was supposed to be his niece, his family—even if it wasn’t by blood—, who he was meant to care for and protect. Not attempt to murder.

“How’d you get wrapped up with the mob?” he asked, voice low and rough.

Because if there was ever a big fucking wrench in your plans, it was knowing you had just gotten on the wrong side of the mafia.

There were gangs. Then there were crews. There were even organizations.

But way at the tippy fucking top of the criminal food chain was where the mob always had, and always would, sit.

The thing that made the mafia powerful was the very thing no one else could replicate. The loyalty that came from blood. The generations worth of connection-building, or wealth-building, of perfecting the world of crime to get to the point where a capo’s hands were often not even dirty because of the hierarchy in the organization.

Everyone envied the mafia.

And everyone was fucking scared of us too.

Rightfully so.

We’d paid for our reputation in thousands of gallons of blood spilled over generations.

Sheryl’s confidence seemed to falter at that.

It was then I knew.

This wasn’t Stan’s show.

This was hers.

She wasn't some innocent woman who got wrapped up in the world of drugs and dirty cops.

Oh, no.

She was the queenpin.

The mastermind of this whole operation.

Working right there under Traveler's nose the whole time, working to create a friendship, so she never got suspicious.

"What? You're the only one who gets to keep secrets, *Uncle Stan*?" she asked. "Let my father go," she demanded. "And we can just forget about this."

"Don't be so fucking naive," Sheryl snapped, making Traveler stiffen. Shocked, I thought, at the vitriol and cutting tone. "That is not going to happen. Now I have no issues with the mafia," she said, turning her gaze toward me. "You should leave and forget what you saw here."

"That's not gonna happen."

"Well then, one missing mafia member likely won't be too mis—" she stared, cutting off at the ruckus behind her, then turning slightly to look.

I was about to raise my gun, thinking this was my chance, but Traveler grabbed my sleeve, a silent plea to wait.

I didn't understand as the voices that were not Aurelio and Milo came closer.

But then they moved into the warehouse, stopping dead at the scene in front of them.

"What the fuck?" the taller, fitter one snapped.

"Traveler," the darker-skinned one breathed out, his eyes wide as he looked at the damage done to her.

These guys had to be her other uncles, Chuck and Don.

"James?" the other one said at almost the same time, his face a mask of horror and, with each passing millisecond, fury.

Whatever this was, they clearly weren't in on the whole beat and kill the Moon family thing.

“Oh, good. Everyone is here,” Sheryl said.

Then, moving faster than seemed possible, she was reaching for a gun, firing off several shots so quickly that it was hard to understand what was happening until I saw Don and Chuck’s bodies jolt as bullets sliced into them.

I didn’t hesitate, aiming at Stan as he reached for his own gun.

Traveler let out a shocked scream as Milo and Aurelio came rushing in, finishing the job on Stan.

But we all paused.

Because we weren’t in the business of shooting women, of killing women.

It was a short pause.

But long enough, it seemed, for Traveler.

Whose hand shot out, grabbed my gun from my hand, aimed, and fired.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

Each fucking bullet hitting their marks.

Sheryl’s body jerked hard with each bullet slicing through her body.

Then she was falling, but not before she got one shot out herself.

Right at Traveler.

I seemed to see it before Traveler, shoving her hard to the side, praying the bullet wouldn’t land.

“Oh, fuck fuck fuck fuck motherfucking shit,” Traveler hissed, dropping my gun, and grabbing her shoulder.

Shoulder.

It was just her shoulder.

She was okay.

A graze.

“Oh, holy shitballs, how did you walk this off?” she asked, looking at Aurelio who was still standing with his gun out while Milo walked to Stan and Sheryl, checking each for a pulse before standing.

Then walking over to Don and Chuck, checking on them.

“They’ll make it,” he concluded. “Come on. We gotta get moving,” he told them, helping them each to their feet. The shock must have been fueling them as they each started to shuffle forward, hands pressing into their wounds.

It was done. For the time being.

Aurelio and Milo moved toward James who seemed to be going a little in and out of consciousness.

“Dad,” Traveler yelped, forgetting about her graze momentarily as she rushed toward her old man.

“You’re hit,” James said as Milo and Aurelio took his weight across their shoulders.

“It’s just a graze,” she said, brushing it off. “You’re a mess.”

“We gotta move,” I said, nodding at my cousins. “We don’t want to be here when the dealers come back,” I added.

“Are we just going to leave the drugs here?” Traveler asked.

“Don’t worry about it,” her father said, wincing as the guys shifted his weight as they started to walk.

“Problem for another day,” Traveler said in a way that implied it was something he’d said to her a lot in the past.

“You guys take her old man to our car,” I said. “I’ll drive these two,” I offered, nodding at Chuck and Don.

“I can—“ one of them started to object.

“Uncle Chuck...” Traveler cut him off.

Chuck's gaze went to her then, eyes going sad. "I should have known," he said.

"There was no way," she insisted. "We have to do this later," she added when I touched her hip, encouraging her to move things along. "Let August take you to the hospital."

"I got it," Chuck insisted again. "Go take care of your old man. I got Don," he said.

With that, they moved back outside. I ushered Aurelio, Milo, and James to get moving while I stood in the doorway of the warehouse, making sure Chuck and Don got safely in their car and started away.

Then Traveler and I made our way toward our car as well.

Without needing to look strong for her old man, Traveler's hand went to her shoulder, and she was whispering curses as we made the slow walk back to the car.

"Same hospital?" Aurelio asked, behind the wheel again.

"Yes," Traveler said at the same time her father said, "No."

"Yes, absolutely," Traveler said, her tone brooking no argument. "You need to get looked at. Scans and everything."

She gave Aurelio a nod, and he pulled away from the curb.

When we made it to the emergency room, Don was already being seen by a doctor as Chuck sat in the room next to him.

It was a silent, but tense, next few hours as Traveler refused treatment, and all four of us sat in the waiting room as Traveler's old man and her two uncles got worked on.

The sun came up, and Milo headed out, grabbing us some decent coffee, and updating the crew back in Navesink Bank.

By the time he came back, Traveler was at work trying to convince her father out of signing himself out.

Don's wife had arrived, but had gone up to the surgery floor to wait for him.

Chuck was on his own, walking out toward us with a sling on his arm to keep him from moving his arm too much, where

he'd been hit.

“Should I go sit up to wait for Don?” he asked, directing the question to James who had ignored his daughter’s valid concerns.

“Let’s not make shit more complicated right now,” James suggested. “We... *all* need to talk,” he added, glancing toward us. “Then we can come back and talk to her.”

“Your place?” Chuck asked.

“Dad, this is—“

“Yes,” James cut her off. “My place.”

We all walked out of the hospital a few minutes later, Chuck and James moving toward Chuck’s car, with the rest of us heading toward ours.

“Okay,” I said as Aurelio and Milo dipped into the car, closing their doors, giving us a little privacy. “Come here,” I said, opening my arms, and waiting for her to walk into them.

She did, all the tension leaving her body in a wave. She melted into me, her good arm wrapping me up. The bad one was limp at her side, and I was careful not to touch it.

I was going to make her let me clean the wound at least when we got to her old man’s house.

“You okay?”

“No,” she answered honestly. “But I need to be. Until this conversation is over,” she said.

“Can I suggest something, and have you actually give it some thought?” I asked, hearing the hope and fear in my voice.

“Okay...”

“After this is over today, can I convince you to come back to Navesink Bank with me?” I asked. “For a couple days. To recoup while your old man finishes up whatever is going on here.”

I expected her to say no, hence the fear in my voice.

But she shocked the shit out of me by quickly saying, “Yes.”

The way my heart felt like it swelled up when she said that? Yeah, I was pretty sure that was proof that things were not and never had been casual with us.

It felt like this might have been something pretty fucking similar to love.

Half an hour later, we were pulling back up to her old man’s house, finding all the lights on, and her father waiting for us at the door.

Aurelio and Milo hung back in the car.

This wasn’t about them.

They could catch some sleep or call back home to fill in our families.

It didn’t escape me that James reengaged the security system once we were inside.

Clearly, this wasn’t fully done, even if the queenpin and her consort were dead.

All the more reason to get Traveler out of Dodge for a while.

I would have to catch her old man alone and tell him just that. He loved her. He had to see the logic in getting her safe, so he had one less thing to worry about while cleaning up his town.

We followed James into the kitchen where Chuck was sitting, holding a glass of something amber in a glass.

It didn’t escape me that James had already cleaned up the mess on the floor from when Stan had attacked him.

“Here,” he said, pulling a stool away from the island where he already had his medical kit set up. “Sit,” he demanded even though Traveler was already moving to do so.

“I got it,” I said as her dad tried to reach for the antiseptic, but was having trouble raising his arm.

James looked at me for a second, then nodded, moving over toward the coffee pot instead. We all noticed how his hand shook as he lifted the pot, then his own mug, but we said nothing. There was no use trying to tell such a stubborn and proud man that he needed to rest.

“This is gonna hurt like a bitch,” I told Traveler as I rolled up her sleeve. “One, two...” Then I poured before she could wince.

“Oh, you fuckhead,” she hissed, rocking in her seat at the burn.

Across the room, Chuck had a ghost of a smile on his lips. Her father’s face was serious as he watched me clean up his daughter’s wound.

“All set. You could have used stitches,” I told her with a disapproving look. “So, now you’re gonna scar. Want some coffee?” I asked, even if she had more than enough already. What she needed was sleep. But we had to get through this first.

She nodded, and I went to make her a cup.

“Okay. What the actual... *fuck?*” Traveler asked after her first sip.

To that, James sighed.

“Yeah, I think we can all agree with that sentiment,” James agreed.

“You didn’t know?”

“That one of my best friends was fucking me over? Trying to kill me and my daughter? No, I didn’t know that.”

“Did you know about Sheryl?” she asked, voice wavering a bit.

“No. I knew there was a new player in town. I even heard whispers that it was a woman, but no. Had I known, you would have known.

“Up until I was attacked, I had no idea there was even a chance of betrayal from the inside. But, obviously, I had no

idea it was Stan, or I'd never have left you with him.”

“I was supposed to be there,” Chuck said.

“It wouldn't have changed anything, Chuck,” Traveler said, shaking her head. “He would have taken you out before coming for me.”

They were silent about that, likely all knowing she was right.

“Was that Tranq they were dealing?” Traveler asked.

“Yes,” James said, nodding.

“All the times I talked to her about how that shit was ruining the neighborhood...” Traveler said, voice sad.

“She was playing you,” I reminded Traveler. “She was playing this whole town. Just a sweet, innocent farmer. While she was raking in millions in life-ruining drugs.”

“What happens to that organization now?” Traveler asked.

“Now, we bring them in,” James said. “I never did get an offer from their top brass. Now I know why,” he said. “Your Uncle Stan already had a deal with them.”

“But Sheryl has been here for years,” Traveler said. “Tranq is a new problem.”

To that, Chuck shrugged, then winced as it jostled his shoulder. “Maybe she was just a farmer for a while,” he suggested. “But got greedy for more. Got involved with Stan, who could tell her how to get more.”

“I don't buy that,” I said. “It's too passive. She was clearly in charge.”

“It's because of me,” Traveler said, her gaze far away.

“What do you mean?” James asked.

“Sheryl was my only friend,” she admitted. “I mentioned things I shouldn't have,” she added. “About you and Stan and Chuck...” she said, looking apologetically at her uncle.

He shook his head. “Weren't telling her shit that wasn't true,” he said.

“Sheryl is... was smart. She would have done her research, figured out which one of you she could go to...”

“But why Stan?” Chuck asked. “Why not me? The fuck-up divorcee...”

“I don’t know. Maybe she picked up on some sort of animosity toward James from Stan,” I suggested. “She would have worked at that crack until it was a crater. Then she got whatever she wanted out of him.”

“Stan was the uncle who had the least love for me,” Traveler said. “He could barely hide his distaste for me while he was pretending to keep me safe.”

“Motherfucker,” James hissed as his gaze lingered on Traveler’s throat. He shook it off, though, and looked up at her face. “You shot straight and steady and true,” he told her, nodding.

“I might have hated all those lessons,” Traveler said, nodding. “But they came in handy after all.”

“It shouldn’t have come to that. You should have been safe,” James said, head hanging.

“Hey, listen,” I said, watching his head lift to look at me. “Your daughter is a royal fucking pain in the ass,” I said, hearing a choked laugh from Chuck that he tried to cover with a cough. “She’s got a mouth, and she knows how to use it. She poked at the neighborhood crews for years. And your work somehow managed to keep her safe all that time, despite her aforementioned pain in the ass personality,” I said, glancing at Traveler who was smiling at me, knowing I meant no malice.

“You couldn’t have predicted someone that close to you would betray you. It would be like my own brother betraying me,” I said.

To that, James nodded.

“How did you and Don end up at the warehouse?” Traveler asked, looking over at Chuck.

“Stan called,” Chuck said. “Said something about how your father had a lead on who went after you guys, and he

needed backup, that he couldn't go because he was taking care of you." Chuck bit off the last few words, realizing just now what a double entendre that was.

"How'd you get away?" James asked, shaking his head.

"I played dead," Traveler admitted with a snort. "I figured most people, even cops, don't know exactly how long four or five minutes is. He gave up soon after I went limp. I went for help at my neighbor's, but he was asleep. That was when Stan—though I didn't know it was Stan at the time—realized I was alive and came for me. I ran, stole his car, and drove around to try to find one of you. When I couldn't, I drove to Navesink Bank."

"Why didn't you call—" Chuck started.

"He stole my phone when I was in the shower."

"Fucker," her father growled.

"Got any more questions for her?" I asked, looking at Traveler.

"Can't think of anything right now. I'm sure something will come up, though."

"I'm taking Traveler back to Navesink Bank with me," I told him, watching his brows go up slightly. "This shit needs to blow over. She needs to be safe. I can keep her safe."

To that, James looked between the two of us, then nodded.

"That would be good," he agreed.

"I'll get her a new phone, so you can be in touch with her, until then, I will give you mine," I told him.

"Sounds like a plan. You need to rest," James said, looking at his daughter, his eyes softening.

She did.

And eat.

And see Lettie again.

Then rest some more.

She'd been through a fucking lot.

“I will,” Traveler said, standing, then walking a bit awkwardly over to her father, and wrapping her arms around him.

It was clear these two were not huggers.

Their bodies were stiff.

“Be careful,” Traveler begged. “I know you have stuff to do, but be careful. I almost lost you twice already.”

“Almost lost you three times,” James said as they parted. “But we will be safe,” he assured her.

Traveler moved over toward her Uncle Chuck, trying to hug him easily, but the man wrapped her up tight before releasing her.

“And I want updates on Uncle Don,” she added.

“Will do, kid,” Chuck assured her as she moved back toward me.

We said our goodbyes, then made our way back out to the car.

In the back, Traveler curled into my side.

“Thank you,” she said, resting her head on my shoulder.

“I’d say ‘anytime,’ but I’d appreciate you not getting into a life-or-death sort of situation for a while,” I said, getting a small chuckle out of her.

“I plan to soak in your tub and eat your cooking and sleep for a week straight,” she told me. Then, after a pause, in a much smaller voice, “Or longer.”

Oh, it was going to be longer.

I was a betting man.

And I was going to put my money on forever.

I was pretty fucking sure I wanted to spend my life fighting and making up with her.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Traveler - 1 day

I passed out cold sometime on the ride back to Navesink Bank.

Right up until it happened, I would have sworn my mind was racing too much to allow me to sleep.

But I guess the days of exhaustion, fear, and adrenaline had finally caught up with me.

That, paired with the fact that I knew I was safe with August, and I just knocked out. I even somehow slept through getting back to August's apartment, and getting carried inside.

I didn't wake up again until the sun was screaming in at me from his large bedroom windows the next day, looking high enough in the sky that I was pretty sure it was closer to noon than morning.

Even so, though, all I wanted to do was pull the blanket over my eyes, and pass back out.

It was my growling stomach and screaming headache that had me grudgingly climbing out of bed, going into the

bathroom to find that August had not only set out a toothbrush for me, but that there was also a fresh outfit sitting there, panties and socks included, but no bra. As if that wasn't enough, there were organic soap and shampoo bars, a hairbrush, ties, and some lotion.

It seemed as though August had set Smush on the task of making me feel at home while I was staying with him.

I wanted to follow my stomach to the kitchen, but I took the time to force myself through a shower and clothes change, brushing my teeth, and my hair. That was a harder task than I'd expected, my scalp sore from being pulled around by my ponytail, but I did my best, then made my way back out of the bath and bedroom.

The second I opened the door, I was hit with it.

The scents of food cooking.

The tangy red sauce, the creamy white sauce, garlic, basil, oregano.

What was he cooking?

The living room was abandoned, but a TV was on, some reruns playing.

"August?" I called, wincing at how much my throat hurt as I spoke.

You'd think sleep would make you feel better.

But, nope.

I felt like crap.

All the pains that had been overshadowed by my worry and fear before were amplified now.

"There you are," August said as I stepped into the kitchen.

It was an enormous space, longer than wide, with a sprawling island down most of the length of it, and a dining table toward the far end with a view of the water.

He'd clearly been up for a while, dressed in slacks and a button up. No jacket, tie, or shoes, just socks.

“Christ,” he sighed as he approached me, his hands framing my face, eyes sad, as he took in all the bruises that really settled into impressively dark shades of blue and purple.

“Feels worse,” I admitted.

“Got your medicine over here. And fresh coffee,” he said, waving toward where he had a cup already waiting for me on the counter.

“What time is it?” I asked as I watched him make me coffee, then bring it and the bottle of pills over to the table.

“Twelve-thirty.”

“Why didn’t you wake me up?” I asked, eyes round.

“Because you needed to sleep,” he said, shrugging as I took two pills, knowing they weren’t going to do much, but at least they’d do something.

“Did you have Smush shop for me?” I asked.

“I did. She just did a quick shop so far. We wanted you to have something to change into when you woke up. But she’s out doing more shopping now.”

“She really doesn’t need—“

“Yes, she does,” he cut me off. “And I don’t want to hear shit about paying me back, or why everything is new, not second-hand, none of that shit,” he said, smirking at me.

“This brand is sustainable,” I said, pointing toward my shirt. “And the soap was organic...”

“Told you Smush is better at this shit than any of us would be,” he said. “Doesn’t even know you, but got all the shit you’d like.”

“Am I gonna meet her?” I asked.

“If you’re feeling up to it, sure,” he said.

“Okay. That’s enough small talk. What are you cooking?” I asked, getting a big smile out of him.

“I’m heating. Mom cooked,” he told me.

“She was here?” I asked.

“Yep. One of my brothers must have told her you were here. And injured. So she hit the store when it opened, then rolled up her sleeves, and got to work.”

“Really?” I asked, surprised to find my eyes glassy.

“Of course,” he said. “And I’m sure there is going to be a meal train once this food runs out.”

“A meal train?” I asked, sipping my coffee, and trying not to jump up and go grab a bowl of whatever was in the oven.

“All the women will pick a day and meals and drop them off. They do it when someone is hurt or sick, pregnant, post-partum, anything that would make cooking good food difficult.”

“That’s really great of them,” she said.

“You done acting like you’re not fucking dying for some food?” he asked, clearly knowing me a little too well.

“Yes,” I said, nodding. “I want a serving big enough for a bodybuilder. Two bodybuilders,” I clarified.

With that, he got up, going to the oven to pull out something that seemed to just be staying warm.

“Fettuccini alfredo with broccoli and breadsticks,” he told me as he brought over a giant plate for me, and a much smaller one for himself.

“Oh, my God,” I groaned, the smell alone practically fucking orgasmic.

I wasted no time, jumping in and twirling the thick noodles, then stabbing a floret of broccoli before shoving it all into my mouth.

“Oh, my *God*,” I whimpered as I started to chew. “I hope you don’t want anymore of this, because I am eating all of it,” I told him.

I stuffed my face until my stomach was so full that I was uncomfortable.

“What else did she make?” I asked as August took the dishes to the dishwasher.

“Pasta Pomodoro and eggplant parm,” he told me. “She said that should get us through the day,” he added, smirking. “I promised her that I would tell her any preferences when you woke up, so she could make those dishes.”

“Really?” I asked, heart feeling like it was swelling in my chest.

“Yeah, of course.”

“Isn’t that a lot of work?”

“Baby,” August said, shaking his head. “She’ll be offended if you don’t have some suggestions. She wants to do it, let her do it.”

“In that case, ravioli. And minestrone.”

“She makes a fucking banging minestrone,” August said. “She’ll even make bread bowls to eat it out of.”

“Well, that needs to happen,” I decided.

“How are you holding up?” he asked as we moved into the living room, him pulling my legs up over his lap, and me resting my head on his shoulder almost immediately. Like we had been doing this for years.

“I’m... processing,” I said.

And there was still a lot to process.

Like the fact that Stan was dead.

That Sheryl was dead.

That I’d been the one to kill her.

I mean, it had to happen. I knew that if she’d been a man and not a woman, the guys would have taken her out. But their chivalry had gotten the best of them in that moment, forcing me to put an end to it.

I wasn’t someone who thought murder was *always* wrong.

In fact, I believed the world would be better if certain people were in the ground. Serial pedophiles or rapists, for example.

And I did believe we were all capable of killing someone in the right situation. There was no denying that it had been an us-or-them scenario.

The only part I was really struggling with was the fact that Sheryl had, for a very long time, been a friend. Even if she'd been faking it all along, that didn't change the experiences I'd had, the feelings that I'd connected to those experiences.

Honestly, if I really thought about it, I would say that in a way, Sheryl had become almost a surrogate mom figure to me when mine up and left town when I was old enough to be on my own. She'd been a steady older female figure in my life. Someone who had warmth, who I shared common interests with.

Clearly, too, that wasn't all fake.

She did garden.

She did go to the farmer's market.

She did volunteer in the community.

True, it was very possible that it was all just a carefully curated persona to keep her off the local police radar, but still. It felt real to me at the time.

My mind was trying to run through every one of our interactions, looking for cracks, trying to pry them open to see what was hidden beneath.

"It was Sheryl who screwed with my cameras inside the shop," I said, looking over at August.

"Yeah, I came to that conclusion too."

"And that story about getting drugs thrown in her truck, and getting beat up when she confronted the dealers, that was all bullshit."

"More likely she and some other kingpin in the area got into it," August agreed.

A deep sigh escaped me, prompting August to rub his hand up and down my arm.

"What is it?" he asked.

“She was the only person I had,” I said. “I wasn’t even on speaking terms with my father, which meant I wasn’t speaking to my uncles either. So she was all I had. And it was all... fake.”

“I can’t say anything to make that better,” August said, giving me a squeeze. “But she’s not all you have anymore,” he added. “And I don’t just mean you have your father and uncles,” he added. When I said nothing, it was his turn to sigh. “Hey, sugar tits?” he called, getting a small laugh out of me.

“What?”

“In case that wasn’t clear enough, I’m saying you got me. And by ‘got me,’ I mean I wouldn’t be opposed to you just... not going home,” he said.

Oh, God.

My heart, so bruised from the events of the past few days, felt suddenly healed.

“Yeah?” I asked, voice small, not wanting to get my hopes too high without some reassurance.

“Yeah. I mean, I get you’re probably fucking allergic to this place,” he said, waving a hand around. “Not a single tile or wood plank in this place is recycled,” he teased. “But this was always just a transition place while I found a home.”

“Are you saying you want me around long enough to... move into a different place with you?” I asked, face scrunching up, cringing at the emotional vulnerability I felt right then.

I wasn’t good with that. Being exposed. Opening up. I had such little experience with it. Especially with men.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying,” he confirmed. “Figure a new house project would allow for a fuckuva lot of disagreements,” he said, smirking at me now. “And, therefore, a lot of makeup sex.”

“I’m going to be... difficult,” I warned.

“No fucking shit,” he said, laughing. “Guess I’m just into difficult women,” he added, shrugging.

“I, ah, I think I might be okay with this arrangement. I mean... I’ll have to go back eventually.”

“Why?” he asked, tensing.

“I have to clean out the shop and my home. Talk to the developers about a buyout. I guess they’ll get Sheryl’s place now too.”

“Hey,” August said, sensing a sadness in my voice. “I get that some part of this feels like a failure when you’ve dedicated so much of your life to that neighborhood. But there was no standing up to development. They will drive everyone you’ve been working to help out in due time.”

“I know. I was thinking that the day of the break-in, actually,” I admitted. “I was wondering if I was just shooting myself in the foot by holding out, knowing my buy-out would be less down the line.”

“Yeah. I think it was pure stubbornness to think you could stay long-term.”

“It was all I had,” I said, shrugging.

“Well, not anymore. And you can do good anywhere. You can do good here. There are people everywhere that could use your help.”

“That’s true.”

“You could even open a coffee shop if you want to.”

“I, ah, I don’t think I want to,” I admitted. “I opened the shop because I could work for myself, and I’ve always loved coffee and baking. But I don’t know if I want to do it again. I don’t... I don’t know what I want to do.”

“Well, luckily, there’s no rush,” he said. “You gotta heal. Then you can sell your place. You’ll have that money as a safety net, though you won’t be needing it with me.”

“I always pay my—“

“I’m sure you have. But now you don’t. Let’s put a pin in this discussion until you’re healed, because I think the makeup sex will be epic,” he said, pressing a kiss to my temple.

“Okay,” I agreed, relaxing back into him. “I need to call my father today. Check on Don.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, fingers stroking up and down my arm. “And if you’re up for it, I’d like to go visit Lettie at her office.”

“I think I’m okay. But I did tell her that I would see her again if I was around.”

“There’s no rush. Smush will be around in a bit, so you can see what she got you. Then call your old man. After that, we can go.”

“Then come home and have pasta.”

“Oh, baby, if there is one thing you can count on with this family, it’s that there will always be pasta.”

August - 1 month

“Where’s Traveler?” my mom asked when I showed up for dinner without her in tow.

They hadn’t actually met yet.

That was something that my mother was clearly unhappy about.

It wasn’t exactly intentional.

That first week of Traveler being with me, she slept so much that any time my mom dropped by, she was passed out.

I’d never seen someone sleep like that. I was almost going to try to talk her into seeing someone, some part of me worried she was depressed. But when she got up, she was happy and bubbly. I think she was just recovering from the events that went down in her hometown. And, to an extent, I think she was catching up on all the sleep she’d been missing out on for years.

After that, she’d thrown herself into finding local charities, and throwing herself into them. She was single-handedly working on an initiative to force the parks system to get a beach-comber to clean up all the litter on it.

She’d been busy trying to find her place in this new town, this very different life.

My ma probably wouldn’t have been so ticked off if she hadn’t found out that Traveler and I had gone out to eat with Aurelio as well as another dinner with Massimo and Cammie.

“She’s in her hometown,” I told my ma as I kissed her cheek. “She had a meeting with the developer today. And she wanted to see her father.”

“Oh,” my mom said, shoulders relaxing a bit. Because she couldn’t exactly be mad that the girl was spending time with her own family while I was spending time with mine.

“She wants to meet you, Ma,” I assured her. “She just wanted to heal up first. She was planning on coming tonight. But this developer thing is kind of important.”

It was the last thing.

She'd gone back to visit with her father and uncles.

Don had some complications after surgery, but he was finally home with his wife and kids. And a shiny new story about what had happened to him. One that didn't involve being a dirty cop. Or implicating his friends either.

As for James, he'd done what he set out to do. None of us had any doubts on that front. The man was clearly a force to be reckoned with. He cleaned up his city. He got his control back.

Tranq would make its way back, but for the time being, his town was clear of it.

As for Stan, well, he was officially a missing person.

My money was on him never being found.

Sheryl's reputation in the town was ruined as she was exposed for the criminal she was.

Traveler said that the same developer that was buying her place had already bought Sheryl's farm.

Apparently Chuck and her old man had stopped by the farm, picking all the produce left, and dropping it off at the soup kitchen.

They weren't *good* men. But they weren't bad either.

They existed in some gray area between.

The same could be said of me and mine, I guess.

"So, she is selling?" my mom asked, hope clear in her voice.

Clearly, my ma was already hearing wedding bells and thinking of baby booties. She was unabashedly obsessed with the idea of more grandbabies.

And while, yeah, that shit was on my mind too, I was okay with us taking our time to get there. We were still young.

We were currently having fun arguing over what kind of house would be perfect.

New builds were out, obviously. But I didn't want a huge fixer-upper, either. I wasn't like Nino. I didn't want to spend years fixing up a place. Cosmetic shit was one thing, gutting the place was a complete other.

We both wanted a yard. Traveler, because she wanted a "native pollinator paradise." Me, because I wanted to see kids playing in it one day. Even if I wasn't looking forward to the yard maintenance.

"There won't be any lawn maintenance since we are planting a clover lawn," she'd argued.

"Clover means flowers and flowers mean bees. The kids could get stung on their feet. We could get stung on our feet."

So, yeah, it was going to be a fucking process still.

Wedding and kids would be something to talk about sometime down the road.

"Yeah. She wants to be done over there, so she can really dig into the house search."

"Good. I'm glad. You need a home. I keep telling your brothers," she added, raising her voice as we walked into the kitchen where Dante and Santo were standing, immediately stiffening at hearing her talk about them. "No woman is going to want to get serious about a man who doesn't have a house for her to make into a home."

"Love you, Ma, but it's not the nineteen-fifties anymore," Santo said, shaking his head at her.

"Yeah, maybe Santo wants to be a kept man," Dante teased, making our mom's eyes go small.

"Not my son," she said, shaking her head as she went to the stove. "I raised my boys to be providers."

"But what if she likes her career?" Dante pressed.

Dante, the clear middle child of the family, did enjoy starting shit with our mom sometimes. Nothing ever serious, just getting a rise out of her.

“Well, of course a woman could work if she *wants* to. But no son of mine will marry someone until he is able to provide for her should she want to stay home and keep house and raise the babies.”

And *that* was the end of that.

Because we all agreed with her.

Luckily for us, given our profession, if we were willing to pay our dues, then bust our asses for just a few years, we were set. There would never be any concerns about money. For us, our wives, or our kids.

“Did Traveler like the gnocchi?” my mom asked as she pulled garlic knots out of the oven.

“Ma, Traveler hasn’t encountered a dish from you that she hasn’t loved. Apparently, she put on five pounds since moving here,” I said. I hadn’t noticed. Not that I would care even if I had.

“A little meat on a woman is a good thing,” she said.

“Can’t argue with that,” Santo said, smirking.

It was no secret in the family that Santo preferred curvier chicks.

“Oh, well, finally,” Ma said as the back door opened, and Valley moved inside. “Nothing like helping your dear mother make dinner,” she said, shaking her head.

“When have you ever needed help, Mama?” Valley asked, but moved immediately to put the knots into a basket with a tea towel to keep them warm. “Oh, tell Traveler that the school jumped on her little recycling initiative,” she said, smiling at me.

I had no idea about a recycling initiative for Valley’s fancy-ass prep school. But it didn’t surprise me. Traveler had been on the phone with Valley for hours when she answered my phone for me when I’d been out picking up coffee.

“What? You’ve met Traveler?” Mom cried, eyes wide. “She’s met my future daughter-in-law before me?” she asked, turning her outrage on me.

This was definitely not a good time to let her know that Smush had met Traveler on no fewer than three occasions already.

“We talked on the phone, Ma,” Valley said, barely able to suppress her amusement.

“Oh, that’s fine then,” Ma said, starting to plate the pasta, and pouring a healthy amount of meat sauce on top.

Behind her back, Valley and I shared a smile.

“Alls I know is you better set up a date for those two, or Ma’s head is gonna fucking explode,” Dante said as he followed me to the table.

I didn’t want to spoil the surprise.

But Traveler had been working almost nonstop for the past week, trying to perfect a “real Italian dinner” to try to impress my mom with.

She’d settled on eggplant rollatini as the main dish with herb bread, a mediterranean salad, and finishing off with something she’d never doubted herself about. Tiramisu.

She’d also been frantically trying to make my place feel more “homey” to, I think, show my ma that she was going to make a good life for her son. “Nesting,” Smush had called it as she helped Traveler hang art and roll out rugs.

Ma was going to be over the moon when I finally invited her over.

It meant a lot to both of them in very different ways. My mom, who wanted all of us settled down and happy, building our own family units. Traveler, who was looking for a surrogate mom figure in her life, so she wanted my mother’s approval.

It wasn’t necessary, of course. Traveler had my mother’s approval just by getting me to settle down and get serious.

Still, it was sweet how much she was trying.

I couldn’t wait until she was done selling her place, and that chapter finally felt fully closed, so we could fully devote

our time to the next one.

Traveler - 6 months

Yes, it took six months to find a home.

Not because there weren't enough on the market, or because we had a strict budget to work within.

Nope.

Just because we were two stubborn-ass people who had very different ideas on what we wanted.

In the end, I was kind of glad neither of us had given in. Because one morning as I was making coffee, the text came through from our realtor about a house that hadn't made any lists yet.

A absolutely charming barn-style home with wooden shakes, a gambrel roof, high ceilings, exposed timber beams,

and a giant hearth with the outside part of the fireplace covered in ivy.

It wasn't new—my most important stipulation—but it had been completely renovated in the past ten years. Which would appease August.

It had wide plank wooden floors, a big, central U-shaped kitchen that allowed you to see into the dining, living, and family rooms at the same time. I figured that would come in handy when there were kids running around, allowing me to cook dinner and keep an eye on them.

Speaking of future children, it was a five-bedroom. Five. The primary was on the lower level, and all the others upstairs along with one and a half baths up there and one and a half downstairs.

The property wasn't huge. But not many in the area were unless you were paying several million. But it was just shy of an acre, which was plenty of room to have places for gardens, a play area, and open running room.

And while the current owners had really done a lot, they'd made sure to keep its original charm.

"Listen," I said when I brought my phone over to August who was still sitting in bed, answering a text. Which seemed to be a second profession of his thanks to his giant family.

It wasn't uncommon for me to get finger cramps from answering all the texts I was getting now too. Not that I was complaining. I'd never felt as whole and loved as I did with his family constantly reaching out to me, including me, wanting to get to know me.

"I'm listening," he said, putting his phone down and looking over at me.

"I better not hear a single complaint about this one," I said as I got on my side of the bed and handed him the phone. "Or I am buying it myself, and you can just continue to live in this glass and stone monstrosity," I told him.

Then I watched him as he read the listing, then flipped through the pictures. All seventy-five of them.

It felt like it took hours for him to finish as I sat there with my hopeful little heart lodged in my throat.

“Damn it,” he said in the end, sighing as he handed me back my phone.

“Damn it?” I asked, my voice a small whisper, that hopeful heart starting to deflate.

“We can’t argue about it,” he said, smirking. “I fucking love it too.”

Oh, thank fucking God.

“Makeup sex is great,” I said, tossing my phone away, then climbing over to straddle him. “But have you ever had *We just picked out our dream house* sex before?”

“I have not,” he said, eyes warming already.

“I have a feeling it’s gonna be even better,” I told him, sealing my lips to his.

It started soft and sweet and loving.

Yes, loving.

We’d said those words.

Him first.

Because I was a real chickenshit when it came to my own feelings.

But my words nearly tripped over themselves to rush out as soon as he said those three words. Okay, his was five words. Because, heaven forbid, he missed a chance to call me *sugar tits*.

So, yes, it started as loving and hopeful.

But it wasn’t long until we were tearing the clothes off of each other, before our hands were roaming, stoking little sparks until they became a raging wildfire.

Before we knew it, August was slamming inside of me from behind, and my face was buried in the bedding, trying to muffle my moans as he drove me up.

August’s hands took a handful of my hair, pulling me up.

“Go ahead and scream,” he said, pounding into me. “They’re not going to be our neighbors for long,” he said, his words and thrusts pushing me right to that edge, then sending me soaring into a whole-body orgasm, leaving me trembling and boneless.

August crashed down next to me, but curled over me, reaching for something.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Getting your phone,” he said. “To tell that realtor to make an over-list price offer right now.”

Have I mentioned how much I loved this man?

‘Cause I did.

More than I ever thought I was even capable of.

Did he still bitch about my reusable silicone bags that took the place of his little single-use zipper bags? Yep. Did I still nag him about the ingredients in his after shave? Absolutely. Did we still bicker and disagree? All the time. But, somehow, it was our differences that made for such a deep bond between us.

He cared about the things I cared about not because he necessarily did, but because he knew I did.

I learned how to do things that had never been in my wheelhouse before. Like compromise. Like not always get my way.

And, amazingly enough, I actually liked that.

It meant that we were building something together, that I wasn’t going to have to always be and do everything alone for the rest of my life.

“I think that big Weeping Willow has to be taken down in the backyard, though,” August said after contacting the realtor.

“Over my dead body,” I said, making August’s lips twitch.

“Want to argue about it for a while?” he asked, and I knew exactly what was on his mind.

“Yes, but I want some of that leftover pasta first,” I said, rolling over his body.

And as I walked to the kitchen, I caught sight of myself in a mirror, stopping dead in my tracks.

Because there it was.

A giant smile on my lips, my joy seeping out of my very pores. That same look that my dad had on his desk of me when I first opened my shop.

Bone-deep happy.

That was what I was.

And something told me that it was only going to get better.

August - 12 years

“What is going on here?” I asked as I walked into the dining room to find Traveler and the kids deep into another craft project.

When it came to time with the kids, Traveler was big on crafts, walks in the woods, and puzzles. Not a day passed that didn't involve glue of some kind. Often involving glue, leaves and acorns found on a walk, and some DIY thing they were making with all of it.

And every single time, Traveler was right there with them, making something herself.

Though she might not even realize it herself, I thought that doing these things with the kids was a way of her sort of healing her inner child, the one who didn't get to do all this kind of shit because she was in the middle of an unhappy marriage, then bitter divorce.

I never had any doubts about what kind of mom she would be. All you had to do was take one look at her charitable work to know how huge her capacity for love and nurturing was.

Ever since our first son came out, she'd been all in on the mothering thing.

She'd even stepped down from the non-profit she'd been working on for a few years. Sure, she did still volunteer her time for charities that were near and dear to her, and even brought the kids with her to teach them about giving back to your community, but she'd chosen to make being a mom her full-time job.

"Toilet paper roll craft day," Traveler explained, waving at the table.

And, sure enough, everything the kids had made, from the colorful Japanese Flying Carps hanging from a stick to the shark binoculars, the bird feeders, and the race cars were made from old TP rolls.

"Haven't you wondered where all our old toilet paper rolls have gone to?" she asked.

"Not once," I said, getting a smile out of her as I squatted down next to one of the kids' chairs.

"Daddy, we made beans!" our second-oldest at six, declared, pointing to the sideboard where a bunch of empty rolls were sitting in a box and filled with dirt.

“We are doing green bean starts in them,” Traveler explained. “They work way better than the plastic trays anyway.”

“Fish,” our three-year-old said, shoving his trio of carp in my face so fast he almost took out an eye.

“You know what I think?” I asked as Traveler rocked our very fussy newborn.

The first three had been relatively easy babies.

“If the first had been this fussy, I don’t think we’d have had this many,” Traveler declared, her head on my shoulder as I had the baby propped up against my legs in bed, rocking him side to side to try to lull him.

We probably would have.

She loved the baby stage, the toddler stage, the little kid stage. She would probably be crazy enough to enjoy the teenager stage when we got there. *In only four years* with our oldest.

God, time felt like it was flying.

“What, Daddy?” our eldest asked.

“I think, since you were so busy working all day on this, that we should have Uncle Lucky drop off pizza tonight,” I said, having noticed when I’d walked past the kitchen that Traveler hadn’t even had a chance to get anything going yet.

We had our meal train going, but sometimes she was so busy with the kids that even getting a tray in the oven took time she didn’t have.

Pizza was always a crowd-pleaser in our house, especially given how infrequently we had it.

What with all the grandmas, aunts, and cousins who loved cooking, as well as Traveler when she had the time and energy, there was usually no reason to order in.

“And,” Traveler said, handing over the baby as I reached for him. “I think we are going to eat on our trays in the living room!” she said, making a big deal out of it, like some grand

adventure. When the two of us both knew it was because cleaning up the craft project looked like way too much fucking work after a long day.

We weren't always an immaculate house kind of family. Toys were almost always scattered around. Muddy shoes rarely found themselves back in their cubbies by the door. There were always at least a few dishes in the sink, no matter how many times we ran the dishwasher.

But we were okay with that.

Life with four kids, we'd decided, should be a little chaotic. Fun should beat out function whenever it could. And time spent with each other should always trump time spent toiling away at endless chores.

"How did you do that, you monster?" Traveler asked a few minutes later, watching from the doorway with small eyes as I got the baby in the crib without him waking up. *Touchdown*, we would call it, when the second his little back hit the mattress, he was up and screaming again.

"It's in the jiggle roll," I said.

"The jiggle roll?" she asked, brows going up.

"Yeah, you know, jiggle," I said, reaching out to grab her arms and give her a jiggle. "Then the roll," I added, rocking her side to side.

"The jiggle roll. Right. How did I not think of that?" she said, shaking her head at me as she followed me down the stairs and out onto the screened-in porch.

The kids were already outside, trying to hang their DIY bird feeders off the branches of the Weeping Willow tree where Traveler had built a low treehouse for the kids to play in.

"Told you that tree wasn't going anywhere," she said, leaning into me, prompting me to press a kiss to her temple.

"Yeah, I figure if I let it stand, we at least have one thing to argue about for the next twenty or thirty years," I said, getting a big smile out of her.

A lifetime of arguing and making up with Traveler.
Sounded pretty fucking perfect to me.

XX

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