



Taming her won't be easy.

UNEXPECTED TEMPTATION

MINIK

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MINK



Unexpected Temptation

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UNEXPECTED TEMPTATION

MINK

Love pops up in unexpected places in this collection from MINK. Even though temptation might not be foreseen, love takes control and brings these alpha heroes to their knees for the women they adore. This collection features Unexpected Queen, Unexpected Love, Unexpected Devotion, Sweet Psycho, and the brand new story Sweet Obsession (the highly-requested story for Ocean!).

Unexpected Queen — He thinks they're getting married as nothing more than a business transaction ... Until he sees her, wants her, and can't get enough of her.

Unexpected Love — His nickname is the Butcher, and for good reason. But can the sweet daughter of a mob boss tame his dark nature?

Unexpected Devotion — She's completely off limits, the boss's sister. But he's never been able to say no to her, and he never will.

Sweet Psycho — Which one is the psycho, the hero or the heroine? (Hint: All of the above.)

Sweet Obsession — I'm a special ops agent, more or less, though I don't let the government tell me what to do. Private contractor. Part of a gang of women who infiltrate black ops and run riot on the bad guys. There's one bad guy in particular I've had my eye on—Vane Bartow. Maybe he's not bad in the classic sense, but he's certainly bad for me—always stealing my focus. So now I'm going to steal something from him. At least that's the plan. Until I get caught. Until Vane shows me

exactly why he flusters me, fascinates me, and ignites every bit of curiosity—and desire—I have inside.

UNEXPECTED QUEEN

UNEXPECTED QUEEN

MINK

I agreed to marry a woman I've never met for one reason only—to become part of the Larone family, the most powerful mafia name in this city. My bride was never important to me. Sure, I'd treat her fine and keep her at arm's length, but this was never going to be a love match.

Until I heard her smart mouth. Until I saw her. Until I lifted her veil and looked into her eyes.

That was it for me. I went from being a made man to a man who would do anything for Angelica Larone.

Do I care that she says she's only waiting around for me to die so she can have my empire? No. Because this thing between us—it's real. I'm going to show her just how real on our wedding night and every night after that.

The only problem? Marrying a Larone has put a target on my back, and Angelica is right in the crosshairs.

ANTONIO

“*Y*ou really don’t care?” Gilly asks as he checks his tux in the mirror. “I thought you were kidding when you said you weren’t interested in getting to know your bride. But now it’s been months since the announcement, you’re about to get married, and you seriously never even met her?”

“No.” I straighten my tie and make sure everything is on point. This is a spectacle more than anything else, and I’m here to put on a good show.

“Do you even know her name?”

“Angelica.” I roll my eyes. She’s a mafia daughter, trained from the time she was a child to be obedient to whoever her family marries her off to. There’s nothing else to know. I don’t want to get married, especially not to some random piece of arm candy, but that’s the way these things work. If I want to get the keys to the Larone kingdom, I have to marry one of Constantine Larone’s daughters.

“I can’t believe you didn’t even bother to meet her. You’re an animal.” He shakes his head. “Fucking brutal.”

“It doesn’t matter. Nothing is going to stop this wedding.”

“You sure you want to take such a big risk just to get in with Constantine? What if she looks like shoe leather?”

“Then I’ll be married to shoe leather.” I shrug. “Her only job is to be a good wife. I don’t expect anything more than that.”

“Yeah, but kids?”

I make a *pfft* noise. “No way.”

He sighs. “I can’t believe I’m letting you go through with this.”

“As if you could stop me.”

He smirks. “You want to step outside and test that theory?”

“You want me to kick your ass on my wedding day in front of hundreds of guests?” I grin. “I think that can be arranged.”

“Let’s go.” He reaches for the door, but it opens abruptly, and Constantine Larone strides in. His suit is almost as impeccable as mine, not a strand of his salt and pepper hair out of place.

He gives me an appraising look. “Going somewhere?”

“Just to marry your daughter.” I cut Gilly a look that says ‘Shut up or I’ll murder you.’ But I don’t need to bother. He knows the dangerous world we live in and how close we’ve been to ruin for so long.

This marriage will cement our family’s place in the most powerful families in the city. We’ll get a cut of a lot more action, and I’ll have a ladder straight to the top.

“She’s ready. It’s time.” He inspects me with a critical eye. “I expect you to treat her well, as well as any woman deserves. If you discipline her, don’t leave marks that will mar her face. She’s breedable, as the doctor attests, and I expect heirs sooner rather than later. Otherwise, you’re free to do with her as you like.”

The slimy bastard offers me his hand.

I shake it. It’s what’s expected of me. He knows under normal circumstances I’d never have a prayer of joining his family. But I’ve made a name for myself in the underworld, and I’m moving up faster than anyone else in the syndicate. On top of that, word is that Angelica is the messiest of his daughters. She’s got issues, the kind Constantine has taken great pains to hide.

Not that it matters. I don’t care what’s wrong with her; she’s mine for the taking. I only need her for her name.

“Let’s go. She’ll be coming down the aisle soon.” He pauses. “Well, her mother will be *shoving* her down the aisle is probably more accurate. In any case, she’ll be your problem now. Not mine.” With that, he strides away into the cathedral.

“Ray of sunshine, that guy.” Gilly smooths his lapels and checks the piece he has tucked under his arm, then turns to me. “You ready, boss?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be for marriage.” I don’t want this albatross around my neck, but it’s the only way to get where I need to go. I’ve had to make plenty of sacrifices to get this far. What’s one more?

I lead the way from the groom’s chambers and walk into the packed cathedral. An old man plays the organ as I walk the red and gold carpet leading to the front where the priest stands, a pompous hat on his head.

“Looks like a chef for Jesus himself,” Gilly cracks.

I give him a look over my shoulder, and he stows the jokes.

I step up to the top, and Gilly stands behind me, his head on a swivel for trouble. Climbing to the top has made me plenty of enemies, ones who’d love to ruin this wedding. I don’t expect they’d strike against Larone, though. They wouldn’t be that foolish.

The organ player shifts to the Wedding March, and the entire room full of the most powerful people in this city stand.

I glance at my watch. Once this deal is done, I have meetings set through the afternoon. A capo’s work is never done.

The doors at the back open, and a veiled woman stands there arguing with Lucrezia Larone. Their voices rise until Lucrezia pushes the woman, her daughter Angelica, down the aisle.

Angelica stands for a moment, unsure of what to do. Then she takes a deep breath and walks down the aisle. Not in a formal sort of way. Just a regular stride, though she wobbles a few times. She either can’t see through the thick veil or isn’t used to walking in heels—maybe both.

Gilly snickers.

I give him a death glare.

When she makes it to the bottom step, she turns and hurls her bouquet at the nearest bridesmaid. More gasps from the crowd.

Then she begins to climb the steps. Her feet tangle in her overdone dress.

I dart out and grab her before she falls, then wrap my arm around her waist and carry her up the steps to the priest.

She makes a raspberry sound with her lips, then starts fussing with her veil. After a bit of digging, she yanks it off her face and drapes it over her head.

“Fucking hell,” she mutters. “What a bunch of bullshit.” Dark hair, red lips, fair skin, and the mouth of a sailor.

My heart seems to stutter, my world turning on its axis as she looks up at me, her deep brown eyes narrowing. “The fuck you looking at?”

Holy shit, the mouth on her makes my cock go rigid and my heart thunder to a new beat. For the first time since I agreed to this deal, I ... I think I might have made a mistake.

ANGELICA

I glare at Antonio and wait for his response. I brace myself for it. I know one of two things are coming. He's either going to call this whole thing off—that's the one I'm hoping he'll choose—or I'll be paying for the disrespect that has left my lips. Even the priest is standing there with wide eyes waiting for Antonio's response.

"I'm staring at my bride." He grabs my forearm.

I try to yank it away from him, but it's useless. He pulls me back toward him and snuggles me into his side.

"Begin," he orders the priest. I can't believe he's actually going to go through with this.

"You'll regret this." I hiss under my breath to him, realizing it's too late now.

He's not backing down, and I've already run my mouth. Might as well say whatever I want. The outcome will always be the same. I learned that at a very young age. It didn't matter how well you behaved, you always got knocked around for something. Might as well give them a reason.

"Regret? That wasn't the word I was thinking of," he whispers back as the priest continues babbling on. I swallow down my fear. He's really going to do this. I don't know why I thought my plan of being disrespectful would work. I guess I figured if he viewed me as a handful, he would just walk away. Panic starts to rise inside of me that that's not the case. My throat goes tight.

“Breathe, angel.”

I suck in a deep breath, realizing I haven't been breathing.

“Can't have you passing out on me yet.”

“What does that mean?” I glare over at him but snap my head back forward when I realize he's staring at me already.

Is he planning to knock me out? I grit my teeth at the thought. My heart is pounding so hard now it drowns out the priest's words. As if they matter. This is all a bunch of bullshit. To love and cherish my ass. The honor and respect part is also laughable. My father never had any of those things for me, so I don't expect he picked a husband that will.

My life is over. Not that I had much of one before. I'm going from one hell to another. Only this one doesn't have my older sister. Though I'm the one that acts older when it comes to the two of us. Only eleven months separate us.

It was supposed to be her up to marry next, but because Antonio hadn't cared who he married, he was getting stuck with me. My older sister is now the last one of us who is not married.

She is beautiful, and everyone always comments on that fact which makes her want to run and hide. I won't be there to protect her any longer or to throw one of my fits to draw unwanted attention away from her. She and I are opposite in almost every way when it comes to how we look, except for our dark hair. She'd struck the jackpot and gotten bright blue eyes and legs that most women would die for. Ones that would have her walking a runway if we had a different life, but we don't. We're both damned.

“I do.” Antonio's words jerk me back to the moment. “Say it,” he orders when the priest comes to me next.

I swallow and push the words out. “I do.”

“I now pronounce you husband and wife.” Antonio is already turning me toward him. I close my eyes and seal my lips together. I already gave him those stupid words; he's not getting anything else. “You may kiss the bride.” I brace myself, but nothing comes. The room is dead silent. I peek

open one of my eyes to see him staring down at me. What? I'm not kissable? Not that I want him to kiss me, but still.

“What the hell—” My words are cut off when his mouth covers mine. I expect the kiss to be hard, but his mouth is soft against me. The opposite of every other part of his that is pressed to me. I gasp when I feel the outline of his cock against my stomach. He steals the moment to slide his tongue past my parted lips.

His hold on my hips stays firm, keeping me in place, but his kiss remains slow. His tongue strokes against mine gently, and I start to kiss him back. A small moan leaves me. Oh no. What am I doing? I mean, I *am* only human, and as much as I don't want to admit it, my new husband is handsome. He's still a jerk that's going to regret the day he decided to marry me, but he's a very good-looking one. He must feel me tense, because I go to bite him, but he pulls back in the nick of time. Dammit.

“Save that for later, my little hellion.”

I open and close my mouth, his kiss still lingering there. I don't get a chance to say something smart before he releases my hips to turn us toward the silent audience. They all start to clap when Antonio takes my hand to guide me back down the aisle.

I glance over at my sister, whose eyes are wide with shock. That makes two of us. I misstep, almost tripping over my stupid heels. Antonio releases my hand and wraps his arm around my waist, pulling me into him so I don't fall on my face.

“I can walk on my own,” I say instead of giving him a thank you.

“Is that so?”

I squeak when he scoops me up into his arms as we exit the church.

“We're leaving?” Oh God. Of course we're leaving. Antonio doesn't answer my question. Of course not. He doesn't answer to anyone. The big scary Antonio Palermo. My father is even a bit scared of him. Not that he'd ever admit it, but I can sense

it. I've gotten good at reading him over the years. It's a part of my survival, really.

A man opens the back door of the limo waiting outside. Antonio deposits me inside before pushing the rest of my dress in behind me. I'm going to be alone with him. The other door opens, and he slips in beside me. When he closes his door, I flinch. The divider is up. We really are alone now.

I peek over at Antonio, who is again staring at me. I get a good look at him this time. He's even more handsome than the picture I saw of him, but he's also more intense too. I don't understand the look in his eyes.

"You can't kill me," I remind him.

His lips twitch. "I'm not going to kill my wife." Right, because that's all I really am. My one of two purposes in life filled. I'm married, and now I must give him heirs.

"Then what are you going to do to me?" I ask, fear once again rising inside of me. I hate it. The fear and feeling so powerless.

I don't think I can take another beating. I still have the lingering marks of the last one my father dished out on my side. I can't forget about it because the damn corset I was strapped into is pressing against it. The dull pain lingers with each breath I take.

He doesn't respond to my question. The back of the limo fills with silence, making me more on edge. I'm starting to wonder if he even knows what to do with me.

ANTONIO

She glances away, then meets my gaze again, as if she can't help herself. Her heart is rampaging, and she swallows hard. Scared. She's terrified of me. Even though I'm perfectly happy to strike fear in everyone else, for some reason, I don't want her to ever be afraid of me.

"I'm not going to kill you, Angelica. I won't hurt you, either. Unless you want me to." I reach into the forest of fabric around her waist and grip her, pulling her into my lap.

"Why would I want you to hurt me?" She blinks.

I run my nose along her neck and up to her ear, then nibble at it.

She pulls back. "What are you doing?"

"I can't help myself." I grab her throat and pull her back to me, then kiss her again.

She smacks my chest, but I don't give in. I kiss her, licking the seam of her mouth. When she opens her lips to protest, I delve my tongue inside.

A shiver runs through her, and she stops attacking me. Her tongue tentatively strokes mine, her body going soft beneath my touch.

I want to yank away all this fucking fabric and get her down to nothing, then spread her legs and mount her on my cock. Fuck, what a sight that would be. But I can't. Despite her sharp tongue, she's innocent. She's never even been kissed. I can

tell. And fuck if that doesn't stroke the animal part of my nature. She's mine, *completely* mine.

Moving to her throat, I lick her soft skin, then delve lower, kissing her chest and the tops of her breasts where they surge from the dress.

"Hey!" She stiffens and pulls away.

Too fast. I'm moving too fast with this skittish angel.

I force myself to ease up on her, to let go of my tight hold on her waist. She wriggles in my lap, and my cock twitches.

She seems to feel it, because her eyes widen, and she glances down.

"It's yours, angel. You can have it whenever you want."

"What?" She scrambles off my lap. "I don't want that," she says breathily.

"Are you certain?"

"I-I know I don't want that." She gathers the fabric of her dress and piles it in front of her like a puffy fence.

"So if I slid my hand up your thigh to your cunt, I wouldn't find it wet for me?" I lean closer to her.

Her breath catches. "You can't talk to me like that."

"I can't talk about your slick cunt and how delicious it will be when I lick and suck it until you come?"

Her cheeks flame red as she gawks at me. "That's never going to happen."

"Never?" I smirk. "We're already married, angel."

"So you think you own me now?" She kicks her chin up. "You don't."

"I own you as much as you own me."

"What?" She scoffs. "You never cared to so much as meet me before today, and now I'm supposed to fall all over myself because you kissed me and talked dirty to me in the back of a limo? I don't know who you think I am, but I'm not falling for

any of it. You can keep your hands and your mouth to yourself from now on.”

“That’s the thing.” I let my gaze slide to her puffy lips, then lower to her breasts, and lower still, to the pile of silk in her lap. “I don’t think I can. Not with you, angel.”

“That’s too damn bad, isn’t it?” she snaps. “You’re part of the Larone family now. You got what you wanted. You can leave me out of it.”

Her smart mouth is like gasoline on the fire that’s burning me up from inside. I want to grab her again, to pin her beneath me and kiss her until she begs me to eat her cunt. But that’s not what my angel needs. From the tremor in her voice, I know she’s still afraid, but I also see more in her eyes. She’s turned on. Her body wants mine, and fuck it’s like torture to sit here without giving her what she wants. But she doesn’t know she wants it. Not yet. She’s too full of worry and fear.

“You’re right.” I sit back.

Her eyes widen. “What?”

“I said you’re right.”

She shakes her head as if I’m speaking a foreign language.

“I didn’t court you as I should have. My main goal was to become part of your family. You’re correct about that, too. I’m not the sort of man who sits around and waits for something to be handed to him. When I see what I want, I take it. Marrying into your family is the easiest way for me to rise in the ranks and eventually become head of the most powerful family in the city.”

“You’ll never be head of the Larone family. You aren’t blood.”

“I don’t want to be head of the Larone family, angel. I will be head of the Palermo family, *my* family. And we will rule this city in any way we please.”

“We?” She scrunches her nose.

“You’re my bride, are you not? An important piece of my family. The future mother of my children.”

Her face goes stoic, and she turns away. “I see.”

“I don’t think you do.” I take her hand.

“No.” She yanks her hand away. “I know I’m supposed to be your broodmare, having your babies while you whore around with mistresses. Trust me, my parents told me all my life that I’m only good for making heirs. You don’t have to say anything else.”

I can’t seem to say what I mean, which is new for me. I’ve never had a problem being understood. Then again, that understanding usually comes from someone who’s at the business end of my gun barrel.

“Angelica, this isn’t—” I turn my head as a car races up beside the limo.

“Isn’t what?” she huffs.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, and I grab her and throw her to the floorboard and cover her with my body.

“Stop!” she screams, but the sound is quickly cut off by gunfire as glass shatters all around us, and the limo veers off the road.

ANGELICA

All the air leaves my lungs when Antonio's body covers mine on the floor of the limo. Pain shoots through me from my already bruised ribs. I try to push him off me, but it's useless. For a brief second, I think I've gone too far and really pissed him off. Until I hear the gunfire and the sound of shattering glass. The limo jerks around, but I can't see anything.

It dawns on me that he's not trying to hurt me but instead shielding me from whatever is happening. I stop trying to push him off. I grab hold of him instead and brace myself as the limo slides into something. It jerks us hard again before finally coming to a stop. Antonio lifts his head, his eyes meeting mine.

"You're okay." It doesn't come out as a question but more like an order, as though he's letting me know that I'm all right so that I don't panic. I know he's waiting for a response to gauge how I'm doing.

"I'm okay," I agree. I don't think I'm hit. The only place that hurts is my side.

"Listen to me, angel. I won't let anything happen to you, but know you're a Palermo now. No one can take that from you. What's mine is now yours."

"What?" I wince when I hear more gunfire go off. "Why are you telling me this now?"

"In case I don't make it." My heart sinks. He presses a hard kiss to my mouth that is over as quickly as it began.

He lifts off me, turning just as one of the doors opens. I watch in stunned silence as Antonio pulls out a gun and fires two shots off before he reaches into the back of his pants to pull out another gun. I sit up, my stupid dress tangling all around me.

Antonio fires another few shots before he turns to me with the second gun. He grabs my hand, slapping the gun into it. “Your hand has to be pressed there.” He shoves the gun harder into my hand so the back of it hits between my thumb and index finger. I feel the handle of it push in. “Then you can pull the trigger.”

I’ve seen a million guns in my life. Never have I held one in my hand, though. Not only that, Antonio turns around so his back is pressed up against me. I could kill him so easily if I wanted to. But could I really do that to the man who just shielded me? I think my father would have used *me* as the shield.

Antonio fires a few more shots out the door before he reloads. The other door swings open. I let out a small scream as a knife lands in the middle of the chest of the man who opened it. I didn’t even see Antonio produce it, let alone throw it. The attacker grabs his chest and gasps before falling forward. Antonio grabs him by the hair and yanks him halfway inside the limo. He pulls the knife out of the man’s chest. The man immediately starts to plead with Antonio not to kill him.

“You ruined my wife’s wedding day,” Antonio says before he slices his throat. Blood splatters across my dress. I sit there in shock. But Antonio doesn’t waste any time; he pushes the body out the door and then pulls it shut. “Anyone comes in this car you shoot unless I call your name.” What the hell? How is this happening? “Angelica!” Antonio snaps.

“Yes.” I nod, answering him.

“Good girl,” he says before he’s out the door of the limo. I want to call after him. To beg for him to come back. For some stupid reason, I want to make him promise that he won’t get hurt. I tense when the door opens, and there is a man pointing a gun in my direction. I don’t get the chance to fire. Before I

can pull the trigger, the person is falling face first inside, blood spilling out of his mouth. The back of the man's shirt is riddled with bullet holes and soaked with blood.

"Angel," Antonio calls. "I'm coming to get you." He reaches in, grabbing the dead man and yanking him out of the way before he leans in, offering me his hand. I take it. He pulls me out of the back of the limo.

"Antonio," I breathe when I see three SUVs riddled with bullet holes. Bodies litter the ground all around us. Holy crap.

"Come on," someone shouts. I stand there paralyzed for a second. Maybe I'm hallucinating or in shock or something, but I swear I recognize a few of the dead men on the ground. That can't be right. "Boss!"

"Got to move," Antonio says before he's lifting me off my feet. He jogs toward a waiting car, shoving me into the back. "Get her out of here." He starts to shut the door.

"I'm not leaving you," the man who called him boss says. If he's Antonio's right hand, I believe his name is Gilly.

"Get her out of here," he orders again.

"Please don't leave me." The words are past my lips before I can comprehend what I'm saying. To my utter surprise, he actually gets in the car. I scramble to the other side to make room for him. I wince as I do it, my side aching now with each breath I take.

The vehicle takes off a second later. Gilly floors it down the road. "What the fuck was that?" he shouts from the front seat.

"Not now," Antonio responds. He sounds so calm, but I can tell he's anything but. "Let me."

I glance down. He tries to take the gun that I'm still holding tightly in my hand.

"Or you can keep it if it makes you feel safe," he offers. I release my hold on it.

"What the fuck was that?" I ask the same question Gilly did earlier.

“Are you hurt?” Antonio’s hands start to roam, checking me over.

“It’s not my blood,” I say absently. “I feel numb.”

“It’s shock.” Antonio’s hand grazes my ribs. I let out a small cry as the pain shoots through my body. Spots begin dancing in my eyes. “Angel, look at me,” Antonio orders, sounding far away.

“Was she hit?”

“I don’t know.” Antonio yanks at my dress. The sound of the material ripping pulls me back for a moment.

“Don’t.” I smack at his hands. “Don’t touch me!” My hand connects with his cheek. “Oh God.”

I just nearly escaped death only to slam myself right back into it.

ANTONIO

I'm more stunned by the bruises on her side than the smack to my face.

“Oh my God.” She covers her mouth with her hand and winces back.

“Who did this?” I skim my fingers along her skin.

“What?” She’s still flinching away from me.

“Who put these marks on you?” I can barely contain my rage, my entire body going even tenser than it already was.

“But I ... I hit you.”

“The wind hits harder, angel. Tell me who hurt you.”

“Boss, I think we’re in the clear, but I’m not taking any chances.” Gilly pulls off the highway and onto side streets, cutting this way and that to lose any tail that might be on us.

“My father. I mouthed off to him.”

The rage turns to molten lava coursing through my blood. That fucking bastard put his hands on her, *hit* my bride. He’s a dead man.

“Come.” I rise and sit on the backseat, broken glass crunching beneath me as I pull her into my lap.

She holds her ripped dress together, her eyes huge as she looks at me. “Are you going to hurt me?”

“Never.”

I raise my hand to her cheek.

She flinches again.

“*Never*, angel.” I gently press my palm to her cheek, her skin warm beneath mine. “And I will kill anyone who touches you.”

Her breath catches. “Is this a trick?”

“No trick. I protect what’s mine, angel.”

Her face falls.

“What’s—”

“Boss!” Gilly calls.

“What?” I keep my eyes on Angelica.

“Got a message from Bartholomew. They did a drive-by on our front gate, but no one was hurt. We returned fire, killed a few of them, but the driver still managed to get away before we could catch them.”

I grit my teeth.

“Did you recognize the assholes back there?” He hitches a thumb over his shoulder. “Because I did.”

“I did, too,” Angelica says softly. “One of them was on my father’s security team. He usually hung out at the back door by the pool. I remember his face.”

“Two of them were definitely at the wedding. I saw them in the crowd.” Gilly glances at me in the rearview. “This wasn’t a coincidence.”

“No.” I don’t believe in coincidences. “Your father married you off to me, then tried to take me out. He and another family, I would guess. But which one?”

“Why would he do that?” Tears well in her eyes. “Why would he want me dead?”

“Not you, angel. Me.” I think Constantine would’ve sacrificed her to get to his goal, though. If it meant he had access to my holdings, he’d have no problem letting his pathetic soldiers shoot his daughter. The fact that he would touch her in anger, would wreak violence on her—he’s a son of a bitch.

“But we just got married. I thought he wanted our families joined. He *made* me marry you.” Her tone turns from sad to seething. “I never wanted to marry anyone, and he’s the one who said I had to. When I told him no, he beat me. But his intention the whole time was to kill you?”

“He wants access to my money, my holdings, my part of the pie. The way for him to get that would be to marry me off to his daughter. You. Then if he knocked me off, he’d have you back in his control, and through you, my entire estate.”

She swallows hard. “So all your stuff would be *my* stuff?”

I smirk. “Getting ideas, angel?”

She looks away quickly. “No, I just ... I didn’t really think about that.” She meets my gaze again. “What makes him think I’d let him have a penny of *my* money? This is bullshit. *I’m* the one who had to marry a stranger. I earned your estate, not him.”

A laugh barrels from me. “That’s what concerns you?”

“Yes!” She throws her hands up, then quickly grabs her dress again before it falls and reveals her breasts. “He just thinks he can kill you and steamroll over me? No way.” She shrugs. “I mean, he can kill you, I guess. But I’m not letting him touch my new mafia empire.”

“Cutthroat.” I grab her chin lightly. “I rather like that in a woman.”

She tries to pull back, but I hold her in place. “You want me to smack you again?” She wets her lips.

“If that’s what turns you on.”

Her mouth opens in surprise. “*Excuse* me?”

“Does hitting me make you wet?” I lean closer to her, our breaths mingling. “Because you can hit me all you want, angel. I’m still going to be inside you once I get you home.”

“No you are *not!*” She pushes against my chest.

I kiss her, claiming her roughly as she beats on my shoulders. Pressing my tongue against the seam of her mouth, I will her

to open for me. She doesn't, her body still trying to refuse me. Sliding a hand up her thigh, I skirt the lace panties underneath her dress.

She jolts, and when I slide my hand higher, I cup her breast where her dress has fallen down. That makes her open her mouth, and I slide my tongue in, caressing hers as I thumb her hard nipple.

A moan lofts from her, and I swallow it down, then take another. Her body relaxes, molding to mine as I kiss her deeply. Her fiery mouth is just what I need to temper the ire burning through me.

"Boss, we're here," Gilly calls.

I look up and see we're at the front of my home, a large crew of my men lined up with assault rifles hung over their shoulders.

Angelica takes a deep breath, then snatches her dress back into place.

Opening the car door, I pull her into my arms and use part of her voluminous skirt to drape along her top, hiding every bit of her soft skin. She's for my eyes only. And soon enough, I'll know every inch of her by heart.

ANGELICA

I thought I hated my father before, but the burning in my chest now is something else altogether. It goes way beyond anger. He wanted to kill me? Those men tried to come into the limo with their guns drawn.

I have no idea if they were going to use them on me or only make a grab for me. If he thinks for a second I would hand over what would be mine in the event of my husband's death, he's lost his damn mind. If anything, I'd take everything I could get my hands on and run—after I got my sister. I would never squander the opportunity for us to be free of my father.

“Is the home to your liking?” Antonio asks as we enter the front door. A few of the men that lingered outside follow us in.

“It will do.” I smirk, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of what I really think.

The house is actually breathtaking. I'm not sure what I thought Antonio's home would be like, but this place reminds me of a castle. It whispers wealth but manages to maintain a warmth to it. It's nothing like the home I grew up in, which screamed money and smacked you in the face with its gaudiness. Everything was covered in gold and pricey pieces of art, ones I knew my father didn't even know the names of and probably cost fortune after fortune. The pieces coat the walls of anywhere he thought people might go inside the home.

“That's probably a good thing. I don't need you adding to your reasons to kill me.” He winks at me. Why is he being playful with me? The palm of my hand still stings from smacking him.

And there's also the fact that my father just tried to end his life. I don't understand this man, but I'm finding a small, mind you a *very* small, I mean the tiniest part of me, wants to.

"I think I'll keep you for now. You are rather good protection." I try to make my tone sound offhanded.

The truth is my mind and heart are still reeling from what happened. The way he protected me. Then again, what would people think if Antonio had been unable to protect his own wife? To have me die while I was under his protection. He wouldn't want that. Men and their egos. I often think those mean more to them than anything else.

"Let's take you up to *our* room."

I stiffen. I knew this would come, but what I didn't expect was the world of emotions I'm having over it now. I told myself I'd grin and bear it. But that was before Antonio kissed me. He woke up something inside me that I didn't even know existed. Not only that, he said I could hit him if that turned me on. He cared if I desired him? I'd seen the heat in his eyes when he asked if I was wet. I had been. How, I have no clue. We'd almost died, and I was getting turned on while we still made our escape with a husband I'm supposed to hate.

"I'm hungry," I blurt out.

"Have something brought up," he says to one of the random men in all black. He grabs my hand and starts to pull me toward the circle staircase.

"Antonio." I pull back on his hand, but he scoops me into his arms. He makes sure to not hit my bruised side.

"Yes, my little hellion?"

I narrow my eyes at him, trying to stay strong. In reality, my bravado is starting to waver. The rush of everything begins to fully hit me.

"You said you wouldn't hurt me." I try to keep the quiver out of my voice.

"Have I hurt you?"

I shake my head no.

“I don’t know if I can...” My face starts to warm. I can throw a fit and curse like a sailor, but for some reason, talk of sex makes me blush.

He arches a brow. “I don’t force myself on women.”

Oh, right. He’ll go get himself one that is perfectly willing. Probably more experienced too. A sourness takes over my stomach. I focus on that, remembering what I am to Antonio. It’s always the same in the relationships within these families. They all talk about loyalty and honor, but none of that applies when it comes to their wives. Antonio might not harm me physically, but there are other ways he could if I let him. I won’t.

“Right.” I turn my head to look away from him as he carries me down the long hallway. He wouldn’t have to even try to find a woman. I’m sure they throw themselves at him wherever he goes.

“Angel, relax,” he says as we enter a giant bedroom.

Ever so gently, he sits me down on an oversized bench at the end of the massive bed. The thing could hold a football team—or a harem, I suppose. I bet he’s had a few of those. I wonder if it bothers him that he now has a wife and he’ll have to be discreet about such things.

He turns, walking away. I try to take in my surroundings. It’s something I’ve learned to be aware of growing up with my unpredictable father. But I can’t keep my eyes off Antonio. I watch as he enters the bathroom, and a few seconds later, I hear the water come on. Not long after, Antonio returns. He pulls me back to my feet, his hands going for my dress.

“What are you doing?”

He pulls the dress free from my body, leaving me standing there in only my strapless bra and panties. His eyes rake up and down my body, lingering on the bruise at my side. I can see the rage in in them. I try to step back but bump into the bench.

“Don’t fear me, angel.”

“You ripped my dress off,” I point out.

“I did. It was covered in another man’s blood.” He leads me toward the bathroom.

“I can shower myself.”

“You’re trembling. Is it the shock or are you scared of me?”

“Not scared of you.” I raise my chin.

“Good.” He leans down and pulls my panties down my legs. His face is right in front of my sex. I hear him suck in a deep breath. I bite the inside of my cheek so that I don’t whimper. Why is that so hot? He wants to breathe me in?

“Step out,” he orders, his voice gruff. I do as I’m told while reaching around and letting my bra fall free. I watch as he strips off his own clothes until he is in nothing but his boxer briefs. I stare at his broad, hard chest. There is one long scar on his side that I’m guessing is from a knife and another on his thigh. That one is smaller. If I had to guess, I would say it’s from a bullet. What I can’t possibly miss is the hard outline of his cock.

“In you go.” His hand goes to my back, guiding me into the shower.

“How come I’m naked and you’re not?”

“You want me naked?” That smirk returns to his lips. I don’t know if I want to smack it or kiss it. What is wrong with me?

“No!” I say quickly. He grabs the soap. “Hey!” I protest when he starts to wash me. “You said that you don’t force women.”

“I’m not forcing myself on you. I’m taking care of my wife. I want their blood off you.” His hands roam my body. The warm water runs down on me. I find myself leaning into him as I relax. His fingers rub circles into my muscles, soothing me in a way that no one ever has.

“Antonio,” I whisper when his hands brush across my breasts. I realize I’ve lain my head on his chest. I tell myself to push back, but I don’t want to move.

“Yes?” His hand slips down my stomach.

“I don’t know what I was going to say.”

His hand cups my sex. I let out a small gasp.

“I think you want your husband to pleasure you.”

“What does that mean?” Is he saying sex? In the shower?

“I’m going to make you come.” His fingers slide through the folds of my sex. He strokes my clit.

“Oh.” I puff out a breath at the sensation. It feels so good.

“You ever touched yourself, angel?”

“No,” I admit. I never wanted to. My whole life I’ve dreaded what was to come when it came to sex. I did everything in my power to keep those thoughts from my mind. Antonio lets out a low groan of approval at my answer.

“I don’t understand it.” I drop my head back finally. “Men go to mistresses to have the sex they really want. A woman with experience. A wife is only for carrying your children and taking care of the home. Why does my lack of knowledge turn you on?”

“Everything about you turns me on, angel. I’ve been hard since I lifted your veil.” He thrust against me, his cock pressing into me. “But I want to hear you come. To be the first to show you pleasure.”

He presses more firmly against my clit as he claims my mouth. I cry out as the orgasm explodes through my body. My knees buckle, but I don’t fall. Antonio keeps me pressed firmly against him. His mouth never leaves mine as I writhe against him. He’s greedy, claiming every moan that leaves my lips for himself.

ANTONIO

She sighs as I pull her from the shower, her hands going to cover herself.

“I licked my fingers clean, angel. I know what you taste like. You don’t have to be shy.” I wrap her in a fluffy white towel.

“I’m not shy.” She kicks her chin up.

“Right.” I give her a sly grin as I towel myself dry, my cock pressing against the wet fabric of my boxer briefs and aching to be touched.

Her eyes go right to it, then she looks away quickly.

“You can look all you want, angel. This belongs to you.” I reach inside the waistband and grip myself, grunting at the pressure. But I don’t stroke it. I’m not going to do a damn thing until she says she wants it. I want her begging me to fuck her, to come in her pretty pussy. Fuck, the thought of it makes my blood boil hotter than ever.

She turns and looks around at the bathroom and bedroom. “If I play my cards right, pretty soon, all this will be mine.”

I stride up behind her and drop a kiss on her shoulder. “It already is.”

She gasps.

“What?”

“I thought I just saw a—I did!” She rushes into the bedroom, then drops to her knees beside the bed.

I didn't think I'd get this sort of treatment on our first night, but I'm not complaining. "You want to su—"

"There's a cat!" she squeals. "Oh, sorry." Her voice quiets. "I didn't mean to scare you."

I look down at my cock and shake my head. "No relief tonight," I murmur and strip them away, then grab a fresh pair, pulling them on and tucking myself inside as best I can. "That's Diablo. He's a stray that decided this was his house, despite me kicking him out of here plenty of times."

I drop beside Angelica and hold out my hand.

He eases out and presses his scarred nose and puffy cheek against my hand. "Hey, boy."

"He loves you." She smiles as Diablo sniffs her, then moves closer and sits, ready for petting.

"He's a bulldozer. He just keeps rolling over you until you agree to his terms."

"He's smart." She scratches his chubby cheeks then the top of his head. "He saw a good home and took it."

"He's definitely spoiled. The guys slip him extra canned food when I'm not around, and Gilly buys him a new toy every chance he gets." I lean down and pluck a giant catnip-stuffed fuzzy carrot from under the bed. "Like this."

"I always wanted a cat. My mom hates animals, though, so she wouldn't let me have one."

Diablo flops over on his side and shows her his tummy.

I can't hide my surprise. "It took him over a year to let me pet his stomach."

She reaches out slowly, then rubs her fingertips along his big tummy, or as the guys call it, his "pussy pouch." It hangs down when he walks, almost touching the floor.

He lets out a rusty purr and stretches as she pets him.

"She's my wife, Diablo. Not yours." I scratch under his chin. "You're laying it on way too thick."

His tail twitches, and he finally gets to his feet and trots away toward the door.

“You scared him off.” She sits back, her towel riding up to her hips.

“Not at all. He must’ve heard Gilly come in. He’s looking for a fresh toy.”

She wrinkles her nose, and I can’t help but stare at her thighs. That dark patch between her legs is almost visible, and fuck I want to get another look at her sweet cunt.

I lick my lips, and she scoots back, then gets to her feet. “Where’s my room?” She strides to the door and opens it, Diablo darting away toward the back stairs.

Standing, I walk over to her and close the door. “This is our room.” I point to one of closet doors. “His.” Then I point to the other. “Hers.” Lastly, I point to the bed. “Ours.”

Her eyes widen. “But you said you wouldn’t force—”

“I won’t force my cock into you until you ask nicely, angel. But you are my wife. You will sleep here with me, under my protection.”

“Why, don’t you trust your men?” she challenges.

“With my life. But that doesn’t mean I want them looking at you any more than they absolutely have to. I’m a jealous man, angel, when it comes to you. I want all of you to myself.”

She swallows hard. “I suppose you should get as much of me as you can before you get killed.”

“You want me dead so soon?” I take her hand and bring it to my lips, lightly biting one of her knuckles. “Before I’ve eaten your pussy until you screamed?”

Her breath hitches. “I-I ... I want ...” She pulls her hand back, then shakes her head. “I want some clothes.”

“You’ve had a long day, angel.” I stride to my closet and grab one of my undershirts for her. “Put this on—and panties, if you absolutely *must*—then get in bed. I’ve got some business to

attend to after the events of the evening.” I glower, my back straightening as I pull my own shirt down over my head.

“You mean you’re going to speak to my father?” she asks, her voice tinged with something that sounds like anger.

“I think he’s made his intentions clear. No need to speak to him. But no one strikes at our family without paying the price. I’m going to hurt him, angel.” I crack my knuckles and pull on my pants. “I’m going to pick some of his men and send him their heads.”

She winces, but then covers it by schooling her face.

“Surprised?” I ask.

“No. I still can’t believe he did that.” She lets a hint of hurt enter her voice. “My own father.”

“Anyone who tries to hurt you will get the same treatment.” I cup the back of her neck and pull her to me. “No exceptions. No one will hurt you, angel.”

I stare at her mouth, at the way her lips part and her breaths grow shallower. “Do you want me to kiss you, angel?”

She wets her lips.

I take that as a yes and kiss her hard, my tongue sweeping against hers as she sways in my arms. I grab her, pulling her to me as I deepen the kiss, tasting and taking as she wraps her arms around my neck.

Fuck, leaving her is harder than I could’ve imagined. But it has to be done. Our enemies have to pay for what they’ve done.

When I break the kiss, she looks up at me with glassy eyes.

“Stay here, angel. I’ll be back soon.” I lead her to the bed and sit her down right as a knock comes at the door. “That’s Barker with the food. Barker is our cook and butler. He’s been with me a long time.”

She nods. “Okay.”

I go to the door, and Barker gives me a curious look. “She’s fine. You can meet her tomorrow. For now, thanks for the

food.”

He gives me a nod. “Of course, sir.”

I roll the cart of food into the room and place it right in front of her. “Eat. I know you’re hungry.”

She reaches for a chocolate croissant.

“Eat. If you need anything else, just let me know. I’ll be downstairs.” I stride to the door as she takes a bite of the croissant.

She makes a *mmm* sound that goes straight to my cock and almost has me turning around. But I don’t. I won’t rest until I answer the threat to her life. With interest.

ANGELICA

I gasp, sitting up, my heart pounding. The sounds of gunfire haunt me. My eyes flick around the dark bedroom. The only light flooding in comes from the bathroom door that's still open.

I'd left the light on in there before I'd crawled into bed after I'd eaten. I didn't think it would be possible to sleep, but in case I did, I hadn't wanted to wake up to utter darkness in a place I still don't know.

My eyes go to the other side of the bed. Antonio isn't there, but Diablo is. I reach over and pet his head. "What time is it?"

Diablo purrs loudly. I give him an extra scratch under the chin before I slip from the bed and pull back the curtains to see the moon bright in the sky.

"Has he even checked on us?" I ask Diablo. He stands, stretching as he walks across the bed before jumping down. "Or does he always stay out this late?" Diablo circles in and out of my legs before darting toward the door, wanting out.

"Why don't we go have a look around?" I crack open the door and peek out. The hallway is empty. Diablo is out the door the second I open it. He's quicker than I thought he would be. He's down the hallway and turning in the direction of the stairs before I know it. I follow after him. The house is eerily quiet.

When I make it to the top of the stairs, I see a man dressed in all black standing in the front entry. He glances my way before quickly redirecting his gaze elsewhere but doesn't move from where he's standing. Is he making sure no one gets out or in?

I'm guessing Antonio has put extra security everywhere after today's events.

My ears perk up when I hear a female voice. I slowly make my way down the stairs, not wanting whoever is talking to hear me. I follow the sounds of the voice. My eyes spot a giant old clock on the wall, letting me know it's two in the morning. It's then I hear Antonio's familiar voice.

A knot starts to form in my stomach. Whatever could he be doing at two in the morning with another female? So many thoughts start to run through my mind. Is it because I didn't give him what he clearly wanted? I suppose the better question is why do I care?

This should be what I want. He said he wouldn't force me. He could go get what he needs somewhere else, and I won't have to worry about it. A lick of white-hot anger flashes up my spine at the thought of him wanting someone else.

I suppose I *do* care for some reason. If I have to be stuck in this, then so should he. I can't go out and date. The same should definitely apply to him. Plus, does he think I'm going to be okay with him having sex with random women then having sex with me to get his heir? I'll end up with one of those STDs I've read about. No thank you.

My mom was never one to speak out of line when it came to my father. She always did what she was told, but I still remember one night waking up to her screaming about my father having given her chlamydia. At the time, I didn't even know what that was. My older sister and I had to google it when we got some computer time for our schoolwork.

I creep past another man. His eyes flick my way and then away quickly. Antonio's words about not wanting his men to see me more than they had to spring to mind. He must have told them not to look at me. I suppose I am only in one of his shirts, but it hangs down to my knees almost.

When I get to a cracked door, I pause, trying to hear whatever the two of them are discussing. "I've had enough for tonight," Antonio says. My heart sinks.

“Just like that?” the woman huffs.

“Gia.” His tone is low and filled with warning.

“Whatever.” I start to step back when the door flies open. A dark-haired girl comes stomping out. Her eyes lock with mine. She’s dressed in a pair of silky shorts and a top. Part of it hangs off one shoulder. “You’re the wife?”

“Angel.” Antonio calls my name. I turn to see him standing behind a desk. The top few buttons of his shirt are undone. The sleeves rolled up.

“No,” I answer the girl, who can’t be any older than I am.

Part of me wants to scratch her eyes out, but another part of me feels guilty. This girl has likely been with Antonio before he knew I existed. Hell, he hadn’t cared who he married as long as it got him where he needed to be. It’s why he got stuck with me and not my other sister, who my father is always getting offers for.

“Yes,” Antonio corrects. That knot in my stomach travels upward toward my throat.

I will not cry. I turn and walk away before I bolt, not wanting him to see that I’m running. More than that, I don’t want him to see that I’m about to cry. I hate it. I’m so angry. I shouldn’t care what he does.

“Ma’am, you can’t go out there,” the man at the front door tries to tell me. I ignore him. He doesn’t physically try to stop me.

“She’s running!” I hear the girl shout.

“Angelica!” Antonio roars. For a brief moment, I pause. His intensity almost paralyzes me.

Three men turn my way when I exit out the front. “Mrs. Palermo,” one says. I ignore them too. I have no clue where I’m going, but I dash down the side of the house.

“Sir!” one shouts as another follows after me.

“Can I grab her?” the one chasing after me shouts, closing in on me.

“No!” Antonio’s voice is closer now.

I round the house to see a giant pool and patio area. I go to run around it, but an arm wraps around me from behind, causing my feet to leave the ground. I scream and throw my elbow as hard as I can, hoping I hit any part of him.

Antonio doesn’t even grunt or loosen his hold. Before I know it, I’m pinned to the ground with Antonio between my thighs. I go to hit him, but he’s quicker than me. He grabs both my hands in one of his and pins them above my head.

“Angel.” He says my name so calmly, as if he’s trying to soothe me. I try to break his hold again, but I get nowhere. In fact, he presses more firmly into me the more I struggle, his hard cock rubbing against my sex. I stop moving. “You need training.”

“Training?!” I spit. “What the fuck does that mean? You brought some mistress here to train me?” I hiss. I want to throw up in my mouth. Antonio throws back his head and laughs.

“I *will* kill you,” I snarl. “You have to sleep at some point.”

“There’s my little hellion.” He smiles down at me. “Training as in, it was too easy for me to catch you. You should know how to defend yourself better.” Wait, what? Is he trying to make it easier for me to kill him?

“Well, your guards suck. I went right past them.”

“They’re not allowed to touch you.”

I roll my eyes. Of course they can’t touch me. He gets jealous. Such bullshit. Like him. He’s such a hypocrite.

“I can’t believe I thought about letting you live.” I won’t make that mistake again. I should know better than to trust any man.

“You thought about not killing me? Next you’re going to tell me that you love me.” He leans down, his eyes dropping to my mouth. I lick my lips. ‘No!’ My mind screams, reminding me he was just fucking his mistress. Does he lick her off his fingers too?

“My side,” I whimper. Antonio jerks back.

“Did you hurt yourself more?” Now he sounds mad.

He drops back between my thighs to his knees to push my shirt up. I bring my feet up quickly and nail him right in the chest. He drops back onto his ass. I roll over and push off the ground to get up. I’m not quick enough. A hand wraps around my ankle.

“My own wife is already using my weakness against me,” he says.

“Your weakness?” I ask, surprised he has one.

“*You.*”

ANTONIO

She tries to kick me again, but I grab her other ankle and pull her to me. Then I get to my feet and lift her, carrying her back into the house.

Her little fists beat against my chest.

“Calm down, angel. You might hurt yourself.”

“Bastard!” she screams as I carry her back up the stairs, my guards looking everywhere but at us. Good. They know better than to ogle what’s mine.

“My father wasn’t a good man by any measure, but he *was* faithful.” I hoist her higher, her feet dangling at my knees.

She absolutely refuses to wrap her legs around me. It pulls a wry grin from me, even though I know it’s going to piss her off. Or maybe because I *know* it’ll piss her off.

“What’s gotten you into such a tizzy, angel?”

“I’m not in a tizzy.” She shoves at me as I sit her on our bed.

“You are.” I drop to my knees in front of her, looking up at her and trying not to stare at the shadow between her thighs.

“You’re so worked up you took off running. So tell me what’s upset you.”

“I’m not talking to you about anything.” She crosses her arms over her chest. “Except when you expect to die so I can have all this stuff. We can talk about that.” Her eyes flash.

“I don’t know, angel. A man like me, I’d like to think I’ll live a long, healthy life.”

“Not when you’ve already got assassins trying to take you out.” She wrinkles her nose.

“Such is the life of a king, angel. Someone always wants my crown. That doesn’t mean I’ll ever give it up.”

“You won’t have to give it up if you’re dead. Someone will simply take it from you.” Her tongue darts to her lips.

“You want my crown, angel?” I slide my hands up the outsides of her thighs. Her skin is warm, soft, and secretly begging for my touch.

“I want everything,” she hisses.

“All I have is yours.” I glide my hands higher, stroking at the sides of her hips and easing the hem of my shirt higher.

“Just think how much I’d enjoy it all to myself. No cheating husband to share it with.” She tenses, her gaze burning into mine. “That sounds like heaven.”

“Cheating husband?” I kiss her knee. “Surely you don’t mean me, angel.” I kiss her other knee. I can tell she’s thinking about busting my lip, but she doesn’t. Instead, her lips part on a breath.

I stroke back down her thighs and gently spread her legs apart just enough so I can kiss the insides of her knees.

“You know what I’m talking about. Don’t play dumb. It’s entirely too convincing.” Her words are meant to cut, but her legs are opening for me, her breathing speeding up as I kiss higher up her thighs.

“I don’t. Please educate me, angel.” I run my tongue along her skin, and she gasps. Her nipples are pressed against the fabric of my shirt, and I’d die to simply feel one against my tongue. I put my palms against her inner thighs and spread them wider. That’s when I discover she isn’t wearing panties. A growl rumbles in my chest. I want her without panties, but I *don’t* want her wandering past my soldiers without them.

I kiss higher, then deeply inhale her scent.

She fists the blanket, and my mouth waters as I move even closer to my goal.

“No one’s ever kissed you here, angel. No one ever will, except me.” I breathe out, and she arches her back. “This hot cunt belongs to me. Only me.”

Something shifts in her, her body going taut. “Oh, I see. You *own* me, is that right?” She puts her palm against my forehead and pushes.

I let her, even though I want to fight and fasten my mouth to her pussy. “As you own me.” I look up at her.

“No I don’t!” she snaps. “You’ll be out there fucking other women. Hell, you probably already were. I saw that woman in your office. She was wearing flippin’ pajamas. Sexy little ones. I bet you—”

I groan and cover her mouth with my hand. “Please don’t talk about my sister that way.”

Her eyes widen, and she stops trying to talk against my palm. “That’s my *sister*, Carina. I called her back here from boarding school because of everything that’s going down. The closer she is, the safer I can keep her.” I pull my hand away.

“Your sister?” She swallows hard. “B-but the way you two were talking. And it seemed like you were ...”

“Like we were familiar with each other?” I laugh and sit back on my haunches. “I suppose we are. She’s my bratty kid sister who managed to distract me from my work with a game of chess and fifty questions about you. She’s nosy. Always has been.” He rolls his eyes.

She’s quiet for a while, possibly digesting this news, then her face softens. “I love my sister, too. She’s everything I’m not.”

“Carina is the same for me. Kind, open, honest. She’s a good kid.”

“You’re not kind or honest?” she asks.

“Only to my family, only to the ones I love. The rest of the world? I will destroy whatever I must to keep you safe and happy, angel. You have to know that.” I take her hand and kiss her palm.

“How could I know that? We only just met! You didn’t even want to be married to me.” She smooths my shirt down, covering herself.

Though I want to pry her legs apart and feast on her—and I know she’d love it once I pressed my tongue against her wet flesh—she’s right. She doesn’t know me, not really. She’s a virgin mafia princess who’s never been with a man, and certainly not one like me. She needs more time to get to know me and my family.

So though it pains my heart and my balls, I stand and lean down, pressing a kiss to her lips. “Let’s talk at breakfast, all right? You and Carina can meet, and we can all get to know each other. We’re family now.”

“Where are you going?” she asks as I grab her hips and settle her into the bed again, covering her with the sheet and blanket.

“I’m not letting your father get away with coming after you, angel.” I cup her cheek and kiss her again, more deeply this time. I’m starved for her, but I force myself to pull away. “He needs to learn that you’re a Palermo now, and we don’t take kindly to anyone threatening us.”

She nods. She may not understand the depths to which I’ll go to retaliate in her honor, but she knows it must be done. It’s how our world works.

“Get some rest, angel.” I turn and stride to the door.

“Um, Antonio?” Her voice is hesitant. “Will you come to bed later?”

I can’t stop the shit-eating grin that spreads across my face or the way my heart warms at her question. But I don’t turn around and let her see it, either. Otherwise, she might storm out of bed and try to smack me again—which, honestly, doesn’t sound so bad.

“I’ll come to bed with you, angel. Every night for the rest of our lives.” With that, I leave and keep the door cracked so Diablo can come and go as he pleases.

I find myself whistling as I jog down the stairs, and Gilly raises a brow at me as he follows me into my office.

“So things are good now?”

“She wants me dead.” I nod.

“And that’s good?” he asks.

“She also wants me in bed with her as soon as possible.”

“She does?”

I ignore his surprise. “Of course she does. To that end, let’s get some killing done sooner rather than later. I want to take out at least four soldiers and one general, perhaps two if we get lucky. Tell me who we can get our hands on within the next few hours.”

His eyes go grim, and he closes the door to my office as we get to work on our revenge.

Once I’ve washed the blood from my hands, I’ll slip into bed with my angel and sleep without a single regret. She’s worth every bit of vengeance I’m about to enact, and I’m going to spend the rest of my life proving that to her.

ANGELICA

I moan, having the best dream. My whole body buzzes with need. It's the same need Antonio keeps pulling to the surface every time he touches me. My mind replays us being in the shower together. His fingers between my thighs, strumming my clit. I'm so close.

"Antonio." I gasp and open my eyes when something hard starts to press inside of me.

"Do not move," Antonio says through gritted teeth. His hands are holding my hips in place. I blink, quickly realizing I wasn't fully dreaming. I'm on top of my husband, straddling and humping him in my sleep.

Heat rushes to my face. He'll never let me live this down. I don't recall him coming to bed, but he must have slipped in at some point. I drop my forehead to his chest to hide my face as my hips push down, my body demanding that I give it what it wants.

"Angel." One of Antonio's hands releases my hips to smack the side of my ass. I let out a loud moan. "Fuck," he hisses.

The shirt I'd been wearing pushes all the way up so there's nothing between us. My bare chest presses against him. "If you move another inch, you're not going to be a virgin anymore." He warns. The head of his cock is pressing into my entrance already. I'm pretty sure this is all my doing. I'd attacked the man in my sleep.

"This is your fault," I huff.

“My fault?” His hold on my hip tightens even more.

“Yes, you did that thing to me in the shower, and now my traitorous body wants more.” I peek up at him when he doesn’t say anything for a long moment. His eyes are darker than I remember. His face is deadly serious. “Antonio?”

“Give me a second.”

“I ah...” I rock my hips again, unable to help myself. I ache for him in ways I never imagined possible.

“Angel.” My name comes out in a warning. I’m not sure what he’s trying to warn me about, but I don’t care. I wiggle a bit more, causing my sex to flutter around the head of his cock. “Fuck,” he grits out as warmth floods inside of me.

“What was that?” My sex clenches around the head of his cock again. I need something inside me. My whole body aches for it, but so does my clit. “No!” I shout when he pulls away, and his cock slips free.

That’s the only protest I get before Antonio has me flat on my back with his mouth between my thighs. I scream out his name when he zeros in right on my aching clit. My back bows off the bed as the pleasure takes hold of me.

Antonio doesn’t stop. He licks and sucks, pushing me toward another orgasm. I shake my head, but words don’t leave my lips. I have no clue why I’m shaking my head no because the last thing I want him to do is stop, but I’m also not sure I can handle the pleasure I know I’m about to experience.

“Give it to me. You stole mine. Now I want yours in return.” He sucks my clit into his mouth, his tongue flicking back and forth. I go off again, screaming his name. My whole body tingles, every part of me feeling sensitive.

I don’t know if I drift off for a bit, but when I open my eyes again, Antonio is kissing up my neck and then down my jaw till he reaches my mouth. I part my lips and kiss him back. I’m lost in a haze of lust. I have no clue why this is happening between us, but I’m rather enjoying it.

“What was that?” I ask when he buries his face in my neck. I feel him inhale deeply, breathing me in.

“I woke up to my wife on top of me.”

“Seriously?” I give him a look that says I’m not buying what he’s selling. No way he’d sleep through that.

“All right. I might have been awake when you climbed onto me. My cock barely slipped out of my boxers and your greedy pussy was trying to get it inside you.”

“Antonio!” I gasp, sitting up. My shirt falls back down, covering part of me.

“What?” he says smugly, putting his hands behind his head, all stretched out in the bed. My eyes roam down his broad chest, to the deep V that leads to his cock. It’s still partly out of his boxers. I stare at the head that is glistening with wetness. A pearl of cum leaks from the tip. I lick my lips, thinking of what it would be like to take him in my mouth. “Like what you see, angel? Cause it’s all yours.”

I scramble out of the bed. The second my feet hit the floor, something trickles down my thighs. I pull up the shirt I’m wearing. It suddenly dawns on me now what that warm sensation I felt was before he’d flipped me over. He came inside of me.

“You came.” It comes out like an accusation.

“And you came twice.” He fixes his boxers, putting his cock away before he sits up and throws his legs over the side of the bed. I did come twice. I try to think of some smartass thing to say, but my head is fuzzy from all of the orgasms.

“Where are you going?” I ask when I realize he’s headed for the bedroom door.

“If I left, would you miss me?” He smirks, opening the door.

“I’d miss the orgasms. That’s about it.” I raise my chin.

“Then I’ll have to make sure I give you them often.” He grabs some bags that are sitting outside the room before shutting the door. “A few things to hold you over.” He places the bags in front of me. “As much as I love seeing you in my clothes, if you leave our bedroom dressed the way you did yesterday with no panties on, I will spank your little ass.”

“You will do no such thing!” I hiss.

“Maybe you’re right. Considering when I gave you that small smack before you let out a moan, I think you might enjoy a spanking.”

I glare at him, but I can’t deny it. I’d also been shocked that when he’d given me that tiny smack to the side of my ass, it shot straight to my clit. “That’s what I thought.”

“You know what—” He cuts me off, claiming my mouth in a deep kiss. It’s not hard, though. This time, it’s slow and sweet. When he’s done, I’m once again dazed.

“Get dressed and I’ll feed you. I already had my breakfast.” A full-on smile pulls at his lips, and I see a stupid sexy dimple appear in one cheek. What is this man doing to me?

I think I’m being seduced.

ANTONIO

“*W*here’d you go last night?” Carina points her fork at me as soon as Angelica and I enter the dining room.

“I had work.” I shrug and lead Angelica to the seat across from Carina. Pulling her chair out for her, I kiss the crown of her head as she sits.

Carina rolls her eyes.

“Play nice,” I chide.

“I’m nice.” She wrinkles her nose. “Don’t listen to him, Angelica. Anything he’s said about me is lies.”

Angelica snorts a laugh. “All he said was that you’re a good kid.”

“A *kid*?” Carina points her fork at me again. “You’re lucky I’m in a good mood this morning or I’d stab you with this.”

“You could certainly try, little sister.” I sit beside Angelica and drape my arm over the back of her chair.

Carina waves a hand at me, clearly dismissing my presence, and turns to Angelica. “I know all there is to know about him, but it’s you I’m interested in. Tell me all about you.” She cuts a piece of her waffles as my staff comes in and pours coffee, delivers fresh, hot food, and offers more.

“Well, I come from a pretty small family for an Italian family. It’s just my parents, my sister, and me—though we have a million cousins, of course.”

Carina nods. “That’s like Antonio and me.”

“My sister is older than me, and she’s pretty much the most sought-after bachelorette in town, but my father is saving her for some big alliance, I think.”

Carina frowns and stabs a piece of sausage. “You really don’t get any say in who you marry? That’s fucking barbaric.”

“Language, Carina.” Gilly strides in, his eyes on Carina.

She flips him off. “That’s nothing. I learned all sorts of things while I was trapped at boarding school.”

“Trapped? That’s the best boarding school money can buy.” I raise a brow. “You have tons of friends and straight As. Doesn’t sound trapped to me.”

“Well.” She shrugs, her dark brown hair falling into her face. She swipes it away and downs the rest of her orange juice. “I can’t help it if I’m popular.”

Gilly sits one seat away from her as he always has. I can never read him when it comes to Carina. When we were younger, he would tease her and play her little games—chess, backgammon, poker. Now, though, he doesn’t seem to have any time for her. In fact, he goes out of his way to keep from being alone with her.

“I would’ve loved to go to a school like that.” Angel smiles and takes a bite of her pancakes. “My mom wouldn’t have it. We were home-schooled by tutors, for the most part.”

“What was your favorite subject?” I ask.

She sips her coffee. “I really liked English. Reading was fun—though not the books I was supposed to read for school. I was more into fan fiction.”

“What’s that?” Gilly butters a piece of toast.

Angelica and Carina simultaneously sputter.

I take a bite of my eggs and let myself enjoy this time with my family. I didn’t realize how good something so simple could feel, but as Carina and Angelica begin to explain the apparent wonders of fan fiction, I can’t stop my smile.

“—but look, that whole omegaverse thing started as *Supernatural* fan fiction, more or less,” Carina says.

“Sure, but did you know some people think it actually started in a Star Trek episode from like the seventies or something? I’ve never seen it, but I read that in one of my forums.”

Carina nods and crunches into a piece of bacon. “I prefer the MM versions, but sometimes a good kidnap reverse harem can really get me going.”

“Oh my God, me too! Wait, have you read the shadow girl series based on Emily Dickinson’s life?”

Carina drops her fork. “Oh my God. I *love* that series!”

“I binge read the whole thing in like, two days.”

“Two days?” Carina crows.

“I didn’t sleep. Not even a little bit. It was so nuts! The way she had two lovers and then wanted to take on a third, but the first one went insane and tried to break into Emily’s house so she could—”

“Sacrifice her on an altar and drink her blood!” They both say in unison and fall into a fit of giggles.

Gilly and I exchange an amused look.

“Do you Webtoon?” Carina leans forward.

“Mmm-hmm. I can’t live without *Lore Olympus*.” Angelica polishes off her pancakes.

“I love that whole series. I’m collecting the hardbacks.”

“I want those.” Angelica sighs. “My mom would’ve lost her shit if I’d come home with any physical books like that. That’s why I have to read online, but I don’t mind it. There’s so much good stuff out there. I wasn’t deprived.”

“I’d let you borrow them, but *someone* dragged me home before the spring semester was even finished.” Carina glares at me.

I let out an exasperated sigh. “You just said you hated being at school, and now you’re mad at me for bringing you back

home?”

Carina’s gaze slides back to Angelica, her eyes narrowing in the same way our mother’s used to when she was about to involve us in a bit of mischievous behavior. “What are you doing for the rest of the day?”

“Um.” Angelica glances at me. “I’m not sure.”

“You can do whatever you like.” I finish my coffee. “After the events of last night, I’ve got a full slate of meetings.”

“We’re late for one already.” Gilly checks his watch.

I pull Angelica to me and kiss her. She makes a surprised sound then melts against me, her mouth opening as I slide my tongue against hers. I almost took her this morning. I was so close, my cock spilling inside her though I’d barely entered her. She’s my undoing, my cock behaving like I’m a 15-year-old with his most fervent crush. But I suppose that’s what she is to me—I’ve been smitten since the moment she turned to me in that church, ire in her eyes as she asked me what the fuck I was looking at. Even now, it makes me smile.

She opens her eyes as I pull back with the smile still on my lips. The one she’s given me.

Carina clasps her hands together and sighs. “Love!”

Angelica’s cheeks heat. “Let’s not get carried away. I’m only here for the inheritance,” she mumbles.

Maybe, for once, my bratty sister is right. Maybe, despite all odds, this *is* love.

ANGELICA

“So.” Carina chews her gum, blowing a giant bubble until it pops and she sucks it back into her mouth. “How do you plan on killing my brother?”

“I haven’t thought that far ahead. But I’m working on it,” I admit as we lie by the pool. Diablo is stretched out in his own chair, enjoying the sun.

“I mean, maybe you should keep him for protection. Your own family is trying to murder you. I’m not trying to be rude, but those are the facts.”

I puff out a breath. “So messed up,” I mutter more to myself than her. I did everything I was supposed to. But I should’ve known it would never be enough for my father. “Maybe they were only going to kill Antonio?” I throw that suggestion out there, even though I know that’s likely not the case.

“I don’t know. I hear the Larones are terrible people.” She rolls over to her side, propping her head up with her hand. “Again. No offense.”

“Well, I hear you Palermos are psychopaths,” I counter. Carina isn’t wrong, though. My family is terrible, even to our own. There is no loyalty even if you’re blood. I’ve gotten the message loud and clear.

“Is this because of the eyes in the microwave story?” she asks.

“What?” I sit up from the lounge chair. Eyes in a microwave?

“Oh, so it’s not that one.” She looks up like she’s thinking. “Was it the heads on the metal spikes of the fence thing?”

“What are you talking about?” I gape at her, my mouth hanging open that she’s being so nonchalant about their craziness.

“You sure you can kill my brother? Cause this seems to be freaking you out.” She blows another bubble.

“I just heard that you guys are known for some crazy torture.” I lean forward. “You were messing with me, right?” I whisper.

“Nah, that’s Butcher. He can be a bit...”—she smirks —“psycho.” I’ve heard whispers of the Butcher, but honestly I thought it was just a bunch of people making up stories. That they said those things because the Palermo family was known to butcher bodies. Never had I considered it was actually a person.

“Butcher.” I repeat the name.

“Yep, I’m sure you’ll meet him at some point. He’s around.” She waves her hand. “If people think we’re psycho, it’s probably because of him. He can be a bit unorthodox in his ways, but he must be very good at what he does because my brother keeps him around. They say he can get information out of *anyone*.”

I swallow hard. “I’d rather not test the theory for myself.”

Carina bursts into laughter. I don’t know what to make of Carina, but I know I like her. She’s a bratty smartass with a dark side. But I also like how direct and in your face she is. She doesn’t hold back.

“We might butcher people here, but women aren’t cattle.”

“Your brother married me against my will,” I remind her.

“Did he?” she challenges. “Does he make you do anything against your will? Besides when it comes to safety...” I open my mouth and close it. She’s right. “You’re safe here. Antonio will never make me marry against my will, nor would he ever make any children you two have together.”

“I’m not having kids with him. I’m killing him.” I drop back down in the chair, stretching out my legs. “Not today, obviously. But soon.”

“Right.” Carina giggles. It grows silent for a long moment before she speaks again. “Our father wasn’t always the best when it came to business, but he was good to our mother. He taught us loyalty above all else. The loyalty also extends to your spouse as well.”

“So you’re saying your brother won’t be having a butt load of mistresses?”

“He would never. A man would be very stupid to cheat on his wife and lie next to her each night while he sleeps.”

Now it’s me that laughs.

“True, but who wants a man if the only reason he doesn’t bang another woman is because he’s scared you’re going to murder him in his sleep?”

“Antonio doesn’t fear that you’ll kill him in his sleep. He’ll be loyal because he’s a man of his word but also because of love.” There she goes with that word again. She even does that dreamy sigh to emphasize it.

“This isn’t love.”

“Really? Cause he wouldn’t shut up about you last night when we played chess. Angel this, Angel that.”

“Really?” I peek over at her. She nods her head up and down.

“It’s sweet how openly loving he is with you too. Telling his men not to touch or look at you. Not like some men who pretend you don’t exist.” She spits her gum out angrily all of a sudden.

“Is someone pretending you don’t exist?” I thought maybe I saw her glancing over at Gilly a few times, but I wasn’t sure. Antonio had also mentioned something about him avoiding her as well, but I hadn’t really thought anything about it. Now that I see her reaction, it’s starting to make sense. Oh, this could be interesting.

“No man is allowed to know I exist.” Carina stands from her chair, adjusting her hot pink bikini. She’s petite but still has some curves.

She'd let me borrow one of her bikinis, but it's snug on me. My breasts are almost spilling out of the thing. I put a robe on to come down to the pool because I'm a bit self-conscious. Especially with the lingering bruise still on my side. I hate that I'm embarrassed about it. My father is the one who should be.

When we came out to the pool, the guards fanned out farther away. They all have their backs to us.

"I think every man will know you exist in that bikini," I assure her.

"Apparently not." She adjusts the straps at the top. "Want to get some snacks? I'll show you the library."

"There is a library?" I'm up out of the lounge chair and grabbing my robe before she can say anything else. Carina doesn't bother to cover up. She practically skips across the patio and into the house. I have a feeling if I did that I'd be in a world of trouble.

I'm just not sure if that's a good thing when it comes to my new husband or a bad thing.

ANTONIO

*M*y meetings are finished, finally, and I'm about to leave my office when I get a message from Butcher.

I snap up my phone and call him. "Anything?" I ask.

"The last two guys said Constantine set it up weeks ago. Maybe when he got a better look at your balance sheet." Butcher's voice is low, rusty, like always. Someone groans weakly in the background.

"You kept one alive?" I ask.

"For now. He's the last general I have under my knife. Once I get done with him, I'll burn him with the rest."

"Good. Anyone who had any part in this—who fucking *dared* come after my bride—I want you to send their heads back to their master."

"Already working on my collection." Butcher snorts a laugh.

"Come up to the house when you're done. Or maybe tomorrow. I want you to meet my wife."

"Gilly said you swooned for her the second you saw her." I can feel him grinning.

"Swooned'?" I roll my eyes. "Gilly is so full of shit."

"So you aren't in love, then?" he teases.

"I didn't say that." I smile, just thinking of my darling Angelica. "Finish up," I snap before Butcher thinks of any more wise-ass comebacks. "See you tomorrow."

I pocket my phone and stride to the back of the house, but when I get there, Angelica isn't at the pool where I'd last seen her. She was smart to cover up in a robe. She may have saved the lives of some of my soldiers, because if I'd even thought one of them was looking at her bare skin ... I crack my neck and stalk back down the hall.

That's when I hear voices from the library.

"No, there was this one manga I read at school that my friends were passing around. It was disgusting! Zombie sex and all sorts of wild shit." Carina laughs.

"So I take it you read the whole thing?" Angel rejoins.

"Oh, definitely."

I walk in, then stop. Angelica is lying back on the tufted leather couch, her robe beneath her. Her breasts swell over the bikini top that has to be two sizes too small for her, and fuck, the fabric barely covers the sweet expanse of skin between her thighs. My cock is at full attention, and I can't look at anything else. Only her. Only my angel.

I swoop into the room and pull her from the couch, drape her in my arms, and walk out with her.

"Hey!" She scrambles to hold on to the book in her hands as Carina's laughter follows me down the hallway.

"What are you doing?" I grit my teeth, my jaw clenching as I take the stairs two at a time.

"I *was* reading a book until an unhinged psycho busted in and kidnapped me!" She kicks, but I don't put her down.

Diablo skitters away in front of me, his tail up and his hair on end as I storm down the hallway to our bedroom. Once inside, I kick the door shut and lay her on the bed, wasting no time in crawling on top of her and kissing her hard.

She smacks at my chest, and I take her wrists and pin them over her head. Her body arches as she tries to buck me, but I settle between her thighs and rub my hard cock along her hot cunt.

That pulls a moan from her, and she kisses me back. Her tongue wars with mine, her body becoming more languid as I move my hips against her, teasing her with my cock. Fuck, I want to do a lot more than just tease.

I pull back and stare down into her eyes. “You were laid out like a feast. *Anyone* could’ve seen you. Could’ve coveted you.”

“No one covets m—” She squeaks as I grab her chin.

“Every man with a pulse would covet you, Angelica. Never doubt that. Never doubt what I would do to keep you all to myself.”

She swallows hard, and I get to my knees, then yank her toward me. When I drape her across my knees, she flails and tries to claw my leg.

“This is for displaying your body for others to see.” I slap her ass hard.

She jolts, an angry cry ripping free from her lips.

“This is for doubting your beauty.” I slap her harder, her ass warm beneath my assault.

“Antonio!” she gasps. “Don’t you dare!”

“And this is for flaunting all this in front of me and thinking—foolishly—that I wouldn’t come for what’s mine.” I slap her ass with five hard hits, then rub her reddened skin, sliding my fingers lower to the thin scrap of fabric covering her pussy.

Her cry turns to a moan.

“So wet for me, my sassy angel.” I dip lower and press right where her clit is.

She bucks, but I keep my palm on her back, holding her down as I push her bikini aside and slide my fingers into her.

Another moan vibrates from her as I slide my fingers in and out of her slick cunt. My cock demands relief, demands I claim what’s mine. But I’m not going to take her until she begs me. I need her to know that she chooses me, the same as I choose her.

With a yank, I pull her bikini bottoms off and toss them aside, then I throw her to the bed and get to my knees. Grabbing her hips, I don't let her escape as she tries to scoot up the bed away from me.

“No, angel. You're going nowhere.” I spread her thighs and fully taste what's mine with a long lick from her hole to her clit. I groan, my control on a hair trigger.

Pressing my tongue inside her, I look up at her. Her gaze is on me, her eyes wild, her chest heaving where one of her perfect tits has popped free of the too-small top. I reach up and pinch her nipple, and the sound she makes sends me into a frenzy.

I lick and suck her tender flesh, devouring her as she moans and writhes, her pleasure growing with each swipe of my tongue. Pressing two fingers inside her, I stretch her tight pussy as I focus on her clit, rubbing it with the broad side of my tongue again and again until her thighs shake, her breath catches, and she comes with my name on her perfect lips.

I drink her down, her pussy milking my fingers as I lick and suck until she's quivering, her body languid.

Standing, I stare down at her, at her swollen lips and her wet cunt. I've never seen a more beautiful work of art.

I taught her a lesson. One she needs to learn.

She sits up, her gaze on me.

“I hope you understand the penalty for—” I groan when she reaches out and runs her palm down the outline of my cock against my pants.

And when she whispers “my turn” in a sultry voice, I'm totally fucking lost.

ANGELICA

I don't think Antonio knows what he's done. He's given me a peek into his want for me. It's real. I can see it in his eyes. I can feel it in the way he touches me. His jealousy bleeds from him when he thinks someone else might get a glimpse of me. At first, I brushed it off as being his ego or something. But as I rub my hand over the outline of his hard cock, I realize the power I truly hold in my hand.

My fingers go for the button of his pants. He suddenly grabs my wrist, stopping me. "Angel, don't start something you can't finish. My control is—"

"Shattering?" I yank my hands free and pop the button of his pants. "Interesting, isn't it? I'd felt I had no control when I was forced to marry you, and now you're the one without it."

His nostrils flare. "You're my wife," he grits out. Oh, he doesn't like hearing that I was forced to marry him. "I would have found you at some point. You were always going to be mine."

I slide off the bed to my knees.

"Angel." He fists my hair, making my sex clench. An ache to be filled settles deep inside me. My body is still humming from the last orgasm, but I need more. I want to play with his control.

"Yes, husband?"

His hold on my hair tightens. "Angel," he groans.

I lick my lips as I reach into his pants for his cock. It springs free. I let out a small gasp, wrapping my hand around it at the base. A bead of cum leaks from the tip. I'd gotten a peek at this morning, but seeing it fully right in my face has some of my bravado wavering. The man is huge. He'll split me in two. My vagina doesn't seem to care, because again it flutters, wanting to be filled.

"You can handle me. You're the only one that will be able to."

A strange emotion blooms in my chest. How did he know what I was thinking?

"Open up," he encourages me. I part my lips as he guides my head toward his cock. I'm not sure who wants this more, me or him.

I moan as his taste hits my tongue. "Fuck," I hear him mutter. His whole body is tense, all his muscles straining to keep himself in place as I explore his cock. My tongue wraps around him. I let out another moan when more of his taste spills into my mouth. "Don't move." His tone brooks no argument.

I hold still as he begins to thrust in and out of my mouth. It's the most erotic thing I've ever experienced. He's using my body, taking what he wants, but still I feel like I have all the power and control. The man is vibrating with his need for me. I can tell he's holding on to his control by a very thin thread.

"Suck, angel. Hollow those cheeks."

I do as I'm told, his cock hitting the back of my throat. Loud groans pour from him. My hand starts to slip between my thighs, my clit throbbing with me. "No." He pulls back, his cock slipping from my lips. "You don't touch my pussy."

"I'm sorry." I bite down on my bottom lip, peeking up at him through my lashes.

"Liar." He lifts me from the floor, tossing me onto the bed. He's on me before I get a chance to move. "You're not sorry at all. Are you?"

"No." I wrap my arms around his neck and yank him down to kiss me. He lets me but kisses me harder. He grinds his cock

against my sex. It slides through my folds, rubbing against my clit with each thrust.

“In me,” I try to order, wanting him to give me more. I lift my hips, his cock sliding down and kissing my entrance.

“I’m not taking your cherry until you say you *want* to be my wife,” he says against my mouth.

“Antonio.”

He lifts his head, his dark eyes locking with mine. I’ve never felt more alive or safe than I have being here with him. No one has treated me the way he does. He makes me feel needed and precious. As though what we have is the real deal.

In fact, it scares me how much I want it. The fear that all of this could be ripped from me. All of it is too good to be true. Even if my family is trying to kill me. I don’t want to leave here, and more than that, I don’t want Antonio to be taken from me.

“I want to be your wife.”

His mouth crashes down on mine. I cry out, my nails digging into his shoulders as he thrusts all the way in me. The pain is sharp, but the connection of having him inside me is more overpowering than anything else. I cling to him, my body adjusting to my husband’s size.

Tears escape from my eyes. Antonio kisses them away. “I’m sorry.” He says those words so easily. Without hesitation. He really is so different from all the men I’ve ever met in my life. They would never in a million years show sympathy, because they consider it weakness.

“I’m okay,” I reassure him. Honestly, I’m not sure if my tears are from the pain or because of all these emotions swirling around inside of me.

“Say it again. Say you’re my wife.” He lifts, bracing himself with one arm to loom over me.

“I’m your wife.” He pulls out and thrusts back in.

“Again,” he orders.

“I’m your wife.” This time I meet his thrust, his cock sliding in and out of me.

“I need you with me.” His hand slips between us, his fingers going to my clit. He strokes me as he keeps driving in and out.

“Antonio,” I gasp. He shifts his cock, hitting somewhere deeper inside of me, triggering another orgasm.

“Angel!” He groans my name as he spills his release into me. His body jerks against mine as he keeps coming. My sex flutters around his cock, locking down around him. A string of curses leaves Antonio before he drops on top of me, giving me his weight.

I wrap my arms and legs around him, holding him close.

What has this man done to me? He’s making me love him. That’s what he’s doing. I might not be as in control as I thought.

ANTONIO

“*T*hey want a meeting.” Gilly leans back in his chair and sips a whiskey.

“Where?” I ask.

“Carlino’s downtown.”

It’s neutral territory, or at least it used to be. That doesn’t mean a meet-up is a good idea. It’s been a week since I married Angelica. Six days since I sent the heads of Constantine Larone’s men back to him. After Butcher dropped them off, it’s been silent. They know who sent them.

“You can agree to the meet, and I’ll show up and handle business.” Butcher smirks.

“As wonderful as that bloodbath sounds, Fernando—”

His smirk turns to a scowl when I use his real name.

“I don’t think I’m starting off on the right foot if I murder my bride’s father in cold blood when he’s made an offering of peace.” As much as I want him dead for attacking us after the ceremony, I’m also interested to know why he did it. If it was just the money, that’s one thing. But is there something else in the old man’s head that might prove more dangerous? I don’t know. But I need to find out.

“Does she even like Constantine?” Gilly asks.

“No. He wasn’t kind to her.” I force my hands to relax from where they’re fisting the arms of my chair. I still remember the bruises that darkened her side. They’re almost gone now, only

faint yellow marks remaining. I've kissed them more times than I can count. I can't seem to get enough of my new bride. In fact, I want her right now.

"Accept the meeting."

"Antonio—"

I cut Gilly off. "This is necessary. If I snub my nose at them, they'll escalate, and that could put Angelica in danger. If it's a higher dowry they're after, then I'll pay it. I don't give a shit about the money."

Gilly stares at me, and he doesn't even have to make his argument. I already know what it is.

"I know you're worried this will jeopardize us or seem weak. I get it." In fact, I feel like a record playing on the wrong track simply because I haven't gone and gutted Constantine myself. But with Angelica in the mix, things are different now. I have to think about her. "Constantine has another daughter, Angelica's sister. She's still under his roof and under his thumb."

Butcher shrugs. "No one's going to hurt some silly little mafia princess."

"Constantine will." I stay firm. "If he can use Bianca to get at Angelica, he will." I don't tell them, but I spent several hours talking to Angelica about her sister a few nights ago. She's worried about her, especially given the fact her father has proven himself to be a man who'll sacrifice his own family if it means he gets what he wants. She hasn't been able to contact her at all, her phone rejecting all calls and texts. Angel is worried.

"So we take out Constantine." Butcher crosses his arms over his wide chest.

"Stop thinking with your cleaver." Gilly sighs. "We can't kill Constantine unless he makes the first move."

"Shooting up the honeymoon car wasn't the first move?" Butcher raises a brow.

“You know it isn’t.” Gilly raises a brow. “Not unless we have real proof. The other families will never take our side over the Larones.”

I sigh, tired of the back and forth. “We aren’t hitting Constantine. Even though he’s a bastard, he’s still my wife’s father. She doesn’t have much love for him left, but there’s enough that I don’t want to destroy him and risk hurting her *or* her sister.”

Butcher groans in frustration.

“You can’t just murder or torture this problem away.” Gilly throws his hands up.

“No more discussion. Tell them I’ll be at the meeting.” I don’t like the decision any more than my men do, but I have to try to settle things between the Larones and my family, for Angelica’s sake. I have to be able to tell her without even a hint of subterfuge that I did everything I could to keep her and her sister safe.

I stride out and up the stairs, my blood heating the closer I get to our bedroom. When I swing open the door, I have to stop, my lips quirking up in an unbidden smile.

“Aren’t you just the sweetest little devil.” Angelica rubs Diablo’s tummy while he digs his claws into the air as if he’s making invisible biscuits. “You are. You haven’t been spoiled enough. That mean old Antonio doesn’t give you all the love you deserve.” She nuzzles his cheek, his purr reverberating through the room.

I’m not jealous of my cat. That would be stupid. Not jealous at all. I bounce onto the bed, startling Angelica and Diablo and sending the latter skittering off the bed and into the hallway.

“Hey!” She sits up, her brows drawing together. “We were busy play—”

I tackle her to the mattress and kiss her hard. “I’ve got something you can play with.”

She giggles and runs her fingers through my hair. “You’ve been gone forever.”

“I agree.” I settle between her thighs, her body clothed in nothing but a T-shirt and panties. I want to strip them off with my teeth.

“What’s going on?” She presses her hand to my cheek.

That simple movement strikes a chord in me. How does she know? How does she know that I’m in a fucking knot on the inside? It’s like she can sense my heart.

“It’s nothing.”

She leans up and kisses me gently. “It’s something. I know when my husband is upset. Tell me. Maybe I can help.”

Fuck, I love it when she calls me that.

I stare down at her, my heart beating so loud I wonder if she can hear it. “Is this how you do it?”

“What?” She ghosts her lips over mine again.

“Kill me?”

She blinks. “What?”

“Killing me with kindness, angel. That’s what you’re doing.” I kiss her again, needing her warmth, her heat. Needing everything about her.

Because I’m about to walk into the most dangerous situation of my life, one I might not return from. But I’ll do it for her. I’ll do anything for my angel.

She sighs against my lips.

I want to rip her panties off and fuck away our troubles, just bury myself in her until they fade. And I will, but only after I’m honest with her.

With a sigh, I press my forehead to hers. “Your father wants to meet.”

Her eyes narrow. “Where?”

I kiss her. I can’t help myself. She asks the right question, her mind already at work.

“Carlino’s.”

“Oh, no. That’s where—”

“The Ferrignos were killed last year. Yes.”

Her eyes widen. “It’s not safe.”

“It’s not, but I won’t be going alone. I’m taking Gilly. Butcher will be here to keep an eye on the house.”

“You mean an eye on me?” she asks.

“Yes. You’re the most precious thing in the world. I won’t leave you unprotected.”

“Don’t go.” She cups my cheeks, her eyes going glassy with tears. “Please don’t go.”

“If I don’t, then your father will take it as an insult and put it before the families as reason enough for him to start a war with me.”

“I don’t care.” A tear slips free from her eye. “If you go there...”

I wipe her tear away with my thumb. “I’m coming back to you, angel. I always will.”

“He’s a bad man, Antonio,” she whispers. “I’m scared.”

I wipe another of her tears away. “I know.” I kiss her softly this time.

“I’m only going to hear him out, angel, try to get news of Bianca. Nothing more.”

“Please don’t go.”

Her tears are ripping my soul to shreds. “Don’t cry, beloved. Don’t cry, my angel.” I kiss them away. “I’ll come back to you. I swear it.”

“You *have* to, Antonio.”

“I do?” I kiss each side of her mouth.

“Yes. Because ...”

My heart seems to skip a beat, my entire being focusing on her, on the words forming on her perfect lips.

She looks up, her eyes still swimming with tears. “Because I’ve fallen in love with you.”

ANGELICA

I hold Diablo close and bury my face in his fluff. He purrs loudly, letting me cuddle him as much as I want to. I've been lying in this bed since Antonio left. The seconds are dragging by. "Bunch of bullshit," I mutter into Diablo's fur. He meows in agreement. "Right? He went and made us love him, and now he's going to get himself killed. Only I should get to kill him. It's my right. Not anyone else's." Diablo lets out another meow.

"Angelica!" Carina shouts my name. A few seconds later, the bedroom doors burst open. Diablo jumps up and hisses at her, not appreciating her interrupting his pets.

"That punk lets you cuddle him? The hell?" Carina heads toward the bed. Diablo leaps down, slipping under it so that she can't try and pet him. "Brat."

"He's not a brat. He's a sweetheart."

"Next you're going to say my brother is a sweetheart."

"He has his moments."

"Wow, you folded like a cheap chair." Carina plops down on the bed. "I'm disappointed. I figured after you killed him that I was going to be your second-in-command. I was planning on kicking Gilly out on his ass." She smirks. I've noticed any chance she gets, she takes a jab at Gilly. I've also noticed how he avoids her, but he can't help but stare at her when he thinks no one is looking.

“Why, when we can just make them do our bidding?” I try to tease, but my heart is not in it today. So many thoughts of what might be going down at that meeting keep racing through my mind. The man I love could be dying right now.

“Good point.” Carina falls back on the bed to lie next to me.

“How are you so calm?” Over the last week, not only have I fallen in love with my husband but Carina too. She may laugh along with me when I joke around about trying to kill her brother, but I think if I actually tried, she’d slit my throat. Not that I blame her. I’d do the same for my own sister.

“I have faith in my brother and Gilly.” She gives a decisive nod.

“My father has been the devil for so long in my eyes it’s hard not to think he can end us all.”

“I’m sorry you had to grow up with that.” She grabs my hand, giving it a squeeze. I welcome the comfort.

Carina can be feisty, but the girl is a marshmallow in the center. I was always feisty and willful at home to draw the attention away from my sister. It was an act I learned to put on. Bianca might have been a year older than me, but she was soft all over. I knew I needed to protect her from my father.

“I can’t lose him.” I let out a long breath, trying to keep my emotions in check. I’m supposed to be strong.

“You have no idea.” Carina rolls to her side to face me. “My brother is sweet with you. He’s been pulling out all the stops trying to lure you to him. But make no mistake about it, the man is lethal when it comes to protecting his family.”

I think back to that day in the limo. It feels like it was almost a lifetime ago, but it wasn’t. A switch had flipped in Antonio. He’d ended those men without a thought or fear in his eyes. He got out of the limo to face whoever it was attacking us. He didn’t rest until he subdued the threat.

My father would have kept his ass put and waited for his men to handle the situation. He would never intentionally put himself in harm’s way. I almost want to laugh. Here I’ve been pretending to be rebellious, and my father was pretending to

be some strong leader. Everything is such a façade, and Antonio is going to rip the curtain back. I bet that's why my father tried to sneak an attack. He's scared of Antonio.

"Thanks," I tell her, appreciating that little pep talk that spurred my own.

"Anytime." She winks at me. "Now, I've got an idea. Come on, get out of this bed."

I sit up as she rolls off the side of the bed but lands on her feet with a hop.

"Can't we lie here a little longer?"

"I mean, if you really want, but I thought now might be a good time to try and get into contact with your sister."

"What?" That has me out of bed. "How?"

"If everyone is at this meeting, I'm guessing she's back home with minimal security?"

"We can't leave." As much as I want to go to my sister, I don't need Antonio getting some alert that I've snuck out. I need him to concentrate, and I know he won't be able to do that if he's worried about my whereabouts.

"We're not leaving." She hooks her arm through mine, leading me out of the bedroom. "You think my brother spent all that money on a fancy boarding school for nothing?"

"I didn't go to a fancy boarding school, so I'm not following whatever it is you're saying." We descend the stairs, our arms still locked.

"Butch." Carina gives Butcher a chin nod. He glares at her.

"What are you up to?"

"Nothing," Carina chirps at him. "Going to the library is all."

Butcher grunts a response, clearly not buying it.

He follows after us. He stops when we enter the library but lingers in the doorway. I know Butcher wouldn't hurt me, but he still freaks me the hell out. There is an emptiness behind his eyes.

Carina grabs a laptop off the table. “You stand here.” She actually places me in front of the chair in the corner of the room before she drops into it.

“What are you doing?”

Carina opens the laptop and wiggles her fingers. “Gonna see if we can get a peek into the Larone home. You said your father has cameras throughout the house.”

“Yes, but not his office or any place he conducts business.” At least I’d never seen any there. They were all over outside, as well as the common areas and hallways. I always felt like we were being watched except in our bedroom.

“Carina,” Butcher barks, having heard everything we said. I spin around to face him.

“I can only have the computer in here, and it’s monitored, but no one is monitoring it now.” Carina says from behind me as Butcher closes in on us. “Don’t move, Angelica.”

“Give me the damn computer,” Butcher demands. He looms over me. Carina is tucked in behind me. Is she using me as a shield? Against the Butcher? The hell? I thought we were friends. Carina continues to click away on the computer.

“He can’t touch you,” Carina says smugly. She *is* using me as a damn shield. Butcher tries to reach around me to grab the laptop from her, but I move, putting my hands up to push back. He steps away so my hands don’t connect with him.

“See?” Carina snickers.

“Damn it, Carina.”

“It’s fine. I’m just checking on her sister.”

“You and that fucking computer,” he grumbles, trying to make a grab again, but I reach out to touch him, and once again he steps back.

“It’s like I have a superpower.” I can’t help but laugh.

“May the force be with you.” Carina giggles from behind me.

We might be laughing now, but once the men get home, I don’t think that will be the case any longer.

ANTONIO

“*T*his isn’t what I’d expected.” Constantine shoots a glare at Gilly. “I thought you’d trust the man whose daughter you married.”

“Trust is in short supply.” I wave the server away once he’s filled my wine glass.

“I heard about what happened after the wedding.”

“You did?” I ask, raising my eyebrows in mock disbelief.

“I was surprised.”

“Interesting.” I lean back in my chair, the room silent except for the two of us and a few pots and pans clanging in the kitchen.

“How is that interesting?” He dips a piece of bread into the olive oil and takes a bite.

I shrug. “I simply find it interesting that your daughter and brand-new son-in-law were attacked in broad daylight yet you neither came nor called to see how your daughter fared. Wouldn’t you find that interesting?”

He stops chewing, his eyes narrowing. “I knew she was all right. I’m not completely out of the loop. You both made it back to your place across the river.”

I take my butter knife and carefully slice a piece of bread from the loaf. “I hope you understand that I take this attempt on our lives very seriously and intend to find the perpetrator and kill

him in short order.” I tap my bread into the olive oil, then chew it, my eyes on Constantine.

The old man clears his throat, his gaze darting to Gilly. “That’s why I wanted this meeting. I need to know what you’re doing to protect my daughter.”

“Which one?” I ask.

He sips his wine. “Bianca is safe at home, which is where she’ll stay until the Frangiones decide to marry their eldest to her. She’s my pride and joy.”

I feel the insult, but not the sting. Whatever he may say, I know my bride is worth far more than his opinion of her. He’s just too foolish to realize it. He’s also too foolish to realize he gave me a piece of information that not even Angelica knew: He intends to give Bianca to the Frangiones. They’re a vicious pack of thieves, cutthroats, and human traffickers, ones I’d never lower myself to associate with. So why would old man Larone seek an alliance with them?

The waiter brings our pasta dishes, the Parmesan melting into the semolina noodles beautifully. It’s a shame to let it go to waste.

I push my chair back and stand.

Constantine’s second shifts on his feet, his hand edging toward his gun. I’m not worried about him. Gilly will drop him if he dares draw a weapon.

“I don’t know what game you’re playing, Constantine, but I will tell you this: Angelica is mine, and she will be the queen of my empire long after you’re nothing but dust.”

He sputters, wine spraying from his lips.

“Your insult to my wife is one I can’t abide. However”—I button my suit coat—“I will grant you mercy this one time, only because I want my angel to be happy.” I lean down and brace my hands on the table. “But if you come for us again, I will bury you, old man.”

“How dare you!” He stands, knocking over his wine. “You’re no one! A nobody who begged for my scraps, and I gave them

to you. Now here you—”

I lunge across the table and grab the front of his shirt, then yank him toward me, spilling the food and sending plates crashing to the floor. “You will *never* speak of my wife that way again.” I spit in his face and shove him backwards.

He goes flailing and lands hard on his ass.

“Gilly, we’re done here.” I stride past Constantine and out of the restaurant as he howls with rage.

He’s lucky I didn’t put my butter knife through his eye. There’s only one thing stopping me—Angelica. I won’t disappoint her or hurt her, even though my vengeful nature demands justice. *My* kind of justice.

But for her, I walk away. I have to. Because she means more than any old man’s insults ever will.



“—didn’t let me come to the wedding. I was so crushed.” A woman’s voice floats through the hallway.

Gilly raises a brow at me.

I shrug.

“I know! I was already so sad to be married off to a stranger, and then when I realized you weren’t there like we’d planned, I had a come-apart, and then I fell apart *again* when I got married.”

I walk to the library, the door open as Angelica and Carina speak to a woman via Skype. It must be Bianca. Clever Carina, striking while she knew Constantine would be busy with me.

“Dad locked me in my room and told Roman to watch me.” Bianca shivers.

“Ugh, I hate Roman. He’s the worst.” Angelica leans forward, her gaze glued to her sister. “But are you okay?”

“Me? I’m the same. I’m more worried about you. Mom let it slip that you ran into trouble after the wedding, but she wouldn’t tell me anything else. What happened? Is it your husband?” Her voice lowers. “Is he cruel to you?”

“Oh my gosh, no!” Angelica laughs, the sound easing the tension that was radiating through me after the meeting with her father. “He’s actually ... well, he’s really sweet. He’s kind of jealous. I mean, he doesn’t let any of his men so much as look at me. It’s funny, really. And you met Carina. She’s awesome.”

“I am.” Carina grins, then glances at me. The grin falls away as she realizes the trouble she’s in.

That’s when I notice Butcher. He’s been standing completely still against the back bookcase, his eyes on the screen, the most intense look I’ve ever seen on his face. What the fuck?

“I wish I could be there with you, to be honest. I hate it here, and Mom—” She gasps and leaves the screen, then comes back in a hurry. “Dad’s home, and he’s shouting downstairs. I have to go.”

“I’ll see you soon.” Angelica’s voice breaks, shattering off a piece of my heart. “I love you.”

“I love you, too. Bye.” Bianca disappears, and Angelica sits back in her chair, then covers her face with her hands and lets out a wail.

I hurry to her and kneel in front of her, pulling her hands away. “My angel, don’t cry.”

Carina slips away and out of the library, just as quick as Diablo when he’s in trouble.

“She’s trapped there. She didn’t say it, but I can feel it. She’s scared. We have to get her out.” Tears run down her cheeks, and I wipe them away.

“We’ll get her, angel. Your father is backed into a corner. I didn’t realize it, but he’s far more desperate for money than I knew. I don’t know what he’s got himself into, but he’s in deep.”

“Wh-what makes you say that? Because he let you marry me?” She sniffles.

That brings a wry smile to my face. “Yes. I didn’t deserve you and never will.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I know.” I kiss her hands.

“Then what?”

I don’t want to tell her this, but it’s best if she hears it from me. “He intends to marry your sister to the Frangiones.”

Her breath hitches, and the color leaches from her face. “No,” she whispers.

I had hoped she didn’t know their reputation. But clearly, she does.

A noise behind me catches my attention, and I turn to find Butcher stalking from the room. He blows past Gilly and stomps out the house, the garage door slamming behind him.

Gilly gives me a questioning look. I shrug. I have no fucking clue what just happened, but I know it can’t be good.

ANGELICA

“Antonio, no.” I grip the front of his shirt. “Please.” Tears sting at my eyes thinking about my sister being at the hands of the Frangione family.

When I married into the Palermos, I knew of their reputation for being lethal, but there was often a reason for their actions. If someone turned up butchered, it was because they’d given the Palermos a reason. But that’s not the way it is with the Frangiones. They are terrible people who commit horrible crimes without regard for anyone.

They are insane. I’ve heard my father call them unpredictable on many occasions. He would always go on about how you never knew what they could or would do. I can’t believe he’s willing to hand Bianca over to them. It doesn’t make any sense. But it does go to show me that my father really doesn’t give a shit about anyone other than himself.

“Angel, it’s going to be okay.” He cups my cheek, trying to reassure me. I lean into his hand, knowing my husband is a man of his word.

“I love seeing that trust in your eyes.” He leans in and presses his mouth to mine in a soft kiss.

Gilly clears his throat.

“Is something happening now?” I tighten my hold on Antonio, not ready to let go of him just yet.

“Not yet,” he reassures me before turning his head toward Gilly. “Go check on Butcher?” Gilly simply nods before

leaving us alone in the library.

“Butcher is super scary.” I would be intimidated by him even if I didn’t know how he got his nickname. The man just has a presence in the room that lets you know not to mess with him or bad shit is gonna happen.

“He won’t harm a hair on your head.” Yeah, I’d gotten that. He’d followed Antonio’s instructions to a fault.

“You don’t ever worry that he could turn on you?”

“Butcher’s loyalty is to the Palermos. We’re the closest thing he’s ever had to a family. The only thing that can ever shake that kind of loyalty is love.” His thumb strokes back and forth along my jaw.

“Are you saying you’d turn on everyone for me?”

“If I had to, I’d burn this city to the ground for you.”

“Well, aren’t you a romantic?” I tease, slipping my hands up his chest and around his neck so I can pull myself into him. Somehow, being close to him like this lessens my worry and my tension. He moves his hands to my ass and squeezes, building an entirely different sort of tension.

“I need to be inside of you.”

“There we go with the romance again.” I laugh. “You’re really laying it on thick today.”

“Naked,” he orders, sitting me down on the table before he heads for the door to close and lock it. “Angel.”

I quickly shed my clothes. Antonio pulls his shirt off over his head. I suck in a breath. If I didn’t know how obsessed he was with me, I might be insecure. The man is ripped. Slowly, I lie back on the table to present myself to him. That always gets him worked up.

He yanks his belt free. “I didn’t get to finish my dinner.” He comes to stand between my thighs, his belt still in his hand. “But you’ll feed me, won’t you, angel?” His eyes roam over my body, taking me in. I never knew him just looking at me would turn me on so much.

“Yes.” I spread my thighs wider, ready for him to feast on me.

“Such a good girl.” He grabs my hips, lifting me off the table only to flip me over. My legs hang off the side. He grabs my hands, wrapping the belt around and tying them behind my back. I whimper. Holy hell, this is hot.

“So soft.” He runs his hands down my back to my ass before trailing them to my thighs. “So perfect.” I turn my head to peek over my shoulder at him. He drops to his knees, spreading my legs wider before he pulls me down the table more. “And all mine.”

He buries his face between my thighs from behind. His tongue thrusts in and out of me only to slip free and tease my clit. Over and over he does this, bringing me to the brink only to pull back. It’s the best kind of torture.

“Antonio,” I moan, pushing my hips back while lifting my ass.

“Don’t tease me,” he growls. I’m about to tell him he’s the one doing the teasing, but the words die on my lips when he grabs my ass and spreads my cheeks. His tongue takes a long lick to stop at my back entrance. I gasp when he presses it into me there.

It’s dark and dirty, and there is nothing I can do to stop him. He’s got me bound. He can do anything he wants. That only makes my desire spiral out of control.

“Please,” I beg. He gives me mercy, his fingers going to my clit as his tongue keeps teasing me with erotic thoughts. With only a few strokes, I’m going off. I cry out his name as I come hard.

I’m lost in my pleasure when he thrusts his cock deep inside of me in one hard stroke, taking my breath away. He drives in and out of me. One hand holds my bound wrists while the other slips down the crack of my ass. He presses his thumb against my asshole.

“Antonio,” I moan.

I need to see him. I turn my head to watch my husband rut into me, hitting the perfect spot deep inside me. It’s almost painful but filled with ecstasy too. The expression on his face is my

undoing. He's lost in his need for me. Consumed by the pleasure that he's giving and taking. His thumb presses into my ass as I start to orgasm again.

Antonio repeats my name like a prayer as he thrusts two more times before planting himself as deep as he can. Warmth blooms inside me. A low groan comes from him. His cock jerks as he spills more into me.

"Fuck, angel." He leans down, placing kisses on my back as he undoes the belt. I moan when he steps back, his cock slipping from me. His release spills down my thighs. "What did I ever do to deserve you?" He plucks me from the table, carrying me over to the sofa. "Was I too rough? I'm sorry. I—"

I place my finger to his lips to stop him from saying anything else. "I loved every second of that." He smiles against my finger. "And I love you. Even if you're a dirty perv." I giggle, making him bark a laugh. His cock jerks against my ass. "How are you still hard?"

"All I can think about is taking your ass next." My eyes widen. His finger and tongue are one thing, but his cock? Antonio is no small man.

"Not yet, Angel." He nuzzles my neck. "Not till I knock you up at least."

ANTONIO

“*I*’ll be up soon.” I kiss Angelica’s forehead and shoo her from the library.

She gives me a sexy look over her shoulder, then pauses and returns to me.

“What is it, angel?” I wrap her in my arms.

“I’m just so worried. Bianca won’t survive people like the Frangiones.” She looks up at me, her eyes welling with tears. “She’s so sweet, Antonio. You’d know if you met her. She’s genuine and kind and so, so good. I’ve always tried to protect her, but now I’m not there and—”

“Shh.” I rub her back. “I’m going to take care of this, angel. I need you to trust me.”

“I *do* trust you.” She sighs. “I don’t know how or when it happened, but you made me fall in love. I thought being forced to marry you was my death sentence, but it’s turned into anything but. Now I want the same thing for Bianca, not a life where she lives in terror. Please, help her.” She buries her face in my chest. “Please.”

I can’t bear to hear her beg me like this, not when I can feel the pain inside her. “Angel, I’m going to fix this. I swear it. Your father is over a barrel. I don’t know how or why, but I’m going to find out. If I have to save his ass to save your sister, I’ll do it.” Fuck, I don’t want to do anything except bury her father in the fucking ground, but I’ll do what I must to make my angel happy.

“I don’t love him, Antonio. Not as a father or anything even close to it.” She sighs. “So I don’t want him saved.”

“There’s my vengeful queen.” I tilt her chin up and kiss her. Angelica has a fire inside her that she only shows to me. She did the day I married her when she asked me what the fuck I was looking at. She does it here and there by challenging me and using her sassy mouth to get me all riled up. Angelica knows just what to say, and I fucking *love* that she already knows me so well. “I’ll bury him if that’s what you want. I’ll have it done before the night is through if you just say the word.” I stroke her cheek.

She sighs. “It’s tempting. I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t, but Bianca wouldn’t want that,” she adds when I finally let up. “She doesn’t want anyone to get hurt, not even him.” Her gaze hardens. “But if it’s between Bianca or my father, I’d end him in a heartbeat.”

Fuck, does she have any idea what her warrior words are doing to me? I’m getting hard again, needing to fuck a baby into her to bind her to me in every way possible. I have no idea why I was chosen to be the lucky bastard to bag this fiery angel, but I know I’ll never let her go now that she’s mine.

“I feel better since I talked to Bianca and she’s doing fine, but also kind of worse that I know what my father intends for her—though she has no idea.” She sighs. “But I trust you, Antonio. I know you won’t let her get hurt.” She gets on her tiptoes and kisses me. “I should go upstairs. I already promised Carina and Diablo I’d try to broker peace between them once you came home safe.”

“I’m here, angel. Go on up.”

“All right.” She moves toward the stairs. “But you’ll be up soon?”

“Soon.”

She nods and climbs the stairs. When she’s out of sight, I hear her say, “Oh! Diablo, we’re already off to a bad start. Why are you clawing Carina’s door like that?”

I turn to head to my office, but Gilly comes rushing down the hall. My stomach drops when I see the look on his face.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“Butcher.” He skids to a halt in front of me. “He’s gone.”

“Gone where?” I don’t exactly keep tabs on Butcher, but then again, he’s always around. Like Gilly. The two of them are my right and left hands.

“I got a text from one of my lookouts you had me put on the Larone house.”

My eyes go wide. “Oh, shit. Are you telling me he’s there?”

Gilly nods. “He pulled up on the back road that goes through the trees. Did it stealth, but our lookout still managed to get a shot of him.”

My head spins as I try to put this puzzle together. “Why the *fuck* is he there?”

“I don’t know.” He shakes his head, then pinches the bridge of his nose. “I haven’t a fucking clue. He didn’t say anything. When you got back, he just took off and went straight there it looks like. Do you think he’s going to try to gank Constantine for you?”

“No. He wouldn’t do that unless I gave the order.” I realize Butcher is a fucking force of nature, but he doesn’t go against me. Never has. Never will. There must be something else going on that I’m missing, but what?

I pull out my phone and text him.

Me: **The fuck are you doing?**

I feel a small sense of relief when I see the dots bouncing.

B: **Taking care of something.**

Me: **At the Larone house?**

B: **Yeah.**

Me: **Get back here. Now.**

The dots don’t bounce. He’s gone silent. What the fuck is going on with him? Butcher is violent and loves bloodletting

more than anyone I've ever met, but he's usually pretty logical. This, though—this behavior is completely out of line for him.

“What the fuck is he doing?”

“Fuck!” Gilly turns his phone around to me. I read the text from our lookout, and then an image pops up. That's when my blood goes cold.

Scrubbing a hand down my face, I meet Gilly's eyes. “Round up the men. We're about to have Constantine's soldiers on our doorstep. Maybe Frangione's too.”

“He's lost his fucking mind.” Gilly stares at the phone, at the night vision shot of Butcher loading what can only be Bianca Larone into the trunk of his car. “Just off the fucking deep end.”

I don't disagree. But it doesn't matter now. What matters is protecting my family, and I will spill as much blood as necessary to keep my angel safe.

ANGELICA

I find Carina and Diablo in the midst of a standoff in the middle of the hallway. The second Diablo spots me, he darts over to me to slink between my legs, rubbing himself against me. Carina glares at him.

“Whatever. All the men in this house run from me, so you’re not special.” She turns, stomping into her bedroom before the door slams.

“What the hell was that?” I say to Diablo, surprised at Carina’s overreaction. I drop to my knees and give him a scratch under his chin. “Is there something going on around here I don’t know about?”

He purrs his response.

“I’ll check on her.” I kiss the top of his head before I make my way over to her bedroom door.

I knock.

“I’m asleep,” she shouts.

“You sound super asleep.” I open the door, not waiting for her to invite me in. “What’s up?”

“Nothing. Just annoyed,” she huffs.

“No one ignores you,” I tell her. Everyone is actually super nice to her. If anyone is being ignored by the opposite sex around here, it’s me. The men treat Carina like a kid sister for the most part. She’s always popping jokes with them. Ones

that I would have gotten backhanded for at home. But Antonio's men only chuckle at her.

"No one ignores me? He's *always* ignoring me. He won't even look my way most of the time. Been doing it for years, and you know what? Fuck him. I'll ignore him right back. I'm sick of his shit."

"We're not talking about the cat, are we?"

"I think I'll go away for college. I'll live on campus." She smirks. "One with boys. Lots and lots of them."

"We're definitely not talking about the cat."

Carina folds her arms over her chest. "Did you see how my brother came to you when he got home? He was all over you. It was gross but also sweet." A dreamy expression takes over her face, but it's fleeting. Her anger comes back with a vengeance. "You know what I got? Gilly muttering something to me about him putting a password on the computer if he has to." Carina paces back and forth. "And I know it was him who took my phone."

"Your phone?" She's so all over the place, I'm having trouble following her.

"Yes, I had it hidden." She groans. "I asked my brother, and he had no clue what I was talking about but said I didn't need a phone since I was home, so it had to be Gilly. The man ignores me but makes sure I'm locked up tight."

"That doesn't sound like he's ignoring you," I point out.

"He's doing his job, which is being at my brother's side."

"Isn't that kind of a good thing?"

"No, I mean yes." Even as she says yes, she shakes her head no. "I don't know." She throws her hands up.

"Angel!" Antonio bellows my name.

"Carina!" Gilly shouts next.

"See? He's not ignoring you." I point my thumb over my shoulder toward the door. Carina's eyes widen, her head cocking to the side.

“Get down!” she suddenly screams as she runs toward the side of her bed.

“Angel!” Antonio shouts my name again.

Carina jerks open her nightstand drawer. I watch as she pulls out a gun, sliding a clip inside of it before she cocks it.

“What’s happening?”

“Down!” Carina shouts at me again as the window beside her bed explodes into the room. Shards of glass shoot everywhere. Carina spins around to face the window and fires as a man tries to climb through it. She hits her target, causing him to drop back out the window. Holy crap, she’s a good shot.

An arm wraps around me from behind. I start to swing my elbow, but Antonio whispers my name in my ear as my feet leave the floor.

“Get my sister!” Antonio tells Gilly, but he’s already grabbing her. Carina fires two more shots.

“Don’t touch me, you big jerk! I can take care of myself. I’m invisible to you, remember.”

“Not now,” Gilly growls at her, ignoring her words and tossing her over his shoulder.

“I’ve got a gun. I could shoot you right in the ass.”

“There’s glass everywhere, and your feet are bare,” I hear him tell her as sounds of more gun fire go off from outside.

“Antonio? What’s happening?”

He pulls me out of Carina’s bedroom and toward another bedroom. One I know because he’s shown it to me before. Taught me what it’s used for and how to use it.

“Butcher just accelerated our timeline to deal with your father.” Antonio puts me on my feet as he slides the bookcase in what looks like a spare bedroom to the side before entering in the code on the keypad. The door to the safe room pops open.

“What do you mean?” Antonio pulls me into the small room.

“He went and got your sister.”

“Really?” I gasp. “Like just walked in and got her?” Is that even possible? Why would he do that? Alone? How is he not dead? “Where is she now?”

“You stay in this room until I come and get you.” Antonio says, not answering any of my questions.

Gilly and Carina bicker back and forth about her not going into the safe room. “I don’t need your ‘worry’!” She does air quotes with a gun still in her hand. “Because it’s your job.”

“Get in the fucking room, Carina, or so help me God, brother or not, I’ll tan your little ass.” Gilly picks her up by the hips and places her in the room.

“Angel. Stay here, no matter what you see or hear. Got it?” Antonio draws my attention back to him.

“Where is my sister? Tell me, and I’ll stay put.” What if she’s out there in all this gun fire and whatever is happening?

“With Butcher,” he answers, but for some reason I have a feeling he’s not telling me everything.

“He won’t hurt her, will he?”

“No,” he responds before placing a hard kiss on my lips and stepping back.

“Antonio, I love you,” I say before he can close the door.

Gilly lifts his gun and starts firing. My heart sinks when a bullet flies by Antonio and Gilly as he slams the door shut. Carina rushes to it and starts engaging the extra bolts. When she turns back around, tears are streaming down her face.

“What’s happening?” I ask her.

“War.”

ANTONIO

Once I know Carina is safe, I rush to the second-floor armory in the back of my closet. Gilly's already there with the doors open.

"How many of our men arrived before the Larones?" I ask.

"Only a dozen or so. More inbound. But it's not just the Larones."

"I know." I saw more SUVs pull up than the Larones could ever fill. It's the Frangiones. They've come for Bianca, though I know she's not here. Butcher took her somewhere else, hopefully somewhere safe.

My phone vibrates. I pull it from my pocket and see a message from Angelica's father.

Constantine: Come outside and talk before this gets really ugly.

I turn the phone around and show it to Gilly.

"Does he think we're stupid?" Gilly raises a brow and stows a couple of grenades on his belt.

I hit the call button. Constantine picks up in two rings.

"Come out."

"No." I select my load out and make sure my favorite pistols are ready to fire.

"I know you have her." His voice is laced with rage. "You took her!"

“I married Angelica fair and square. You—”

“You know who I’m talking about!” he bellows.

“Constantine, calm the fuck down.” I post up near the front door with several of my men. Glass litters the floor, but there are no more shots for the moment.

“I will not calm down. Where is my daughter?” He lowers his voice. “If you don’t deliver Bianca into my hands in the next five minutes, Geno Frangione is going to level this place, and I’m going to help him.”

“You’d sell your daughter to that piece of shit?” I smirk. “You’re a shit father. Though I think you already know that. Why do you need the money? You took my dowry and ran, and now you’re going to sell Bianca to the Frangiones. For what? What have you done? Because I know you’re the cause of it. You’re sacrificing your daughters to save your own ass. You nearly killed Angelica,” I seethe. “Sent killers after her on her wedding day. What the fuck is so important that you’d do that to her?”

He’s silent for a long while.

I peek out the window. About a dozen of my men are lined up at the front of the house, taking cover behind cars and the fountain. Beyond them, down the driveway is a blockade of SUVs. I don’t have a head count, but there are at least 20 men, maybe more. We’re outnumbered, but I’ve never run from a fight, and I won’t start now. Not when I have my family counting on me.

“I ...” Constantine clears his throat. “I didn’t intend for Angelica to get hurt.”

“You’re full of shit. Tell Geno I said to take his best fucking shot. We’ll fight until—”

“Wait! Just, just fucking wait.” He sighs. “I have—*had*—a mistress. I loved her. She got close to me, learned about where I keep my money and how I hide it offshore. Six months ago, she cleaned me out. Every last dime.” He sighs. “But that doesn’t matter. Not now. I’ve already made the deal with Geno for Bianca. He’s brought an army with him. If you don’t turn

her over, you're all dead. Even ... even Angelica if she's in there."

"You've forfeited the right to even say her fucking name, old man. She's mine to protect. *Mine*. And neither you nor the Frangiones will *ever* lay a finger on her." I end the call.

Gilly gives me a wry grin. "I take it there's no truce?"

"Get ready." I press my back to the wall beside the window. "They're comin—" Gunfire rips through the night, shattering more windows and peppering the entire first floor with slugs.

Gilly hits the floor and wrenches the front door open. I dart out, keeping to cover and edging around one of the cars out front.

Frangione's men are marching up the driveway, their strides confident.

"Light them up!" I yell to Gilly and the rest of my soldiers.

All hell breaks loose, and when I see Gilly lob two live grenades like he's pitching a no-hitter, I move my attention to the men farther back. The ones in front turn into a pink mist when Gilly's grenades hit and explode. I take shots, dropping man after man as they return fire.

A bullet whizzes past my ear, and I duck as a slug embeds in the wall behind me. Propping my gun on the hood, I keep firing until I have to reload. Some of my men have fallen, but I keep firing, keep fighting. I won't let them invade, not when Angelica and Carina are sheltering inside.

I empty the rest of my magazines, defending my home while more boots hit the ground ahead of me. More enemies swarming toward the house.

"You out?" Gilly yells.

"Yeah!" I dash past the car I was stationed behind and scoop up a gun from a fallen soldier. Pain tears through my leg, and I fall behind another car as Gilly scrambles over to me.

"You all right?"

“Yeah, just winged me.” I check the action on the pistol and start firing again. “Go inside. Get the girls to safety.”

“No.” He’s grabbed another gun, too, and returns fire to the barrage of shots that impact all around us. “I’m not leaving you.”

“You have to, Gilly. Keep them safe.” I gesture toward my leg. “I’d only slow you down.”

“No.”

“That’s an order!” I yell.

Gilly stops and looks at me, his gaze unreadable.

“Go.” I grip his forearm and squeeze. “It’s all right. Go. Tell Angelica I love her.”

“She knows.” He winces as a bullet shatters the side view mirror above us, then shakes my hand. He hesitates only for one more second before dashing into the house.

I reach for another gun, grab it, and peek over the hood of the car. There are too many, all of them being led up the driveway by Geno Fucking Frangione. I’ve always hated that motherfucker, and now he thinks he can walk up my lane like he’s a conquering warlord? Fuck that.

I check the clip, find it almost full, then ram one into the chamber before stashing it in my waistband. I send my love to Angelica and hope she can feel it as I get to my feet, my leg aching.

Geno stops and raises a hand. His men don’t fire.

“You the only one left?” He grins, the scar on the side of his face making him more grotesque than usual.

“I’m the one you came for, asshole. So come get me.”

He shrugs. “Sounds good to me. Once I’m done with you, I think I’ll take your little wife for a spin. Get an idea of what her sister will be like.”

My blood was already boiling. Now it’s molten. “Come on then. Enough talk.”

He nods and pulls out a knife as he strides toward me.

Closer, motherfucker.

“I could just put a bullet in your head and go easy on you.” He shrugs. “But I can’t let my reputation get dusty, you know? I’m going to make this hurt.”

“So am I.” I duck and roll the live grenade Gilly had pressed into my hand beneath the car like I’m at the lanes throwing a strike.

Geno lets out a strangled yell, and then the grenade goes off so close by that I’m rocked off my feet, onto my ass, and into the dark.

EPILOGUE

ANGELICA

“*W*hat is taking her so long?” I huff to Diablo, who is sitting in my lap. He’s passed out cold, so he gives no response. Crawling into my lap for some cuddle times has become his favorite thing to do if I’m alone in a room. He’s been snoozing for the last thirty minutes.

There’s no reason Carina should be taking this freaking long. I should go check on her. Slowly, I lift Diablo from my lap, placing him on the bed before I go to find her. I pause at her bedroom door that’s standing open when I hear Gilly’s voice. He sounds pissed off. I move a little closer to peek in.

“Tell me why you asked to see Doc.”

“I just think I’m coming down with something,” she lies right through her teeth. If you ask me, she’s pretty good at it. She doesn’t miss a beat or anything.

“Lie,” Gilly snaps at her. I guess she’s not as good at it as I thought. Or it could be the fact that Gilly knows her so well.

“Why are you even in my room? Don’t you have things to do? People to knock around?”

“What’s behind your back?” He repeats through gritted teeth. Yikes, why is he so worked up?

“Ah, my bed? And just in case you were wondering, behind that is a wall.”

I almost burst into laughter at how sarcastic she’s being, but I hold it in. Gilly takes a deep breath as though he’s holding on to his patience by a very thin thread.

“Carina.” He grabs her and spins her around. I rush into the bedroom and shut the door behind me. “The fuck!” Gilly’s voice booms through the room as he snatches the small box out of her hand.

“I’m keeping it,” Carina states, raising her chin in defiance. She is really covering for me. If I didn’t already know she was ride or die, I would at this moment.

Since Doc was scheduled to come by to check on the bullet that had grazed Antonio a few weeks ago, I’d asked Carina to do me a solid. She’d pulled it off, requesting to see the doc after she’d checked over Antonio. Carina said it was because she thought she might be coming down with a cold.

In reality, she was getting a pregnancy test for me. I know it might be early, but I can tell something is different with my body. I don’t want Antonio to know anything until I’m sure. There is so much still going on. I don’t want to add any more to his plate until I’m positive I’m actually pregnant.

I haven’t had a period since I got married, and Antonio and I can’t keep our hands off each other. Even when he’s supposed to be taking it easy. I swear I tried to tell the man no. That he was going to rip a stitch or something, but with a few kisses, my husband melted away my hesitation.

“You go to an all girls school! How is this even fucking possible?”

Carina rolls her eyes.

“Is it one of our men?” I don’t think I’ve ever seen Gilly act more serious than at this moment. And that’s saying a lot considering everything that went down recently. I can see him thinking over the possibilities. “No, I would’ve known. You’re not pregnant. It’s impossible.”

“Is not.” She’s fighting a smirk. Carina really does enjoy pushing Gilly’s buttons. You’d think he was her big brother with how freaking protective he is over her.

“Fine, then we’re getting married. The baby will be mine.”

“Woah,” I gasp. What the hell?

“Fuck you, Gilly!” Carina gets right up in his face. Well, as best as she can with him towering over her. “I will not marry for some bullshit. I’ll marry for love, and when I damn well please.”

“You’ll—”

“Hey!” I cut in. This is getting way out of control now. We just got this place cleaned back up. We don’t need another war exploding inside the house. “It’s for me.” I walk over and snatch the test out of Gilly’s hand.

“What’s going on in here?” I spin around at the sound of my husband’s voice. He looms in the doorway.

“Nothing,” both Carina and I say at the same time. We really have been hanging out too much. Antonio isn’t letting her go back to school yet. There are still threats out there. Butcher really kicked a freaking hornet’s nest. At least my sister is away from the Frangiones and my father. I’ll take it.

“What’s behind your back, Angel?” Antonio prowls toward me.

“A bed? And just in case you were wondering, behind that is a wall.” I steal Carina’s words, making her snort a laugh. Antonio only gives me a wicked smile that promises to get the information out of me one way or another. My nipples tighten in anticipation.

“Okay, you two take this out of my bedroom. I see what’s happening here.” Carina motions between her brother and me. “As for you, you can fuck all the way off,” she tells Gilly.

Antonio scoops me up into his arms, cradling me. I have no choice but to pull my arm out from behind my back to reveal the test. His eyes drop to it, but he doesn’t say anything. He only carries me out of the room and into ours, where he places me ever so gently onto the bed.

“So.” I lick my lips. He takes the test from my hand and tosses it onto the nightstand. “I, ah.” His mouth claims mine in a kiss before I can say another word. “Antonio.” I gasp his name between kisses. He’s tugging at my clothes. “Aren’t you going to say something?”

“You’re pregnant.”

“What?!” I put my hands on his chest.

He’s already managed to strip my clothes from me. “I know my wife’s body.” His hand caresses my hip, then slides up to cup my breast. “Your pussy tastes sweeter too.”

“Antonio!” I hiss.

“I love that you still blush for me even though I’ve licked every single inch of this body.” He really has at some point or another.

“Are you happy?”

“You know I wanted heirs. I’ve told you I wouldn’t take your ass until I got you knocked up.”

“Antonio!” I hiss again, making him chuckle. Damn I love that sound. I’d been so freaking scared I was going to lose him. But I should have known better. My husband is a warrior.

“Honestly, I didn’t think it would happen so quickly. I’m not sure I’m ready to share you, but fuck am I going to love seeing you round with our child. You give me things no one else can. You’re truly priceless, my wife, my queen, my everything.”

UNEXPECTED LOVE

UNEXPECTED LOVE

MINK

The Butcher. My nickname isn't really a nickname. It's a calling. An identity that I was born with, and one that's as much a part of me as my heart or my liver. I'm violent, remorseless, and I delight in causing pain.

I've never made any apologies for my nature. Never felt the need to ... until I saw Bianca. When I glimpsed her, something inside me shifted. Before I even knew what I was doing, I'd kidnapped her and stolen her away.

Once I have her, I realize I have no idea what to do with a young, innocent girl. And for the first time in my life, I don't want to cause pain. I don't want to hurt her. All I want to do is the one thing I have no idea how to do—I want to love her.

BUTCHER

“Do you think I can call my sister? She’ll worry.”
Bianca sits on the bed, her big eyes following me as I pace in front of her.

“No.” I can’t do that. I ... Fuck, I don’t even know *what* I’m doing!

Something inside me just snapped when I saw Bianca talking to her sister, Angelica, via Skype. It’s like I went into this fucked-up headspace and couldn’t get out. I left Antonio and Angelica’s house like a man possessed, and I didn’t stop until I got to the Larone compound. Then I broke in, took Bianca Larone, and stole her away.

Now I have her trapped in my safehouse, the one in the hills far outside the city. Antonio has been calling me, texting me, doing everything but sending a fucking pigeon. But I don’t care. I have bigger problems—namely, the woman sitting on my bed.

She’s still staring at me.

It should make me uncomfortable. It does anything but. Heat flicks along my skin and tightens my muscles. My cock is almost painfully hard, and pacing back and forth has done nothing to restore blood flow to my brain.

I’ve fucked up. I glance at her. No, I’ve *royally* fucked up. Bianca Larone should be safe at home, waiting for her marriage to one of those dickhead Frangiones. But the moment I have that thought, rage boils in my blood, and I have to take a deep breath to keep myself from punching a hole in the wall.

“You, um, you seem upset,” she says quietly. “Are you okay?”

I stop and scrub a hand down my face. Why is this innocent, perfect woman worried about me? I’m a goddamn monster, and I like it that way. I have no business doing what I did. No business with this curvy goddess of a woman. I should take her back. Maybe it would keep the hammer from dropping on Antonio—and it *will* drop. Once Constantine Larone realizes I’m the one who stole his prize daughter, he’ll come for Antonio, and he’ll want blood.

“I’m so fucked.” I put my hands on my waist and lean back, letting out a deep sigh.

She shifts, yanking down her skirt to cover her knees. “If you want my father to pay my ransom, you should probably take pictures or record me saying I’m alive and the time. He’ll want proof of life before he’ll pay you.”

I turn and face her.

She blinks several times as she takes me in. I’m a giant. I hit the gym every day to stay that way. When I put the hurt on some mafia asshole who thinks he can cross me and mine, I want him to tremble in fear and piss himself when he sees me coming for him. But when I see her lean back just a little, it makes me wish for the first time that I wasn’t so hulking. Then again, this is who I am. I’m the Butcher, and I can’t change that fact. I don’t want to. But what I *do* want is to understand why the fuck I just kidnapped Bianca Larone, brought her to my safe house, and sat her on my bed.

I arch a brow. “Why aren’t you screaming for help?”

“What?” She darts her tongue out and wets her plump bottom lip.

I shrug. “Generally, when I have someone in my clutches”—I gesture toward her—“like you are now, they start screaming for someone to come save them. You’re not screaming. Why is that?”

Her light brows draw together as she thinks it over, then she lifts one shoulder in a shrug. “I guess it’s because I’m not scared.”

I never work off my back foot. I'm never at a loss for a clever quip or a knife in someone's gut. But this time, this time I have no fucking clue what to say. She's not *scared* of me? *Everyone* is scared of me. She must be lying.

"Are you trying to play mind games, Bianca?"

"Mind games?" She shakes her head. "You'll have to talk to my dad if you want mind games. They're his specialty."

I step closer to her.

Her eyes widen a little, but she doesn't lean away. Fuck, why does that please me on levels I didn't even know existed?

"What's your specialty, Bianca?" I look her over—the doe eyes, olive skin, delicate neck. She's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen and also the most fragile. I could break her in my hands the same as snapping a twig. Fuck, that thought is sobering. I step back from her.

She cocks her head to the side as if she's confused, but she answers, "I don't have a specialty. I'm just supposed to look pretty, be obedient, and marry whoever my dad tells me to." Her tone turns bitter as she goes.

"I take it that's not what you want to be?"

"No."

"Then what do you want?"

She swallows hard. "No one's ever asked me that before. Well, no one except Angelica. But certainly not a man, and absolutely not my father. He doesn't care what I want. Never has. Neither does Mom." She finally drops her gaze, her eyes going to the wooden floor at my feet. "It's because they don't care. For so long, I hoped they did, but then I found out they wanted me to marry a Frangione." She shakes her head slowly. "The cruelest family of all, the worst of the worst, and they're going to sell me to them, to make me a brood mare for those horrible people." She snuffles. "So if you demand a big ransom, they'll pay it. They don't want to mess up their deal with the Frangiones. You don't have to hurt me or threaten them. It'll be easy for you to get your money. Then they'll marry me off like I said."

This time when I step to her, I take the risk and reach out to stroke her cheek. “Over my dead fucking body.”

BIANCA

Slowly, he reaches his hand out. I think he's expecting me to flinch away, but I don't. Is he scared of me? His finger ever so gently strokes my cheek. I lean into his touch.

I can't remember the last time someone touched me so softly. Not since my sister was married off and taken from my life. She was the only person who ever protected me. For some reason, everyone always thought I was the prized one out of the two of us. They were so wrong. My sister isn't only beautiful, she's brave. I'm eleven months older than her, but it's always her watching over me, not the other way around. I'd never been more scared than when she left.

Not even when this hulk of a man burst into my bedroom and scooped me up. I hadn't even bothered to fight him. I knew it was pointless. I'd only end up getting hurt more. I'd also been a bit in shock. Especially when he was carrying me out and I saw some of my father's men dead on the floor with their throats slashed. There had been so much blood, it soaked the rugs. He merely stepped over them or around the bodies as if it was no big deal.

Angelica would have fought. She would have kicked, scratched, and screamed at least. If she'd been there, she would have even thrown herself in front of me. She's a protector, and I don't know why, but as I stare up at the man hovering over me, I think he might be one too.

Even when he placed me into the trunk of the car, he did it with care. He could have tossed me right in without regard for

my well-being. Nothing he's done so far has given me a reason to truly fear him. I turn my head, his finger catching the corner of my mouth. He leaps backward. I swear the house shakes as he lands on his feet.

"Don't do that." He grits his teeth together. I'm not sure if he's fascinated by me or annoyed. His eyes linger on me. They have been since he placed me on the bed. I noticed him trying not to look my way but failing.

Angelica often joked that I was a siren. That I drew everyone's eyes toward me. I hadn't noticed until she pointed it out. She was right, and I hated it. The feeling of having my father's men always looking at me creeped me out. It had gotten worse after Angelica was gone, but they'd thankfully kept their distance. I'm not sure if it was in fear of my father or my future husband. What I do know is that if I didn't show up a virgin there would be hell to pay.

But with this hulk of a man, I find that it's kind of adorable that he's trying not to stare. That he only steals his glances.

"Do what?" I lick my lips. His eyes drop to them.

"That," he grits out.

"Lick my lips?" I do it again. "Now that you said it, that's all I can think about." My tongue darts out again to wet them. He grunts, turning to give me his broad back. My fingers itch to run my hands up it.

I've seen a lot of men come and go from my father's home, but none have been as big as him. I bet people stare at him too. I'm finding I can't help myself.

"You can stare at me. I don't mind."

He glances over his shoulder at me.

I snort a laugh. I put my hand over my mouth to not laugh harder as he sends a glare my way. He looks adorable. I bet no one has ever described him that way before. "What's your name?" I ask.

"Fernando." He turns back around to face me. "What is your game here?" he asks me again.

“You’re the one that kidnapped me.”

“Yes but—”

“Did you hear that?” I slip off the bed. He snags me around the waist, pulling me into his body. His hand goes over my mouth. We stand there completely still. I tilt my head back to try and look up at him. His head is cocked to the side, and I think he’s listening for sound. My body relaxes into his. Something presses hard into my back. I’m guessing it’s his gun.

“*Meow.*”

“Hmm!” I try to speak from behind his hand. I start to struggle to get free of his hold. There is a cat! He can’t possibly expect me to be quiet when there is a furbaby in the vicinity.

“Don’t do that.” He drops his hand from my mouth. The one around my waist, however, stays wrapped around me.

“Do what?” He keeps saying that. “Breathing?”

“You’ll continue to breathe,” he orders.

I laugh but stop when I hear another meow.

“There’s a kitten.” I don’t know why I whisper it, but I do.

“Stay put.” He releases his hold on me, pulling a gun out from the back of his pants. I thought it had been in the front. *Oh.* Heat rushes my face when I realize what was poking into my back. Fernando leaves the bedroom.

I wait a few seconds before I lean out to see down the hallway. I watch as he slowly opens the door, revealing a tiny kitten standing in front of it.

“A kitten!” I squeal, rushing down the hallway.

“I told you to stay put.” Fernando leans down and scoops the kitten up into his hand. It appears even smaller in his giant mitt. It’s the cutest thing I’ve ever seen in my life. I reach out to pet it. Fernando brings it into his chest as he kicks the door back closed.

“It’s so fluffy.” It is pure white with the bluest eyes. “Can we keep it?”

“Keep it?”

“We can’t leave it outside all alone. Who would do such a cruel thing?” He stares down at me, his brows pulled together. Suspicion is written all over his face. “Please,” I start to beg. “I’ll be like the best kidnapped person ever. I promise.”

“You already said you would.”

“Well, I can start being bad.” I raise my chin the same way I’ve seen Angelica do when she was ready to go toe to toe with anyone.

“You already are. I told you to stay in the bedroom.”

“How about I stay in the bedroom with the kitten?” I suggest. Before he can respond, another meow comes from the other side of the door. “Another!” I try to open it, but Fernando blocks me, handing over the kitten.

“Back,” he orders. I do as I’m told and take a step back. He opens the door again. There stands who I’m guessing is the Mama with two more kittens in tow.

I grin. “This is the best day ever.”

BUTCHER

*B*ianca is on her knees petting the kittens as they crawl over each other to get to her. Her light brown hair falls into her face, and one of them takes a swipe at it.

She giggles and scoops it up. “You’re sassy. You remind me of my sister.” She kisses it on the nose, then hands it over to the mother cat. Then she looks up at me with her doe eyes. “We can keep them, right?”

We? I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing. It becomes more painfully apparent with each second I spend in her presence. I never should’ve stolen her. What was I thinking? I guess that’s the thing—I wasn’t.

“Right?” she asks again.

“I ...” I wave a hand at her.

She takes that as a yes, because she squeals in excitement and snuggles one of the kittens.

They must’ve come from the old barn on the property. I don’t use it much, only when I need an especially secluded spot to do my dirty work. But these days, I do all that at Antonio’s place or at our warehouse. I haven’t been back to the barn in over a year. I look around at the house, an old farmhouse that I revamped into a modern home with all the technology to keep it secure.

“They’ll need food and litter and toys.” She smiles up at me. “*Lots* of toys.”

It's not as if I can magic those things out of thin air. I'll have to drive somewhere closer to the city and find a pet supply store, but that would mean leaving Bianca here by herself. Just thinking it makes something twist in my chest.

"What is it?" she asks.

"What?"

"You have a funny look on your face."

"Nothing."

She puts the kitten down next to its mother and gets to her feet. "Let's go to a pet store. We can get all the things we need."

I gawk at her. "You can't leave."

"Why not?" She puts her hands on her hips.

"Because you're ... Because I ..." I've always been a man of few words, but this is becoming fucking ridiculous. I can't seem to form a complete sentence when she's staring up at me with those innocent eyes.

"Because you kidnapped me and don't want to risk your ransom?" She rolls her eyes. "You'll still get it even if you take me out to do a little shopping. It's the last thing my father would expect, anyway. He'll never look for me at PetSmart. So don't worry about getting your payday."

I want to tell her that she's got me all wrong, but then I'd have to tell her who I really am. The Butcher. I'd also have to try to come up with a reasonable explanation for why I kidnapped her out of the fucking blue without a plan or an endgame. Hell, I don't even know why I did it, so there's no way I'm going to be able to explain that to her.

I take a deep breath and weigh the options.

"Let's go." She bounces on the balls of her feet.

I guess I don't need to weigh them after all. This little slip of a woman won't take no for an answer. She's more like her sister than she realizes.

“Fine. But you stay by my side. You don’t wander off. You speak to no one. You don’t leave my sight. If you yell for help or—”

She makes an incredulous snort. “I’m not going to yell for help. I’m not an idiot.”

“I didn’t say you were.”

“Good.” She nods. “Because I’m not. I mean, I’m not as smart as Angelica, but I—”

“Hey.” I step to her, and to my relief, she again doesn’t cringe away from me. “You’re plenty smart. Don’t say otherwise.”

“You don’t even know me.” She raises a brow. “I mean, other than the basic things a kidnapper knows about his victim, I guess. Did you study up on me before coming to get me? You must have. I mean, you chose a good target to get a decent ransom. So yeah, you must’ve studied up.”

“Studied up?” I shake my head slowly. “No.”

“Good, then I can still surprise you.” She smiles.

“I don’t think that would’ve been a problem.” The fact that she’s standing here in my house is a surprise. The fact that she doesn’t seem to be afraid of me—holy fuck, that’s the biggest surprise of all.

“Fernando, you’re stalling. Let’s go.” She grabs my hand.

I freeze. No one’s ever touched me like this. Not with warmth and familiarity. And she *shouldn’t* be touching me like this at all. She doesn’t know if I’m a psycho or if I intend to hurt her. She’s trusting me for no good reason. If she knew who I really am, she’d run screaming and do everything in her power to escape. My reputation is dark enough to have made it to her ears, I’m certain. The Butcher is a common tale among the mafia around here—mothers even use it to scare their children into behaving. But I’m no fairy tale. I’m real, and I enjoy spilling blood if it means safety for my chosen family. Antonio and Gilly are like brothers to me, and we’ve always had each others’ backs—which makes it even more strange that I haven’t returned a single call or text from them since I snatched Bianca from the Larone estate. I’m on my own.

She squeezes my hand, her warmth traveling along my skin and making something fizz pleasantly at the back of my brain. “Come on, Fernando. Don’t worry so much. I’m not going to try to escape. You’d catch me if I did.”

Damn right I would.

My name on her lips is all it takes to get me moving. I know it’s a stupid risk, but my desire to make her happy overrides all of those concerns. My cold, calculating mind isn’t in control right now. Some other part of me is. It scares the shit out of me, but when Bianca smiles up at me with trust in her eyes, I realize it’s worth the risk. *She’s* worth the risk.

BIANCA

“So do I like, get back in the trunk?” I ask. I’m pretty sure me not seeing where I am is a big part of a successful kidnapping.

“No,” he grunts.

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing. His grunted one-word responses are adorable.

“Put this on.” He hands me a hat before he reaches for my hair. For a moment, he runs his fingers through it, and I wonder what he’s doing. Then he piles it on top of my head. I put the hat on to cover it. Next, he drapes a giant coat over me. “There.”

“Are you sure I don’t stand out more dressed this way?” I thought I was supposed to be blending in.

“Have you seen a mirror? Trust me. This will draw less attention.”

“Okay.” I scrunch my nose, not sure I agree, but whatever. He’s the professional kidnapper here. I’m just along for the ride until he gets the ransom from my father.

He puts his hand on my back, guiding me out to the car. “Wait! Don’t I need a blindfold since I’m not going in the trunk?”

“It’s fine.” He opens the passenger door for me.

“Why, thank you,” I say before I get in and buckle my seatbelt. Fernando slips into the driver’s seat.

“Good girl.” He nods at my seatbelt.

I don't know why, but his praise warms me. I suppose it's not something I'm used to getting. It's dark out, so I can't make out much as Fernando drives down a long, windy driveway that cuts through a bunch of trees before we finally make it to a street.

"You think they'll be okay?" I glance back even though I can't see the house any longer, worrying about the kittens.

"They'll be fine. Putting them in the tub was a good idea." Again, a warm feeling fills me.

I thought if we put the kittens in the tub they'd have to stay put, while the mom could get in and out if she needed to. We'd also shut the bathroom door so she'd stay close to her babies. When we left, they'd all been on the blanket we'd placed in the tub, feeding from her.

"So—" I glance around, having no clue where we are, but that's not saying much since I barely left my father's house. We could be ten miles from home, and I wouldn't know. "You kidnap a lot of girls?"

"Girls? No."

"So I'm special?" I tease.

He doesn't respond.

I guess not.

"You kidnap men?" I ask next to fill the silence that has now taken over. I peek over at him. Even though I only have a view of his side profile, I can still see the tightness in his jaw. His eyes remain on the road.

"Yes." He finally answers after a few seconds. But I'm not sure if he's answering my first or second question. Or maybe it's both.

"Is that a yes to question number one or question number two?"

"Both."

"I'm flattered I'm your first."

He flicks a glance over at me before his eyes go back to the road.

“I’m only teasing.”

“I’m not.”

“Do you laugh?”

“No.”

“Do you smile?”

“No.”

“Is all you ever say ‘no’?”

“No.”

I snort a laugh. I swear I see his lips twitch. I love that I got him to do that.

“So I was thinking about my kidnapping. Maybe you don’t have to ransom me to my father. My sister’s husband Antonio might pay for me. I think she might have him wrapped around her finger.” I hold up my pinky and wiggle it. When I talked to her earlier, she sounded so in love. The way she went on about her husband and how he treated her—he has to love her. “I didn’t know men in this world could love their wives.”

“The Palermo family treasures their women.”

“Really? Why?” I turn in my seat, wanting to know why they’re so different.

“Nothing makes a man more deadly than thinking someone will hurt the woman they love. The biggest wars have been fought over women. I think your father might be learning that lesson now.”

“I don’t think he loves my mom.”

“No, but he’s infatuated with his mistress. Women are cunning. They play the long game. They can be your greatest asset or your quickest demise.”

“Wow, you really believe that?”

“It’s what I’ve seen in my life. Often the last words some men utter before they die are about a woman. They can steal money

and obtain power, but you can't make someone want or love you, and that will drive a man insane. Especially ones used to getting what they want."

"You sound like you speak from experience." I turn back in my seat, not caring for the idea of Fernando pining after some woman. He might already have one, but I don't see a ring on his finger. Not that men always wear them.

"I speak from what I've seen. Nothing more."

"You don't have a girl out there waiting for you? If you were mine, I don't think I'd care much for the idea of you kidnapping other girls."

"No one is waiting for me, Bianca."

"No one?"

"No one that doesn't want to wring my neck."

"Right," I laugh. "Like someone could wring your neck." I hold my hands up. "I don't think I could even fully wrap my hands around your neck." Fernando grabs one of my hands.

"Your hands aren't made for that." He strokes it with his thumb. The roughness of his touch makes my body light up. I've noticed the scars that cover parts of his arms and the one that cuts through his eyebrow. There's also one under his ear on his neck where I'm guessing someone made the mistake of trying to slit his throat.

"What if my hands were made for you?"

The car suddenly jerks, but Fernando quickly rights it. "Bianca, you have no idea what you're saying."

"Just an idea." I shrug. "I could be your wife."

Honestly, it sounds perfect to me. I don't want to marry into the Frangione family. What if I was married to someone else? A special someone that could keep me safe? Also, someone that I like. Fernando intrigues me. He also does things to my body no one else has ever done. I crave his touch. I want to touch him too. To see how many scars are hidden under his shirt.

If I were already married, then the Frangiones wouldn't have any claim to me.

"We're here." Fernando pulls into the parking lot of a pet store while not answering my question.

I don't think I'm as much of a siren as my sister thinks I am.

BUTCHER

I try to keep my mind from spinning as I walk her around the pet shop.

She hands me cat toys, treats, litter, and several other things that I easily balance in my arms—but what’s completely out of balance is my head. She mentioned marriage. *Marriage!* And that’s not the part that’s truly knocked me on my ass. No, it’s the feeling it gave me when she said the words.

I should’ve wanted to run far away from this situation. I mean, I’m not the marrying type. Never have been. But when *she* said it ... It felt ... It felt *right*.

Fuck. I’m in too deep. Way too fucking deep. I stole her when I should have left her the hell alone, and now she thinks I’m going to ransom her to her father. Abso-fucking-lutely not. I’ll never let her go back to Constantine Larone, not when he intends to marry her off to the dickhead Frangiones.

“I’d pay, but I seem to have left my wallet at home.” She smiles up at me, and I realize we’re standing at the register.

“Shit.” I reach for my wallet and pay, the clerk staring up at me with obvious fear in his eyes as he bags all the toys and treats.

“They are going to love all this!” Bianca grabs one of the sticks with a feather attached and waves it around. “I wouldn’t mind chasing this myself. Look how fun.”

I grab the rest of the purchases and return to the car, stowing them in the trunk.

When I get back in the driver's seat, Bianca is chattering happily about the kittens and how we were so lucky that the mama cat wandered up to my house.

She's so caring and warm, her whole demeanor lighting up as she talks about how she wants to take care of the kittens.

I don't think I've ever wanted to take care of anyone or anything in my entire life. Not until I saw her. That was all it took. Hell, Gilly always told me I was nuts. Maybe he's right. Maybe I'm off my fucking rocker.

"You okay?" She reaches out and touches my forearm.

"Hmm?"

She shrugs. "You just got really quiet."

"I'm always quiet."

"Sort of, but you don't always do this—" She makes a face that puts wrinkles between her eyes and a grimace on her lips.

A laugh tries to claw its way from my lungs. "What's that supposed to be?"

"You," she says in a lower, gruffer voice. "All frowny and serious."

God, why does she have to be so adorable?

I sigh. "I'm a serious man, but at the moment, I seem to be a serious fuckup."

"What?" She drops the mimicry act. "You aren't!"

I shake my head.

"You're doing great!" She squeezes my forearm. "You kidnapped me and didn't get caught. That's huge. And then you whisked me away to some secret location—totally spot-on for kidnapping. Now all you have to do is make your ransom demand." Her face falls.

"What's wrong?"

She shrugs and turns to look out the window. "I guess I just don't want it to be over so soon is all."

"The kidnapping?"

“Yeah. I know you think I was talking crazy before about getting married.”

Not crazy. What’s crazy was that I was interested—and I still am.

She sighs and leans back. “I really don’t want to marry a Frangione. I’ve heard about them. Have you?”

I give a nod.

“So then you know. They’re horrible. I don’t know if I’d survive being part of their family. Probably not, if I’m being honest. I wouldn’t have anyone to protect me. My sister is already married ...” Her voice trails off. “I miss her so much. When she left, it was like she left a hole in here.” She taps her chest. “Like I’m missing a piece of myself, you know?”

I don’t. I’ve never let anyone get that close to me. Not even Antonio and Gilly. They’re like brothers to me, but I don’t feel like I’ve let them all the way in. I can’t. Not when they can be taken from me in a heartbeat. We live a dangerous life. Though, generally speaking, I’m the most dangerous man in any room, there are plenty of assholes out there who would love to take out Antonio, Gilly, and even me. I can’t exactly relate to what she’s saying, but I can hear the pain in her voice all the same. “I ... I imagine that when she left, you realized how alone you were.”

She nods. “Yes. And there was no one to stand between my father and me, no one to defend me. Angelica would never let my father marry me off to a Frangione, not without a fight. She got into plenty of them. She’s strong, and I’m ...”

“You’re enough, Bianca.” I can’t seem to stop myself from taking her hand in mine. “Don’t doubt yourself because you’re different from your sister. Difference isn’t the same as weakness.”

When she beams at me, my cold heart does a stutter step, and I have to keep my eyes on the road so I don’t do anything stupid. Anything like—like kissing her. Because damn do I want to take her mouth, to feel how soft she is, to taste her tongue and more. So much more. Because I’m a beast, and this

innocent soul beside me is a lure I can't seem to resist. She's like a bit of shiny perfection, and I'm a crow who can't look at anything else.

"I like the way you think, Fernando." She squeezes my fingers. "You're a very positive person."

That finally draws a laugh from me, the sound rusty from disuse.

"What?" Her eyebrows pop up as I turn onto the lane that leads to the house.

"I just don't think anyone has ever referred to me as 'positive' before."

"Never?"

"Never. No. I'm anything but."

"I don't think that's true. I think there's a whole lot more to you than what other people say. And maybe I can see you better than most."

If that's true, then I'm fucked. Because I'm as rotten as they come. If Bianca knew my real line of work, she'd promptly take to her heels and run far, far away from me. My real name may be Fernando, but my real calling is the Butcher. I hurt bad men for sport, and I enjoy it. I'm not the sort of person Bianca should ever associate with. All the same, I don't seem to be letting go of her hand.

In fact, I don't know if I'll ever be able to let her go, and isn't that a fucking kick in the nuts?

BIANCA

“*I*s it okay if I name them?” I ask Fernando, who is sitting on the sofa watching me play with the kittens. He helped me barricade an area for them so that they had more room to play without us having to worry about losing them.

“If you want.” Fernando has been a bit quiet since we got back. I think my whole marriage idea might have shifted something. I can’t help but wonder what kind of girl he would be into.

He’s a man of few words, so he really doesn’t give much away about what he likes or dislikes. He’s a big man, so I’m sure he’d want a girl with more curves. I have some, but they’re nothing in comparison to Angelica. Father always called her chubby, but I didn’t see it that way. I wished my clothes fit me the way hers hugged her.

“Maybe I shouldn’t name them.” One of the kittens chases the mouse on the end of the string as I move it across the floor. The other two kittens are feeding from their mama.

“Why not?” he grunts.

“I’ll get attached.”

“You don’t want to get attached?”

“It’s better not to. It hurts less when someone takes it from you, and it always gets taken or worse, used against you.” That’s been the story my entire life growing up in the Larone family.

“They are *your* kittens. No one will take them from you.” His tone is hard, daring someone to challenge him on this.

I peek up to see him standing with his arms folded over his chest now. He looks so serious, as if he’s going to stand guard to protect against anyone who might dare to enter and try to take them.

“You’re adorable.” I laugh.

“Adorable?” His expression turns to one of confusion, which only makes it more true.

“When it’s time for me to go, I can’t take them with me. Even if my new husband okayed it, I bet he’d somehow use them as a tool against me. I don’t want them in any danger.” I jump to my feet. “Maybe you could take them to my sister?” I know she’ll keep them out of harm’s way.

“I’m not taking them anywhere. They’re *your* kittens. Name them.”

“Is that an order?” I fight a smile, but I’m sure I’m losing.

“It is.”

“Okay, good because I already picked out names!” I clap excitedly. “Since they’re all girls, I was thinking Patria, Minerva, and María.”

“The Mirabal sisters.”

“You know their story?”

He nods. “I’m a bit surprised you do. It’s my understanding your father didn’t allow you to go to school.” He’s definitely done his homework on me.

“He didn’t, but Angelica and I would read anything we could get our hands on. They were brave. Together they fought for what was right against a dictatorship even knowing they could die.”

“They did die,” he reminds me.

“With honor.” I drop my head, a wave of emotions hitting me hard. I’ve never fought back. Fernando’s hand comes to my

chin to lift my head. “I should fight. I can’t marry that man. Bring his children into the world.”

“You’re not marrying a Frangione.” He drops his hand from my chin, and I miss his touch immediately.

“Why? Are they not paying the ransom?” I know this sounds ridiculous because I’m kidnapped, but a spark of hope blooms inside of me that I won’t be leaving anytime soon.

“They can’t afford it.”

I scrunch my nose in confusion. “Really?” I should be happy, but then what happens to me? As much as I hate my father, am I so easily disposable? “Can you ransom me to Antonio?” I’d suggested that before, but he hadn’t responded to the idea.

“What will you call their mother?” He changes the subject again.

“I was thinking Mirabal.”

“I like it.”

His praise makes me smile so big my cheeks hurt. “Has anyone ever told you that you’re the best kidnapper?”

“Not the kidnapped.”

“Oh, just the people you kidnap for?” I can’t help but tease him.

“Something like that,” he grumbles.

“So you work for a certain family? Which?”

He doesn’t respond.

“Do you like this family you work for?” If he doesn’t, maybe I could talk him out of all of this. Though that could mean his death. I’m sure he has some contract to follow through with. I don’t take Fernando as a man that is the head of some big family.

No, he’s a man of few words and brute force. He does things that need to be done or handled. I bet he is very valuable to some family out there. When we’d been at the store, people would practically run from any aisle that we entered. It hadn’t

bothered Fernando, but it had me. People treat him differently without knowing what a sweet gentleman he really is.

“You’re not going to tell me, are you?” It’s strange. Some questions he’ll answer easily, while others he avoids altogether.

“Not yet.”

“Fine.” I huff. He already said he won’t hand me over to the Frangiones, but if he gives me back to my father, it would be the same as giving me to them. My stomach starts to turn thinking about going back there.

I know I haven’t been gone long, but everything is so different out here. I can’t go back. I told Fernando I would be the perfect kidnapped person, but I’m not so sure about that anymore. He’s given me too much freedom. A taste of something I’ve never had before.

Another plan starts to form in my head. Fernando might not want to marry me, but I’ve caught a few of the glances he’s shot my way. I remember his erection pressing into my back. He must have some kind of desire for me, even if it is small. What if I could make him fall in love with me?

“Fernando, can I ask one more thing?”

“Yes.” Oh, finally a yes for once.

“I want to choose something for myself. For it to not be taken from me.” I walk over to him, placing my hands on his chest. He tenses under my touch. I’m not sure if that’s a good or bad thing. I lick my lips. “Will you kiss me?”

BUTCHER

A kiss?

My palms go sweaty, my mind suddenly spinning. I've been asked for mercy, for a reprieve, for a quick death—but I've never been asked for a kiss.

I don't think I can do this. I don't even know *how* to do this.

She looks up at me, her doe eyes expectant as she glances at my mouth. Her palms on my chest send waves of heat through me, and I can't seem to back away from her.

No one touches me. I don't like it. Never have. Whatever situation I'm in, I'm the one holding the reins. Part of that death grip on control is that no one *ever* gets close enough to touch me. I don't fucking allow it. I have them hogtied and bleeding before they ever get the chance to lay a finger on me.

But Bianca—she's not my usual victim. She's not a victim at all. In fact, I think I'm the one in danger right now, not her, because when she touches me, I go weak. So weak that I'd do anything to keep her hands on me, to keep her looking at me like I'm someone to be loved instead of someone to be feared. The desire she stokes in me is dangerous, and it's the sort of raw weakness I've avoided all my life.

"You don't have to," she says softly, her gaze still on my lips like a touch.

Before I can think it through, before I can think *at all*, I lean down and press my lips to hers. Her breath catches in her throat, her hands curling against my chest.

I pull back, uncertainty blooming in my mind, but desire overwhelms it, and I kiss her again. Harder this time, my tongue demanding a taste.

She opens her mouth, a moan against my lips, and I grab her waist, pulling her against me as I swipe my tongue past her lips.

That's when something inside me seems to erupt, a need like I've never felt entering my veins quicker than any drug. I delve my tongue deeper, tasting her and feeling her as I clutch her to me, my hands greedy to feel her.

She twines her hands around my neck, and I lift her, backing her against the wall. I get a better angle, tonguing her as she kisses me back, her body wanting mine in a primal way I can feel all the way to the bottom of my balls. My cock presses into her stomach, demanding a whole lot more than just a kiss.

I grip her ass with one hand, palming it and squeezing as she makes a high-pitched sound in her throat. She's warm and delicious, her taste like a sweet plum that hints at tartness but never quite makes it. I could kiss her for hours, could explore this new sensation until the world came to an end.

But I have to pull away, have to let her breathe as I stare into her eyes.

"Fernando." My name leaves her lips like a sacrilegious prayer, and I want to hear it again, and again, and louder—screaming it while she comes on my cock. The thought makes me even harder, and she must feel it because she bites her swollen lip.

I don't know what to do, but I know what I want to do. I kiss her again, stealing her breath as I lift her higher and grind my cock against her sex.

She moves with me, her knees spreading wider as she moves her hips with me. The sensation is unlike anything I've ever felt. Far better than my hand. So much so that I can't stop imagining what it would feel like to shove inside her, to feel the heat I can sense at her core.

A groan rips from me at the idea of it, and I have to pull back and gulp in air.

That's when I realize how dangerous Bianca really is. She asked for the one thing that could bring me to my knees. Nothing else ever has. But she went for what has quickly become my glaring weakness—her. I can't deny her. Even now, she still moves against me, her hot cunt only a few pieces of fabric away. I wonder what she tastes like there.

Before I even realize I'm doing it, I slide my hand inside her pants and panties and ease my fingers along her pussy.

She gasps and rolls her hips, her eyes locked to mine.

“Like this?” I stroke along her wetness.

She nods.

“This?” I move my fingers lower and press them inside her, her wet pussy so tight that it strangles both fingers.

She moans, her back arching.

I kiss her throat, unable to resist her skin as I pulse my fingers in and out of her. “Here?”

“Yes, please.” She grips my shoulders and works her hips, fucking my fingers while I hold her against the wall.

I groan, my body keyed up higher than it's ever been, and I'm completely awash in her. I can't wait another second, so I pull my fingers from her panties and sink them into my mouth, sucking her taste and swallowing the juice from her sweet plum.

She watches, her lips parted, her eyes wild.

“You taste sweet. Did you know that?” I ask and slide my fingers into her panties once more.

“N-no.” She moans as I stroke her wet flesh and find the little nub toward the top.

“Here.” I kiss her, sharing her taste, and start stroking her clit with swirling movements.

She grinds harder against me as I suck on her tongue. She doesn't hold back, her body taking what it needs, and I'm all too happy to give it. I want to feel her come, to hear what she sounds like when she can't control herself. Fuck, I can barely control *myself*. I want to feel her heat from the inside, but I need this first. I need to watch her, to learn her, to make sure I can give her the pleasure she deserves.

"Fernando!" She gasps as I move my fingers faster over her swollen clit. "I-I-Fernando!" She comes on my hand, her body tensing and releasing as she moans my name.

I've never heard anything more erotic, never seen anything more beautiful. Her orgasm rolls through her, and I surge my fingers inside her, feeling her cunt constrict again and again as I use my thumb to stroke her clit. She gulps in air, her body trembling and finally relaxing as I ease my movements and pull my hand from her panties.

I lick myself clean again, savoring her taste, then slowly lower her to the floor, making sure she feels every hard inch of me on the way down.

"Is that the kiss you wanted?" I ask.

She looks up at me, her eyes lidded and glossy. "That's ... that was ... that was more than I ever knew was possible."

I'm a proud person by nature, but when she says that, I swear to fuck my cock grows two more sizes. I pleased her. I pleased the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.

Nothing can compare to this feeling. Nothing ever will.

I lean down to kiss her again when I hear a loud bang at my front door and a familiar voice yelling, "Open up, motherfucker!"

BIANCA

“Oh gosh!” I know exactly who’s standing on the other side of that door. It’s my sister. Her tone lets me know she’s not messing around. It’s the same one she used to use at home when she thought someone was messing with me.

She’s in protective mode. Panic fills me. I want to see her more than anything, but what will happen to Fernando? Will they kill him for kidnapping me? Has my father requested Antonio help track me down? I dig my fingers into Fernando’s shirt, not wanting to let him go. Tears fill my eyes. Seconds ago, I was having the best experience of my life, and now it could all be ripped away from me.

“Don’t cry,” Fernando orders. My bottom lip quivers even though I’m trying to remain strong.

“You can’t order someone not to cry.” I whisper. “It doesn’t work that way.”

“I said open the motherfucking door!” My sister pounds harder on it.

“You’re going to scare my kittens!” I shout back. “You should run. I’ll distract them. Go out the back door.” I hate the words even as I say them. What if I never see my Fernando again? My Fernando. That sounds lovely.

“Kittens?” Angelica’s voice softens.

“Open the damn door. My fucking leg is killing me,” I hear someone else say. I think it’s Antonio, but I can’t be sure. I’ve only heard him speak a few times.

“I told you to use the crutches like the doctor suggested. Should have listened to me,” she sasses him.

“I don’t need crutches,” he grumbles back at her.

“Men,” my sister huffs. I don’t have to see her face to know the exact expression she has on it right now.

“Not going anywhere.” Fernando steps back, but I don’t let his shirt go. “Sweetness. You gotta let me go.”

“I don’t have to do anything.” I dig my fingers in tighter. “Did you call me sweetness?” Is he giving me a pet name? A term of endearment? My heart swells in my chest. I mean, there’s no way I’m letting him go now. I watch as Fernando licks his lips.

“Yeah, sweetness.” Heat blooms through my cheeks, remembering how only moments ago he licked my orgasm from his fingers.

“All right, clear any kittens because I’m busting this door open.” Angelica’s voice breaks me from my dirty thoughts.

“That door is reinforced with steel, Angel. There’s no way you’re busting through it.” Antonio tries to talk some sense into her.

“Oh.” She gives another one of her annoyed huffs.

“I’m coming!” I shout before things get out of hand. I’ll talk them down. Tell them Fernando is a good person who saved me from a terrible fate. Really, if you ask me he’s a knight in shining armor that came to my rescue.

“You did,” Fernando says under his breath. My mouth falls open.

“Did you crack a joke?”

He shrugs.

“You did!”

“Order him to open the damn door,” my sister demands of her husband.

“I’m not so sure he’s under my control anymore. Not in this part of his life,” Antonio responds. I’m really not sure what that means. Does Fernando know Antonio? I release my hold on Fernando to go to the door. He snags me around the waist, pulling me to him, my back going to his chest. He leans down to whisper into my ear.

“No one will take you from me, Bianca. I need you to understand that.”

“Okay,” I agree.

“I don’t think you truly understand. Very bad things will happen if someone tries to come between us.” For the first time since I met Fernando, I sense a darkness to him. It doesn’t scare me. But it does make me frightened for other people.

“I understand.” I turn in his arms and lean up on my tip toes. He has to meet me halfway so that I can press my mouth against his. He releases his hold on me so that I can answer the door. “I’ll be there in a second,” I yell.

I suddenly have the bright idea of grabbing one of the kittens. I quickly run over and pick one of the babies up. I can feel Fernando’s eyes on me the entire time. I take two steps and turn back around to get another one. Two kittens are better than one. “Kittens make everything better.” I whisper to Fernando as I head for the door again.

I pause when I get there, unsure of how the heck I’m going to open the door now that my hands are full. Before I can even turn around, Fernando is there taking them from me. “Good idea. She won’t attack you while you’re holding kittens.” Fernando doesn’t respond. He only holds one kitten in each hand. It’s adorable.

“That’s it! I’m—” I flick the locks and pull the door open to see my sister standing there. Her husband is behind her. He’s got a few cuts on his face.

“Did you do that to him?” I ask. I thought they were in love.

“No, our father and your now-dead fiancé did.” My mouth falls open. Angelica grabs me, wrapping me in a tight hug.

Over her shoulder, I see her husband glaring over us, and I know it's toward Fernando.

"So I don't have to marry that man?" This day keeps getting better.

"Not that one, but when one Frangione falls, another takes his place," Antonio says. My stomach drops for a second, but then I remember Fernando. He'd never allow that.

"No, Fernando promised I wouldn't have to marry into that family. Didn't you?" I turn to look up at Fernando.

"Fernando?" both Angelica and Antonio say.

"He's holding kittens," Angelica whispers like we can't all hear her.

"He's a good kidnapper, I swear." I quickly come to Fernando's defense.

"I think maybe you should come with me." My sister offers me her hand. Fernando's words ring loud in my ears.

"I can't," I tell her.

"Yes, you can. Can't she, Antonio? Tell her."

Antonio doesn't respond. He and Fernando are in some sort of stare-off.

"He's not who you think he is, Bianca."

"He is. He's my knight in shining armor. He saved me." I lean in. "He kissed me too." Angelica's eyes widen. Probably not the time to tell her about the incredible orgasm.

"You kissed the Butcher!"

BUTCHER

*A*ntonio runs a hand through his hair, Angelica stares dumbfounded, and Bianca turns to look at me, her eyes wider than I've ever seen them.

"Fernando?" she asks.

"Yes." I *am* Fernando. To her, and to her only. To everyone else, I'm the Butcher.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Her eyes water.

I open my mouth to respond, then snap it shut. There are too many reasons, ones I'm not going to spill in front of Antonio and Angelica. For one, maybe I *wanted* to be Fernando for Bianca. Maybe, for once, I could be someone worthy of more than fear and loathing. Bianca has been so kind to me, soft, unafraid. I don't want to lose that. But I see now that I already have.

She takes a step back from me. "Y-you're the Butcher. This whole time, you ..."

Angelica wraps her arms around her. "It's okay."

Bianca shakes her head slowly. "You lied to me."

"No." I force myself to stay put even though I want to grab her from Angelica's embrace.

"You did!" Bianca yelps. "You made me think you were some random kidnapper looking for a ransom."

"I just didn't correct you."

“That’s the same as lying!” she cries.

“Fuck.” Antonio pulls his phone out and starts texting, probably to Gilly. “This is a goddamn mess.” He pockets the phone when he’s finished. “Come on.” He jerks his chin toward the front door. “Let’s let the girls talk while we get some air.”

The last thing I want to do is walk away from Bianca. I itch to pull her into my arms. She needs me, not her sister.

“Butcher!” Antonio snaps.

“Go.” Bianca turns into her sister’s embrace as Angelica glares at me.

“Bianca, I—”

“She told you to go.” Angelica’s voice is lower now, deadlier, and her eyes could bore a hole into me.

Fuck. I’ve fucked it all up. With heavy steps, I follow Antonio out onto the porch, the wind blowing leaves onto the driveway as he leans against one of the supports.

The door clicks closed behind me, and I’m grateful that Bianca didn’t go running. She’s still here. She’s still somewhere I can keep and protect her. But now I have to get rid of Antonio and Angelica—problem is, neither of them seem inclined to leave us alone.

“What the fuck were you thinking?” He lets out a long sigh, his back still to me.

“I wasn’t.”

“No shit.” He turns. “No fucking shit. You just disappeared. I didn’t know where you were. Gilly was trying to track you down. Then we had a fucking army of Larones and Frangiones on our doorstep.” He throws his hands up. “I got fucking shot. And where were you?”

For the first time in a long, long time, guilt washes over me. I left my friends high and dry while I went off on my own, half-cocked and with no plan whatsoever.

“So I’m going to need you to explain to me—right fucking now—what the hell you’re doing with Bianca Larone held captive in your house. Because if you don’t, Angelica may walk out here and tell me to kill you.”

“You could try,” I growl.

“If she told me to, I would.” He stares back at me, dead serious.

“If she wants a dead husband, sure.”

He shakes his head. “This is going nowhere. Explain what the fuck you were thinking so I can give her some sort of plausible explanation.” He glances at the door. “Because if Bianca says you’ve hurt her in any way, it’s going to go badly for both of us.”

I lean against the wood siding and rub my temples. “I don’t know what I was thinking.” I reach back into my memory of when I first saw her. “I was at the house. Angelica was doing Skype or whatever with her. Then I just ... It’s like I snapped. Not like I do when someone pisses me off by trying to pass off bullshit information when they’re under my knife. It was different. Sort of like something in here”—I tap my temple—“or here”—I tap my chest over my heart—“clicked. After that, I just went into motion, and I didn’t stop until I’d kidnapped her and brought her here.”

“You’ve never done anything like this before.” His brows are drawn together. “I’ve known you since we were kids, and you’ve never even thought of taking a woman like this.”

“I know.”

He takes in a deep breath and lets it out slowly. “Okay.” He gives me a hard nod, as if he’s come to some sort of decision.

“Okay what?”

A smirk turns the corner of his mouth. “This is good, because I *really* didn’t want to have to fight you.”

My confusion only grows as I stare at him, a smile spreading across his stupid face.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

He shrugs and walks over, clapping me on the arm. “I know exactly what’s happened. I don’t know what to do about it, but at least I understand it. Now, the Frangiones want to marry her to Len, one of the younger brothers. They’re searching for her everywhere, even had the nerve to send some of their goons to one of our warehouses to ask questions.”

I crack my knuckles, and the old bloodlust begins to pump through my veins. “I hope you kept them for me.”

“Not necessary. We’ve already crippled them, and they won’t be stepping foot any closer than that small inquiry. They’re still licking their wounds, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t dangerous to whoever has taken their prized bride.” He gives me a pointed look.

My bloodlust intensifies a hundredfold. “I’ll never let them take her.”

“I know.” He runs a hand through his hair again. “I get it. For now, I think the safest place for her is here with you. I can have Gilly work on some backchannel intel to send the Frangiones searching far afield for her, throw them off the scent as best I can.” He leans against the post again. “But it won’t last forever. They’ll come, and when they do, we all need to be ready.”

“So you’re with me on this? You won’t let them have her?” I ask.

“First off, Angelica would try to cut off my balls if I let the Frangiones have her sister. Second, I’d never separate you from the woman you love.”

It hits me like a shot to my gut. Love. I should deny it, downplay it, do anything to distance myself from the idea. But I don’t. I can’t. I’m a violent, vicious man, but I’ve always told the truth, especially to Antonio and Gilly. Just because Antonio saw the truth before I ever realized it doesn’t make it any less true.

I love Bianca Larone.

“Fuck.” I sigh.

“I can relate.” He claps me on the arm again even though I give him a death stare at the contact. “It’s a fucking surprise, isn’t it? But it’s the best one I’ve ever had.”

I can only nod as the full weight of what we’ve discussed lands on my shoulders.

Bianca is mine.

Now I just have to convince her that for her, I’m Fernando, and for anyone who crosses her—I’m their Butcher.

BIANCA

“*D*id he hurt you?” Angelica’s hands start to roam all over me. I stand there, still in shock. I’ve heard my father speak of the Butcher before. And there had been a few whispers from the men when they hadn’t noticed I was in the room. I could tell by the sounds of their voices that they were terrified of him.

“He can’t be the Butcher.” I finally say. “He likes kittens,” I mutter.

“Did you hit your head?” She starts to feel my skull.

I smack her hands away. “He didn’t hurt me. All he’s been to me is sweet.” I think I’m in a little bit of shock. I knew Fernando had a dark side, but I’d never imagined he could be the Butcher.

“Sweet?” Angelica points her thumb over her shoulder toward the front door. “We’re talking about that man. With the black eyes.”

“His eyes aren’t black. They’re brown but really dark with different shades of brown. They’re darkest around his pupil then it lightens as it goes out. It reminds me of when you melt chocolate.”

“So you *did* hit your head.”

“I didn’t hit my head.” I walk over to where Fernando made a space for the kittens so they couldn’t roam all over the house. My sister follows me.

“Tell me what’s going on.” I sit down on the floor and put one of the kittens into my lap.

“Things kind of blew up when Butcher kidnapped you.”

“So he did kidnap me? Just not for a ransom or because you asked him to?”

Angelica pauses at my questions for a long moment.

“I wasn’t going to let you marry into the Frangiones, but no, it wasn’t us who sent the Butcher to collect you. We were still coming up with a plan, but everything blew up when Father figured out it was the Butcher that took you. He thought he’d done it under Antonio’s order so both he and your ex showed up at the house.”

“Stop calling him my ex.” I turn the kitten over to hold her like a baby cradled in my arm. “Why did he take me?” Besides being shocked that Fernando is the Butcher, it’s the one other thought that keeps racing through my mind.

“I don’t know. He’s crazy. He’s the Butcher.”

“He’s not crazy.”

Angelica cocks her head to the side, looking at me as though I’m off my rocker too for defending him. “You’re really defensive of him.”

“It’s just hard.” I huff out a breath. “I cannot make my mind understand how my Fernando is the Butcher.”

“Your Fernando?”

“You know what I mean!”

“Nah, I don’t think I know what you mean.” She shakes her head. “I don’t want to freak you out, but I can only think of one reason he’d kidnap you. In fact”—she scrunches her nose—“when I was talking to you on the computer, he saw you. A second later, he was storming off. Now that I’m running through the timeline of events, I realize that he went straight for you.” Her words both surprise and confuse me more.

I’m still no closer to understanding why he kidnapped me. “How does someone so boldly walk into our father’s house

and just take me?” That’s another thing I can’t wrap my mind around.

“Because he’s the Butcher, and he’s crazy. No one dares to mess with him because they know the consequences.”

“Stop calling him that!” I snap, making the kitten meow. Angelica’s eyes widen. I can’t say I blame her. I’m not one prone to outbursts—of anger at least. Tears, sure. I put the kitten back down. It runs over to its mom and starts nursing.

“What else do you call him? I don’t know how he’s not dead. He waltzed in there and right out.”

“But why? You said there is only one reason you could think of.”

“He wants you.”

“No.” I shake my head. He did say he wouldn’t let anyone separate us. That things would go very bad if anyone tried, and I do believe he means *anyone*. “I suggested he marry me, and he didn’t jump at the idea. And it was me that asked him to kiss me. So your theory doesn’t make sense.”

“Let me get this straight. You asked a man that once microwaved someone’s eyeballs to marry you. Do I have that right?”

“Gross.” I gag. “Fernando would do no such thing.”

“Maybe not Fernando, but the Butcher would. Are you really not scared of him?”

“No,” I answer truthfully. “If anything, I’m scared for everyone else.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t leave.”

“Yes, you can. We’ll leave right now.” My sister gets to her feet.

I debate telling her what Fernando said, but I don’t want to make things escalate, and they surely will if I fill her in.

“It might be best if they stay here for now, Angel.” My sister glares over at her husband, who is standing by the door. I didn’t hear him come in. I don’t see Fernando.

Did he have a change of heart and leave? Oh, gosh, what if Antonio hurt or killed him? As soon as that thought enters my head, it leaves. I don’t think the Butcher would be so easily killed.

“Why would she stay here?” Angelica loops her arm into mine.

“No one knows about this place but the people here and Gilly.”

“So we’re staying here with her?”

Antonio shakes his head.

“No way, Antonio. You want to leave her with the Butcher?”

“He’s not going to hurt her. Clearly.”

Angelica looks at me. “What do you want?”

“To stay with Fernando.” Not only for my own safety, but I think maybe for theirs too.

Fernando might not hurt me, but now knowing he’s the Butcher, I have no idea what he might do if they did try to take me from here. I don’t know if I could reason with him. Ten minutes ago, I would have said yes. Now I’m not so sure I know him at all. It’s all so confusing.

Fernando steps into the house. My heart gives a flutter seeing him. He doesn’t meet my gaze. When I glance over at my sister, I see how she looks at him, and that hits me hard. Is that how everyone looks at him? Is he afraid now I will do the same?

“Bianca, maybe—”

“I’m staying.” I cut her off before she can finish, being assertive for once in my life. I might be hurt and mad at Fernando, but I think he is hurting too, and that only makes me hurt even more.

BUTCHER

*A*ntonio and Angelica pull down the driveway, leaving Bianca and me alone in the house. She hurries back to our bedroom where the kittens are and plops onto the floor beside them.

I follow. There's nothing else I can do. I get the feeling I'll always follow her wherever she goes, even if she doesn't want me to.

She strokes the mother cat on the top of her head as the kittens snuggle in a little pile of whiskers, feet, and fur.

I watch her for a long time, the silence growing between us. It's not as if I've ever been much for talking. Even so, I find myself searching for something—anything—to say to her to make her feel happy. It's so odd to want that—happiness for another person. It's new to me, but it's real. I don't want her to hurt or worry, and most of all, I don't want her to be afraid of me. But maybe it's too late for that. Now that she knows who I really am, how could she not be terrified?

She sighs, her gaze lifting to mine. "I know you won't hurt me."

Something deep in my chest relaxes the slightest bit.

"I mean, I know your reputation." Her gaze drops for only a second before she returns her beautiful eyes to me. "I've heard enough to know what sort of work you do, if you can call it that. *Work*."

I can't deny it. There's nothing for me to say.

“It should bother me more than it does, but I feel like what bothers me most is that you didn’t tell me the truth.” She shrugs slightly. “Then again, if you’d told me you were the Butcher, I probably would’ve tried to escape. I definitely wouldn’t have promised you I’d be a perfect kidnapping victim.” She shakes her head. “But you were never the Butcher to me. You’ve been Fernando. Fernando is the one I wanted to kiss me, to touch me, to hold me.”

The tension inside me eases even more. She’s pouring her heart out to me, showing me every facet of what she’s feeling. It’s a gift, one I want so badly. I’m fucking terrified of saying the wrong thing and messing it all up.

“Antonio trusts you. And Angelica trusts him. It’s the only reason she left without me.” She rises and steps to me.

I hold my breath as she reaches up and touches my cheek with her palm.

“Don’t lie to me again, okay?”

“I swear on my life, Bianca. I’ll never lie to you again.” It’s an oath I give readily, a small price to pay for the forgiveness I see in her eyes and hear in her voice.

“Good.” She lowers her palm to my shoulder. “Then we understand each other.”

“Yes.” I want to kiss her, to fucking maul her with my mouth and my body, to give her more pleasure than she can take. But I can’t. Not when I wounded her. Not when she needs time.

Her stomach grumbles.

A smile tries to twist the corner of my lips. This is something I can do for her, something I’ve never done for anyone else.

“I’ll make you dinner.” I kiss her forehead, unable to stop myself.

“You can cook?”

“Yes.” I take her hand gently and pull her along with me down the hall and into the open living space.

“Where’d you learn to cook?” she asks as I sit her at a stool by the wide island.

“I left home when I was fourteen. Kicked out by my old man.” I’ve never told anyone this, not even Antonio. My past—like most everything about me—is better left in the dark. But for Bianca, I feel like she needs this, this piece of the real me. I want her to believe in me, and I know this is the way to get there. She gave me her vulnerability. Now it’s my turn.

“I’m sorry.” She watches as I get ingredients from the refrigerator and the pantry.

“Don’t be. He wasn’t much for talking either, unless you count fists as communication.” I clear my throat and keep going as I put a pat of butter into my pan and grab a knife to filet some chicken cutlets. “Anyway, I was on the street for a while, but then I got hired on to do some dirty work for one of the families. I’ve always been big, even before I started lifting weights religiously, and I had a particular skill set that made me valuable. I would do anything they needed. The dirtiest, bloodiest work that grown men turned down—I could do it, because I knew I never wanted to live on the streets again.” I can’t look at her, can’t bear to see judgment or condemnation in her eyes, even if I deserve it. So I focus on beating an egg and pouring out some breadcrumbs to coat the chicken. “Once I made enough money to get a decent place of my own, I realized I needed to learn to cook—that or live off takeout. Not my style. At that time, I mostly worked at night. During the day, I would sleep, and if I couldn’t sleep—which was often—I’d watch TV.” I finally take a chance to glance at her when I wash the crumbs from my fingertips.

She’s watching me, her face set in soft lines. No harsh judgment, nothing even hinting at condemnation. If anything, there’s ... compassion. Fuck, is someone chopping onions in here?

I turn back to the stove and drop the cutlets into the hot olive oil, the sizzle giving me a breather. When it settles down, I keep going.

“It just so happened that most of the times I was awake, there was a show on Food Network called *Barefoot Contessa*.”

She gasps. “Ina!”

I turn and catch her gaze again. “Yeah. You know her?”

“I love her! She’s so fancy with her ‘good vanilla’ and living in the Hamptons.” She grins. “I just didn’t know you were a fan, too.”

“Big fan.” I smile. And for once, it’s easy. It’s so fucking easy to smile when Bianca is in the room. “She’s basically my personal culinary instructor, though she doesn’t know it.” I drop the pasta into the boiling water and flip the cutlets.

“I love her show, though sometimes I used to cheat and watch the one with Giada on it. She wasn’t as fun as Ina, though. Ina always did those pretty flowers and table settings and really made a production of it.” She giggles. “Though I always thought Jeffrey was secretly gay.”

“Definitely.” I slice two lemons and add the juice and cream to a pan along with seasoning.

“That smells so good.” She licks her lips.

“Almost done.” I check the pasta and the chicken. Everything’s ready, so I plate it up and pour the sauce over the top.

When I slide the steaming plate in front of her and hand her silverware, she doesn’t waste a moment.

“Don’t burn your tongue.” I open a bottle of white.

“Oh my God, Fernando! It’s so good!” She chews, then opens her mouth and blows out the heat before chewing some more.

Fernando. That’s who I am. That’s what she called me. I hope she never stops.

BIANCA

“*T*his food is perfection, but this wine is yummy.” I polish off my second glass. It makes me all warm and fuzzy inside. I reach for the bottle to pour more. I noticed that Fernando hasn’t touched his. He poured a glass but never took a drink. He beats me to it, grabbing the bottle. “Hey.” He pours a little into my wine glass, only filling it halfway. “Stingy.” I pick it up and drink it all down.

“Have you drunk before, sweetness?”

“Nope!” I chirp. He takes the bottle and sits it all the way on the other side of the table. “What? You’re banning me from having more now?” I roll my eyes. “Rules, rules, rules. Story of my life.” I take the last bite of food on my plate.

“I just don’t want you to get sick. If in twenty minutes you want more, I will give it to you. That’s all.” He looks unhappy that I’m unhappy, which is adorable.

“Oh.” I lick my lips. “So no rules then?” Fernando pauses for a long moment. I give him my best glare, which I think fails because a smile pulls at his lips so is it really a fail? Getting a smile, even a small one, from Fernando is a win in my book.

“I don’t want to control you, but I do want to keep you safe.”

“So I can have my own phone? Internet access whenever I want?” I ask only to clarify that he and I are on the same page.

“When this is all over, yes. Right now, we have to lie low.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” he says without hesitation.

“Can I pick out my own clothes and pick who I marry?”

“You can wear whatever you like.” It doesn’t go unnoticed by me that he skips the subject of marriage entirely.

“Even if it’s”—I drop my voice to a whisper—“scandalous?”

With the way Fernando stares at me, I think he might not care for other men looking at me. That should bother me, but I find it endearing coming from him. He makes me feel special and different, like I can be a little bit edgier or even sillier than I ever was at home.

I know that some husbands don’t care if their wives step out discreetly. As long as it’s after their childbearing days. It goes unsaid that the husbands do it from the very start. Some come into their marriages already having a mistress. I don’t foresee Fernando ever being that kind of husband.

“Yes, wear what you like.” He cracks his knuckles. “I know how to fight.”

I burst into laughter.

“Fight? Is that what you call it?”

He tenses.

“I’m teasing you, Fernando. I’m not completely naïve to this world and what happens.”

“Why do you not fear me?” He leans his head to the side, studying me.

“It’s the way you stare at me. It’s different than anyone else ever has.”

“The way I look at you?”

I nod. “For so long I’ve been taught to sit and look pretty. That I was to be quiet. Sitting in a room for hours with people, you learn a lot about them. I watched them. I fear a lot of them. Some that have never said a single word to me, but with you, I knew the second you burst into my bedroom you weren’t going to hurt me. It was all over your face. Don’t get me wrong, you’re good at hiding your emotions and keeping your

face unreadable, but there are always small signs if you know what you're looking for. They're not always in the face. It's body language too. People think they get this gut feeling about things, but that's not what it is. The truth is, it's their mind noticing things and taking in details. The mind senses the danger; you're just not understanding why."

"You're not only pretty, Bianca; you know that, don't you? You are far more cunning than you give yourself credit for."

"Does that mean I can have more wine?"

Fernando barks a laugh and fills my cup halfway up again.

I snag my glass and jump up from my seat. "Is there music here? Can we put some on?" I want to let loose for once. And not have to worry about every single move I make. Something I never got to do at home.

He stands, pulling out his phone. His fingers move across the screen. A giggle bubbles free from me. He glances up at me. "What?"

"It looks so small in your hand." I laugh harder. "You're so big." I don't know why this is so funny to me. I'm sure it has something to do with the wine. "I bet you could crush it with your bare hands. Get it, *bear*?" I lift my hands like a bear and growl.

Fernando stares at me, and I wonder if maybe I hurt his feelings. I rather love his giant bear hands. In fact, I want him to touch me with them. I start to apologize, but then he throws his head back and laughs. It's deep, and the sexiest thing I've ever heard in my life.

Before I know what I'm doing, I'm walking to him. I grab the front of his shirt and pull him down into a kiss. Fernando groans and deepens it. I try to rub myself against him, but he suddenly pulls back, his breathing heavy.

"You've been drinking." See, how is he the Butcher? He's so sweet and unwilling to take advantage which, while noble, doesn't mean I don't want one of those orgasms again.

"Okay, but that doesn't mean we can't do things we did before. I was sober and okay with them earlier," I point out.

This all sounds logical to me.

“That was before you knew who I was.”

“You’re not my Fernando?” I ask.

“I will only ever be *your* Fernando.”

“Good.” I smile up at him. “Now music me. I’m gonna dance.” I spin away from him in a twirl. A second later, music fills the air, and I dance.

For the first time in my life, at this moment, I feel free. It might be an illusion, and I know things are far from over, but for tonight, there is only my Fernando and me.

BUTCHER

She dances until she sways on her feet, her body falling asleep before her mind. I catch her and cradle her in my arms, her eyes barely open as she watches me carry her to our room.

I gently lay her in the bed.

I shouldn't be here with her like this, not when she's impaired and I can't take my mind off the seductive way she moves. Her body is warm and soft—everything I'm not.

“You look so serious.” She slurs her words as she runs her fingers down my forearm. “Always so serious.”

I smirk and hook my fingers in the waistband of her pants and pull them down, then toss them aside. “You look drunk.”

She lifts her hips, clearly urging me to remove her panties, too. Fuck I want to. I want to yank them away and devour her pussy. It may be my first time, but I'm certain as all hell that I can find her clit and send her straight to the goddamn moon. Just the thought sends a stinger to my dick, which is desperately hard and aching with its own heartbeat.

“You need rest.” I grudgingly grab the sheet and blanket and pull it up to her chin.

She frowns and swats at my hands. “No. I want you.”

I swallow hard, those words doing things to me that I never could've imagined. *I want you*. No one has *ever* wanted me. I'm the last person anyone in this life ever wants to see. A hulking brute who can take a man's head off with my bare

hands—no, no one’s ever wanted anything to do with me. Just catching a glimpse of me would cause people to make the sign of the cross or grip their rosary or say a silent prayer to whatever deity they’d chosen. Not that it would save them if they were on my list. No one’s ever escaped me. No one ever will. Especially not the innocent bit of sweetness who’s staring up at me through heavy-lidded eyes.

“Serious again,” she mumbles and pulls my hand to her mouth, her tongue darting out and teasing my thumb.

I groan.

“That’s more like it.” She licks it, then pulls it into her mouth, her soft tongue licking down to my knuckle.

“Sweetness, don’t ...” I press my thumb down onto her tongue, and she hollows her cheeks, sucking and licking as my heart beats loudly enough for her to hear.

My cock demands I give her what she’s begging for, ram myself down her throat and come, coating her inside and out. But she’s drunk. And it doesn’t matter what she says she wants—if I take advantage of her now, she’d hate me for it later. And I’d hate myself, too. Nothing I do for work ever leaves even the slightest smudge on my conscience. It’s almost like ‘not giving a shit’ is my superpower. It doesn’t hurt that most of the men I hurt and kill have done far, far worse in their lifetimes. But that’s different.

Bianca doesn’t deserve the Butcher. She deserves Fernando, a man who would never hurt her, who would rather *die* than hurt her. So with that thought in mind, I pull my thumb from her hot mouth and replace it with my lips.

The kiss is short, mainly because I have to pull back before my instincts have me on top of her and thrusting inside her hot cunt.

“Fernando.” She reaches for me.

“I can’t, sweetness. Not when you’re drunk.” I take her hands and kiss each of her palms. “You need sleep.”

“But I want you,” she whimpers. “Stay with me.”

I close my eyes, relishing those words on her lips. When I open them, I sigh and look around the room. The mother cat and kittens are all snuggled in a pile of fur and sleep. The whole place is locked down, and my phone will alert me if anyone sets foot on my property.

“Please.” She closes her eyes, her hands still in mine. “You won’t hurt me.”

How does she read my heart like a book? I don’t know. I don’t understand any of it, not from the moment I left Antonio’s house with only one goal in mind—taking Bianca.

“Just stay with me. Please, Fernando.” Her voice is soft, falling into sleep as her lips stay parted.

I shouldn’t. I should take my ass out to the living room and crash on the couch, leaving her to sleep peacefully and finally rest after the long night and day she’s had. But she asked me to stay. Pledged. I can’t deny her.

So I rise and close the door to our room before I strip out of my clothes, careful to leave my boxer briefs on. My cock stands out thick and hard against the material, and no matter what I try to put in my mind—nasty shit that only the Butcher could come up with—it doesn’t make it go down. Not when I’m this close to Bianca. Not when I’m about to share a bed with her.

When I return to her, her eyebrows are furrowed, a wrinkle between them. I climb into bed, careful to stay away from her side.

I lie on my back and stare up at the ceiling.

The bed shifts, and I sense her before I feel her touch. She rolls into my side, her cheek resting on my chest as I wrap my arm around her back. It’s so easy, so natural, as if we’ve slept this way hundreds, thousands of times. But it’s new. It’s all so new. My skin is sensitive, her touch foreign and almost exotic. I can feel every bit of her body that touches me, even her breath against my chest. Everything about her is warm, sweet, perfect.

I’m scared to move. Scared to think.

That's when she pulls her knee up and rests her thigh on my hard cock. A groan sticks in my throat, and I can barely breathe. Just the pressure of her against me makes my balls pull up close to my body. She's driving me wild, and she's not even awake.

I stroke her back slowly, hoping the movement will calm me down.

She moves her leg higher.

I bite my lip hard enough to draw blood.

Her breath tickles my nipple, making it go hard, and her breast presses against my side, her shirt doing nothing to hide the fullness of it.

Sweat beads along my brow, and I don't know how I'm going to survive this night.

Fucking hell.

I thought I knew torture. I thought I knew pain.

Now I realize I didn't know a goddamn thing. Not until I stole my Bianca.

BIANCA

I fight not to giggle as I stare at Fernando's sleeping face. Even in his sleep, he looks so serious. His brows keep furrowing and un-furrowing. What I love most, though, is his hold on me. He keeps me tucked close to him. Not that it's hard since I'm clinging to him.

I've already spent a good five minutes taking him in. It's nice to get a chance to stare at him without him glancing away or shifting to give me the side of his face. Self-conscious is not a word I would have ever thought when I'd heard stories of the Butcher. But I think with me, Fernando may be a bit that way. My whole life, I've been stared at and told I was pretty. I think Fernando has been stared at, and in those stares all he ever saw was fear or disgust. Those things take a toll on a person after a while.

I get this feeling he's waiting for me to say something that might hurt him, and it's why he often pulls his gaze away. Which is freaking crazy. I can't even fathom him thinking, me, tiny Bianca, could hurt the Butcher.

I think I'm finally coming to grips with the fact that the Butcher and Fernando are the same person. And the more my mind accepts it, the less it bothers me. If anything, I feel a bit powerful. Which is nice since for so long I've been under the thumb of someone. It's new to have a little bit of control.

Oh, don't get me wrong: I think Fernando wants to keep me. But I don't think he wants to control me. In fact, as terrible as

it is to think, I'm pretty sure the Butcher might actually be under my thumb.

What a strange concept. It's not that I want him there. I don't want to control him, but the fear that always lingers around me is gone. Odd considering I'm in bed with a man most would consider depraved and deadly. That's the thing, though: He's not that way with me. Fear is the last thing I feel when he's around. But I will admit, I pity anyone that would try to come in here and cause either of us harm. That's the only time I think I wouldn't be able to pull Fernando back.

While he might be sweet with me, I know the Butcher is still there lingering under the surface. Waiting for someone to step out of line. It's part of him, and I know if I truly want to have a relationship with Fernando then I'll have to accept the Butcher too. I'm just not sure how to do that or to show him that I could possibly do that.

I trail my finger down his chest. He tenses under my touch for a second before he relaxes. It doesn't go unnoticed by me that small scars linger in different places. I'm pretty sure there is a bullet hole in his shoulder. The man really is a warrior.

"Bianca." He sighs my name.

I slip on top of him. He doesn't stop me as I trail kisses down his chest and lower. His eyes open, watching me as I continue. I might have been a tad drunk last night, but I knew what I was asking for. Today is a new day, and there is no reason for him to tell me no. In fact, I don't think it's a word Fernando would use often with me. He told me he'd never lie to me again, and last night he told me he'd let me be or do whatever I wanted as long as it didn't put me in harm's way.

"You don't like to be touched, do you?"

He's not used to it, but I plan to rectify that.

"I love being touched by you."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Your touch is soft and sweet. There is no agenda behind it."

Now that piques my curiosity. “What do you mean?”

“Is this something you really wish to talk about? Me with another woman?” My nails sink into his chest.

I quickly pull them back, not having meant to do it. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. I enjoy all your touches. Scratch away, sweetness.”

“Fine, tell me,” I blurt out. “I want to know everyone on the list. You see, I know this man with a very deadly set of skills, and I could have them all taken out.” I try to make light of it even while the jealousy is eating me alive.

“There is no list, sweetness, nor do I think you’d create one. It’s not in your nature.”

“I might,” I huff. I’m finding I’m rather possessive of Fernando. I didn’t get to have a lot of things in my life to be mine alone.

“The women who have hit on me, as you might call it, do so because they want something rough. They think I can give it to them. It’s not about wanting me. It’s about them wanting what they think I’ll do to them.” A coldness lingers in his gaze.

“They’re wrong. I think if we had sex, you’d be sweet and loving.”

“With you I would be,” he agrees.

I cock my head to the side, even more confused. “But with others?”

“There are no others. I don’t want to give them what they want, nor do I want anyone touching me.”

I open and close my mouth as it really dawns on me what Fernando is saying to me. He really could be all mine. *Only* mine.

“So I can do what I want?” I start to kiss down lower, making it all the way to his boxer briefs. His hard cock is pressing against the material, wanting out.

“You can do whatever you want to me, sweetness.”

I grip his boxers and pull them down, causing his cock to spring free. I gasp at the sheer size of it, but that doesn't stop me from wrapping my hand around its base. A small bead of cum leaks from the tip.

A guttural sound comes from Fernando, making me freeze. "Does it hurt?"

"Not in the way you think."

"You need release?" I lick my lips. "You need me?"

"Always." He groans as I wrap my mouth around the head of his cock, giving Fernando what he needs. This isn't about a blowjob. It's me showing him I want to touch him not only for me, but because I want to please and love him.

BUTCHER

*H*er mouth is warm and wet, her hand gripping my shaft perfectly as she tastes me.

I grunt, my body straining, my hips demanding I thrust up into her lips. But I don't. I force myself to lie still and watch as she learns me, her tongue exploring as she runs it down my shaft then back up again.

"It's soft on the outside but so hard on the inside." She takes my head in her mouth.

I groan and grip the blankets, fisting them to keep myself from gripping her hair and fucking her mouth.

She licks the head like a lollipop, and I swear I almost levitate off the fucking bed. "Like this?" She does it again.

"Yes." I can barely form the word.

She licks me again and again, then takes me in her mouth as far as she can.

I grunt louder, and there's a goddamn deathmatch going on inside me between my urge to come in her mouth and my need to be patient. Breathing in deeply through my mouth, I let it out from my nose and keep my eyes on her. Even though it only makes me hotter and brings me closer to the edge, I find I can't look away from her, not when her perfect mouth is full of my fat cock.

Pulling away, she eyes it. "I don't think I can get it all in my mouth, but I can try." She goes down on it again, and when my

cock hits the back of her throat, my hips thrust of their own accord.

She gags a little and pulls back. Her eyes water, and a single tear runs down her cheek as she takes me deep into her mouth again. It's the most erotic thing I've ever seen, my sweetness with tears on her cheeks while she sucks my cock.

I force myself to breathe, to hold out as she runs her tongue up and down my length then starts bobbing her head, stroking my cock along the roof of her mouth and farther back to her throat.

When she gets into a rhythm, I watch as she locks her gaze with me and keeps going, her mouth tight on my cock as she moves up and down. Faster and faster, her hand working as delicious slurping sounds escape her mouth. She doesn't stop, and then I feel her legs spread wider, her wet cunt rubbing against my knee as she grinds on me.

I lift my knee, pressing against her as she rides it, her mouth getting wilder on my cock as she chases her own orgasm.

My body is already coiled tight, and I won't last. Not when she's rubbing her hot cunt on me while she sucks me, hollowing her cheeks as she keeps her gaze on mine.

I gasp in a breath, but it can't stop what's coming.

"Sweetness!" I try to pull my hips downward, but she keeps me in her mouth as I come.

I groan, my body going rigid as I spurt into her hot mouth, her tongue lapping against my skin as she begins to moan, her movements slower, deeper, her body taking its pleasure as she swallows my seed.

She cries out around my cock and pulls it back in her mouth again, licking me clean as her body finally slows its feverish movements and goes languid, her hips grinding to a halt.

I reach down and grab her, drawing her up my body until we're face to face. Then I keep going, lifting her up.

"What are you—Oh!"

I lick her pussy, then grab her ass and spread her wide, sucking at her wet skin and devouring every bit of her sweetness.

“Fernando!” She grips the headboard as I press her cunt against my face and bury my tongue inside her.

She arches, her tits jutting out above me. I reach up and cup one, then squeeze her hard nipple as I lick her from her hole to her clit. I feel it on my tongue, the little nub. I don't stop. I focus on it, licking it again and again with the broadside of my tongue until Bianca's hips move to my tempo.

I'm in fucking heaven. She's riding my face, her tit in one of my hands and her ass in the other. I want to live like this, to die like this, to never stop sucking on her pussy. She bears down, her clit demanding my complete attention, so I give it. Sucking it between my lips, I nip it with my teeth, then go back to whipping it with my tongue.

She arches, her entire body tight and tense. When I slip a finger down her ass and into her wet cunt, she mewls. That's when she shatters, her pussy squeezing my finger as I continue to lap her up, swallowing her juices and licking her pussy until she stops grinding, stops chasing. I don't want to stop, though. I want another orgasm from her, then another, then more. I want everything she has.

She shudders and pulls away. “I'm too sensitive.” She squirms.

“You're just right.” I lean forward and lick her again.

“Fernando!” she gasps.

I pull my finger from her dripping cunt and slide it around her asshole.

Her eyes widen. “You can't—”

“I will.” I grin up at her, my face wet with her juices. “I'm going to have all of you, Bianca. I can't stop.” I slide her down my body and rest her on top of my aching cock.

I hiss when I feel her heat, her wetness.

She rests her palms on my chest, her eyes on mine. “All of me?” She moves her hips just a little bit, just enough to make

my brain go fucking haywire.

“Every last drop.” I slide her lower and almost fucking die when I feel the head of my cock nudging her tight entrance.

“Maybe that’s what I want.” She moves her hips again, sliding me into her just the slightest bit.

I bite my cheek to keep from yelling at the pleasure of it.

“Maybe I lured you into this. Maybe I’m a trap for the big, bad Butcher.” She sits up and cups her breasts, giving me a goddamn feast for the eyes as she pinches her own nipples. “A temptress sent to bring you to your knees.” The sparkle in her eyes hints at a mischievous nature she’s hidden from everyone—everyone except me. I love it.

“If that’s your job, then you’re a fucking expert, sweetness. You need a promotion.” I slide a little more inside her, my cock aching to go deeper, to take all of her.

She winces the slightest bit.

That’s when I stop. That’s when I realize I can’t do this. Not if it means hurting her.

I grab her arms and lift her off me.

“What’s wro—” She squeaks as I roll to my side and claim her mouth, her body pressed to mine, though I’m no longer in danger of hurting her.

Relief washes over me. I’ll never hurt her. Everyone else? Sure. But Bianca? No. I’ll *never* hurt my Bianca.

BIANCA

“*A*re you hungry?” Fernando asks. I’m sitting at the kitchen island with my arms folded over my chest. I know I’m pouting, but I don’t care.

“No.”

He stares at me, not believing me for one second. Then my stomach goes and growls and gives me away. Traitor.

“I’ll make something for you.”

“You can do whatever you want. Doesn’t mean I’ll eat it.” Fernando cocks his head to the side. The utter confusion on his face would make me mad if it wasn’t so adorable. He really has no clue what to do with me.

“Do you want me to eat your pussy again?”

My mouth falls open. I quickly close it.

“No.” *Yes!* My mind screams.

“You enjoyed it.”

“Never said I didn’t,” I snap back. Fernando’s brows pull together. Guilt nags at me when I see an almost defeated expression on his face.

“You’re upset with me?”

“Captain Obvious over here.” I’m really acting like a brat, but I can’t help myself. My sister would tell me my anger is really sadness. That anger is just easier to deal with.

“Sweetness, please tell me what I’ve done wrong.” He braces his big hands on the island. All I can think about is where those fingers were an hour ago. I press my thighs together.

“You should know. I shouldn’t have to tell you.”

“Normally, I would torture such information out of an individual.”

“Give me your best shot, big guy.” I smirk, knowing he’s not going to hurt a hair on my head.

“I don’t like this.” Now he folds his arms over his chest. We stare at each other across the kitchen island, and I wonder who will win.

“Damn it!” I huff when I blink.

“What? Did something happen?” He rushes around the kitchen island to see if I’m okay.

“We were having a staring contest, and I lost.”

“We were?” He has that adorable confused expression on his face again. How am I supposed to stay mad at him when he keeps giving me looks like that?

“I blinked. Hence, I lost.”

“We’ll do it again.” He grabs my chin to turn my face to look into his eyes. They lock, and a second later, he blinks. I fight a laugh but lose. What am I going to do with this man?

“Don’t make me laugh! I’m mad at you.” I shoo his hand away.

“I know what this is. Carina gets hangry all the time. I should feed you.” He heads for the refrigerator and starts to make breakfast.

I can’t believe he really has no clue why I’m upset. Carina is Antonio’s younger sister. I met her once when my sister Skyped me and she was there. I’m pretty sure that was when Fernando saw me for the first time.

“Can I call my sister?” I ask.

“Yes. Let me get a phone.” He leaves the kitchen, coming back a moment later with two brand new phones still in a plastic wrap. They’re not fancy. I’m guessing they are what people call burner phones. I’ve never had a cell phone, so I don’t care what kind it is as long as it works.

He opens them both and gives me one. “I don’t actually know her number.”

“I set everything up.”

I pick the phone up to see he already put Angelica’s number in and that I only need to hit the call button.

“Thank you.” I slip off the stool and head back toward the bedroom, needing to talk to my sister right now. I’m so confused inside. I have no clue about men or relationships, so I’m hoping she can give me some insight. I mean, it’s not like she has a ton of experience, but it’s still more than I have.

This morning, I thought my whole life was really going to change. I don’t just mean being saved from my father or some horrible husband, but that I was going to get to pick a man I want. One that I could call my own. But then Fernando stopped us from going any further.

“Hello.” My sister’s voice breaks me from my thoughts.

“Hey, it’s me.” I don’t know why, but I have the sudden urge to cry.

“What’s wrong?” She can tell from my tone I’m upset.

“Is that Bianca?” I hear Carina in the background. “Put it on speaker. I’ve got questions.”

“Ah, I think maybe I should talk to her alone,” Angelica tells her.

“I bet my ass she’s calling about the Butcher, and I know him better than both of you,” she responds.

“No she doesn’t. Does she know what he sounds like when he...” I trail off before I say *cum*.

“Oh my God!” They both say. Angelica had already put the phone on speaker.

“You had sex with the Butcher? In my mind, I’d think he’d be a rough lover, but from what I’m hearing from Angelica and Antonio, he’s a kitten with you.”

“We’re not having sex,” I growl into the phone.

“You sound really mad about this,” Carina says.

“How would you feel if you wanted to have sex with a man and he didn’t want to have it with you?” The line goes quiet. “Hello?”

“There must be a reason. Give us the soft details,” my sister finally responds.

“Soft.” Carina snorts.

I tell them as much as I’m willing to admit without crossing a line that is too personal for Fernando and me.

“Then he just stopped when he was already a little inside of you?” Angelica asks, but I know she’s thinking it over.

“He doesn’t want to hurt her. A girl’s first time can be painful. Or so I hear.” Carina sounds irritated. I guess I’m not the only one wanting to get laid here. But that’s not what I really want. I want Fernando to make love to me. I want this deep connection with him that we’ll only ever have with each other.

“So he’s never going to have sex with me? Great,” I huff, dropping on the bed.

“You could do it yourself,” Carina suggests.

“What do you mean?”

“Pop your own cherry?”

“I can do that?” I sit back up. “Like how?”

“I don’t know if you’re a good influence or a bad one, Carina.” My sister laughs.

“Just let me look.”

“At my vagina? This phone doesn’t have FaceTime. It’s one of those older ones.” They both burst into laughter.

“No, dork. I’m googling it. I think I’m going to like your sister. I wasn’t sure with the whole being into the Butcher

thing. I thought she'd be emo or something."

"You know I can hear you, right?"

"Yeah, I know how phones work."

Angelica sighs. "You'll learn quickly that my sister-in-law is a smartass."

I think I might like her too.

"Got it. Okay here's what you need to do. You'll have to finger yourself. There might be this soft kind of elastic texture to the side. Says it's moon-shaped if you still have it."

"Does it really say that?" Angelica sounds skeptical. So am I.

"I guess that's right, just based on this picture. You may not have a hymen at all. Most women don't, but maybe he felt it or something and was afraid to push more and hurt you. That's all I can think of." Carina snorts. "I really can't imagine the Butcher not wanting to hurt someone."

"What if it's not about my virginity? What if he realizes if he takes it too far he's going to be stuck with me and he doesn't want that?" My insecurities start to come out.

Either way, I'm going to see about taking my own virginity. If Fernando doesn't want it, I'll deal with that heartache, but if he's not going to do it, I am. I'm taking ownership of it.

"He kidnapped you. I think it's safe to say he wants you," my sister points out.

"Yeah, because he saw me. But now he knows me, and I might not be all he thought I'd be."

I'm only a pretty face. That's what I've been told my whole life. Fernando might be realizing that too.

BUTCHER

I rearrange her pancakes for the third time, then the fourth. The tower doesn't look perfectly straight, so I once again nudge the top two to the left a little. Leaning down, I do my best to eye the top to make sure it's level.

The bacon is crisp, and I have it warming in the oven until she's done with her phone call. I bite my cheek. The phone call is making me nervous. Hell, everything about Bianca this morning has me on edge.

She's mad at me. I don't know why.

I've been wracking my brain trying to figure it out. With the edge of my spatula, I ease her eggs over just a touch toward the side of the plate. I don't want the syrup to touch them once I pour it over the pancakes. She wouldn't like syrupy eggs. I can't let that happen. She deserves the best.

I stand up straight. "Shit." I should've made her some oatmeal to go on the side, something with spiced apples. She'd love that.

Whirling, I hurry to the pantry and grab a Granny Smith and a container of quick oats. All I have to do is make a simple syrup and cook the apples for a short while in the syrup and some cinnamon with a dash of vanilla at the end. The oats can cook at the same time, and then I can mix it all together.

I eye the stack of pancakes. Maybe I should just start over so everything's hot and fresh when she comes back.

Reaching for the plate, I stop when I hear the slightest grunt.

It's been hard for me to keep myself in the kitchen while she's been in the bedroom talking with Angelica—and likely telling her sister exactly why she's upset. I want that information almost as badly as I want Bianca, but not quite. And, since I want Bianca more, I minded my business in the kitchen and allowed her privacy to speak with Angelica. But the grunt I just heard—that didn't sound like something Bianca would share with her sister. It sounded ... I can't think of a word, but my cock certainly likes it, because I'm suddenly hard as a rock.

I drop the oats and the apple on the counter and stride around toward the bedroom. The sound comes again, and my cock kicks at my zipper.

“What the fuck?” I whisper under my breath and stop right as I get to our bedroom door.

It's shut. For privacy. I shouldn't go barging in there when Bianca clearly wanted to keep her discussion between her and her sister.

Even so, I put my palm on the handle.

“God, what the hell is even in there?” Bianca mumbles. “This should be easy. Maybe I should add another finger? Go deeper?”

My eyes widen so much that I swear I must resemble a cartoon character.

“Don't look, Mama Kitty. This is X-rated business.”

My mouth goes dry. I can't think. Everything in my head is a gray tornado of twisting reason and failing resolve.

I turn the door handle and push it open slowly.

Bianca is on the bed, her legs spread wide, and one of her fingers is deep inside her pussy. She arches, a hiss coming from her mouth as she seems to try to push even farther into her pink cunt. “It's not there.”

“What's not there?” I stalk to her.

She jumps and yanks her finger out of herself.

I catch her wrist and plunge her finger into my mouth, sucking her taste from them as she stares up at me with a startled expression.

Once her finger is licked clean, I pull it from between my lips. “What are you doing in here, sweetness?” My voice is low and gravelly, stretched taut just like my control.

Her cheeks flash a deep pink, and she slaps her legs together. “I, uh. I was um ...”

“You were fingering my pretty pussy,” I fill in for her. “You were touching what’s *mine*.”

“Yours?” She blinks.

“Mine.” I bite down on her finger, and her eyelids flutter.

“B-but you didn’t want to, you know, last night. You stopped—”

“Because I can’t bear to hurt you, sweetness.” I cock my head to the side. “Did you think it was for some other reason?” That’s when the lightbulb finally goes off in my thick head. “*That’s* what you were angry about?”

She glances away.

I know a tell when I see one. I’d be a shitty torturer if I didn’t.

“Ah.” I climb onto the bed, spreading her knees apart and leaning down to blow on her tender skin.

“Fernando.” She holds my gaze. “I thought maybe ... Maybe you realized you didn’t want me.”

“Didn’t want you?” I snap my head up, then crawl up her body and claim her mouth in a bruising kiss. How could she ever think I didn’t want her? I want her so badly I’d turn my back on my family just to get a taste of her. And to make her mine forever? I’d do any-fucking-thing she asked. I pull back, and she catches her breath as I run my tongue along my lips, savoring her taste. “Are you saying you want me inside you, sweetness?”

She twines her fingers together behind my neck. “Yes,” she whispers.

I stroke her soft cheek. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“That’s why?” she asks. “That’s why you stopped?”

I nod. “You’re so tight, sweetness. I could feel you squeezing me, and fuck, it was the most amazing thing I’ve ever experienced. But I refuse to hurt you. I won’t do it.”

She leans up and kisses my mouth, her tongue skirting across my lips. “You *will* do it.” She spreads wider, and my hips nestle at the juncture of her thighs, my cock begging to be buried inside her.

“I won’t hurt you.” I feather kisses along her jaw.

“I don’t care if it hurts, Fernando.” She reaches between us and grabs my pants, unbuttoning them and reaching beneath my boxer briefs. “I was trying to stretch myself for you, to remove any barrier. I want you inside me. I need you.”

I groan when she wraps her small hand around my shaft.

Supporting myself on one arm, I shuck my pants and briefs the rest of the way off, then I strip her shirt away, leaving her bare to me. I fasten my lips to one of her hard nipples, tonguing it as she strokes me slowly, rubbing the head of my cock against her wet pussy lips.

My hips move with her, my entire body at a breaking point as I switch to her other nipple, sucking and biting as she moans and moves against me. Her back arches, and I thrust against her, my cock slipping inside her as she pulls her hand away.

I stop and meet her eyes. “I swore I’d never hurt you.” My muscles shake as I keep myself from thrusting.

She leans up and kisses me again, her mouth soft and sweet, and when she thrusts her hips upward, I yelp at the sudden heat that surrounds my cock, the pressure, the slickness, the utter perfection that is my Bianca.

BIANCA

I thought I was going to be the one in pain, but Fernando is wearing an expression I've never seen before, which makes me think he's the one in it. There had been a short sting, but the sensation of having him deep inside me and getting to make love for the first time to the man of my choosing makes everything else pale in comparison.

"Fernando? Honey." I run my fingers up his arms that he's using to brace himself over me.

"It's too much." He groans as warmth explodes inside me.

"I think I'm the one that's supposed to be saying that," I tease him, but he doesn't crack a smile. His breathing is rapid, but after a few seconds, it starts to even out. I keep stroking him, knowing my touch calms him somehow.

I think he might have come already, but his cock is still hard. I might actually be a siren if I got him off so quickly. I'll try not to gloat about it later. Or maybe the man is so big that even when he's not hard he's still a lot to take. Either way, I want to take it all when it comes to Fernando. I want to know every inch of him.

"Bianca, what am I going to do with you?"

I lick my lips. I have a million ideas, but I go with the most logical at the moment. "Make love to me."

"Love?"

"Yes, love. You can do that, can't you? Love me?"

“I’ll spend my life doing that,” he vows before claiming my mouth in a soul-searing kiss.

It might not be an outright ‘I love you,’ but I know that’s what he means. I drop my hips onto the bed so that his cock slides partly out of me, but Fernando pushes forward, sinking himself inside me again.

I let out a moan. There is so much of him, but my body takes it as though I was made to fit him. Hell, who am I kidding? I want more. I dig my nails into his shoulders and move my hips with him, meeting each of his thrusts. The small burn I’d felt when he pressed fully inside me is long forgotten, and the only thing left is my Fernando.

At first, his strokes are slow and gentle, but I can tell he’s holding back. I read him better than I think he knows. He wants to drive into me and take what’s his, but he’s afraid of hurting me. What he doesn’t understand is that I want Fernando *and* the Butcher. They are one and the same, and I will love them both if I want us to last. I have to. I can’t force him to choose between the two. The same as I wouldn’t want him to change me unless I wanted to.

“Let go.” I stare up into his dark gaze. “You say I’m yours, then take me like I am.” As soon as the words leave my lips, all his control snaps. One hand reaches up to grab the headboard as he starts to thrust harder into me. His grunts fill the room. It’s the most erotic thing I’ve ever heard.

“Fernando.” I moan his name as my own orgasm starts to build. The whole bed rocks as he drives in and out of me. A sweet mixture of pain and pleasure bleeds together. I love it. There is something about it that feels so right.

Suddenly, he sinks his teeth into my neck. I scream out as the orgasm slams into me. The possessiveness of him marking me throws me over the edge into ecstasy. Fernando groans my name loudly as he comes with me. His body jerks over mine as he fills me with his seed.

There is no going back now. Not that I ever wanted to. Fernando has claimed not only my body but my heart. The burn I feel on my neck from his bite was the Butcher claiming

me too. Fernando's body gives way, coming down on top of me. He doesn't give me all of his weight but a lot of it.

I wrap my arms around him. My body hums with happiness. I didn't know there was this kind of joy out there. I knew you could be close to someone. I have that with my sister, but this is different. It's soul deep.

"I love you," he whispers as he lifts his head from where he buried it in my neck.

"I love—"

"Fuck!" Fernando barks. He pulls back, his cock sliding out of me. I give a small wince. He leaps from the bed, far more graceful than a man his size should be able to, but he still comes down with a loud thud that shakes the room.

I sit up, and a mixture of our fluids spills out of me as I do. I glance around, thinking something is wrong. Has someone found us? Fernando stares at me with horror on his face.

"What's happening?" He reaches out to start to touch my neck but stops. Then his eyes drop to the bed between my thighs. Blood and both of our orgasms mark my thighs and the sheets. I notice his cock is coated in it too.

"Don't you do it, Fernando." He's not going to backtrack and start to freak out. He's always so scared he's going to hurt me, but hurt isn't always physical. I think he knows that more than he realizes.

"I already did it, clearly." He starts to pace. "I marked your delicate, precious skin. I—"

"Gave me a taste of the Butcher." He stops pacing, his whole body going tense.

"I love you too, Fernando." I lick my lips and sit up onto my knees, completely naked in the center of the bed. I leave my thighs parted so it's very clear what he just did, and that I wanted every bit of it. I reach my hand out for him to take. He does. "I love you too, Butcher."

BUTCHER

“*M*ore.” I press a forkful of pancake into her mouth.

She takes it, chewing slowly. “I’m stuffed. Seriously,” she says around the mouthful.

I narrow my eyes at her, then glance at her nearly clean plate. She’s eaten almost everything I made for her, plus drank two cups of coffee. Maybe I can finally lay off. I just hate the thought of her being hungry, especially since I feel like I wore her out in bed before giving her a chance at breakfast.

“You sure you don’t want more?” I cut another piece of the pancake stack.

She grabs my wrist. “No.” She groans and swallows, then leans her head against my bicep. “I’ll bust.”

I relent and drop the fork, then grab her and pull her into my lap. She groans again and rubs her stomach. “Food baby.”

For some reason, my throat seems to close up, and my eyes water for a split second. Just the thought of her with a baby in her belly—*my* baby—fuck, it knocks the breath right out of me. It’s something I’ve never considered before, and certainly never wanted. But with Bianca, I find I’m reconsidering everything, even wanting children.

“So you want a family?”

Her eyes snap to mine. “What?” She cocks her head to the side. “You mean kids?”

I nod, not trusting myself to speak. My throat still feels tight, my eyes tingling.

She smiles and pats her stomach, looking perfect with my white undershirt swimming around her. “I’ve always wanted kids. At least two. Maybe more. I don’t know what my life would’ve been like without my sister—I can’t imagine it, and I don’t want to. So when I have kids, I want to have more than one so they can always play with each other.” She scrunches her nose. “Or fight with each other. Angelica and I used to argue when we were kids, but we always made up by bedtime. We had to sleep in the same bed. Our parents would try to separate us into our own rooms, but she’d always sneak across the hall as soon as the coast was clear.”

“You two are closer than I’ve ever been to anyone.” I stroke a lock of hair behind her ear. “Except you.”

Her smile brightens her big eyes. “You feel close to me?”

“I’ve been inside you, sweetness.” I lean down and brush my lips across hers, savoring her breath against my skin.

She shivers and licks her lips. “I know. I want more.”

My cock thickens and aches. “I want more, too. But you’re sore.” I kiss her forehead.

“I’m all right.”

I stare at her. She stares back. I keep looking into her blue eyes until she blinks.

“Ugh, okay, I’m a *little* sore, but it’s not bad.”

“I want you, Bianca.” I kiss her lips more deeply this time, then pull back. “Never doubt how much I want you. All the time. Every breath. But I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I know.” She nuzzles into the crook of my neck. “I know you’re afraid of that.”

Fear isn’t something I’m well acquainted with—at least not fear coming from me. I instill fear in others with ease. But I don’t experience it the same way. Being the biggest, the strongest, the most depraved—all these traits have insulated me from ever being truly fearful. Bianca has changed that. Changed me.

“You’ve got that serious look again,” she says.

“You can’t even see my face.” I stroke her hair.

“No, but I know it’s there.”

She’s right, of course. My mean mug tends to stay stoic at best, terrifying at worst. I try to wobble my eyebrows and wrinkle my nose, but then my face goes back to ‘murder’ setting as always.

“You make me smile.” I kiss her crown.

“I know.” She snuggles closer. “I love it when you smile.”

“You do?”

“Yep. I even love it when you glower, when you’re super serious, when you look at me like you’re confused because I’ve said something that is most likely nonsense—I just love you.”

Nothing has ever felt so good. Nothing ever will. Hearing her say those words makes me want to be someone she can always trust, always want, always depend on. I will be.

“Do you want kids?” she asks.

“I thought I didn’t.” I can’t stop touching her, running my fingers through her hair and along her back. “But then I kidnapped this beautiful woman who says she loves me. Now I’m not sure.”

“Where is she? Are you hiding her in the closet?” she whispers.

I tickle her, and she lets out a giggle and squirms in my lap.

“Fernando!” She squeals and tries to scoot away from me, but I capture her easily in my arms and cage her against my chest.

She looks up at me, and I kiss her again, feeling every bit of love and promise that our future could hold.

My phone vibrates on the counter. I ignore it and kiss her more, my fingers tangling in her soft hair as I lift her onto the counter and grab her waist.

The phone keeps buzzing.

She pulls back and looks.

“Ignore it.” I chase her mouth.

“Wait. It’s Angelica.” She swipes it from the counter and hits the answer button.

I groan.

“Hey, what’s up?”

I feel when her demeanor changes, see when her shoulders slump.

“When?” she asks. She listens for a short while, then nods. “Okay. I’ll, um, I’ll tell Fernando. See you soon. Love you.” She ends the call and meets my gaze. “The Frangiones know. They found out you took me, and they want Antonio to hand me over.”

“Never.” I grit my teeth, my body going tense. “I’ll never give you up, Bianca.”

“The other families have arranged a meeting to hash out what’s to be done.” She sets the phone on the counter. “They want me there.”

“No.”

“If I don’t go, then all the families will take the Frangiones’ side by default. They’ll come for Antonio, Angelica, you, and me.”

I fist my hands and try to think through all the avenues we have to escape. But when I think about the full force of all the families being brought to bear against the only people in this world I love, I sigh. They wouldn’t survive. Antonio would fight until his last breath, but not even he could survive a consolidated attack.

“It’s okay.” She cups my cheek. “I’ll be okay.”

I meet her eyes again, then kiss her like I fucking mean it. Because I do. She’ll never become a Frangione bride because she’s mine. Always will be. The families be damned.

BIANCA

I wonder if there is some mob rule book? There has to be some kind of loophole or something that we can use to our advantage. I'm no longer a virgin. For all I know, I could be knocked up. What if I'm already married? Then I can't marry someone else. Unless they kill Fernando. My stomach churns, and I wring my fingers together. I want to go back to our little cabin and stay forever. It was our own bubble without the rest of the world.

Those days were the best and most freeing of my life. I've never felt more myself than when I was alone with Fernando. He gave me things I never knew I needed. I didn't have to be quiet and meek. I could say and do what I wanted without fear of being judged or of there being consequences. It's been so ingrained in me to be a certain way, but Fernando is showing me that I can be any way I want. It only makes me love this man even more.

With each mile we draw closer to the city, I sense a shift in Fernando. I can tell he's going from Fernando to the Butcher. It's not that I fear the Butcher, it's that I fear what wrath he might dish out.

I bet if I asked him to turn the car around and drive us the other way, he would. He'd pick me over everything else. Knowing he'd do that for me gives him every bit of loyalty that I have inside me. I'll do anything for this man because I know he'd do the same for me without hesitation. I honestly had no clue there were men like him in this world.

But Fernando isn't going to suggest we turn the car around and go make our own lives somewhere else. He knows it would kill me if something happened to my sister. Even her husband and Carina are growing on me. When I think of us all, I can see a world so different than the one Angelica and I always thought we'd have to endure.

It's not only me that would be losing the ones they love if we ran. Fernando would also be giving up his family. I honestly don't think he understands the depth of love he has for Antonio and Gilly. They're basically his brothers.

I think he confuses some of his loyalty with love. You'll never convince me that the Butcher has done some crazy, terrible things for Antonio just because he enjoys doing them.

I might have thought that two weeks ago, but not now that I know Fernando. The way he touches and loves me. That man is dangerous only to those who could do harm to the people he cares about. He might think he's doing a job for loyalty. He can title it whatever he wants in his mind, but it's love. It would kill him if something happened to them because we took the selfish route, especially when the reality is they brought us together in a way.

"Sweetness." He reaches over, putting his hand over mine. Just that little touch by him helps to settle my nerves.

"This is the right choice," I reassure him. I want him to know I'm with him every step of the way. There's nothing I wouldn't do for this man.

I bet his mind is running through all sorts of scenarios, the same as mine is. I'm sure his are far bloodier than mine, but I have no doubt he's going over all kinds of possibilities and outcomes. There is no way the Butcher has lived as long as he has without being steps ahead of everyone else.

He might not be the leader of the Palermo family, but it's clear to me there is way more to this man than just torturing information out of people and brute force. You'd need a lot more than that to stay alive. He's cunning.

"You're scared."

I smile over at him. “You’re so good at reading me. Sometimes I think we’re an old married couple with how attuned we are to one another.”

“But I don’t know what you’re scared of.”

“Honestly, I’m having an inner battle. Part of me doesn’t want anyone to get hurt because of me and the choice I made to pick you.”

“I kidnapped you,” Fernando points out.

I roll my eyes. I still picked him. I don’t care what he says.

“Another part of me wants them to know what it means to come for Angelica and me. For them to see what true loyalty is. They hurt women and treat us with no regard. I want them to hurt.” I pull one of my hands out from under his to set it on top. “Does that change how you see me? I know you’re the Butcher, but I’m the light to your darkness, but I just....” I trail off, not sure how to explain myself.

“It’s our souls, Bianca.” I know when he says my real name he’s being serious. “They’re coming together.”

A giant smile pulls at my lips so big it almost hurts. “The Butcher, such a romantic.” I laugh. It dies away as I squeeze his fingers. “Are you scared?”

“Yes,” he says without hesitation. “I’m a ruthless man. I was before I had nothing to lose; now I’m not sure what I’m going to be. There is nothing I wouldn’t do to protect you.”

I stroke my fingers on top of his hand. “Is it terrible that I think that’s kinda hot?”

“Sweetness,” he growls.

“I’ll always be your sweetness, Fernando. I want you to know that. You will be the only man to ever own my heart or any part of me. You were the first man that has ever shown me kindness. It pisses me off that these people have the audacity to call you the Butcher.” A smirk pulls at Fernando’s lips. “What?” I huff.

“It’s cute. You standing up for me, but sweetness, you get a side to me no one else gets to see. I’d be a liar, which I told

you I'd never be to you, if I didn't admit that I enjoy collecting the souls of some of those men."

Fernando pulls up to the gates of the Palermo estate. They swing open for us. "Then today is going to be a good day for you, Fernando. I want you to collect as many as you can." I turn to look at him. "My father's being one of them."

BUTCHER

“*Y*ou ready?” Antonio tucks his Glock into the waistband of his pants.

“Always.”

“This isn’t a slice and dice operation, Fernando.” Gilly slides his pistols into their holsters, then pulls on his coat over them. “You need to keep a cool head.”

“I’m as cool as ever.” I stash some knives in holsters at my ankles, then more along my wrists.

Antonio sighs. “I can feel you seething.”

I holster my own pistols, then face him. “I won’t let them have her. I need you to know that, Antonio. I don’t care what happens or what the families try to decide for her. She’ll never be anything except mine.”

“I understand.” He and Gilly exchange a look.

“What?” I narrow my eyes. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Antonio sighs and runs a hand down his face. “Angelica told me you and Bianca have ...”

“Fucked,” Gilly fills in.

“Like I said, she’s mine.” I glare at Gilly.

He shrugs. “Just cutting to the chase. No offense intended, big guy.”

“The Frangiones are unaware of that. They think I arranged the kidnapping of Bianca as some masterstroke to bring down

the Larones.” Antonio smirks. “I mean, I’m glad they think I’m that cunning, but their mistake is going to make this meeting even trickier.”

“They expect her to be a virgin.” Gilly, once again, cuts to the chase. “When they find out she’s not, it might get dicey. The Frangiones will take it as a direct insult, and her father will likely come for Antonio again.”

“Her father will be at the meeting?” I crack my knuckles. I may work for Antonio, and he may be like a brother to me, but my Bianca told me she wants me to collect the souls of her enemies—chief among them, her father. I won’t disappoint her.

“Why do you have that look in your eye?” Gilly shifts from one foot to the other.

“What look?” I ask.

“It’s the crazy look.” Gilly points. “Antonio, he’s got that crazy look.”

Antonio sighs. “Butcher, I know how you feel. I do.” He glances at the door. “My Angelica means everything to me, and if what Angelica says is correct, then Bianca means everything to you.”

I nod.

“I’m not going to let anyone take her. I won’t agree to it. Understand?”

I nod again.

He fastens his suit coat. “If anyone tries it, you have my blessing to do what you need to do to keep her in your possession.”

“Antonio.” Gilly gawks at him. “You can’t set him loose at a meeting like this. If he spills blood from the other families—”

“Then it will be on their own heads for coming between a man and the woman he loves.” Antonio’s tone doesn’t leave room for argument.

“But—”

“What if it was Carina?” I say quietly. “What if the Frangiones wanted her as their bride? Would you just hand her over?”

Gilly goes tense.

Antonio sighs again and shakes his head.

“Carina will *never* marry one of those rats,” Gilly snaps. “Over my dead fucking body.”

I stare at Gilly. “Same.”

He takes a deep breath, then gives me a curt nod. “I get it.” He rolls his shoulders. “All right, I get it. I just don’t want us to start something that the other families could finish. If they join together against us, we won’t have a chance.”

“They won’t.” Antonio opens the door and strides down the hall, Gilly and me following.

“How do you know that?” Gilly asks.

Antonio pauses right before the foyer and turns to us. “Because I’m taking the Butcher to the meeting. They aren’t going to start a single fucking thing when he’s standing at my back.”

“True,” Gilly agrees.

“Now, once we’re out of there with Bianca in hand, that’s when it might get dicey. But I have a plan for that, too.” Antonio turns back toward the foyer and strides away.

Gilly and I exchange a look.

What plan? He mouths.

I shrug.

“Oh my God!” I hear someone squeal. “You look like a doll, a perfect little bride doll!”

When I look up the stairs, my heart seems to come to a halt, locked in a vise as I stare at a vision of beauty.

Bianca wears a white dress, a veil flowing down her back as her sister fusses at the material, pulling it and pinning it in different places, making it fit Bianca like a glove. My mouth waters, my mind going hazy, my fingertips hot, my ears cold,

my entire being focused on the sweet angel standing at the top of the stairs.

“I only have to pin it a little here and there, and the seamstress is already on the way. You don’t mind wearing my dress, right?” Angelica stands.

Bianca’s gaze lands on me at that moment, kicking my heart into gear as it beats only for her.

“No!” Angelica turns Bianca around and steps in front of her. “You can’t see her in this dress! I was just using the stairs to pin the train. I thought you were all in the office. Go get changed.” She shoos Bianca down the hallway, the train disappearing last as I stare after her.

I’m dumbstruck. It’s not as if I’m known for my speaking skills or for saying much of anything. But right this second, I couldn’t put a sentence together if my life depended on it. All I can think, all I can *see*, is Bianca swathed in white with a smile on her lips as she meets my gaze. She’s a sweet breath of heaven in my frigid hell.

Gilly snaps his fingers in front of my face. “You awake in there?”

Antonio smacks his hand away. “Give him a second.”

Gilly snickers then stows it as Bianca reappears in street clothes, Angelica on her heels as they hurry down the stairs.

The moment Bianca gets close to me, I open my arms. She runs into them, and I catch her, squeezing her to my chest as I kiss her crown.

“So beautiful” is all I can manage to say.

She laughs. “You liked it? I couldn’t tell from the way you were staring.”

“I loved it.”

“Good.” Antonio claps his hands. “The wedding is on as soon as we return. Now let’s get to the meeting, get it over with, and get you two married.”

I look down into Bianca's luminous blue eyes. "But I haven't asked you properly."

"You don't have to." She gets on her tiptoes and kisses me. "Yes. A million times yes, Fernando. I'm yours, if you'll have me."

"If I'll have you?" I can't keep the surprise from my tone. "I've never wanted anything more." I pick her up and spin her around, sending Antonio and Gilly scattering.

She laughs and wraps her arms around my neck, hugging me tightly as I pull her close.

"I love you, sweetness. So much."

"I love you, too. Both of you. My Fernando and the Butcher. Forever," she whispers.

I kiss her hard, tonguing her and tasting her, not caring who's watching. She's mine, and I can't seem to process it, to analyze, to do anything except revel in it.

When I finally pull away, she gasps in a breath, and Angelica starts clapping. Antonio and Gilly join in, and when I finally put Bianca on her feet, they're all laughing and smiling.

My chest swells with pride, my heart pounding. This is it. Bianca and I will be wed. But first, we'll have to run the gauntlet of the murderous families of the underworld, including the Frangiones.

"Let's get this done." I take her hand and lead her out into the night, her light the only thing I need to guide my way.

BIANCA

I try to keep my composure. The last thing I want anyone to think is that I'm weak or that I'm not cut out to be the Butcher's wife. I wasn't sure how everyone would respond when we'd gotten back to the Palermo home. Fernando might have crossed some lines, but I'm the one who took it to another level.

There had been a time when Fernando could have returned me pure and ready to become a bride to one of the Frangione brothers. Not that I think he would have, but I made sure there was no going back, and in that, I know I was selfish.

I put a lot at risk, including my sister and her husband. Part of me has some guilt about it, but another part doesn't. I didn't choose this life. It chose me from the moment I took my first breath. But the second I had the opportunity to make choices for myself, I took it. And I have to admit it's nice to have some level of control over my life.

There are only two ways tonight could end, and I think we all know that. It will either be death or victory. There is no other outcome. I will not become a Frangione. I wouldn't bring any child into their world. I know my father can be a terror, but Len Frangione is something else altogether. I'm sure he's even worse now since Antonio took out his brother.

The more I think about it, the more I realize that I may be wrong about my father not being as ruthless as them. He is, after all, willing to hand over his own flesh and blood to them to keep himself in power and to get a cut of money.

“Sweetness.” Fernando tucks a piece of my hair behind my ear. I love the rough texture of his fingers on my skin. There are so many things I love about this man. I only just found him. I can’t lose him already.

“Please don’t leave me,” I whisper.

Fernando would die to keep me safe, and that means making sure the Frangiones never touch me. But they would hurt me if they took him from me. They’d shatter my heart, and I’d never be able to put that back together. I can’t let that happen. I’m just unsure of how to stop it.

“I would never leave you. In this life or any other.”

“As sweet as it is for you to say that, it also doesn’t reassure me that I’ll get to spend the rest of this life with you.”

“Everything I do will always be for you, Bianca.”

“Then know this.” I turn so I can face him while I’m still buckled into my seatbelt. “I’ll follow you if you leave me.”

“Bianca.” His face grows hard, but that look he’s wearing doesn’t scare me. It might terrify everyone else, but not me when it comes to my Butcher.

“I’m only being honest with you.”

“What if you carry my child inside you even now?”

My breath hitches. “That’s not playing fair.”

“No, that’s playing honestly.” He cups my cheek as he leans in to kiss me. “The only people to die tonight will be the ones that dare to take you from me. But I too need to be honest with you.”

“Always.” That had been our deal.

“You might see a side of me you’ve not prepared for. Hearing stories is one thing. Seeing them unfold in front of your eyes is something different.”

“Isn’t that the fucking truth,” Gilly mutters from the driver seat.

“Did you really microwave someone’s eyeballs?” I thought maybe some of the stories were a bit exaggerated. But it’s becoming apparent that none of them were.

“Yes, I made the message very clear that day,” Fernando says with no remorse.

“What message was that?” I ask.

“That it doesn’t matter if you’re a man of God to a congregation you preach to every week. If you touch or do other things to children, not even God can protect you from the Butcher,” Antonio answers.

“Father Fantoni.” I gasp. He’d up and disappeared. I suppose that explains it. He always did give me the creeps.

“What families are coming?” Fernando asks as I still try to wrap my mind around him offing Father Fantoni. The vilest of people hide in plain sight. It’s funny how my Fernando is sweeter than anyone knows, but they all stare at him as if he’s the devil. If anything, he’s an avenging angel.

“Of course her father. The only backing he has at the moment is the Frangiones, but the DaVincis will be there as well.”

“Nick DaVinci?” I’ve seen him a few times before.

I don’t think he ever noticed me. His attention is always on his wife or any business at hand. There have been many stories about him too. He rules with an iron fist but is fair. He also walked into a wedding and shot a groom dead moments after the man had gotten married before he took the widowed bride for himself. He’d wiped the Tuscani family right off the map. People don’t even speak that name any longer.

“Yes, I’m sure Marco will be with him,” Gilly adds. Everyone knows of Marco too. It’s rare to be thick into this lifestyle and also be a lawyer, but he manages to do it. He’s Nick’s brother-in-law.

I grip Fernando’s hand when we pull off the highway and down into a warehouse district. I made Angelica promise me that no matter what happens, she’ll take care of Fernando and my little fur babies. She brushed it off, saying I’d be back to do it myself.

I take a deep breath feeling the cool metal of the gun my sister strapped to my back before I left, telling me not to let anyone know I have it. She took her time to show me how to use it correctly—something her own husband had been training her to do.

Gilly pulls through a giant metal door into one of the warehouses. I see a handful of cars parked all around. Groups of people stand next to each of them. Another follows us in. The second we clear the door, it starts to close.

Today, I will be strong. Fernando has told me so many times that I am in my own way. I want to really prove that not only to him but to myself too.

BUTCHER

I don't like the look of it, but I suppose I wouldn't care for this meeting even if it were held at the Four Seasons. The Frangiones, DaVincis, Corlettis, Larones, and Ornavans each stand beside their respective vehicles. Their heavies look around, searching for any possible ambush. There won't be one. Not when all the major players are already here. None of them would risk themselves, not over a beef brought to the table by the Frangiones.

"Stay close to me no matter what." I squeeze Bianca's hand.

"You don't have to tell me twice." She scoots closer to me as I open the car door.

I step out. Bianca knows to wait, so I shut her door and open Antonio's. He steps from the front seat, his gaze falling on Constantine Larone first.

"Let's get to business, gentlemen." Marco DaVinci steps forward and gestures toward an office set off to the side of the warehouse. He turns to Antonio. "I'm afraid we're going to need Bianca Larone's presence as well, just like we discussed."

"She's here." Antonio strides to Marco. "I'll have her step from the car as long as her safety and autonomy are prioritized, also just like we discussed."

"Of course." Marco gives a slight nod.

Len Frangione snorts a laugh.

My neck cracks when I turn to glare at him.

“Something funny, Len?” Nick asks, his voice like shattered glass rubbed into a wound.

Len shrugs, his beady eyes bouncing from me to the car where Bianca sits. “Nothing at all, Nick.”

“Good. Keep it that way.” Nick turns and strides toward the office at the back of the warehouse. “Get the girl. It’s time to talk.”

My hackles rise when he refers to Bianca as ‘the girl.’ She’s a whole hell of a lot more than that, but I have to pick my battles. I’m not here to shed DaVinci blood—though I will if it comes to it. I’m here for the Frangiones and for Constantine Larone. Their lives were forfeit the moment they thought they could control, hurt, or own my Bianca.

“Let’s do this.” Antonio gives me a nod.

I open Bianca’s car door, and she slips out, Gilly climbing out behind her. He knows to watch her back. I’m going to be in front, blocking her from whatever bullshit Len might try to throw at her.

I glance at her quickly.

“I’m okay,” she whispers.

“Come on, Bianca,” Constantine Larone snaps.

I turn to him, and when I do, he pales. His gaze sticks to mine, and his mouth drops open the slightest bit.

“Don’t talk to her.” I step toward him. “Don’t even fucking look at her.”

“Butcher.” Antonio’s voice holds a note of caution. “Let’s get this done.”

I keep glaring at the old man, who seems to lose three inches and as many years as he cowers before me.

With another look at Bianca, who gives me a strained smile, I gesture for Antonio to lead the way. The other families have already followed the DaVincis into the office, though Len is still hanging around the door like a goddamn hyena.

I march ahead of Bianca, blocking his view of her. He finally gives up and walks inside as we get there. Inside is a makeshift conference table and several chairs scattered around it. The seat at the end of the table is conspicuously open, and I know it's intended for Bianca.

Though I want to keep her hidden, to shield her from the eyes of all these men, I know I have to play my part. It's the only way to keep her and the ones I love safe.

So I lead her around the table and stand behind her as she takes her seat. Antonio sits to her right. Len tries to come around and take the seat on her other side, but I move to block him, and Gilly slides into it first.

I look down at Len, and he sneers up at me. "Why's the brainless muscle here? I thought this was a meeting of the minds."

"Don't you call him that!"

My eyes open wider than they ever have in my life, and the entire room grinds to a halt as everyone gawks at Bianca.

She glares at Len. "You need to apologize."

"Apologize?" he asks, then breaks into a raucous laugh.

Before I even think, I ease around behind him, my hands ready to snap his neck.

"Butcher," Gilly hisses.

I force my hands back down to my sides and step away while Len finishes his hyena laugh. If this had been over anything other than Bianca, he'd already be dead. But I have to be careful. Protection, not vengeance. At least, not yet.

I return to my place behind her as Len finally settles down.

"Have a seat." Nick DaVinci points.

Len obeys, dropping into a chair and grinning at me.

"We're here because the Frangiones made a deal with Constantine Larone for his eldest daughter Bianca to marry into their family." Marco recites the facts like he's in front of a jury. "That deal went awry when the eldest Frangione, Geno,

was”—he clears his throat—“when he *died*.” He doesn’t look at Antonio, though I’m certain Marco is aware that Antonio is the one who killed him.

“Len has made a case that he should be the one to marry Bianca Larone now that his brother is no longer available to fulfill the deal. However, the Palermos have taken Bianca and maintain possession of her for reasons unknown.” Marco and Nick both glance at me for only a split-second.

They know. I don’t know *how* they know, but they know. Bianca is mine. I hope they realize that means I won’t let anyone walk out of here alive if that’s what it takes to keep her by my side.

“You stole my bride, Antonio.” Len slaps his hand on the table. “Hand her over, and this doesn’t have to go any further. Constantine has already blessed our marriage. I could have sour grapes over Geno.” He shrugs. “But I can let it go as long as you get out of the way. Give her to me, which is only fair.” He smirks. “Then we can be brothers-in-law.”

I edge closer to Bianca. She’s breathing faster, her heart probably racing.

“This is what is fair,” Constantine adds. “I had a deal, and I still intend to uphold my end. I kept Bianca in pristine condition, and she’s never been so much as touched by a man. She’s the perfect bride, and she belongs to Len.”

“It’s a fair offer.” Marco looks at Antonio. “Any counter?”

“I have a counter,” Bianca says, a sassy edge to her voice that sets my blood on fire. She reaches behind her and fumbles around.

That’s when I see she has a gun tucked into the back of her pants.

What the fuck? For a moment, I wonder how this might play out. Is she going to kill everyone at the table? Goddamn, she is beyond adorable.

I can’t let her do that, of course, not when everyone here is armed to the teeth. Reaching down, I stay her hand.

She clasps her fingers with mine. “My counter is that all of you can go fuck yourselves, especially you, Father. I’m *not* pristine. In fact, I am absolutely filthy, and I love being that way. I’m in love with the Butcher, and I have his cum inside me right now. So all of you can stop patting yourselves on the back and fuck right off. I’m not something to be bought and sold, especially not by my horrible father and this ugly, greasy man sitting here trying to buy me. I’m glad your brother is dead, but you may be even worse.”

My eyebrows hit my hairline.

You could hear a pin drop.

“How dare you?” Constantine Larone is on his feet, his face beet red. “You stupid little cunt!” He pulls a gun.

I yank Bianca backwards as he fires, and the entire room erupts in yells.

Pain blooms along my temple as I fall to the floor, then roll to keep Bianca beneath me.

“What the fuck, Larone?” Antonio shouts.

“Are you all right?” I ask Bianca.

She turns her head to look at me. “I’m okay. Great, actually.” She laughs a little. “Finally telling him off felt amazing.”

“Stay down and close your eyes.” I kiss her cheek, then rise, my gun already in my hand.

Antonio has already wrestled the gun away from Constantine Larone, and Gilly has a gun pointed at Len.

The other families have all fled, screeching tires echoing through the warehouse. All except Nick and Marco DaVinci. They sit in their same spots, both of them simply watching.

“I demand that Bianca be returned to—”

I fire, and Constantine’s head jerks backwards, his brains painted over the wall behind him as his body hits the floor.

“Fuck.” Antonio swipes some of the gray matter from his suit coat.

Then I turn to Len.

He shakes his head. “You can’t.” Turning to the DaVincis, he says, “You can’t let him touch me. This is a meeting. There are rules, and—”

“From what I saw, you and Constantine broke the rules, conspired to take Bianca by force if necessary—and then Constantine lost the plot and tried to off his own daughter.” Nick DaVinci tsks. “Not a good look.” He stands and buttons his suit coat. Marco does, too, both of them walking to the door.

“Good seeing you again, Antonio.” Nick shakes his hand, and with that, he and Marco walk away, giving their silent blessing to whatever else happens in this room.

“Nick, wait!” Len screams. “Wait!”

I grab his head and slam it onto the table. Blood spurts from where I broke his nose. Then I grab one of my knives and use it to stab through his hand and pin it to the wooden surface. I do the same to his other hand with another blade.

His screams are a sweet melody as I go to work.

“You thought you could take my girl?”

Slice.

“You thought you could touch her?”

Stab.

“You thought you could even breathe the same air as her?”

Break.

I go for a long time, long enough for his screams to turn to whimpers, long enough for his life to hover on the edge of oblivion, long enough for Gilly to start looking green, and long enough to finally come out of my rage-filled haze. I take a breath and back away, admiring the grisly work I’ve done. Len only has three breaths left in him. Maybe four if he fights for it.

When I turn and see Bianca, my anger recedes, and fear takes its place.

She's been watching. She's been here the whole time while I've been lost to my vengeance and bloodlust.

But that's the thing about Bianca.

She's. Still. Here.

She rises from her place at the table and comes over to me, her fingers straying to my forehead. "Doesn't this hurt?"

"No." My voice is guttural, fucking beastly. I'm the Butcher. A nightmare to end all nightmares.

But when she gets on her tiptoes and kisses me, I become nothing more than a man in love. One who would do anything for the woman who stole his heart and cradles his bruised soul, even when it's covered in blood.

Len breathes his last, and I claim my bride with a kiss of blood and promise. I will always protect her. As Fernando and as the Butcher. Both of them exist only for her.

BIANCA

“*I*t all makes so much sense now,” I tell my sister as we get ready for my wedding. When we got back to the house, Carina and Angelica were so relieved that everyone was okay. Fernando led me upstairs, where we took a shower together, washing the blood off the both of us. None of it was mine, but Fernando was obsessed with making sure he got all of it off me.

I stood there and let him have his way, washing every inch of me, which of course led to intense sex. Is it weird to have sex after you watch your fiancé kill your father and then slice and dice another man that you were supposed to marry? Who knows and who cares? I know I don't. I might have more of the Butcher inside me than anyone realizes.

I hadn't felt anything for those men as they died in front of me. If anything, I was pissed about the bullet graze Fernando had taken because of my smart mouth. I still can't believe the things I said. But I have to admit that it felt good to not only stand up for myself but him too.

“What makes sense?” Angelica asks as she puts waves into my hair. I know my Fernando enjoys it when my hair is down. He is always touching and running his fingers through it. She'd almost banged the bathroom door down wanting us to get out of the shower because we both needed to get ready.

“That Fernando is such a good cook. The man is killer with a knife.” Angelica locks eyes with me in the mirror of the

vanity. “Get it?! Killer?” I snort a laugh. She tries to fight a laugh but loses it.

“You told me that your sister was sugar sweet and innocent,” Carina says from the bed. She’s stretched out across it, petting the kittens and giving their mama a break.

“That was before the Butcher got his hands on her.”

“Hey!”

“I’m not saying it’s a bad thing!” My sister rushes to respond. “I mean really, it’s good. The world is tough, and I think he gives you a bit of edge while also being able to protect that sweetness you have inside of you.”

“I can’t believe Butcher is getting married. I thought for sure he was asexual.”

“Nope, he’s just Bianca sexual.” I smirk. I have no idea if anyone knows that Fernando had never been with another woman before me, but that’s our secret, and I love the two of us having our own secrets.

“Clearly.” Carina snorts.

“He gave me a wedding present.” My sister looks at my hand. I don’t have a wedding ring. I hadn’t thought about that until now. I don’t need a ring, but I want Fernando to wear one. I’d love seeing my mark on him every day.

“What was this gift? Was it a human heart?” Carina teases. “Did he at least put it in a box and wrap it up?”

“No! Fernando would never give me someone else’s heart. He’s rather jealous.”

“You don’t say,” both Carina and my sister say at the same time. The two of them have gotten close. I try not to let that bother me, but I’d be lying if I said it doesn’t just a little. But it’s to be expected with Carina living in the same house sometimes. I can’t help but wonder where Fernando and I will go after the wedding. I suppose we could go all the way back to the cabin.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Angelica puts the hair iron down.

“Where will I go after I’m married?”

Angelica hesitates at my question. My stomach turns.

“Honestly, I was kind of hoping you’d stay. I mean, I get it if you guys want your own place. Maybe you could build nearby eventually, but this place is giant, and you can have a whole wing, and we’ll raise our babies together and—”

“Yes!” I cut off her rambling.

“Really?”

“Of course! It’s been hard not having you close.”

“You two are really co-dependent.” Carina sits up on the bed.

“Jealous?” Angelica teases her.

But Carina doesn’t smile. “A little bit.” She shrugs.

“Well, we’re all sisters now, so there is no reason to be jealous,” I tell her. I know she has a good brother, but there is nothing like having a sister.

“Fine, but no take-backs,” she chirps with a fake evil smile.

“So did I miss the gift thing?” Angelica asks.

“Oh yeah.” I shake my head, having forgotten for a moment. “Fernando killed Constantine Larone.” I’m not going to call him my father ever again. “Once I say ‘I do’ to Fernando, the Larone name is dead along with him.”

“Holy shit.” Angelica gasps.

“You’re not upset, right?” I ask quickly.

She blinks. “No. Not at all. He was a bastard, and I’m ... I’m *glad* he’s dead.”

“See, the Butcher isn’t scary. He makes dreams come true.” I stand from the vanity, ready to put my dress on.

“What kind of fairy tales did y’all read growing up?” Carina laughs from the bed.

“Get off the bed and get dressed,” my sister orders her before she helps me into my own.

“Welcome to having a bossy sister, Carina. Remember you asked for this.”

We all get into our dresses, then do our final touch-ups. I wonder what my Fernando will look like in a tux. I can see him now getting flustered with his bow tie and someone having to help him.

“Hey.” Carina grabs my hand suddenly. “Thank you. Fernando and I have never been close, but he is still like a brother to me. He’s protected us all. I’m happy he’s found someone that can love him for the man he is.”

“Don’t thank me. He’s easy to love,” I say simply.

“I don’t think all of us are.” Her words are ominous, but I don’t get a chance to ask what she means before a banging sounds from the door.

“Fernando, I’m coming!” I shout, knowing it’s him.

“You’re supposed to wait downstairs,” my sister adds.

“No,” he grunts from the other side of the door. A giggle bubbles free from me. I walk over and open the door to see my handsome soon-to-be husband standing there. He opens and closes his mouth when he sees me.

“My dress is more shocking than me telling Constantine and Len that I was a dirty girl with your cum inside of me?”

“What?” my sister shouts before she bursts into uncontrollable laughter.

“You better not say you’re shocked I’m doing this.” I give Fernando a stern look.

“No, sweetness. You need the engagement ring.” He holds up a ring between two of his fingers. It’s a giant square black diamond that is surrounded with smaller diamonds that shine brightly around it. It’s perfect. It reminds me of him and me. I hold my hand out, letting him slip it onto my finger.

Now his mark is on me forever. I carry a piece of his darkness, and I’ll never let it go.

EPILOGUE

BUTCHER

Wiping my hands clean, I drop the bloody cloth on the table and reach up to turn off the bare bulb hanging over my victim's head. He's dead. Finally. And he gave me the names of two of his associates who've been trafficking women on our turf. I'll be visiting them soon enough, and their lives will end here in the dark with their friend.

But that's work for tomorrow.

Tonight, it's my anniversary, and I promised my sweetness I'd be home on time. I close the door to the shed and lock it, then stride to the house. Antonio and Angelica are out of town on vacation, so Bianca and I have the place to ourselves.

After a quick shower in the spare downstairs bedroom, I head to the kitchen and get to work. I make her favorites, frying chicken cutlets and making mashed potatoes just the way she likes. I'm almost finished plating when I feel her walk up behind me, her fingers splaying along my back.

"You should've woken me up." She yawns.

"And interrupt a pregnant woman's nap? Never." I turn and kiss her, my hand resting on her round belly. "I showered down here so I wouldn't bother you."

"You're so good to me." She winds her fingers behind my neck and kisses me again, our tongues dancing with each other as I pull her closer, her body soft, round, and warm. I've only been away from her a few hours, but I find I'm already starved for her.

Her stomach growls, and I pull away, then walk her to the kitchen table and get her seated. “You’re hungry.”

“I am.” She licks her lips, her gaze straying down my chest to my pants. “Very hungry.”

“Food first.” I step back. She’s been insatiable ever since she got pregnant, and I’m not complaining, but that doesn’t mean she can skip meals. Not on my watch.

She groans and rubs her stomach as I slide her plate in front of her and light the candles in the center of the table. “You’re always so romantic, Fernando.” She smiles up at me as I drop one more kiss on her lips.

I smirk. Romantic isn’t something I ever thought I’d be, but she’s right. For her, I’m a lot of things, and I’ll be anything she needs.

Sitting beside her, I reach over and begin cutting her chicken.

She doesn’t argue, not even when I feed her piece by piece, carefully placing the food in her mouth until she says she’s stuffed.

“You should eat, too.” She reaches for my plate.

“I will, but I want dessert first.” I stand and lift her onto the table, spreading her legs as she leans back onto her elbows.

“Fernando.” She bites her bottom lip. “What if someone—”

“No one’s home. Just you and me.” I drop to my knees and pull off her panties and stuff them in my pocket. Then I spread her wider, my palms splayed against her pale thighs, her pink pussy already glistening for me.

“Don’t tease me,” she moans.

“Never.” I lick her from hole to clit.

Her toes curl, her body already on edge.

I don’t hold back. My tongue knows her cunt and favors her little clit, stroking it until her thighs shake. Then I lick it with the broad side of my tongue until her breath catches and she comes on a cry of my name. Over and over again, her pleasure

washes over her, and I lap it all up, savoring it and swallowing her down.

When she finally takes a deep breath and lies farther back, I kiss her pussy then stand and free my cock.

“I need all of you.” She reaches for my shirt, fisting it and yanking me down to her.

With a hard stroke, I enter her, plunging deep into her heat as she arches for me. Swiping her top down, I suck her nipple into my mouth and knead her other breast. They’re heavy and full now, milk already beading on their tips as I suck and lick.

She moans, her body alive as I thrust in and out, my cock demanding I fuck her sure and deep. That’s what she likes, and that’s what I give her. All of me.

I piston harder, shaking the table as she holds onto me. I crush her mouth in a deep kiss, tonguing and tasting as I take all of her. She grinds against me, getting friction on her clit, and I push deeper, stroking her where she needs me.

Her body goes even tighter, and then she’s moaning into my mouth, her pussy squeezing me into oblivion as I come, my seed spurting into her as I thrust again and again. I fill her, giving her every last drop as I kiss her and devour her cries of pleasure.

We move together, breathe together, exist together. I was made for her. Both halves of me finally became whole when I found my Bianca.

When I can finally take a breath, I stare into her eyes, into my entire world. “Happy anniversary.”

She smiles, wicked and sweet all rolled into one. “That happy anniversary was for Fernando.” She moves her hips. “Now I want another happy anniversary with the Butcher.”

I grin and claim her mouth again, my hips moving at her command. I’ll never get enough of my sweetness or her perfect and unexpected love.

UNEXPECTED DEVOTION

UNEXPECTED DEVOTION

MINK

I'm the right-hand man to the rising star of the East Coast mafia. But he's not the one who's always had my allegiance. It's Carina, his sister, the one woman who's had my heart in a vise grip ever since she came back from school. But she's off limits, and some lines, once crossed, can never be redrawn.

I tell myself to keep my distance, but the more she tempts me, the more I falter. Carina isn't just beautiful, she has secrets, ones that bring danger to her doorstep. But I'll never let anyone harm her, and when she's threatened, i'll stop at nothing to keep her safe and in my arms.

GILLY

She's in the pool.

Not that I'm anywhere near her. I won't allow myself to be. Not when she's in a bikini and lounging in the sun like an indulgent—and fucking sexy—housecat.

"Gilly, are you even listening?" Antonio sighs.

"Of course."

Butcher snorts.

"Shut up." I roll my eyes at him. "You were saying my work on moving what's left of the Larone holdings into our hands is going well except for a few disputes from the Corlettis."

"Those pricks have zero claim on anything even remotely related to the Larone name." Antonio shakes his head. "They just want trouble."

"Let's give it to them." Butcher cracks his knuckles.

"Diplomacy first." I'm the cautious one of the group, the most level-headed. At least I like to think so. But there's one thing—one *person*—who gets under my skin and makes me anything but reasonable.

She's in the pool. Maybe sunbathing in a chair, her bikini straps pulled down so she doesn't get any tan lines on her smooth olive skin. My mouth waters.

"The Corlettis are the closest thing the Frangiones had to allies. They're sore about how we handled those assholes." I shrug. "The Corlettis would never dare challenge you to your

face. Not after what happened with the Frangione heirs and Constantine Larone.” I glance at Butcher, a small, satisfied smile twitching at the corners of his mouth. We effectively destroyed the den of vipers known as the Frangione family. It only makes sense that the Corlettis are seeking to fill the void. “They’ve been using a light touch so far.”

“Doesn’t mean I’m going to give them anything.” Antonio glowers.

“Nothing of consequence, but we should always remember to throw the dogs some table scraps.” I think through the small list of Larone holdings. “Toss them the coke connection to South America through the Ornavans.”

Antonio’s face brightens a bit at that. “The operation you suspect has an FBI informant in it?”

I nod. “We’ll wash our hands of it entirely. Let the Corlettis deal with the Feds.”

“I hate giving them anything except a bullet,” Butcher says.

“This is worse than a bullet. The Feds will bleed them slowly.”

That makes Butcher smile. Of course it does.

“All right. Enough business.” Antonio waves us away. “I promised Angelica a nice dinner in the city this evening. I need to get ready.”

Butcher’s already moving to the door, as if he was simply waiting for the all clear so he could return to Bianca in their wing of the house. The love bug has bitten the Palermo family hard. First Antonio and now Butcher—two men who I never imagined would fall in love. But now they’re ruled by it, and I have to say I’m rather liking the change.

They hurry away to their respective wives as I glance toward the foyer. I should walk down the hall and out the front door. Maybe take a drive to the city or occupy myself with more work, balancing accounts, checking for any bullshit in the Larone books.

Instead, my feet carry me toward the back of the house. It’s dusk, the sun coating the trees and landscaping in a warm

golden glow.

It coats her, too.

I stop, my breathing suddenly faster, my palms going sweaty, my cock getting achingly hard. She's right where I knew she would be.

Why do I do this to myself? It's fucking torture. That's Butcher's forte, not mine. But here I am, watching her through the window as she naps, her lithe body on display in a white bikini that leaves very little to the imagination. Not that I need it. I know every curve and dip of Carina's body, every inch of her committed to memory. The way her pouty lips purse after she's said something particularly sassy, the way she sways her hips when she walks, the scar on her left ankle from a bike accident when she was six, and a million other details that don't escape my notice.

She shifts, her legs spreading the slightest bit, giving me a perfect view of the triangle of white fabric between her thighs. I move closer to the window, my eyes straining against the falling night. The outline of her pussy lips presses against the fabric, giving me a tantalizing view of her most intimate parts. Parts I want to worship with my tongue, my fingers, my cock. Parts I want to coat with my cum so everyone knows who she belongs to.

My heart hammers, my cock pressing against my pants as the reasonable, intelligent parts of my brain shut down. All I can see is her. All I *want* is her. How many times have I imagined taking her? Holding her down as she pants my name, giving her every inch of me until she shudders and gasps, pleasure overcoming even her sharp tongue. Fuck, I want it so badly that sometimes I wonder if I might lose my goddamn mind.

I should've left when I first realized I had feelings for her. That would've been the right thing to do. I should've told Antonio I was going out on my own, even if I wasn't. I should've tried to be a good man and walk away from the one temptation that I have to fight every day to resist. But I didn't. I'm committed to this family. More than that, I'm committed to Carina. If I walked away and something happened to her,

I'd never forgive myself. I can't have her, but I can't leave her. I'm trapped, and maybe I want to be, if that's what keeps me close to her.

You see, the love bug may have only recently bitten Antonio and Butcher, but it's had its fangs in my heart from the first moment Carina Palermo returned from school.

She's Antonio's sister.

She's only eighteen.

And she's completely off limits.

CARINA

For the longest time, all I ever wanted was Gilly's attention. Since I was a young girl, before my brother thought it was best to send me off to boarding school for not only my safety but to get the best education, I'd stare at the man like he'd strategically placed all the stars in the sky for me alone.

That was the thing about Gilly that always drew me to him. Most men can be a bit hot-tempered. But not him. He's always so calm, cool, and collected. I found that calmness fascinating as a young girl.

Then I went away to school, and when I came back, my feelings for him started to change. Of course I've always thought him to be handsome, but that word doesn't even do him justice now. The man is downright sexy. I guess something has changed for him too, because he does almost anything he can to avoid me when I'm home. I know I can be a bit much at times, but jeez, I'm a freaking Palermo. What does he expect?

But now he's back to watching me, and I'm not sure why. If I had to guess, I would say it's one of two things, the first one being the war that's going on between my brother and the other families. It's why I was pulled from school a month shy of graduation. The only other reason I could come up with is that he's on to me. I don't know how that would be possible, but I wouldn't put it past him with the amount of resources he has.

I spent the afternoon by the pool getting some sun. I didn't have to see Gilly to know he was there. Call me crazy—my friends do, anyway—but I could sense him. He was watching, and I was more than willing to give him a show of what he'll never have.

After watching my brother and then the freaking Butcher fall madly in love and chase down their wives, I decided I would no longer beg for Gilly's attention. In fact, at the moment I very much wish I didn't have it at all.

My phone buzzes from under my pillow. I pretended to go to bed hours ago. I pull it out to see alerts from the BB group. My two best friends from prep school, both of whom are now enjoying summer break before they go off to college. One is headed to MIT, while the other will be going to CalTech.

I click into the program Magic made for the three of us to chat on. Most might think BB stands for Bad Bitches—which we are. Okay, maybe not Magic—she can be a softy—but really it's the Bloody Badgers.

Ocean: These drones are so killer.

Magic: Do we have to call them killer?

Ocean: I can shoot shit with them. Why not?

Magic: The point was for them to be more eyes in the sky. Not actual weapons. That was just an added bonus.

Me: Well, sometimes you have to take a shot.

Ocean: Ahhhh! See.

Me: How is it going with the drone?

We swiped two over a week ago from Aztec Corp.

Magic: Oh, there is so much chatter about them being stolen right out from under their noses, but they'll never find us. I might have sent them down another trail. One that leads to a dead end.

Me: Magic I love when you get devious.

It really was too easy for us to snatch the drones, or maybe I don't give us enough credit. I can basically get in anywhere I want. My problem is I'm a bit messy. That's where Magic comes in. The girl can clean up any trail I leave behind. As for Ocean, once she got her hands on the drones, she made her own little upgrades.

Ocean: I'm good to go. I've been playing with them all week. Magic and I tested them over some no fly zones, and she was able to keep me off their radar.

Magic: Of course I could. That shouldn't even be a question.

Ocean: The real question is are you ready, Rebel?

Me: Always.

Ocean: All the way ready?

Me: Yes, Mom!

Magic: I really want to ask how you got your hands on dynamite so easily, but I'm not gonna.

Me: Me? Ask Ocean how she taught me to make a bomb in about three seconds.

Ocean: We all have our skills. Now let's put them to use shall we?

Me: Going dark.

I send the message before I clear out the chat to slip from my bed. Normally I'd have Magic cover my trail from leaving the house, but I'll have to deal with the fallout later once my brother or Gilly realizes I've snuck out and back in. I trust Ocean and Magic, but I don't let anyone near the tech within our family home.

Plus, they might not notice. The house is still in a rebuilding phase after we got into a small war with another family. I'd been pissed at the time when my windows had gotten blown

out, but now I'm rather thankful. I was here when it was put back together and the new alarm system put back on them.

I grab my black bag, slinging it on before I double check my 9mm. I slip it back into its holster under my hoodie and pull my gloves on. I'm going to need them—and not just for the fall.

I remind myself to give at the knees when I jump out the window from the second floor. I let the palms of my hands help brace me as I hit the ground. They also help me push off so I can take off at a dead run toward the trees.

When I get to the stone wall that lines our home, I scale it quickly, the gloves giving me the help I need and protecting my hands. Ocean was right about these things. As promised, I spot a car waiting for me a short distance away.

“Hey.” I knock on the window.

“Megan?” the man asks.

“Yeah.” He unlocks the door, and I slip into the back. “You already got the location?”

“Yep.” The Lyft driver takes off. I pull my phone back out.

Me: Megan? Really.

She was the biggest bitch at our prep school. Her father was a senator or some shit.

Magic: You got your ride. That's all that matters.

I let out a breath and try to relax. Being on home lockdown has been hard for me. I got to finish school remotely, but idle hands and all. Sometimes I peek into the dark web. Okay, not just sometimes.

I'm really not one that should get to judge about the drug trade since my family's business includes a touch of it, but this is different. I'm not talking about your run-of-the-mill drugs. Sure, they do damage, but my focus is the creeps that produce ketamine and Rohypnol. I have a major problem with those. At least the reason these men are making it for. Their little lab is about to go up in flames.

“You sure this is where you want me to drop you?” the driver asks when we pull down into a warehouse district of town.

“Yep. There’s a rave nearby,” I lie as I get out.

“Where?” I hear him ask but keep walking, knowing Magic has paid the bill and cleared anything out that could trace any of us. I reach into my pocket and pull my ear piece out. The second it’s in place, Ocean’s voice is there.

“I see you,” she sing-songs.

I glance up and around, but I don’t see her. “I sure as fuck don’t see you.”

“Isn’t that the point?”

“Touché.” I walk quickly toward my target. “You got a scan?”

“Been watching all day. Thermal shows two men inside,” Ocean says as I slip my backpack off and pull out the small bombs she helped me make. I start to line them around the building one by one.

“Jarrod and Keaton?” I confirm. This was their little drug lab, after all.

“Yep, someone else showed up for about an hour, but they left. Had a hat on, and I couldn’t get a good enough scan of the face, so I don’t know who it was, but he’s not there now.”

“K,” I respond as I get back to work.

Magic is quiet, which isn’t surprising. As much as she wants to do this, I know she doesn’t love the idea of anyone getting hurt. As for me, I don’t care if they both go up in flames, but I’ve lived a very different life than Magic. So has Ocean.

“Shit,” Ocean mutters as I set the last device. “We got a car. Same one from before. Oh God. He’s got a girl with him.”

I creep around to the front.

“She’s unconscious.” Magic finally speaks.

“What do we do?” Ocean asks.

“We might just find out who has better aim,” I tell her before I step out and pull my gun from the holster. Her drone can fire,

but I have no clue how much she's played with that feature. I don't have any time to waste. I have to act now. I move quickly, stepping from the shadows and approaching the dickhead with the unconscious woman.

"Put her back in the car," I order the man.

He freezes when he sees me. Not that there is a lot to see. I'm in all black with the hood of my hoodie pulled up to hide part of my face and hair. He stares at the gun but sizes me up. He knows I'm female and small.

I pull the gun off him and point it at the doorknob to the two-story warehouse and fire, hitting it before I swing it back toward him, letting him know I've got great aim.

"The fuck!" Ocean hisses, both of us knowing the two men inside would have heard that.

"Don't make me tell you again."

He steps back, placing the unconscious girl back into the vehicle.

"Close the door."

He slams it shut. "Who are you?" he asks as I start to move around the back of the vehicle.

"Toss me the keys." He does.

I snatch them from the air as the two asshats from the warehouse come peeking out the front door to see what's going on. The wind blows, and my fucking hood falls back, but our eyes lock, and something about him is familiar.

"Who I am is the person saving your life," I tell him before I fire one shot into his shoulder and a second into his outer thigh. He collapses to the ground as I run and jump into the car. He can't chase me, but he also can't rush into that warehouse either. I floor it.

"What's going on?" I ask Ocean.

"He's lying on the ground. The dipshits have come out to help him."

“I guess he saved their lives.” I sigh as I flip open the remote and push the button. The building blows. I watch in the rearview mirror as it goes up in flames.

“He might have saved their lives, but they’re not going to look pretty anymore.” Ocean chuckles.

“I guess I can cancel your pickup?” Magic chimes in.

“No, move it to Midwestern Hospital. I’m dropping this car there in the emergency bay with the girl.” I glance over at her. She can’t be but sixteen. I should have shot him in the head.

“Did you get a better image of his face?” I ask.

“I think. I’ll run it and see what I can find,” Ocean responds.

“There’s a gas station two blocks from the hospital. I’ll have the car there,” Magic informs me. “Lots of cameras at hospitals, Rebel.”

“Then do your magic.”

There's an itch at the back of my brain.

I'm trying to work through disentangling Larone assets so we can feed the Corlettis into the FBI's machine via an informant, but when I should be examining shell companies and detangling corporate webs, my mind wanders. Back to *her*.

I glance at my door. Not that she'll be coming through it. I'm at my office, the large pool house adjacent to the Palermo mansion. It serves as my home most of the time—my actual house a few miles from here, neglected for the most part.

The door doesn't open. The itch in my brain only grows.

“What the fuck?” I slam my laptop closed and lean back, rubbing my temples as I glance at my watch. It's after midnight. I could call it for the evening and go to bed. It might be wise, but I don't feel like turning in. What I *feel* like doing is ... It's the one thing I can't do. I *can't* go to Carina.

It doesn't matter that I imagine what her touch would feel like, how she'd moan as I made her writhe with my tongue, my fingers, my cock. None of that matters. Because she's Antonio's sister. Because she's way too young for me. There are a million other reasons, too, mostly having to do with the fact that I live on the edge of a knife. Violence surrounds me. I may not relish it the way Butcher does, but I'm no stranger to it. I've taken lives. There's blood on my hands, and that's something I'd never want to taint Carina with.

She's too young, too naïve to know about the hard truths of this world. She puts up a sassy front, but she doesn't know how bad things can truly be. The bloodshed, the bullshit, the fucking dehumanization that occurs far too often. It's better if she stays far away from it. And me.

I crack my neck, the itch in the back of my neck growing into a buzzing sensation, like bees are making a home in my cranium. That's all I can take. I stand and stride to the door, yank it open, and stare across the lighted surface of the pool, up past the hedges around the first floor, and higher to a double set of windows that reflect the sliver moon.

Carina's room.

It's dark. As it should be. She should be asleep, dreaming of college and getting away from all the bad shit that comes with the Palermo family name.

Still, I stare. No, I don't just stare. I *want*. I *need*. But my needs will always come second to hers. I made that choice long ago when I joined this family. And for her, I'll make it again and again.

I move to close the door, but then I freeze.

A shadow is moving through the patch of apple trees about fifty yards away. The hair on the back of my neck rises, and I palm the pistol from the holster at my chest. What the fuck is this? Has our security been breached?

I peer through the darkness, following the shadow as it picks its way closer to the house. My breath catches. I know those movements. I know every step, every bend of the knee, every sway of her body. It's Carina.

What the fuck is she doing?

Instead of standing here gawking, I slip out of the house, along the darkened edge of the pool, and into the big house's back entrance. I make it to Carina's room in record time—it helps that I could walk to her room blindfolded.

When I sit in the chair across from her window, I settle into the shadows and wait. I don't have to wait long.

Her shadow falls along the window pane, and then her gloved hands grip it and shove it up. She steps into her room, then turns and closes the window quickly and quietly.

Once it's done, her shoulders drop, the tension in her fading as she strips off her gloves, then reaches down and grips the hem of her black hoodie.

My heart begins to pound, my mind going back to that hive of bees. I should say something. After all, I came up here to catch her, nothing more.

But as she begins to pull her hoodie over her head, I make no move. I only watch, my blood heating as she tosses it aside and turns toward me. She's wearing a tight white tank top, no bra underneath. Her hard nipples poke through the fabric, and my mouth waters as she bends down and shucks off her black pants and socks.

Her panties are bright pink and high on the sides. When she turns again and double checks the window, I see it's a thong. Her ass is on full display, the roundness of it making my hard cock ache.

"Locked. Safe. Not busted." She sighs and reaches up, releasing her hair from her black elastic. The strands fall around her shoulders in a waterfall of beauty, and I want to know what it would look like wrapped around my fist. "Mischief managed." She turns and strides into her bathroom, the light clicking on and almost illuminating me, but not quite. I'm still in the shadows, still with a view of her as she brushes her teeth.

I should've already sprung the trap on her, should've scolded her until she told me what the hell she was doing out of the house this late at night. From the looks of it, she's done this before. How have I missed it? How has the security footage not given her away? These and a million other questions burn inside me, not the least of which is: *Did you sneak out to meet another man?* That thought has me gripping the arms of the chair so hard one of them creaks.

She stills, her head turned slightly to the side for a moment.

I force myself to relax and take a deep, silent breath. I do, though all it does is lower my temperature to a vicious simmer.

She goes back to brushing, humming a tune as she does.

Then she flips off the light and heads to bed.

I watch as she crawls between the sheets then grabs her phone, firing off a few quick texts. Who to? Her fucking *lover*? My rage tries to swallow me whole again. This time I let it.

I rise slowly. She doesn't see me, the light from her phone blinding her to anything else in the room.

She nibbles her bottom lip, then smiles a little as a message comes through to her.

I don't know what the fuck is going on, but I do know that whatever little high school prick she's talking to isn't long for this earth. I'm going to find him, and I'm going to make it hurt before I kill him. I'll do shit to this boy that will make the Butcher go green at the gills.

Advancing on her, I stand by the bed and watch her, the way her fingers race across her screen, the way her tits press perfectly against her top. I want to see her panties again. Fuck, I want them in my goddamn mouth.

But first, she needs to learn a lesson.

The moment she darkens her cell phone and reaches to put it on her nightstand, she gasps, her eyes finally catching sight of someone in her room. That's when I move, slapping my hand over her mouth as I grab one of her wrists and pin her to the bed, my body covering her as I feel every fucking bit of her forbidden body.

CARINA

For a split second, my heart jumps into my throat, but then the smell of Gilly fills my lungs, and I relax, knowing it's him that has me pinned to the bed. Damn, his body feels good against me. Since I've been pulled back home from school, I've dreamed of moments like this. Ones that had Gilly slipping into my room to have his way with me. So many nights I've played that fantasy out in my mind. It's hard not to when you're watching the people around you fall in love.

In those fantasy-filled dreams, Gilly and I would enjoy the thrill of it being a secret for a while but then eventually come clean. Obviously, none of that ever happened. He's not in my room because he wants to be. I'm in trouble. If I had to guess, it's because he caught me sneaking back into the house. If he had caught me sneaking out, things would have played out differently. I probably never would have made it past the estate wall.

My brother, unlike a lot of the families in our world, prepared me for the life I was going to grow up in and likely live in one day. As long as I have the Palermo last name, I'll always be a target or tool that could be used against my brother. That's why he made sure he trained me. I was taught how to handle guns and knives. I was shown what to do if someone tried to attack me.

He never wanted me to be defenseless. Other families didn't do that for their daughters or sisters. They think it makes them rebellious, and I don't think they're wrong. Going to one of the best prep schools in the world I'm sure only added to that

rebellion. I was taught to think for myself, but because of how my family treated and loved me, they have my devotion.

But there is one thing you can never let happen. Not when you're small. You can only prepare so much for a fight. Especially with a man twice your size. The key is to never let them close. Not that Gilly and I are about to fight, but brute force always wins out if it gets close enough. At the moment, I'm utterly helpless. There is not one thing I could do to get myself out of this situation. All the control is in his hands.

As fast as the fear filled me, the second I realized it was Gilly something else took over. Heat rushes through my body at the idea of being completely under his control. I've never gotten the chance to explore what things I might be into, but my body at this moment is screaming for me to submit to this man. It doesn't matter, though. I won't give in. I can't. Gilly is too late. My heart might be pounding and my panties getting wetter by the second, but my mind has already decided to stop this—whatever *this* is. So I do the only thing I can think to do at this moment.

Nothing.

I decide to wait for the next move. I lie utterly still. I don't try to fight him. That would be pointless. It would only drain my energy, and it would be a battle I'd lose quickly. Still, it takes everything in me not to fight back. A whirlwind of emotions are rising up inside of me as each second ticks by, and it has nothing to do with being busted for my late-night sneak-out. It has everything to do with the fact that I've been in love with Gilly for as long as I can remember. He's not here for me, I remind myself again. He's here for my brother. To find out what I've been up to so he can report back to him.

"How many times?" he whispers into my ear. His warm breath tickles my skin.

I don't respond because I can't. His hand is over my mouth still.

"Was this the first time you snuck out?" Does he mean out of the house or the property? Big difference. I go with property, so I nod.

“Was it for a boy?” These questions aren’t so black and white.

I shrug this time.

His grip on my wrists tightens, and I know my response has pissed him off. Why does he care if I went to have a makeout session with a boy? I understand being mad over my safety or whatever, but I’m not a promised bride, nor will I ever be one unless I was to offer myself as one. My brother would never ask that of me.

“Did he touch you?” he asks next. I swear I can feel his heart pounding in his chest, but maybe it’s my own. I shake my head. That’s when I realize something else besides our pounding hearts. He’s hard. His erection presses into me. I’d know the feel of a gun or the handle of a knife. What I’m feeling is all him.

I swipe my tongue across the palm of his hand as I lift my hips. Not that I get them to rise far with Gilly’s weight on top of me, but I get the reaction that I know I will because Gilly would never want my tongue on him. That would be a big no-no, and Gilly always follows all the rules.

He jerks his hand back, but to my surprise, he doesn’t leap off me.

I stay pinned under him.

“Don’t do that,” he grits out.

“Sneak out or lick you?”

“Carina,” he grates, warning in his tone.

I enjoy playing with fire, especially when it comes to Gilly. I don’t know what game he’s playing, or maybe it’s not a game at all. His cock being hard might merely be a man’s reaction to being pressed to a half-naked woman.

“Did you watch me undress, *Uncle Gilly*?” The *uncle* rolls right off my tongue. That hold he has on me tightens even more. It’s almost painful but in the most delicious of ways.

“Did you enjoy the show? That why you’re all worked up?” I wrap my legs around him. He starts to speak, but I keep going. “Hope you enjoyed it, because that’s all you’ll ever get from

me. You'll never see me like that again," I bite out. My anger finally gets the best of me.

Gilly doesn't have that problem. He's always the level-headed one. The rational one. Probably one of the reasons my brother is still alive to this day.

It's also the reason Gilly will never be mine.

GILLY

She's testing me. And fuck, I've always been an overachiever.

I take a deep breath, but that only brings her scent into my lungs, mixing into my blood and going like octane through my veins.

"Why do you care?" She bares her teeth. "I could be out there on my back for whatever boy I want, and there's nothing wrong with it."

"Carina, if you know what's good for you, you won't say anything like that to me ever again." I'm two crazed heartbeats away from stripping her down and throwing her in the shower, scrubbing her skin clean of any other man's touch, then shoving my hard cock so deep inside her that she'll never doubt me again.

"Are you supposed to be in here?" Her gaze darts to the door, then teasingly back to me. "What if Antonio walks in and sees?"

"He'll see me disciplining a brat." I'm caught up in lust, in jealousy, in every raw emotion I've tried to avoid.

"A brat?" She smirks. "Me?" She arches, pressing her breasts against me, her hot cunt only a few pieces of fabric away from my aching cock.

"Tell me his name, and I'll go."

"Whose name?" She flutters her lashes innocently.

The name of the man I'm going to kill. “The name of the man you were with tonight.”

“Hmmm.” She purses her lips, giving her an even more pouty look. “I can barely remember.”

“You don't remember the names of your”—the next word sticks in my throat, but I push through it—“lovers?”

Her eyes narrow. “Do you remember yours?”

This has gone on long enough. I pull my trump card. “Tell me who he is, or I'll tell Antonio about your late-night activities. Do you think he'll be all right with you sneaking out?”

Her nose wrinkles. “You'd do that?”

“I'd do that and much, much worse.” Starting with reddening her perfect ass then eating her cunt until she begs me to stop.

“Asshole,” she says under her breath.

My self-control is slipping. Every second that she sasses me, it slips a little more. I pride myself on my ability to rein in my nature and the nature of those around me. I've kept Antonio from going off half-cocked more times than I can count. But right now, I'm the one who's on the verge of making a mistake. I'm the one who needs someone to pull me back from the edge. But all Carina seems to want to do is push me off it, shove me over the cliff until I'm falling into her and doing every feral, filthy thing that's churning through my mind right now.

“Shall I call him now and wake him up?” I glance at her full lips, at the way she wets the bottom one with her tongue. A groan tries to loft from my throat, but I swallow it down.

“I wasn't out with a boy, okay?” she snaps. “I don't have a boyfriend, so you can lay off.”

I swallow hard. Is she lying? I peer down into her eyes, looking for subterfuge. I don't find any. If anything, I find ... arousal. Her eyes are heavy-lidded, and the way her body is warm and pliant beneath mine—she's so goddamn fuckable.

“Happy now?” She surges up, making a pitiful attempt to buck me.

All it does is give my cock the friction it craves. It gives her some, too, because the slightest whimper escapes her, and she glances at my lips. I could kiss her. I could finally taste what I've been obsessing over from the moment she returned from school.

My heart kicks even harder, and my cock demands I make good on my thought. I want her so much, but I can't have her.

Eighteen, I remind myself. *She's only fucking eighteen. And she's Antonio's sister.*

"There you go." She sighs.

"What?" I ease my grip on her wrists.

"I can hear the calculator in your head firing up." She looks away.

Though it takes a concerted effort, I finally release her and sit up, throwing my legs over the side of her bed and just sitting there, gripping her mattress hard so I don't reach for her again.

"If you weren't with a boy, then where were you?"

"It's none of your business, *Uncle Gilly*." She yanks her blanket up, covering herself.

"Don't call me that."

"Or what, *Uncle Gilly*?" She glares at me.

"Carina, I'm warning you. One more time and—"

"And you'll tell my brother, *Uncle Gil*—" She yelps as I grab her arm and yank her to me.

Then I press her down over my thighs and yank up her shirt so I can get a better view of her ass.

"What are you—" Her voice stops when I slap one hand over her mouth, gripping her just hard enough to stop her from struggling.

"You want to be a bad girl?" Fingers shaking, I rest my hand on her ass.

She jolts.

“You want to test me, Carina?” I rear back and smack her ass hard, my palm stinging as she screams against my palm.

She tries to get up, but I shove her back down, splaying my fingers across her back as she writhes.

“You want to toy with me?” I slap her again, hard.

She arches and pants against my palm.

If I ran my hand lower, right to the honey between her legs, I know I’d find her wet. That thought is another shot of adrenaline in my blood. I slap her ass again and again.

Her cries turn into moans, and she whimpers against my palm. My cock is so hard, pressing against her stomach as she breathes hard.

“Remember this, Carina.” I slap her again, softer this time.

“The next time you want to use that smart mouth on me, remember what happened here tonight. Because I can get into your room. I can get to you anywhere at any time. I can find you, and I promise you, I will give you this same treatment until you do as you’re told.” I rub her red ass, squeezing and feeling her until the roar between my ears demands I throw her to the floor and fill her with my seed.

That’s when I lift her and lay her on the bed, then stand and walk out of the room, closing the door softly behind me.

CARINA

Ocean: I need you to calm all the way the fuck down.

Magic: This is not the breakdown I thought we'd be having today.

Ocean: Right? You're the one that should still be up on some non-sleeping binge listening to police scanners and watching monitors while triple checking you covered everything.

Magic: Kinda nice that you're not the one freaking out.

Ocean: But are we really shocked that Rebel is about to well... Rebel?

Me: I can see everything you guys are saying.

A second after I hit send on the message, the whole thread disappears.

Me: Ha ha

Magic: I got jokes sometimes.

Ocean: So I think maybe you should talk to that brother of yours.

I let out a long sigh, but I know she's right. I can't run away. My brother would send out a search team or kill off a few families thinking they'd kidnapped me if I did. I have to do this the rational way. Boo.

Me: Is there anything else happening today beyond my meltdown?

I'd blown up their phones this morning saying I wanted out of the country. That I wanted a new identity, a passport and so on. I googled a bunch of places that I could possibly move to that would get me as far away from Gilly as possible.

I still can't believe what he did last night. At that moment, with his hands on me, I'd been so lost in him. He'd given me a taste of something I had no idea I wanted. Then in true Gilly form, he did what he always does to me. He turned his back on me and walked out, leaving me there aching. Only this time it was in more places than one.

Magic: I'm still running the guy's face you shot.

Me: The other two?

I expect her to tell me they're in some hospital in the burn unit or something but nope.

Magic: Dead.

I stare at the one word. I don't care that they're dead. They are lower than scum as far as I'm concerned. Not only do they prey on women, they make sure they drug them so that they have no chance to fight back when they do it. The only thing that surprised me was how easily Magic gave the information.

Me: You okay?

Magic: No, the coroner just put in the report. Cause of death for both was a bullet to the head. Also, not one hospital in a hundred miles of that location treated anyone for two gunshot wounds last night.

Ocean: Mystery man is in the wind.

Me: Find him.

That is not good. He saw my face, and I saw his. There was something familiar about him that still pulls at the back of my

mind, but I can't place it.

Magic: I'm trying.

A knock sounds at my door. I message the girls that I'll check back in later.

"Come in," I shout, knowing it could only be a handful of people that would knock on my door. Angelica pokes her head in.

"You ever coming out of your bedroom?" I see her sister Bianca behind her. Bianca is one of the sweetest people I've ever met in my life.

Is that what I'm lacking? Angelica has an inner sweetness too. Is that why I'm not so appealing? Gilly's words from last night run through my mind. Am I just a brat who's gotten everything she wanted handed to her in life? Well, everything besides Gilly, that is.

"Yeah." I slip my phone under my pillow, getting up from my bed. I can only hide out for so long. It's already afternoon, and I'm starving. "I need to talk to my brother."

"He's in his office with the boys." Angelica steps back, opening my door more.

"Boys." Bianca giggles.

Yeah, thinking of Antonio or the Butcher as boys is laughable. As for Gilly, I don't know what I think he is anymore. I swear for a moment I saw need in his eyes for me, but I'm sure it was just a normal male reaction. Probably went out and had someone else handle it for him while I had to lay in bed and ache alone.

I can't stay here. Those are the kinds of thoughts that will start to eat me alive. I'll become bitter. Watching Angelica and Bianca be so madly in love only makes that bitterness grow, and I refuse to let them know that because they'd have guilt, and it's not a guilt they need to carry. They've been through enough in their lives. They don't need me to add to it.

It's strange how I was protected more from things while they had to often stare evil in the eyes, but they turned out one way

and I another. Why am I harder? My brother would tell me it's the Palermo blood in my veins. But that can't be true. He crumpled like a cheap chair when it came to Angelica. So I think we can throw that theory out the window.

"Something is off with you," Angelica says as we make our way down the hallway toward the stairs.

"You missed breakfast," Bianca points out. As though that alone was the giveaway that something was up with me.

"It's more than that." Angelica grabs my hand and gives it a squeeze. We grew close when she first married my brother. I was a tad jealous when Bianca showed up, but she too treated me as if I was her sister. I adore and love them both, but I think change is needed. A new chapter has to start for me.

We descend the stairs together. I go straight for my brother's door that is cracked open, which means it's all clear to enter. I still give a double knock before I push it open. My brother sits at his desk while Butcher stands with his arms folded over his chest. Gilly has his hands placed on Antonio's desk, leaning down. The two of them look to be in a serious conversation.

Gilly stands while the other two's attention swings to their women behind me. "Everything okay?" my brother asks me. Gilly doesn't even glance my way.

"No," I respond.

"No?" my brother repeats.

Gilly tries to remain relaxed, but I can sense his tension. Does he think I'm going to tattle on him for spanking me? Not in a million years. He can grow a set and tell my brother if he wants him to know, but that's the problem, isn't it? He doesn't want him or anyone else to know.

"I want to leave. To move away from home." Both the sisters let out a small gasp from behind me. "It's time. I need to leave the country for college." That would be the safest bet and keep me off the radar. Then another sentence springs to my lips, likely whispered from the devil on my shoulder. "Or consider marriage."

"Marriage?" both my brother and Gilly shout.

“Not an arranged one, but I’m sure there are potential suitors out there. I suppose I’m asking to be courted. Will you at least think about it?” I give my biggest smile before I turn and leave my brother’s office. This time it’s me that gets to turn my back on Gilly.

I hope it burns. If he even cares.

GILLY

She's being a brat. A huge fucking brat. My heartbeat booms in my ears, my gaze locked on the door she just flounced out of.

There's no way she's interested in being courted. She's always wanted to go to college, not get trapped in some political marriage.

"What's gotten into her?" Antonio sinks into his chair and rubs his temples. "She's being even more nuts than usual."

Butcher grunts. "Women."

"She's just trying to start something." I crack my knuckles. It seems her spanking wasn't enough. She needs more discipline. Good thing I'm here. I'll get her back into line.

"She's never wanted to get married. I don't even know where to start. Suitors? I guess I could put out some feelers. There are plenty of men who'd—"

"Are you serious?" I whirl on him. I thought I was pissed before, but just the thought of Antonio entertaining her request is enough to make my blood turn volcanic.

He sighs and leans back. "She said she wants suitors." An evil glint lights in his eyes. "So I'm going to give her what she wants. Plenty of men who want to marry into the Palermo family."

"All of them twats." Butcher smirks.

“Exactly.” Antonio nods. “She’ll take one look at them and realize she’s going down the wrong path. Maybe this is exactly what she needs to kick her ass into gear about applying to college. She wanted a gap year—I said fine. I’m going to say fine to this too. Let’s see how long it takes for her to realize she’s fucking up.”

“This is a bad idea.” I can barely keep my voice level. “Inviting the other families to send their young men into our home—this can cause trouble. Especially when they find out Carina didn’t choose any of them.”

Antonio shrugs. “Maybe.” His eyes focus on me. “But what if she finds a young man in the bunch she likes?” He watches me, his gaze unwavering.

I take a deep, calming breath. Even though I want to rage. Even though I want to tear through this fucking office and destroy every last scrap of furniture and plaster right down to the fucking studs.

I can feel Butcher’s eyes on me, too, like a fucking brand burning into my temple.

Antonio gives a curt nod. “Then it’s decided.” He’s taken my silence for assent—instead of for the white-hot fury it truly represents. “I’ll put the word out. Let’s plan dinner for this Saturday and let the families send whoever they want. She’ll have her pick.” He glances at my hands. “You all right?”

I glance down and realize I’ve fisted them so hard my knuckles have gone white. I don’t trust myself to speak, not when I feel a knot in my throat and fire in my gut. I can only nod.

“Good.” He leans forward and opens his laptop. “Let’s talk this afternoon about the Irish accounts. I need to get this set up.” He raises his gaze to me again. “I’d let you handle the details, but I know you’re elbow deep in Larone’s books. What a fucking mess he had going over there.”

Turning, I mechanically stride from the office. I hear the door close behind me, Butcher staying behind to talk to Antonio.

I'm so on edge I think I might fucking levitate, my muscles tight as I walk to the kitchen and look inside.

Carina, Angelica, and Bianca are sitting at the kitchen table talking as Carina eats a late breakfast.

"Carina." I can't keep the bite out of my voice.

She looks up, a smug expression on her beautiful face. "Yeah, what?"

"I need a word." I need a whole fucking lot more than that.

"Okay, have a word." She waves her fork around the table.

"Privately." I move toward her, always drawn to wherever she is.

Bianca and Angelica exchange a look then rise.

"Hey, you can stay." Carina's voice contains a slight hint of worry, and when she looks up at me, the smugness is still there but also a sliver of concern. As if she's happy that she's pushed me but wondering if she perhaps went too far.

Yes, you fucking did, brat. I keep my gaze on her as Angelica and Bianca scurry from the kitchen, throwing hurried "See you later" over their shoulders.

"What the fuck was that?" I lean over the table, pinning her with my stare.

She puts her fork on her plate and dabs her mouth with her napkin. "In civilized society, this is usually called 'breakfast.'"

I broke my arm when I was a kid. Fell out of a tree that I had climbed in haste to escape a couple of bullies. Once the bullies gave up, I tried to make my way back down. That's when I missed a foothold and fell. When I hit the ground, I felt my arm snap. It was a quick, sharp feeling. And it had a sound. That same snap—the feeling, the sound, the sharpness, all of it—echoes in my mind as I snap again.

Before I even know what I'm doing, I grab her upper arm, lift her from her chair, and drag her across the kitchen.

"Hey!" She struggles against me and swipes at the block of knives on the counter.

But I have the element of surprise. Who would've thought the reasonable, level-headed Gilly would manhandle his best friend's little sister? No one. Not even Carina. She didn't hear the snap. But I did. She fucking broke a part of me, and now I'm going to show her the jagged edge she caused.

I push her into the pantry and slam the door behind us, then shove her against the shelves, gripping her wrists and pinning them behind her.

"What the fuck!" She struggles, knocking over some jars.

I don't care. I tighten my grip. "Suitors, brat? Is that what you want?"

"What business is it of yours?" she snaps, her breath coming out in pants.

I can almost smell her arousal. My little brat gets off on crossing me. "You don't need suitors." I growl. "I know *exactly* what you need."

"What's that?" She stares up at me, challenge in her eyes.

I let go of her wrists and grip her shoulders, then swipe her ankles with my foot. She drops. I catch her and ease her to the floor.

"Hey!"

I get a fistful of her hair and pull, then reach for my fly with my other hand.

Her mouth opens in shock, and she finally stills, down on her knees, right where I want her.

"Keep it wide, brat." I reach into my pants and pull out my hard cock, then run the tip along her lips.

"What are you—"

I press it into her hot, wet mouth, then groan at how good it feels. The reasonable part of me tries to stop me, to tell me this is wrong. But I've already snapped. I'm already gone. And when I push my cock deeper into her mouth, I shut down the reasonable part of me for good.

“Take it all, little brat. You want cock? I’ve got it right here for you.” I thrust in and out of her mouth.

She looks up at me, her eyes wide, and then she grips my thighs, a moan in her mouth as she sucks me.

I grunt, my hips moving faster as I pull her hair with both hands, fucking her hot mouth as her tongue licks along my shaft. More and more, I push against her throat. She gags a little, her eyes watering, and I feel my release coming. I grip her tightly.

“Take it all. I want you to swallow every last drop, Carina.” I come on a harsh groan, my cock spilling inside her mouth as she slurps and swallows, licking up my seed as I take in deep, shaking breaths.

When I finally catch my breath, I pull out and reach down, grabbing her and lifting her back to her feet. Tucking myself back in, I meet her gaze.

“Keep testing me, Carina. Keep testing me, and the next time I’m going to shove myself inside that virgin cunt of yours.” The words are mine. They’re on my lips, but it’s the snapped version of me talking. The level-headed Gilly would never say anything remotely like this. Never *do* anything like this.

She licks her lips. And, as if she’s even more emboldened than before, she says, “Who said I’m a virgin?” With that, she pushes past me and out of the pantry, her hips swaying as she strolls away and leaves me speechless.

“Wow, blue really is your color,” Angelica says, glancing over the fifth dress I’ve tried on. My brother didn’t want us all going out shopping, so he brought the store to us.

The library has been turned into a dress shop. There are racks and racks of clothes along with a million boxes of different shoes to pick from. It’s a bit overwhelming. I should be excited. Isn’t this a girl’s dream? I think part of the problem is I don’t know what my dream is in life.

For a while, I thought about college, but I think the Palermo blood runs too deep in my veins. If I’m not thinking about Gilly, I’m thinking about what else the BB crew could be doing. Unfortunately, Ocean has grounded us. Magic still can’t find the mystery man, which is insane.

Has he locked himself in a house somewhere or something? It’s hard to stay hidden these days. Cameras are everywhere unless you know what you’re doing. I still can’t get his face out of my mind. Yet I can’t place him no matter how many times I wrack my brain. That worries me because he might be doing the same thing when it comes to me.

“It really is. It’s her eyes.” Yes, my eyes. A bright blue that is striking. People always comment on them. Too memorable. I’ve never thought about that before now.

I cock my head, staring at myself in the mirror. The dress is beautiful. The top is tight, pushing my boobs up, making them seem bigger than they really are. I’ve always been on the small

side. It's partly why my brother always pushed that I needed to be able to protect myself. Too bad he didn't teach me how to protect myself from his own right-hand man.

I lick my lips, still shocked over what happened with Gilly. Mr. Always-in-Control forced me to my knees and shoved his cock into my mouth. It was so damn hot. It took everything I had to walk and not run from the pantry. I'd gone straight back to my bedroom, and with only a few touches, I came harder than I ever have in my whole life. Sure, I've given myself a few orgasms, but this was nothing compared to the others. What would it have been like if it was Gilly that got me off? I shake the thought from my head. I can't allow my mind to go there.

I should be livid. I *had* been livid when I'd waltzed into my brother's office that day. Somehow, in a weird way, Gilly snapping back at me had not only cooled my anger, but now it has me all over the place inside. The tables have turned now, and I'm the one avoiding Gilly.

"Maybe I should try something else." Because they aren't wrong. As I stare at myself in the mirror, that is not a girl staring back at me. I'm a woman in every sense of the word.

One that has offered herself up on a silver platter to suitors. The problem is, even if I really did want to do this, I would never know if the man I picked actually gave a shit about me or merely wanted part of my last name and the connections it would bring.

"We don't have time, and that one is perfect!" Angelica protests as a knock sounds at the door.

It swings open a moment later to reveal Butcher. His eyes go straight for Bianca. There has always been a darkness that surrounds Butcher, but when he sees Bianca, I get a glimpse of Fernando. The man behind the Butcher. The one few know. I think Bianca is the only one that truly knows him in every way.

"You have guests." Butcher steps forward into the room, revealing three women behind him.

“Come in, ladies.” Bianca grabs a hold of Butcher, trying to show that he’s not as scary as he appears. They all give him wary glances. My first thought is that she’s lucky most people are scared of her man. Keeps everyone at arm’s length. When women see Gilly, they swoon, and I want to vomit. “Who put you on door duty?” She laughs, pulling him back out of the room. The door falls closed behind them. I think Butcher just stole her. She’ll be back at some point.

“Come. You can set up here,” Angelica tells them before she makes introductions. “Do you mind if I go first? I want to make sure everything is going as it should.”

“Nope.” I drop into one of the chairs and watch both girls descend on Angelica—doing her hair, nails, and makeup.

She’s all worked up because this is the first event she’s really hosted as my brother’s wife. She’s good for him. Angelica can be equal parts sweet and fuck around and find out. Especially when it comes to someone she loves.

Do I lack sweetness? I thought I might, but Gilly somehow knew I was a virgin. How? He knows I’ve been sneaking out. I’ve always been a bit rebellious, but I wanted what my parents had. Our father might not have been the best at leading our family, but he loved Mom. There was no one he was more loyal to than her. My brother is the same. I want that. As rebellious as I am, I still hold on to a few old school values, I think. My virginity is for the man who will love and adore me forever. The one who will pick me over all others.

Is that really so much to ask? Gilly would never pick me over my brother. I need to come to terms with that. Maybe tonight isn’t as bad an idea as I thought.

The girls work their magic on me and then Bianca when she finally returns. During that time, I decide that tonight I’m going to be open to possibilities. I’m not sure I want to be the head of a family, but I do know I am a part of this world, and I’m not going anywhere.

This is insane.

I stare at myself in the mirror, taking a long, hard look. Even so, I still haven't come to grips with what I did to Carina in the pantry a few days ago. And I *really* can't come to terms with what's going to happen tonight.

The staring contest has to end. If it doesn't, I'm going to smash the shit out of my mirror and lose my goddamn mind.

I turn and take a deep breath. It should calm me. It doesn't. I haven't been calm from the moment Carina's smart mouth reached my ears. She's all I can think, all I can see. My temper is shorter than it's ever been, and my ire is on a hair trigger.

Antonio and Butcher have noticed, too. They haven't said anything to me, but I see their shared looks.

Fuck! I'm going off the rails. When I close my eyes, all I can see is Carina at my feet, her mouth wrapped around my cock as I thrust—*No!* I grit my teeth. If I think about that, I won't be able to string a sentence together. I need my wits about me tonight.

Tonight. I take another deep breath. The house is prepped and ready to be filled with suitors, mafia men who want to make a play for a Palermo bride. It makes me sick. It's taken every shred of control I have not to tell Antonio to call it off, to stop this fucking foolishness, to put an end to Carina's gambit.

But I haven't said anything against it, no matter how badly I want to. Carina made up her mind. She told Antonio exactly

what she wanted. He agreed to give it to her. I can't get between them. Not on family business. But that doesn't mean I can just grin and bear it, either.

I fix my tie—no mirror necessary—and stride out into the evening. A string quartet is already playing inside the main house, and the windows are lit and welcoming. Angelica wanted to make a good impression on her first event, and I can already tell she's outdone herself.

When I stride into the house, the low hum of voices greets me. Up ahead, two young men are having a quiet discussion in the hallway outside the dining room, and many more are standing and talking in the foyer.

Antonio greets each one of them with a handshake and introduces them to Angelica, who hangs on his arm as he dotes on her. I stalk down the hallway, my hackles rising as more voices meet my ears. There have to be a least a dozen men here tonight—all of them wanting a piece of my Carina.

My Carina. That's something she's not. I may be obsessed with her, in love with her, fucking unable to escape thoughts of her—but she's not mine. My loyalty requires I keep my distance and remain respectful as I keep her safe and keep her family's fortunes on the rise. The thing in the pantry—that was a slip. A bad one. I can't let it happen again. No matter how much I want her, I have to put her welfare over my need for her. At least, that's what the level-headed Gilly would do. That's what I *should* do. But the moment I get a flash of what it felt like to discipline her with my hand against her ass—I'm dangerously close to snapping again.

“—definitely still a virgin.” One of the young men smirks at the small group he's talking to.

“The fuck you say?” I step to him.

He looks up at me, his smirk disappearing.

“I-I-I—Nothing.” He swallows hard.

“And this is Carson Falco.” Antonio and Angelica move next to me and introduce the little shit who dared talk about Carina like that.

The prick glances between Antonio and me.

“Did we interrupt?” Antonio asks pointedly, and I realize he’s trying to keep the peace.

“N-no.” Falco shakes his head. “I was just apologizing for speaking out of turn.” He smiles, one I bet he practices in the mirror. The little shit.

“We do that a lot around here,” Angelica adds gracefully. “Let’s get drinks. Carina will be down shortly.”

“Sure,” Falco says a little too quickly, then hurries toward the dining room with Antonio and Angelica following behind.

Antonio gives me a questioning look, but I shrug him off. I’m not repeating what that prick said.

Carina is taking her time. I figured she would. Building up the drama before making an entrance is just the sort of drama I’d expect from my little brat. There’s that word again—*my*. I have to stop thinking like that. It’s only going to lead to more mishaps, more moments of me losing my rationality.

For Carina’s sake, I have to be on my game tonight. This event isn’t just a marriage mart—not that I’d ever let her marry one of these assholes—but it’s also a wonderful tool to pick up information. Tidbits that the young idiots will let slip, which is exactly why Angelica is encouraging them all to have plenty of drinks. Any gathering is a perfect place to gain intel, especially when it’s full of young, cocky, drunk pricks.

“You good?” Butcher grunts from behind me.

“You look tense enough to spring from here to the roof.” Bianca frowns. “Are you all right?”

“I’m good.” I roll my shoulders. “Don’t worry.”

“Okay.” She doesn’t seem convinced, but she pulls on Butcher’s arm. “Come on. I want to see how many victims Carina has to choose from.”

“Victims?” Butcher’s lip twitches. “I like it.” He leads her into the dining room, where the voices are still humming.

I turn and look up the stairs.

For some reason, that's the exact second Carina walks into view on the landing.

My heart seems to shudder and seize, everything inside me grinding to a halt before jumping forward at ten times the normal speed. She's wearing a light blue dress that wraps tightly around her chest, hugging her breasts and then flaring out in gauzy fabric that barely reaches mid-thigh.

I stare at her face, at her bright blue eyes that seem to consume everything they see—including me.

She meets my gaze, and her chin rises in challenge as she walks to the stairs, her heels giving her hips even more sway. A temptress, an irresistible demon sent to torment me—she's all those things and more.

When she reaches the floor, she stops for a moment before slowly walking to me, her hips swaying in that tantalizing way. I can't speak, can't think. This is the first time we've come face to face since the pantry. I'd counseled myself over and over again that I was to keep my cool, to keep my hands to myself.

But now ... Now that thing inside me that snapped before—it's already bent to the breaking point, and she hasn't even opened her smart mouth yet.

"You like it?" she asks, her voice sultry.

My tongue feels two sizes too large. "Yes."

She gives me a wicked half smile. "That's too bad. Because it's not for you." She moves to step past me.

Snap.

Before I can even form a single thought, I've grabbed her arm, yanked her to me, and gripped her throat.

"Everything you have is for me, little brat. *Everything.*"

The one word *everything* takes all the air from my lungs. I'm sure it's not helping that Gilly has his hand wrapped around my throat. I should be screaming at him or even smacking and clawing him, but I'm so shocked I stand there unmoving, letting him keep his firm grip on me. His hold is letting me know he's in full control. Not only that; anyone could catch us right now.

"Gilly?" I try to say his name without emotion, but it comes out in a moan instead. Why can my body and mind never stay on the same page when it comes to this man? No matter how many times I tell myself that he and I will never be, the second he touches me, I melt. Right now, I'm a damn puddle.

"Everything," he repeats before he starts to move while keeping his grip on my throat.

His other hand wraps around my waist, my feet leaving the floor. Within a few steps, he has us inside the bathroom. He puts me down on my feet, but his hand around my throat never leaves, even when he turns and flips the lock on the door. The sound echoes loudly in the small powder room. I'd never thought the bathroom was small before, but I'd also never been inside it with a man the size of Gilly.

"Then what are you going to do with me?" I finally pull it together long enough to get the words out. That's only because those cool blue eyes of his left mine for a moment. When they lock back on me, I freeze again. How does he do this to me?

Love. The one word flits through my mind. As much as I want to deny it, that's the truth. I'm in love with him, and it's why I'm so pissed and wanting to push past what will never be.

He steps into me, backing me up until my ass hits the edge of the sink. Then he lifts me without saying a word and yanks my dress up until my silky black panties come into view. His grip on my throat tightens. I should be telling him to stop, but that's the last thing I find myself wanting him to do.

“What are you wearing?” he grits out.

“Called a thong. It was that or no panties at all. I can't have panty lines.” I smirk. Finally I give a push back. It might only be a verbal one, but it's something. “What? You've never seen a thong? You should see the back side.” He drops his hand from my throat and takes a step away. Disappointment fills me at the loss of his touch.

“No. Turn around and show me.”

I'm not sure if this is an order or a challenge. Either way, if he wants to play this game, then we'll play. I slip back down off the counter, my heels clicking on the marble floor. I keep my dress hiked with one hand as I slowly turn around and pull it up to show him my back side. I make a point of leaning forward so that he can get a real good view. Did he say he's never seen a thong before? I want to ask, but I don't. That truth could hurt in ways I don't care to think about right now or ever.

I watch him in the mirror. I expect his eyes to be on my ass, but they immediately lock with mine.

“Aren't you going to take a look?” I run my tongue across my lips, wondering if he'll push me to my knees again and make me take him into my mouth. The thought alone makes me wet between my thighs. “Uncle Gilly,” I gasp. No sooner than the tease slips past my lips, his hand comes down on my ass.

“You're a little brat.” He yanks the thong down my thighs before he uses one of his knees to spread my legs as far as they can go with the thong at my knees.

“That’s not your problem,” I remind him as I push my ass backwards, unable to help myself. My own desire is now coating the inside of my thighs.

“Oh, but it is.” His hand slides down my ass. The roughness of his palm and fingers only drive me to want more. “So wet.” He groans when his hand reaches my sex. “Did you get this wet when you sucked my cock?” I nod, unable to answer as he starts to push a finger inside me. He doesn’t go in deep. I watch him in the mirror as he moves his finger around.

“What are you doing?” I need him to do more, or I’m going to explode. His finger stops. His eyes once again locking with mine in the mirror. “Finding out that you’re not only a brat but a little liar too.” He pulls his fingers back out. I bite the inside of my cheek so I don’t protest. I refuse to give him the satisfaction.

“And what did I lie about?” I ask.

He brings his finger to his mouth and sucks it clean. A groan rumbles from him as he gets a taste of me.

He reaches for his belt, undoing his pants. I watch his cock spring free. He strokes himself. “You have a hymen.”

My mouth falls open.

“I felt it.” Is he about to take it? I don’t get the chance to ask. He drops to his knees, burying his face between my legs from behind, his tongue thrusting inside me over and over before going for my clit. The sensation is more than I can bear.

“Gilly.” I grip the counter, about to come, but he pulls back. “No!” I whimper. He stands. Tears sting at my eyes. He’s not doing this to me again, is he?

“Don’t tease me about other men having you.” He guides the head of his cock to my entrance, pressing inside of me only a little. His arm wraps around me, his hand going between my thighs from the front.

His fingers go for my clit. He places them there but doesn’t move them.

“Please,” I beg, no longer caring if I sound desperate or not. I need him.

“Remember this,” he grits out before he finally gives me what I need. It doesn’t take long to fall apart with how on edge I am. With a few touches of his rough fingers to the bundle of nerves, I’m flying into pleasure. My sex locks down around the head of his cock.

Gilly groans loudly as warmth explodes through me. It takes me a second to realize what he’s done.

He came inside me.

GILLY

I stride into the dining room, my heart pounding and my mind in a spin. What have I done? I've gone too far, that's what. I came inside her, my cock giving in to her wet heat as I fingered her to orgasm. Just the memory of it sends another jolt of heat to my cock.

Antonio raises a brow at me.

I'm sure my skin is still flushed, my demeanor shattered, but it's not like I can explain why to him. I give him a short shake of my head.

His gaze lingers for another moment before he turns back to whatever prep school twat has his attention.

I go to the sideboard and fix myself a drink, then rethink it and make it a double. After downing it, I make another. Once it's burning down my throat, the door to the dining room opens again.

My body goes taut. I already know who it is. I always do. Carina is in my blood, like a whisper always at the edge of my hearing. I can *sense* her.

The room takes a collective breath as she swans in, her head held high. "Sorry I'm late, fellas." She gives a smug smile, her gaze skirting across me.

Angelica hurries to her. "So beautiful!" she exclaims.

Angelica is right. Carina is gorgeous. But the prettiest part of her is the cream pie I left between her thighs. She may have cleaned up in the powder room, but she couldn't get rid of all

of me. I'm inside her. She's marked with my cum, my scent. That thought gives me a smug satisfaction of my own.

The boys in the room all try to draw themselves up taller as they elbow to get closer to her. Angelica starts introductions as I watch each and every interaction.

Carina smiles for them, says a few nice things, does her little song and dance—but I know the truth. She does, too. None of these little boys can satisfy her. Not a single one can give her what she needs. A man has to do that. Not just any man. *Me*. Still, she toys with them, allowing them to think they made her smile or laugh. But it doesn't reach her eyes. In fact, the only real emotion I feel from her is when she looks at me—and what I sense then is ... hunger. My little brat wants more of what I gave her in the powder room.

"Brooding much?" Antonio pours himself a drink as the last of the twats introduces themselves.

"I'm not brooding. Just watching."

Antonio grabs his glass and tilts his chin toward one of the boys. "I'd say Falco has the edge. His family is just coming off that dispute with the Allegris. They cleaned up."

I nod. "I saw the photos. There isn't a single Allegri left in this city."

"All their holdings are in Falco pockets now. They're by no means on a footing to rival us, but it's a nice little kingdom, and Carson Falco could be easily ruled by Carina. She could run that family in her sleep. And when the time's right—"

"Add their holdings to our holdings," I finish for him.

"Precisely."

Ire rises in my gut. Antonio should be protecting her, not sizing up who would bring money to the family. Then again, this is what Carina chose. She *wanted* these pricks fawning over her and making offers.

I grind my teeth.

"You all right?" he asks.

“Yes,” I snap.

He purses his lips. “You’ve been off. What’s going on with you?”

“Nothing.” I squeeze my glass tightly as Falco leans in and whispers something to my Carina.

Antonio sighs. “And I thought it was hard to get information from Butcher. You’re turning out to be worse than him.”

Butcher snorts from where he’s clearly been listening.

Antonio steps forward, his voice booming over the room. “Everyone sit. Dinner is ready.”

Carina walks around the table, sashaying past me and teasing me with her scent as she heads for the seat to Antonio’s left.

I follow her, stepping in front of the line of hungry boys who want nothing more than a taste of the most decadent dish in this room—one that just so happens to belong to me.

“Here.” I pull her chair out for her.

She shoots me a deadly look over her shoulder as she sits and I scoot her chair forward.

I take the seat beside her.

Falco lowers himself into the chair directly across from her, and the other hopefuls grumble about the distance between them and their prize.

Once we’re seated, I slide my hand up her thigh and grip.

She jumps slightly, then cuts her gaze to me.

I squeeze a little harder, leaving my fingerprints on her tender flesh, then gently rub away the pressure.

“If you intend to skip college, are your plans to travel?” Falco asks.

She turns to him, a smile perched on her delicate lips. “I’d love to travel.”

“My family has villas all over Italy.” He smiles, showing off what must’ve been years of braces. “And we also enjoy

several other properties all over the world. Anywhere you'd like to go."

I slide my fingers higher along her thigh as the servers set out the first course.

"We just bought an estate in the French countryside." The boy beside him pipes up. "Do you like France?"

"I ..." She shrugs. "I don't know. I've never been. But I've always dreamed of visiting Versailles."

"I'll take you—" at least three of the boys say at once.

She gives a teasing smile, her cheeks going pink. "How could a girl refuse an offer from such handsome men?"

I dig my fingers into her thigh again, and that's when I realize she intends to torture me the entire night. Tit for tat. She's getting back at me for the powder room.

But what my little brat doesn't seem to understand is that I keep score—and for every bit of this charade she makes me endure, I'm going to take it out on her round, luscious ass.

CARINA

I've made a grave mistake. I'm in way over my head here. At boarding school, there were only girls. Without boys, we didn't have distractions. Besides, who wants a boy? I know I didn't. Not when I've grown up in the world I have. An average boy would never have cut it or held my interest. I would have run circles around them.

So I was never pissed or thought I was sent to an all-girls school to keep my chastity intact. It was not only a way to keep me safe, but I think my brother hoped that my classmates would gloss over the family I come from. He forgets it's my world too, and I don't have any plans to leave it.

I'll forever be grateful for the school. It's where I met my best friends. We were thick as thieves from the moment we came together. We would always talk about what we were going to do when we got out into the world. Especially when the subject of dating came up. That was the one topic where I was clearly out of my element.

I'm *still* out of my element in this room full of guys. I could handle the attention of one or two of them, but they're all staring at me like I'm going to be their dinner. At times they're tripping over each other to get into conversation with me. I can barely keep up with what each of them is saying. Especially with Gilly's hand on my thigh. All these men for my picking, and he's all I can think about it.

With Gilly, it's the damn chase. I hate that. I don't want to love a man I have to chase. Though I'm not sure if it counts as

chasing if he's dragging me into the bathroom. His cum is still inside of me. I couldn't bring myself to wipe it off. I rather enjoy having his mark on me.

"You should have a destination wedding," Angelica says. "Give us all a reason to get away."

I almost choke on the sip of wine I'd just drank. Gilly's fingers grip my thigh harder. I hope they leave a mark.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves. We're all getting to know one another," I rush to get out before she and Bianca can start to make wedding plans.

"I'd love to take you wherever you want to go. In style, of course." Falco gives me one of his charming smiles. It's too charming, but out of all the men here, he's the only one that is actually a potential suitor. Too bad I feel nothing. Not a spark or anything. Is it because there is nothing there or that Gilly already has my heart?

I think it was three years ago I really noticed Gilly. He was always at my brother's side when I came home from school. Months I spent away, and still I couldn't shake what I felt for him. I don't think a summer in Europe will shake that either. Then again, maybe if I was away from him while others tried to court me, it would be a different story.

"That is very sweet of you. I'll keep that in mind," I lie with a smile on my face.

He buys it. Thankfully, my brother takes over some of the conversation at the table. He's able to pull most of their attention, which makes sense, considering half the reason any of them want to marry me is because of him. It's ironic that the reason Gilly probably doesn't want to be with me is because of my brother.

I start to wonder what his type is. Women never came and went from the house. At least they didn't when I was home. My father loved my mother, and she would have killed him if he stepped out on her. Not that he would have; loyalty was everything to them. It is to Gilly, too. It's why I'll never come first to him. Even if my brother did give him his blessing.

Anger blooms in my chest at the reality of it all. That same sensation I had to run this morning courses through my body.

“Eat,” Gilly whispers into my ear.

“Fuck off,” I snip back under my breath as I reach under the table to try and remove his hand. He won’t let me. “Think I won’t make a scene?” I catch Bianca watching us out of the corner of my eye. “Try me.” I turn my head to stare into Gilly’s eyes.

“Eat,” he says again before removing his hand finally. I do eat, but not because he ordered me to. The quicker I can finish this meal, the better. I don’t taste a thing. Not even when the dessert comes and it’s my favorite, crème brûlée.

“Carina.” My brother calls my name as we all get up from the table to move to the parlor. “A word.” Oh shit. I keep a smile pasted on my face while everyone else leaves. Gilly is the last to go.

“You okay?” he asks me, concern etched on his face. Some of my anger starts to dissolve.

“Yeah. It was a bit overwhelming.”

“You clearly have your pick.”

“But do I really?” The words slip past my lips. I hadn’t meant to say them.

“Carina, I would never force—”

“I know.” I cut him off. “Like I said, I’m overwhelmed is all.”

“Is there anything else going on that you want to tell me?” I’m not sure if he means Gilly or my late-night sneak-out activities. Either way, I keep my mouth shut. There is no way I am confessing to either one of those.

“Not at the moment.”

“All right.” He kisses my cheek. “You can always talk to me.” I nod before we both head out of the formal dining room.

“Carina.” I turned to face Falco, who called my name. He comes out of the same powder room Gilly dragged me into

earlier. “Can we have a moment alone? If that is okay with you.” He looks to my brother to get his approval.

“That’s up to Carina.”

“Only a few minutes.” He gives me that charming smile again that does nothing for me.

“Okay,” I agree. It’s better than going into the parlor and having a bunch of them all over me.

“Stay close,” my brother orders before he steps away to join everyone else.

“I want to take you out so we can have some time alone to really get to know each other. See if there’s a connection,” Falco says. Even if we did go out, my brother would never allow it to be alone. There would be guards.

“I’m sorry. To be honest, I don’t feel a connection.”

“Maybe not yet. We just met. We need more time together. Besides, our families together would make a wonderful connection,” he counters as if this is a business deal.

“If this was about making a family connection, a marriage would have been arranged. I’m free to choose who I want to be with.”

The smile drops from his face. I’m sure he’s not used to women having free say in his family. Another reason to knock him off the list.

“Your brother gives you a lot of leeway. Is he also the one who taught you how to shoot?”

“What?” I ask, confused.

“Don’t play dumb.” He steps closer. “You’re far from it, Carina. You blew up my warehouse. Shot at one of my men.” My stomach drops. *No*. “Did you really think you wouldn’t be recognized? You’re quite stunning. Unforgettable really.”

“What do you want?” I’m not sure what else to say at the moment. I’m shell-shocked. How pissed would my brother be if he knew what I’d done? That I had stepped over into someone else’s territory and didn’t know it? I thought I was

fucking with some stupid nobody. Falco is making and selling ketamine and Rohypnol? Does his father know that?

“A date.” That stupid smile returns to his face. I want to slam my palm up into his nose and knock it right off his face. Instead I ball my hands into fists to keep control.

“And you think this is the way to get it?”

“We have things to discuss. Think about it. You are far more cunning than anyone realizes. We could be powerful together.” If he thinks I’m so cunning, why is he threatening me? This is a threat, isn’t it? Falco reaches out to touch my face. I’m about to step back when a hand comes out and grips Falco by the wrist.

“We don’t touch,” Gilly grits out before he flings Falco’s hand back.

That’s rich coming from him.

GILLY

*A*ngelica and Antonio show the last of the little pricks out, Falco lingering longer than the others.

Carina watches them, but she isn't engaging anymore. After I found her talking to Falco in the hall, she seemed to have retreated inside herself. The conversation died quickly, thankfully, and Antonio called the get-together to a close.

When Falco finally oozes out the door, Angelica and Bianca rush to Carina while Antonio shoots the Butcher and me a look.

I want to go to Carina, to ask her what the hell passed between her and Falco that spooked her so badly, but I can't do that with Angelica and Bianca hovering. It'll have to wait. She's in good hands with the other women. They've already formed a bond, a strong one, and I have no doubt they'd protect each other with their lives. Not that we'd ever let it come to that.

Antonio and Butcher stride out, and I'm duty-bound to follow even though I'm desperate to speak to Carina. Something about her change in demeanor has unsettled me. It's almost as if she's ... afraid? If that douchebag frightened her, I'll—

“You all right?” Antonio asks as he closes his office door.

“I'm good. Just tired of these greased-up children pretending to be men.”

Antonio snorts a laugh and sits on one of his leather sofas. “Can't disagree with you there, but I think a few of them

showed promise, and Carina didn't seem to mark anyone off her list."

"Who showed promise?" I cross my arms and lean against the doorframe.

"That Falco kid." Antonio keeps his gaze on me. "Well-spoken, polite, from a good family. The match would give Carina a life of ease and access to all the luxuries she could ever want."

I do my best to keep my face neutral. But inside I'm going up in fucking flames. That kid is a verified piece of shit, and I want to stomp the life out of him. Maybe I will. Maybe I'll leave this meeting, grab my keys, and go on a fucking suicide mission if it means that twat never sets a finger on my Carina.

"She talked to him." The Butcher grunts out his answer. "More than others."

"Because he forced himself into her conversations every time he got the chance," I shoot back.

"He's headstrong. I was too at that age." Antonio shrugs. "Angelica would say I still am."

"You can't be serious. That kid is nowhere near good enough for Carina." I realize I'm overstepping my place, but I can't help it. It's like the raging lava pit in my gut is erupting higher and higher ever since I saw that worried look on Carina's face.

Antonio's gaze narrows. "It's up to her, Gilly. She has to make her choice. I simply get the feeling that Falco is at the top of her list. However, if she chooses another, then I will abide by her wishes. Simple as that."

She'll choose another. There's no fucking way she'd ever agree to let that greaseball touch her, much less *marry* her. She's Antonio's sister, but I know her better than even he does. I've tasted her, felt her, dreamed of her for longer than I care to admit. She's in my blood now, part of my soul.

A gentle knock at the door has Antonio on his feet. He pulls it open before Angelica can knock again.

"Yes, my love?" He takes her waist and kisses her.

“She’s made her first pick for a date.” Angelica grins when he finally lets her go.

Needles prick along my spine. “Who?” I almost bark the word. She shoots me a curious look. “The talkative one. Carson Falco.”



Her room is dark, and she’s in bed, but she’s not asleep. The light from her cell phone illuminates her beautiful face as she types faster than I even thought possible. Her brow furrows in concentration and worry, and she’s so invested in whatever messages she’s getting back that she doesn’t notice me until I’m standing at the foot of her bed.

She jumps and almost drops her phone, then recovers. “What are you doing in here?”

“What’s got you scared?” I get right to the point as I walk around to stand over her.

She clutches her phone to her chest, hiding it from me.

“Is it him?” I ask and point to the phone. “Because if it is, I’m going to take that phone and smash it right here, right now.”

“Him? You mean Falco? No!” She grips her phone more tightly.

“Then who?” I sit beside her, bracing myself across her by flattening my palm to the bed beside her hip.

“None of your business.”

“The one you met the other night when you snuck out?”

“No,” she says, but she glances away when she says it. So the truth is yes. Whoever she’s texting is the person she met when she snuck out.

“You need to tell me the truth. I can’t have you sneaking out again. It’s dangerous.” I lean closer to her.

She stays quiet for a long while, then asks, “Are you saying that as my brother’s associate or as someone who cares about me?”

“Why can’t it be both?”

She stiffens and turns away.

Wrong answer.

“Carina—”

“Go tell Antonio about me sneaking out. I don’t care anymore. Just get out of my room.” Her phone pings with more incoming messages.

I lean back and take a deep breath, then let it out slowly. “You chose a date with Falco. Why?”

She turns back to me. “Why do you think, Gilly? He’s a young, attractive guy with tons of money.”

I stare her down. She’s holding back, and if I’m right, whatever she’s failing to tell me is what had her spooked earlier, and it’s what has her feverishly texting whoever is currently messaging her again and again.

“Who’s on the phone, Carina?”

She stares up at me defiantly.

With a quick movement, I grip both her wrists and pin them above her head, then climb on top of her, the blanket separating us. Her phone falls to the floor with a soft *thunk* on the rug.

“Get off me,” she snarls.

“You and I both know I could take that phone and crack the password in under fifteen minutes.” I squeeze her wrists, then force myself to go easy. “Something’s bothering you. Tell me who you’re texting about it.”

“My friends are none of your business.” Her fierceness sends a jolt of need to my cock.

“Everything about you is my business!” I eye her mouth, and then I fuck up. I fuck up royally. Because I can’t stop myself

from kissing her hard, from tasting the heaven that rests on her lips like honeyed wine.

She moans, her body warm beneath mine as I swipe my tongue against hers. She answers, kissing me deeply, arching against me as I lose myself in her. Just like I always do. I want her so badly that my brain misfires, my instincts taking over.

It takes all the strength I have to pull myself back, to sit up on the bed and take a deep, shaking breath.

We sit in silence for a while, her wall going back up brick by brick as I try to cling to reason, to duty, to honor.

“Carina, I only want to help you.” I sigh. “Just let me in.”

She leans over the bed and swipes her phone from the floor. With her other hand, she points. “The door’s over there. Don’t let it hit you on the ass on the way out.”

CARINA

Gilly sits there for a long moment, neither of us speaking. What else does he want me to say? I gave him his opportunity to tell me the real reason he didn't want me to go on the date with Falco, but he didn't take it. I don't know what he wants from me. If anyone needs to get their shit worked out, it's him. I've got enough battles of my own to deal with.

“Go out on a date with Falco, and I'll kill him.”

That might actually solve my problem, but it's really not that easy. I have no idea what the fallout for that would be, not only for Gilly but my brother. But I do know that it would not go over well with the other families.

“That would start a war.”

“People die all the time for all kinds of reasons.” True, but it can't be him that does it. The Falco family can't think it came from us.

“Get out of my room. I'm done with this conversation.”

Gilly stands, to my surprise.

A pang of disappointment fills me, but I shouldn't be shocked. I'm okay for him to play with in the dark but nowhere else. A dirty secret. That's what I am to him. At first I thought that it might be fun to sneak around with him. I guess what they say is true. Be careful of what you wish for. You just might get it.

“This isn't over, Carina.”

“It most definitely is, Gilly. I’m not your little toy to play with when you want.” I lash out with my words. I know some of them are for Falco too. He came into my home and threatened me. Scared me.

“You’re not a toy.”

“I’ll scream.”

“Carina,” he warns.

“I swear it, Gilly. I’ll scream this whole house down. Then you’ll have to explain to my brother why you’re always sneaking into my room. You tell my secrets, and I’ll tell yours.”

“You’re not being rational.”

“I’ve never been rational, so this shouldn’t come as a surprise to you.” I laugh. “Now leave.” I order him in a sharper tone this time. I know I need to get him out of here before my resolve wanes.

I don’t see it coming. Gilly’s hand wraps around my throat. His hold is firm but gentle, letting me know he’s in control. But is he? I don’t think he really is. Gilly pins me to the bed under him. I don’t fight him. Fear doesn’t shoot through my body like it should. No, instead my traitorous body fills with lust.

“Get some rest, but this *isn’t* done,” he repeats. “You’ll never be done with me.” He presses his mouth to mine in a hard, punishing kiss. “You belong to me.” He releases his hold on me and heads toward my bedroom door. “Cancel the date.”

He doesn’t wait for a response before he slips from my room, closing the door behind him. I want to throw something at the door, but I manage to get myself under control. Barely and mainly because my phone vibrates, reminding me of the task at hand.

Magic: Found him.

Magic: And the man from last night.

Me: They're together.

Magic: Yep.

The first thing I did when I got back to my bedroom was pull security footage from our home and grab a full-face picture of Falco. I knew if Magic had it, she'd be able to track down the man from the other night.

Ocean: You know what you're doing Rebel?

Neither of them ask about my family, but they know. It's an unspoken thing. I'm sure once I handed over the picture along with Falco's full name, Ocean took it upon herself to do a soft dive into the man. I wouldn't expect anything less from her.

Me: Where are they now?

I don't answer Ocean because, *no* I don't know what I'm doing yet. My brother always told me when you don't know what to do, you should be still and wait. So that's exactly what I'm doing.

Magic: Strip Club

Of course that's where they are. It doesn't come as a surprise. She drops the location into the group text.

Magic: There are only cameras on the front and back doors. I know he went in and hasn't come back out yet. I can't see inside. Let me check the phones.

I head to my closet to change. I have to cut up some of my clothes, but when I'm done, I know I'll have no problem getting in.

Magic: There are only three cell phones in that building.

I'm not surprised. I know oftentimes places make you leave your phone at the door. Unless you're a big shot. I'm guessing one of those phones is Falco's.

Me: I need a car.

Ocean: You're going to the strip club?

I snap a picture of myself in the mirror and send it through.

Magic: Wow

Ocean: You look good with red hair. Did you just happen to have a wig in your closet?

Me: Always be prepared.

That's another thing my brother taught me growing up. I bet he'd be surprised that I actually took in everything he said. I grab a long coat and put it on, along with a second phone. If I'm asked to leave one at the door, I'll toss that one at them.

Magic: Back door is opened with a punch code.

A second later, the code pops up in my phone. I grab a knife. It's the only thing I can sneak in and hide easily once I ditch the coat. I hate not having a gun, but Falco is going to learn who he's playing with. I grab my laptop from under my bed and unarm my bedroom window.

Me: Got a car?

Magic: Your question insults me.

Ocean: I don't like this. What am I supposed to do? Hover outside with a drone?

Me: If you want.

I can picture Ocean glaring at the message, but I know that's what she's going to do. She won't be able to help herself. It's easy enough for me to slip out. A car is waiting the same as it was the other night.

The driver doesn't ask questions, already knowing where I want to go.

“Pull to the back,” I tell him when we get closer to the strip club. He does as I say. The back parking lot has a few cars in it, but no one is out here. When the car pulls away, I slip my coat off and stride for the back door. It’s go time.

I glance over my shoulder into the dark sky. I don’t see anything, but I know Ocean is there. I punch in the code, and the door unlocks. I step into the back where four girls are mingling around changing outfits.

“You new?” one asks when she sees me.

“Yes,” I lie.

“What’s your name?”

“Rebel.” I smirk.

Getting in was easier than I thought. Too easy. Now I have to find my target and pray this all doesn’t blow up in my face.

But like I said... I’m irrational. I’m a Palermo.

GILLY

My blood pressure ticks up a notch with each mile farther I drive from the Palermo estate. Where the hell is Carina going?

She snuck out of her room and made quick work of the grounds and the stone wall, then had a ride waiting for her. It makes me itch to know that she's snuck out enough times to have a well-laid plan each time she does it.

I'm putting a stop to this right now. There's absolutely no reason Carina Palermo should be sneaking out in the dead of night. If she was doing something on the up-and-up, she wouldn't need this sort of secrecy. I also know she isn't doing anything shady—if she were, she'd have told Antonio all about it, and he'd probably reward her for having initiative. That leaves one answer to the question of what the fuck she's doing—something *dangerous*. That's the only reason she'd hide it.

My grip tightens on the steering wheel, my knuckles going white as I follow the nondescript black sedan into the northern section of downtown. It's an area on the edge of gentrified and seedy—clubs lining the streets where just a few blocks over, high-rent condos are going up. It's a no man's land. No one family lays claim to this territory, but different families run different clubs along the main strip. Her car turns down the alley behind Maniacs, one of the high-end, invite-only places where dark shit goes down.

I follow, killing the headlights as I maneuver behind a dumpster, my blood pressure still rising at a precipitous pace. It goes through the fucking sunroof when I see her step from the car and whip off her long coat. She's wearing a crop top with a black skirt that could double as a postage stamp. It barely covers her, and I know for certain that if she makes one wrong move, too much of her will be on display.

With nimble fingers, she enters the door code and slips inside. My mouth drops open when I lose sight of her. How the fuck did she know the door code? And *why is she dressed like that?*

A headache forms behind my temple as I put the car in reverse and slam on the brakes once I'm almost out to the main street. Jumping from my car, I hurry to the front door.

"No entry." A bouncer with about a hundred pounds on me holds out his hand, blocking my way.

"If you want to keep that fucking hand, you'll let me pass," I snarl, my anger fogging any rational thought. Anger and ... fear. Carina doesn't belong in a place like this. She could get hurt. Badly.

"We got a tough guy?" He reaches out to grab my lapel.

I take his hand, yank it to the side, then twist his pinky finger so hard it snaps.

He yowls, and another man opens the black door of the club, takes one look at me, then steps back. "Gilly. Didn't expect you."

"Vince." I brush past him.

"Should I tell Mr. Cavalli you're here?" He peers out into the dark behind me. "Is Antonio comin—"

"Just me."

He closes the door on the still-yowling bouncer.

"I'm sorry about him. He's new." Vince gives me a tight smile. He's been a club manager for various families for years. He was on our payroll a while ago at one of our cabaret fronts, but we shut down when the feds got too close.

“I’m looking for a girl.” He tries to hide his shocked expression. He most likely thought I was meeting someone here to talk business.

“Aren’t we all?” His smile widens until I see his gold teeth glinting.

“Who else is here tonight?” I glance around at the black walls leading back into a small club space and then farther into private rooms and torture scenes. This club is well known for its particularly twisted forms of entertainment.

“I’m afraid I can’t divulge client information. You know that.” He drops his voice to just above a whisper. “Heavies in the back. Steer clear.” He taps the side of his nose. “Now let’s find you a girl.”

I let him lead me into the club area. A few tables are enjoying bottle service while two women writhe onstage. I ignore these bit players and peer through the gloom. No Carina.

“Not here.” I turn and head back toward the hallway.

Vince scurries ahead of me.

“Gilly, when I said heavies, I meant it.” He shakes his head. “The Falco heir and—”

Someone moans in the room beside me, and the crack of a whip shatters even the heavy thump of base as a woman screams. I grind my teeth, my body going taut. What if that’s Carina? What if one of these bastards has her? What if it’s *Falco*?

I push past Vince and storm down the hall.

“Gilly!” he squeaks and runs after me.

When I reach a door at the end, I push it open.

“No, that’s the—”

“How do you wear these pasties? It would only cover half my nipple.” Carina’s voice washes over me, and it feels like a cooling drop of rain rolling down my fiery spine. But that lasts only for a moment, because when I see her perched on the

dressing room table trying to stick a pastie to her bare nipple while a working girl looks on, I lose it.

I fucking lose it.

She looks up right when I reach her.

I grab her arm and yank her top back up.

“Gilly!” she squeals and tries to jerk her arm free.

I ignore her protests and drag her through the dressing room and out the back door she so easily entered. Once we’re in the street, I throw her over my shoulder, all while she’s kicking and trying to punch me in the back, and carry her to my car. Then I toss her in the back seat and follow, slamming the door as I sit down.

“Gilly, what are you–No!” she screams when I grip her and yank her onto my lap.

“You’re going to tell me what the fuck you were doing in there.” I don’t even recognize my voice. I’m gone. *Snapped.* “But after.”

Her eyes widen. “After? After what?”

I grip the nape of her neck and bend her over, then yank her legs around the other side of me so she’s lying across my knees. I don’t have to lift her skirt up; it’s already to her fucking waist and showing me a flimsy thong.

“Don’t you ever put yourself in danger again!” *Slap.* I spank her hard. Again and again, I let loose my fear, my longing, my need. I spank her until her ass is red and hot, her cries ricocheting through the car as she looks back at me with teary eyes.

When my fear for her finally subsides, the fire inside me dimming just a hair, I rub her ass, my palm stinging as I smooth the pain from her skin.

Her cries turn into whimpers, then throaty moans.

That’s when I break, when I press my fingers inside her soaked cunt and pull out her wetness to rub her clit.

She bucks, her body going tense as she cries out, her orgasm hitting her hard and sudden as I circle that little nub, wringing out her pleasure until she goes limp. I stare at her perfectly reddened ass and bring my fingers to my lips, licking and sucking the taste of her from them.

When I pull her up and sit her facing me, her eyes are heavy lidded. I wipe the tears from her cheeks, then kiss them.

I cup her face and stare into the eyes that have been my undoing for so, so long. “Don’t ever scare me like that again.”

Her lips part, her brows drawing together. “You were scared?”

“Promise me.” I press my forehead to hers. “Please, Carina.”

She blinks a few times. “I ... I promise.”

The barbed wire that had wrapped around my heart when I saw her disappear into the club finally relents. I can breathe again. I can *think*.

I glance around at the fogged-up windows and remember who’s inside the club. “We have to go. Now. And I want a full explanation on the way home. No bullshit.”

I step from the backseat and close the door, then pause and take a deep breath. I have to steel myself because if she tells me that she came to this club to hook up with Carson Falco, I’ll have his blood on my hands before the sun rises.

CARINA

I sit in the backseat, my body still buzzing with pleasure. I'm not sure what the hell that was, but a pressure I didn't know was there had lifted off my whole body. When Gilly's hand came down on my ass, I was livid, but as the slaps kept coming, I felt myself building to a release I didn't know I needed.

The doors suddenly lock. I sit up straighter. Gilly is still standing outside the car. He pulls out his keys and hits the unlock button. The lock clicks open, but as quickly as it unlocked, it locks again. This time when he pushes the button, nothing happens.

"Carina," he warns.

"It's not me." I hold my hands up to show him that I'm innocent. The car suddenly starts on its own.

"Carina!" he shouts.

"What do I do?" Ocean's voice fills the speakers. "Should I like shoot around him? I'm still not great with the shooting thing. I haven't had enough time to practice."

"Don't shoot!" I scream. Gilly pulls out his gun. I don't think I've ever seen him look more serious, and that's saying a lot.

"Unlock the car." I see the drone down the alley.

"Done," Magic says as the lock clicks back over. Gilly's arm stops before he can hit the window with the butt of his gun. He flips it in his hand and fires one shot. The drone falls from the sky.

“He shot me,” Ocean says in shock as Gilly opens the driver side door.

“The fuck is going on?” He throws the car into drive and peels out of the alley.

“He shot me,” Ocean says again.

“Carina?” He tries to hit the button on the screen of the center dashboard to turn the speakers off, but it’s not going to work. Not with Magic.

“You shot our drone,” I tell him as if that explains everything.

“Your drone?” Gilly grits out. I’m going to get another spanking.

“It’s okay, we have two more.” Magic’s voice comes over the speaker.

“He’s a better shot than you, Rebel.”

“He is not!” The hell?

“Okay, I take it back.” Ocean fights a laugh. She might be laughing, but Gilly is getting madder by the second. He’s used to having everything under control, and this is anything but that.

“Guys, I’m good. I’m heading home.”

“How do we know he’s not making you say that?” Magic chimes in.

“He’s my uncle.” I smirk at my little jab. Gilly shoots me a look that has it quickly dropping off my face. “Seriously, guys. I’m good. I’ll message you later.”

“All right,” Magic says, and then the car fills with silence.

“Rebel? Why are they calling you that? I’m assuming these are the ‘friends’ you mentioned.”

I bite the inside of my cheek, not responding. I don’t know where to start.

“Better yet, why were you at the club?”

“Why were *you* at that club? Do you go there often?” I try to keep my tone flat, but I fail miserably. This whole night has

not gone according to plan.

“Jealous?”

Anger unlike anything I’ve ever felt flashes through my whole body. I reach forward, my hand coming out to smack him. He catches it. “Watch it.” He gives a firm squeeze before releasing my wrist.

“Fuck you.” I fold my arms over my chest and stare out the window. I’m not telling him anything now. I hate that I can’t control my emotions. I’m quick to anger. It’s in my blood.

“Burns, doesn’t it?” I close my eyes and take a breath.

“I’ve never been in that club before.”

“Just that one?” I peek at him.

“Sometimes there are meetings I have to attend in the back of a lot of places.”

“Nice dodge.” I roll my eyes.

“I don’t pay for sex,” he spits. Now it’s him getting angry again. Gilly has always been so calm. I can’t help but enjoy the fact that I can provoke him.

“Then what do you do?”

“Nothing.” He grips the steering wheel harder.

“Nothing? You’re full of shit. There’s no way.”

“Tell me what you’ve been doing, and I’ll tell you,” he offers. Do I really want to know? I’m not sure I’ll be able to take hearing him tell me about him being with a woman.

“You first,” I say after a beat. I guess I’m a masochist.

“I wasn’t lying. I don’t do anything. Not since—” He flicks a glance my way.

“You don’t do anything?” I lick my lips. “You don’t touch yourself, *Uncle Gilly*?”

“God damn it, Carina!” he shouts. Okay. Maybe I took it a bit too far. “Now you. Spill.”

“You didn’t really answer mine, so I don’t have to tell you shit.”

“I told you.” He sighs.

I stare at him for a long moment, and it hits me. “You’re serious?” Gilly is always so calm and disciplined. At least that’s what I remember him as. Until now. He’s snapped. “You’re punishing yourself, aren’t you?” He’s mad that he wants me.

I guess I’m not the only masochist. I want to push for more, but I leave it for now. Gilly has to choose where he stands. He’s fighting his own inner battle. I can’t make him choose me. I wouldn’t want to.

“Your turn.”

“You can’t get mad.” I chew on my bottom lip. I’m already on very thin ice. I’m not sure telling him what I’ve gotten myself into right now is the best idea. I have no idea how he’s going to react. Especially when he hears it involves Falco.

“I couldn’t get madder.”

I don’t speak for a long moment. He pins me with a hard look in the rearview mirror. “Tell me.” I come undone at the gentleness of his tone. The words spill past my lips.

I give it all to him. Well, all that really applies to what’s happening now. Magic, Ocean, and I have done small things to test the waters here or there, such as stealing drones or whatnot, but I don’t go into those tiny details.

“And what did you think you were going to do tonight? Your little drone girl and computer whiz couldn’t protect you inside that club.”

“I was going to show him what it meant to play with a Palermo.”

Gilly shakes his head.

“He came into my home and tried to threaten me,” I hiss.

“You should have told me. I would have handled it.”

“Tell you? Why the hell would I do that?”

“Because I can protect you!” he shouts. It makes me jump. I’m not used to him exploding, but that doesn’t stop me from doing it right back.

“You don’t protect me, Gilly! You hurt me. Don’t you get that?” The words are out of my mouth before I can really think about what I’m saying.

“Carina, I—”

I meet his gaze in the rearview and press my palm to my chest over my heart. “This is what you hurt. Over and again. Don’t tell me you protect me when you always leave me broken.”

He keeps his gaze locked with mine, but I know it’s only a matter of time before he lets go. He always does.

GILLY

The anguish in her voice breaks me. She slumps back in her seat as I drive up to the garage attached to the pool house.

As soon as I put the car in park, she has the door open and is turning to walk away from me. “I can sneak in the same way I snuck out.” Her voice trembles, but she keeps her chin up.

“Stay.” I shouldn’t say it, but I do. I shouldn’t mean it, but I fucking do. I’ve only ever wanted Carina, and I can’t bear the thought of causing her harm.

She whirls. “Stay?” She cocks her head to the side as if she can’t quite hear me.

I reach my hand out to her, holding it open and silently willing her to take it. “Stay with me tonight.”

“So you can play with me some more and hide me away like your dirty little secret?” she challenges.

“No.” I can’t look away from her. I never could, not really. It’s a truth I’ve been fighting, one I thought I could somehow master. But I can’t. Carina isn’t a woman I can deny or ever truly let go, and what I feel for her is all-consuming. Admitting it to myself is easier than I’d imagined. It’s like letting go and falling but knowing that the fall will be worth it, even if the landing hurts.

She steps closer, her gaze on mine. “Then what?”

“I’m going to worship your body and take your virginity. No.” I shake my head. “Not just *take* it. I’m going to enjoy it and

every bit of you, every last fucking crumb. Because I can't keep doing this. I can't keep shutting you out when all I want to do is give you all of me." I take a deep breath. "If that's what you want." My hand is still there, waiting for her to bridge the gap between us.

Her lower lip trembles, and she slowly lifts her arm. "I ..."
She takes my hand, hers small and warm in mine. "I want that. I want *you*."

I pull her to me and kiss her. Hard. Without apology. It's a claiming kiss, one that burns away every bit of the distance and denial. She moans, her body going lax as she presses against me. I grip her waist, holding her close as I back her against the car and swipe my tongue against her lips and into her mouth. She's heaven, every bit of her delicious and sultry.

My cock aches, and I groan when she lifts one of her legs, opening her core to me as I grab her thigh and hike it up even higher. She's wearing next to nothing, but I need more. I need all of her. Gripping her ass, I lift her.

She squeals against my lips as I carry her through the garage and into the house. Wasting no time, I carry her down the hall and to my bedroom. Sitting her on the bed, I drop between her legs and reach for her skirt. With a pull, I yank it free and then do the same to her panties.

"Spread," I grunt and push her knees apart.

My cock strains against my pants when I see the wet, pink flesh between her thighs. I dive down, pressing my mouth to her sweet cunt as she gasps and runs her fingers through my hair.

I need her completely open to me, so I press my hands against her thighs and spread her wider, then delve my tongue into her tight cunt. Honeyed and sweet, her wetness coats my tongue as I suck and lick her, tasting every bit of her as she lies back on the bed.

"I know what you need, Carina. I'm the only man who can give it to you. The only man who will ever taste this perfection." I press my tongue inside her again, and she

arches, her breasts straining against her flimsy top. I reach up and grab the fabric, then yank it down, tearing it and revealing her tits, the nipples hard and dusky.

I lick up her stomach and suck one into my mouth.

“Gilly.” She pants, her eyes on me as I suck one nipple and then the next. Her hips move against me, her body wanting all I have to give. I need to be inside her. It’s like a fucking whip at my back demanding I take what’s mine.

I bite her nipple, and she arches again, pressing against me.

“Please, Gilly. I need ... I need you.” Her voice is breathy, her eyes wild.

I back up and yank off my shirt, then unhook my belt and shuck off my pants and underwear. Her gaze goes straight to my cock, the heat of her eyes like a touch.

I groan and fist myself, pumping once, precum already forming at my head.

She licks her lips, and it almost makes me spill all over her pussy. Fuck, just the mental image of it is nearly too much.

I climb on top of her and press my cock head against her hot pussy. She grips my shoulders as I rub against her, teasing her clit again and again, and also driving myself mad with need. I want to slam inside her, to take every bit of her. But I won’t hurt her. I can’t. Not my sweet Carina.

“Hold on to me.” I claim her mouth as I press my head inside her tight cunt.

She tenses.

I kiss her deeply, stroking my tongue along hers until she answers, her body opening up again as I ease in deeper. When I meet resistance, I grab her wrists and pin them to the bed. She moans and arches. That’s when I press harder, pushing past the resistance and swallowing down her cry as I slide into pure heaven.

I can’t breathe, can’t do anything, not when my Carina is hurting. I pull away, giving her a chance to catch her breath as my cock is squeezed in the most exquisite vise.

“Are you all right?” I kiss her cheeks, her forehead, her chin.

“Y-yes.” She moves her hips a little.

I groan and bite my lip hard enough to draw blood.

“Don’t stop.” Her voice is throaty and sexy and impossible to deny.

I pull back then move deeper. “You were made for me, Rebel.” I kiss her softly. “Just like I was made for you.”

She moves again, her hips pressing against me.

“I need you. More.” She leans up and kisses me.

I don’t need any more urging. I’m on the edge already, my control long gone. With a groan, I pull out to my tip and surge in again, then start a slow rhythm. She starts to match me, her nails digging into my shoulders as I fuck her sweetly.

“More.” She runs her fingers through my hair and pulls. “More, Gilly.”

Fuck, yes. I speed up, fucking her deeply as I kiss to her neck, sucking her sensitive skin and running my teeth along her throat.

Having her beneath me like this is already too much. My cock is threatening to erupt inside her, and I can’t think through the utter bliss.

“I need you to come.” I kiss down to one of her tits and suck the nipple, then slide my hand between us and thumb her clit.

“Gilly!” she squeals.

I move faster, pounding into her as the sounds of skin on skin ricochet around the room. Somehow, I know she likes it hard and fast, rough. So I give it to her.

My orgasm threatens, so I focus on her clit, each pounding move of my hips mimicked by my thumb.

Her hips freeze, her thighs shake, and she arches as my name leaves her lips on a sexy cry. I feel her squeezing around me, her cunt goading me into release. I give in, my cock jerking as

I join her in total pleasure, coating her pussy with every bit of me and marking her as mine.

My Carina.

My Palermo goddess.

My only love.

CARINA

*H*ow many times have I dreamed of this moment? I'm waking up in Gilly's arms. My body aches from the night before. I thought I'd been hungry for him, but he's been relentless in having his way with me all throughout the night.

In his arms, I feel small and delicate. I don't want to move, but I know I need to get back to my bedroom before someone comes looking for me. It would only be a matter of time before my brother or Butcher came knocking. I turn my head to see Gilly's eyes closed, his breathing even. I think he's asleep, but his hold on me is tight. So much so that I'm unsure how the heck I'm gonna get free without waking him.

Slowly, I try to wiggle free. Gilly's arms around me only tighten more. "Where do you think you're going?" His husky voice causes goosebumps to break out along my skin. He presses a tender kiss to my neck that makes me smile. Gilly has always been known as calm, but at times, he could almost seem emotionless. I love that he's now giving me all of him. That he's not hiding.

"I need to pee?"

He grunts but releases his hold on me. I make my way into the bathroom and gasp when I see myself. Love bites mark my breasts. I run my finger across them. He marked me. My nipples harden, and I fight the urge to run back to his bed.

I pull myself together, finding one of his shirts to wear. How am I going to make it to the house without someone seeing

me? I snag my phone from off the nightstand to check the time. Gilly's hand comes out and grabs me around the wrist.

"What are you doing?"

"Going to sneak back into my room."

"I'm done with this sneaking around bullshit." He pulls me down into the bed with him. Gilly rolls, pinning me under him. His mouth claims mine in a hard, possessive kiss.

"Gilly." I moan as my phone starts to go off. I'm sure it's Magic and Ocean trying to make sure I'm okay. It's not long before Gilly's phone starts to go off. He doesn't stop kissing me. I push on his chest. "Your phone."

"Don't care."

"What if it's my brother?" I try to look at my screen to make sure it's actually not my brother calling me. What if he realized I'm not in the house so he called me and then Gilly when I didn't answer?

"Don't care," he says again. "Why'd you get dressed?" A laugh bubbles out of me at his grumpy tone. It's almost a pout.

"I care." I push at his chest again. "I got myself into a mess," I remind him.

"We're not a mess." He stares down at me.

"I don't mean us." I run my fingers through his short hair. "I mean the whole Falco thing." Gilly's face hardens at the mention of his name.

"Don't say his name when we're in bed together."

I roll my eyes because he's being ridiculous. "I never really wanted him."

"Don't care."

"Those are your two favorite words now."

"I care about you." He drops his forehead to mine. I wasn't expecting him to say that. I know it's not an *I love you*, but my heart still flutters as if it is. Gilly hasn't said those words to me, but him picking me over my brother says it all.

“Then maybe I should come clean to Antonio about Falco and then later we can tell him about this,” I suggest. I’m not sure how Antonio is going to handle the news of Gilly and me being a thing. What I do know is that the Falco situation is going to get me into a crap ton of trouble. In my defense, I had no clue when I’d blown up that warehouse that he was connected to it.

“I’m not lying about us.”

“Isn’t that what you’ve been doing? Or did you think you might actually let me go at some point?” I push.

“Fuck,” he grits, rolling off me to sit up on the side of the bed. I fight a smirk. Yeah, Gilly was never going to let another man have me. I crawl over and kiss his shoulder. He grabs me, pulling me around to straddle him.

“Please?” I say before he can try and push. His phone goes off again.

“You win.” He presses a hard kiss to my mouth. “For now.” He stands, putting me onto my feet before he walks over and grabs his phone. I check mine and let out a breath when I see it’s not my brother.

“I’ll be up in a minute,” I hear Gilly say. “Yeah.” I give him a wave as he glares at me, the phone still pressed to his ear. I know this is my chance to escape, so I do. I sneak back up toward the house.

I message the girls, letting them know I’m okay before I unarm the alarm on my window and slip back into the house. The second my feet hit the floor in my bedroom, I know I’m busted.

“And what do we have here?” Angelica asks. Her sister is standing next to her.

“Is this what they call the walk of shame?” Bianca smiles as she says it. Both of them are giddy to know what or better yet who I’ve been up to.

“No.” Angelica shakes her head at her sister. “Carina is shameless.”

“True.” I smirk in agreement.

“Whose shirt do you have on?” Bianca pries.

“What are you two doing in my room?” I ignore her question and ask my own.

“You missed breakfast,” Bianca answers. Angelica is studying me. Does she know whose shirt I’m wearing? Bianca can be more aloof, but not Angelica. She often pretends as if she doesn’t notice something when really she’s watching everything. She’s very cunning and a perfect match for my brother. He got more than lucky with her.

“I never miss meals, do I?” No, because I know Gilly is normally at them or I’ll pass by him at some point. The more I’m out of my bedroom, the more often I get to run into him.

“Not Falco’s?” Angelica finally speaks again. I shake my head no.

“Thank God,” she huffs out.

“Oh good. I thought you really liked him. He gives me the creeps, but I didn’t want to be mean,” Bianca blurts out.

“Well, it’s not Falco. And for the record, if someone gives you the creeps, I’d like to know.”

“I didn’t want to be rude.” Bianca worries her bottom lip between her teeth. It’s mind-blowing that she and the Butcher are married.

“Be rude. Be rude as fuck, Bianca,” I tease her as I head into my bathroom to shower.

As worried as I am about telling my brother that I might have started a war, I can’t bring myself to have regrets. Carson Falco needs to be taken care of one way or another.

I stride into Antonio's office.

"Where were you?" he asks, his gaze straying to my mussed hair.

I didn't bother to shower before coming over to the main house. Then again, if I'm being honest, I didn't want to wash Carina's scent off me. I can catch it even now, soft and feminine, like flowers and citrus.

"Sleeping." I shrug.

"You never sleep in." One of his dark eyebrows rises. "And you missed breakfast. You never do that, either."

I can feel Butcher looking at me from his spot by the fireplace, so I sit on one of the leather sofas and do my best to act natural. Telling Antonio is at the top of my list for the day, but maybe I need to ease him into the information.

"I can skip breakfast now and again. It's not a big deal."

Butcher snorts.

"Where's the fire? You usually don't call unless it's something big."

"It is." Antonio finally stops scrutinizing me and turns to his computer monitor. "I just got an email from some contacts that we have a flesh trader in town, right under our noses."

Fuck, if he's talking about who I think he's talking about, I'm headed straight for the confrontation about Carina and Falco.

“Give me names.” Butcher cracks his knuckles.

“It’s not that simple.” Antonio shakes his head.

Butcher grunts.

“Who is it?” I ask.

“The Falcos.” Antonio’s eyes narrow. “Well, I don’t think it’s all of them. But I suppose we’ll have to cut the head off the snake and take them all out to make sure. Human trafficking is a scourge, and it’s one I won’t fucking tolerate, not in my city. I thought I’d made that clear when I cut all those holdings from the Larone portfolio. But I guess one family didn’t get the message.”

This is it. I’m at the moment where I have to decide if I’ll stay quiet and hide my relationship with Carina, or if I’m going to come clean. Because when I reveal what I know about Carson Falco, it’s going to domino into what happened last night. And I know the weight of what I’ve done. I’ve taken Antonio’s sister for my own without asking for his permission. It’s a major transgression, one that would lead to a date with a bullet in plenty of other families. But with Antonio, it’s different. We’ve known each other a long time. I only hope that the trust I’ve broken in claiming Carina is one that can be mended. After all, I fully intend on him being my brother-in-law in short order.

“Why do you look like that?” I realize Antonio’s been staring at me while I’ve been debating over confessing.

“It’s just my face.”

“Your face looks so strained it’s like you’re trying to shit out the entire Packers offensive line.” He points at me. “Spill.”

I clearly need to work on my poker face. On the other hand, it’s never been a problem before. Only when it comes to Carina does my mask slip. She’s also been under my skin, my little brat turning me upside down and inside out.

I take a deep breath. “It’s not the entire Falco clan. There’s only one bad apple in the bunch.”

“And how would you know that?” Antonio leans back, his gaze fastened on me.

“I have some inside information that—”

“From where?”

“A source.”

His eyes narrow. “Go on.”

“Carson Falco is trying to branch out from his family and work on new endeavors. Everyone we fired from the Larone trafficking systems—the ones we left alive—they work for him now. It’s been going on for a few months, but he’s already buying and selling women, probably turning a decent profit.”

“Carson Falco. The kid who came in here and said all the right things? The one Carina chose for a date?”

I nod. “It’s him.”

Antonio stares for a long time, no doubt going over the myriad of troubles that will arise from wiping out Falco’s operation.

“But there’s another wrinkle.” I have to take my licks. There’s no way around it.

“What wrinkle?”

I clear my throat. Generally, I’m not the type of man to be afraid. I logically plan out all the eventualities, which has kept Antonio alive and atop a thriving empire. I’m the reasonable one. I know that. But this thing with Carina, it defies all logic. It defies everything I’ve ever believed about myself. I think that’s how I know it’s right—Carina is the piece of me I never knew was missing. She gives me a spark of wildfire that seems to burn right through me, all the way to the center of my heart where she lives.

“Carina has gotten involved in trying to shut down the trafficking operation, and Falco made her from surveillance footage. That’s the reason she chose him for a date—he blackmailed her into it, and I have zero doubts he’d try to blackmail her into a marriage.” My teeth grind at the thought of it. “I would *never* let that happen.”

Antonio blinks slowly. “What do you mean ‘Carina has gotten involved’?” His voice is low, deadly.

I retell her clandestine operation with her friends from school, including their ongoing desire to stop Falco at all costs. When I’m done, Butcher has moved around behind me. The huge killer is practically breathing down my neck.

Antonio flips a quarter over his knuckles. Back and forth. Back and forth. His brows are wrinkled in thought. When he finally looks up at me, I can’t read what’s in his eyes.

“And how do you happen to know all this about Carina, Gilly? My second in command. The man I trust above all others? How *exactly* do you know what Carina has been up to right down to the fucking second?”

I’m sitting here looking into the barrel of a proverbial gun. If I tell the truth, it might go off. But there’s nothing for it. I love Carina. No bullet will ever change that fact.

“I know because she spent the night with me last night.”

Antonio’s mouth drops open.

“I know because I love her, Antonio. I’ve loved her ever since she came back from school. She’s it for me. I know this might get me killed. Hell, for all I know, Butcher is pointing a knife at my neck right now.” My hackles rise as I say the words. “But that doesn’t matter because I love her. I love Carina, and I want to make her my wife. I know I should’ve told you, should’ve come to you first. But this thing between Carina and me ... it’s not something I can describe. It’s not something I planned.” I shrug. “But it’s also not something I can deny. I want Carina for myself. Forever.”

Antonio slowly rises, thunderclouds gathering across his brow.

I take a deep, calming breath and send out a silent message to Carina. It contains an apology for leaving her so suddenly, and more than that, it contains all my love.

CARINA

“*Y*ou guys still here?” They really aren’t going to give up on this one. I towel dry my hair as I walk toward my closet to find something to wear. I wonder when Gilly is going to tell my brother about Falco. I should have told him to wait for me so we could go to Antonio together. It’s my mess, and I’ve pulled everyone else into it.

“We left and came back,” Bianca says. I can tell she wants to say more but is holding herself back.

“You should get dressed,” Angelica tells me. “Quickly,” she adds. I pause at my closet door when I hear the concern in her voice.

“Why, what’s going on?”

“Dressed,” she snips to hurry me along. Sure, Angelica can hand out orders, but she’s not one to be bossy unless there is a reason. It doesn’t take long before that reason dawns on me.

“Oh God, he knows.” I rush into my closet and quickly throw on some clothes. “How mad is he?” I ask when I exit my closet. “I didn’t know it was Falco’s warehouse when I took it down.”

“What warehouse? How do you take down a warehouse?” Bianca gives me a confused look.

“You bomb it.” I sigh. Antonio must be really mad if Angelica rushed up here to give me a heads up.

“You blew up a warehouse?” Bianca’s eyes widen with surprise. “That’s kinda badass. I thought this is about you and

Gilly hooking up.”

“He told my brother?” I hiss. What the hell? That was the one thing I told him not to do!

Of course he didn’t listen. I never listen either, but that’s beside the point. Still, he just came out and told my brother? I hadn’t really gone over the repercussions of how Antonio would handle this. Gilly is his second in command and his most trusted confidant. What if he sees it as a sign of disrespect and disloyalty? What will happen to Gilly? My stomach turns at the thought of him getting hurt or worse.

“I told you to get dressed quickly,” Angelica points out. My heart starts to race.

“Is it that bad?” Fuck. I’m so stupid. I wanted him to pick me over my brother. I should have thought about what that might mean for Gilly. How my brother might handle that. I don’t wait for Angelica to respond. I take off at a dead sprint down the hallway and toward my brother’s office.

I can hear Angelica and Bianca calling my name, but I don’t stop. My only focus is getting to Gilly. I need to know he’s okay. I burst through my brother’s office doors, not bothering to knock. I’m already in trouble.

“Antonio!” I scream when I see he’s got his hand wrapped around Gilly’s neck. Butcher stands off to the side unmoving. Gilly doesn’t try to fight my brother.

“Carina.” Both Gilly and my brother say my name at the same time.

“Don’t either of you say this isn’t my business.” I rush over and grab my brother’s arm.

“Don’t, Carina. It’s his right to be angry.” I ignore him and keep trying to pull on my brother’s unmovable arm. I knew he was strong, but this is ridiculous.

“It’s my fault. I seduced him.” I’m getting more pissed by the second.

“That’s probably not going to help,” I hear Butcher say.

“Shut it,” I snap at him. “Antonio,” I plead with my brother. “He picked me.” I tug on his arm.

“Is that true, Gilly? Do you pick her? Is she where your allegiance lies?”

“I pick her the same as either of you would pick your wives.” My brother’s expression turns even harder at Gilly’s response.

“You’d kill me?” Antonio challenges.

“I’d kill anyone if it came down to it for her,” Gilly says without missing a beat. My eyes fill with tears. My brother releases his hold on Gilly, but neither of them move. I do. I wrap myself around Gilly’s arm.

“Maybe he should have come to you first, but I needed—”

“Him to pick you,” my brother finishes for me. “I’d say welcome to the family, but you’re already family.” he smirks. The tension bleeds out of the room.

“You jerk.” I shove at my brother’s chest. He actually takes a step back.

“*Ribelle*.” Gilly tucks me into his side so I can’t go for my brother again.

“Rebel? It’s actually a good name for her.” My brother keeps on smirking.

“He didn’t give it to me. He just said it in Italian.” Which actually makes it sound really hot. Not that I’m going to tell my brother that.

“That the name your little bandits call you?” Now the smirk drops from my brother’s face.

“Little bandits? Really?” He did not just call us that. “I’ll have you know we blew up Falco’s whole warehouse.”

“As I’ve heard. You really are going to have your hands full, Gilly.” My brother walks around behind his desk to sit down.

“Don’t,” Gilly says to me before I can say what Gilly will have his hands full of. I bite the inside of my cheek to keep my mouth shut. Gilly drops a kiss on the top of my head, and I find myself relaxing.

“You think I didn’t know about this?” My brother motions toward us.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Angelica huffs from the doorway. “You’re keeping secrets from me.”

“Come here.” He pushes his chair back.

“Don’t boss me around,” she says but goes to him.

“They needed to play their game without us interfering.” He pulls her into his lap.

“So everything is okay?” Bianca’s soft voice drifts through the office. She stands tentatively outside. Butcher walks over and grabs her hand, pulling her into the room.

“Game?” Seriously?

My brother shrugs. “Angelica has been wanting to plan a party anyhow. So I played along with *your* game.” He gives me a pointed look. “As you said. He picked you.”

“As he should.” Angelica cuts in.

“Yes,” my brother says in agreement with his wife. “But your other little games are another story.”

“That warehouse needed to go. I might not have gone about it in the smoothest of ways, but I don’t regret it. I got the job done.”

“You did, but your action was impulsive, foolhardy. Now you have a target on you, and we’re going to have to deal with it.” Antonio glowers. “*Harshly.*”

Gilly shifts to stand behind me, wrapping his arm around me, my back pressing into his chest. My brother lets out a long sigh, knowing where I get my impulsiveness from.

Him.

GILLY

“*W*e can’t spend all day in bed.” Carina kisses my chest, her soft lips like whispers against my skin.

“We can.” I run my fingers through her hair, then roll over, pinning her beneath me.

She squeals as I kiss her throat then bite her, leaving another mark on her beautiful body.

“You’re so bad!” She wriggles beneath me as I cup one of her breasts, squeezing it lightly as I return to her mouth.

I can’t get enough of her. I know I never will.

“We stayed in bed all day yesterday.” She laughs as I press my knee between her thighs. “You know everyone in the house is gossiping about us. Not to mention Ocean and Magic. They’ve been texting me nonstop.”

“You’re mine, Carina. Everyone else is just noise.” I lick her throat again.

She sighs. “I wish we could just stay here. But we can’t. The plan—”

“I don’t like it.” I lift up on my elbows and stare down at her.

She cups my cheek. “I know, but it’s a good plan.”

“Even so.” I know Antonio would never put her in danger, but just the thought of her spending any time with Falco alone makes my fury bubble and burn.

“We have to neutralize Falco. This is the best way to do it. All I have to do is show up for the date, spend a tiny amount of time with him, then leave. After that—”

“The Butcher and I hijack him, take him somewhere private, and handle him. I *know* the plan, Rebel, but that doesn’t mean I like it.”

“It’s safe this way. We know where he’ll be and when, and none of the families can point the finger at us because I’ll be out of the picture by the time you and Butcher kidnap him. Not to mention, Antonio and Angelica will be at dinner at the LaPaglia family’s house, totally above suspicion.”

I sigh and roll over, bringing her with me so she’s perched on top of me. “I don’t want him anywhere near you.”

She smirks. “Because you’re jealous?”

“No, because I love you.”

Her eyes widen.

Now it’s my turn to smirk. “Have I finally managed to leave you speechless?”

She stares for a moment, then a smile breaks across her perfect face. “Really?”

“Yes really. Maybe you’ve noticed that I can’t stand to be away from you, I can’t ignore you even though I fucking tried, and I’m completely obsessed with you.”

Her smile grows bigger, then falters. “I don’t know. I mean, you’ve always been here, always been loyal to my brother—”

“No.” I shake my head.

“No?” She arches a brow and rests her chin on my chest.

“I’m loyal to *you*. Before anyone else.”

“Even Antonio?”

“Even him.” I tuck her hair behind her ear. “I’m in love with you, Carina. Have been for a long time. I haven’t stuck around here for Antonio’s sparkling personality.”

She snorts.

“I’ve stayed for you. Only you.”

The way she looks at me—it makes it hard to breathe. The trust in her eyes, the admiration—it almost hurts.

“I love you too. I’ve loved you for longer than I think is even legal.” She quirks a brow. “But one day I just knew I’d never get over you.”

“You don’t have to get over me. I’m yours.”

She kisses my chest. “And I’m yours. Now, let’s get this Falco crap handled so you can make love to me until I pass out.” She climbs off me and darts away before I can snatch her back.

I groan as she sprints into the bathroom and turns on the shower.

As much as I don’t want to admit it, she’s right. The plan is solid. I just have to keep my cool until it’s time for me to take Falco down. But when it comes to Carina, I’ve never been able to think clearly. I can only hope this time will prove to be the exception.



“Fancy,” Butcher grunts, his lip curling in disdain as we enter through the kitchen of La Rue, an upscale restaurant on the swank edge of downtown.

A few of the servers give us curious looks, then they go back to hurrying from the kitchen with full plates. In a place this busy, no one’s going to ask any questions of two well-dressed men like us. We could be wealthy patrons, guests of the chef, or even some sort of Michelin star committee members.

“This way.” I already have the restaurant’s layout burned into my brain, and I make a path through the kitchen, into a back hallway, and then into a small antechamber next to a private dining room—the Falco dining room, to be precise.

“Hey.” Butcher’s meaty paw comes down on my shoulder. “Go easy.”

“I am,” I grate out.

He grunts, his only response.

We creep closer to the dining room. Its heavy wooden doors are shut, but I can hear voices inside. Carina is talking, and she sounds almost bored. For some reason, that soothes me.

It goes quiet for a moment, and I move a step closer. Then I hear Falco. His voice is louder, and it's angry.

I take another step.

“—tell your brother what you did. Sit down! You aren't going anywhere until you agree to my proposal. We *will* be married.”

Carina laughs. “You really think I'd marry you? I wouldn't piss on you if you were on fire. You're nothing but a lowlife pimp. Now get out of my way. I'm leaving.”

“I said sit down, you stupid bitch!”

Carina yelps.

That's all it takes. I shove the doors open, my knife already in hand.

“What the—“ Falco has his hand around Carina's arm, gripping her hard, then he reaches into his suit coat.

Right as he does, she swings, the edge of her hand chopping him in the windpipe.

He releases her and gasps.

I throw my knife, the blade hitting him between the eyes.

Falco looks surprised, then cross-eyed as he looks at the knife. He falls, his head glancing off the table as he goes down in a heap.

Carina runs to me, and I catch her in my arms.

“Did he hurt you?” I ask.

“No.” She shakes her head against me.

Butcher closes the doors behind us, then calmly strides over to the dead man. He drops to his haunches, then looks up at me.

“Fuck,” he grunts.

“I know.” I botched the whole damn plan, but I don’t regret it. I can’t, not when Carina could’ve been hurt. “This is going to start a war.”

“Hang on.” She pulls her phone out and gives me a wicked smirk. “I think I might have a solution.”

“*W*hat are you doing?” Gilly growls at me as I search Falco’s pocket.

“I’m copping a feel,” I deadpan, earning me a glare that I know I’ll be paying for later.

If I didn’t have my hand in a dead man’s pocket, I’d be getting excited about what was to come later with Gilly. This probably isn’t the right time to be thinking about that, but I can’t bring myself to be the least bit sad that Falco is dead. “Got it.” I pull out Falco’s phone.

“It’s locked.” Butcher states the obvious. Not a second after he says it, the lock screen magically disappears, granting me full access.

“Thank you, Magic,” I whisper to myself as I go through Falco’s texts.

“Blood Badgers.” I say the code words, knowing my phone will respond to my voice and bring Magic and Ocean online. I hit the button so that they’ll be on speaker.

“We’re here,” Ocean says. The expression on Butcher’s face is almost comical. He really shouldn’t be too surprised. I was the one to hack into the Larones’ home and find his Bianca. Whom he kidnapped not long after.

“There’s a guy named Kent, right? That’s Carson Falco’s right-hand?” I know Falco has a man waiting outside in an SUV near his car. He wouldn’t have come alone. We need that man gone.

“Yeah,” Gilly answers.

“Magic, I need you to scan Falco’s texts. I need to know how he’d word a text to Kent to tell him to leave and meet him at the warehouse on Benton.”

“Warehouse on Benton?” Gilly gives me another glare.

“I was going to tell you after tonight, but this should work too.”

“Give me a second,” Magic says. I hear her clicking away as the computer scans through Falco’s texts. “Got it. Text him *Meet at Benton. I’m going to play with Carina.* He spells your name with a K.”

I immediately send off the text.

Kent: Playing with goods before you buy them? Be careful. She’s a Palermo.

“Oh gross,” Magic mutters.

“What?” It must be bad if she won’t say it, but she can be shy when it comes to being crude or talk of sex.

“I don’t wanna say it,” Magic huffs.

“It says to respond with *Do as you’re told and I’ll let you play with her too soon,*” Ocean says for Magic. I cringe at the sound of bones breaking fills the room.

“He’s dead already,” I try to reason with Gilly as I send the text. “Get his keys.” Gilly pulls the knife from Falco’s head and then fishes out the keys in his pocket. “Are there cameras in this restaurant?”

“Only outside in the front parking lot,” Ocean replies. “I’m taking them all down now.”

“There might not be cameras, but you have to get this body out of here.” I shove Falco’s phone back into his pocket. “Put him in his own car and drive him to—” Ocean cuts in, spouting off the full address.

“What’s at the Benton warehouse?” Gilly asks.

“That’s where they set up a new shop for their ketamine and Rohypnol manufacturing.”

“You’re still keeping secrets from me.” Gilly’s displeasure is evident in his tone.

“I only told her about it like an hour ago.” Ocean once again jumps in for me.

“I think we’re good, girls. We’ve got it from here.”

“Fine,” Ocean huffs, sad she won’t see the warehouse blow up. Though I suppose she still might watch.

“Be careful out there, Rebel,” Magic says before they go offline.

“So.” I stare down at the dead body. “You guys have some stuff to do. I’ll just—”

“You’re not going anywhere.” Gilly grabs my wrist.

“Really? I can come with?” I was sure he was going to send me home so I was doing it myself before he got the chance.

“I know how much you enjoy watching shit explode.”

“You’re so sweet.” I grab Gilly by the front of the shirt and pull him down for a kiss.

“Get the car.” He presses Falco’s keys into my hand. “Pull it around back.”

“On it!” I chirp, slipping out as discreetly as I can. When I get around to the back with the car, Butcher is coming out with Falco draped over his shoulder. He drops him into the back seat. I scramble over to the passenger seat so Gilly can take over the wheel while Butcher gets in the car.

“You okay?” Gilly asks.

“I’m fine.” I reach over and place my hand on his thigh. His body is full of tension. “That was really hot,” I admit, biting my bottom lip.

“Me knifing someone does it for you?” He flicks me a questioning look.

I snort a laugh. “That was pretty badass, but I’m not that crazy. You being jealous. That’s what was hot.”

“Fucking great,” he mutters under his breath.

“What?”

“If you start trying to make me jealous all the time...” He grits his teeth.

“I promise I’ll only do it with people that I want to die. I swear.” I hold up three fingers, doing a scouts honor.

“What am I going to do with you?”

“I can think of a few things.” I wiggle my eyebrows at him. He fights a smile, but I catch it. Gilly and I are truly a perfect match. He balances me, and I know he’s going to keep me out of trouble—or at least keep me from getting in over my head.

Butcher enters the warehouse first when we get there. Gilly hands me a gun and tells me to stay in the car. As badly as I want to go in with them, I know Gilly will work better knowing I’m safe in the SUV.

They aren’t inside long before Gilly is coming out. One of the doors to the warehouse opens, and Gilly pulls the car inside. I watch as he takes Falco’s body out of the back seat. Good call. It would be odd for him to be in the backseat of his own car. He drops him on the ground next to the vehicle and shoves the keys back into his pocket.

The door starts to close but not before Gilly and Butcher come jogging out. They jump into the SUV.

“How is it going to blow up?”

“I know how to blow shit up too,” Butcher grumbles, backing the SUV up and pulling out.

“Oh, I thought you just tortured people,” I tease. A boom goes off, and I spin around to see the warehouse going up in flames.

“Seatbelt,” Gilly orders.

“Seriously?”

“Yes, seriously.”

“Whatever,” I huff but put my seatbelt on.

“At least someone can keep her in line,” Butcher mutters.

“I’m keeping her all right,” Gilly responds, making my insides flutter.

“Cause I’m letting you,” I blurt out, unable to stop myself.

“You can have the last word, little rebel.”

“I know.” I smirk.

The man really does give me everything I need and more.

EPILOGUE

GILLY

“*T*he family that disposes of bodies together, stays together.” Carina smirks and raises her glass in a toast.

Antonio rolls his eyes and raises his, too, along with the rest of the table.

It’s not custom for the bride to make her own wedding toast, but my little rebel has never been one for following the rules. Antonio, Angelica, Butcher, Bianca, and I all clink glasses then down our champagne.

Carina’s glass is barely on the table before I grab her and swing her into my arms, her wedding dress puffing into my face as I carry her toward the door.

“Hey, but there’s going to be food!” Angelica calls.

“I’m coming back for the food. I promise!” Carina calls.

“She’s telling the truth.” The blue-haired Ocean’s voice trails behind us. “She never missed a meal at school.”

“I won’t let you go hungry.” I kiss her neck, then run along the main hallway, out past the pool, and into the pool house while she squeals and holds on tight.

“Are you threatening me, Gilly?” She grins.

“What about me stuffing my cock into that perfect little mouth is a threat?” I kiss her hard and carry her into our bedroom, and almost trip on Caramel who flounces at my feet.

“Whoa!” I jump back.

“You almost stepped on the baby!” Carina coos and kicks her legs, trying to get me to put her down.

“The baby is not cock-blocking me. Not this time.” I gently shoo the sweet fluffball out of our bedroom with my foot and close the door. I have no doubt he’ll sit outside the door, staring at it until it opens again. He’s still a kitten, but he’s hopelessly devoted to my sweet rebel.

“Promise to apologize and give him treats?” She kisses my neck.

“Anything you say as long as you spread for me.”

She giggles as I lay her on the bed and stretch out on top of her, her poofy skirt making it difficult for me to get where I need to be.

I sit back and yank it up, then growl when I see she’s totally bare. “No panties?”

“What can I say?” Her eyes glint with mischief. “We both know I’m a brat.”

“No fucking shit.” I can’t resist. I bend down and inhale her sweet cunt, then lick her from hole to clit.

She squeals and digs her fingers into my hair, and I press my tongue inside her, tasting all of her as I unfasten my pants and free my cock.

Focusing on her clit, I lick and suck until her thighs are shaking, her body taut, her back arched, and then I pull away.

“Gilly!” she cries.

I spread her wider, then press my head at her entrance.

“I thought you were going to make me suck—oh!” She moans as I thrust fully inside her, her slick walls welcoming me as my cock thickens even more.

I yank down the top of her dress and fasten my mouth around one of her hard nipples, tonguing it as I thrust hard and deep, making her mine again and again.

She wraps her legs around me, her body moving with me, chasing her pleasure as she grinds and arches.

I don't ease up. I can't. We said our vows and sealed ourselves to each other, but this is primal. This is my essence marking hers. It's forever, and I want her to feel our bond as strongly as I do.

"Can you feel it?" I pull back and look at her flushed face, her parted lips.

"I can feel you." She leans up and kisses me. "All of you. Your cock, your heart, your love." She nibbles my bottom lip. "I want it all."

"You have it all."

She smiles up at me, her lashes fluttering as I keep us joined and grind against her clit. "You have mine, too. I'm yours."

"My brat."

"Your rebel." She twines her arms around my neck, pulling me close as I hit her just the way she likes.

Her hips lock up, her body surging toward release. I urge her to it, fastening my mouth to her neck and sucking her favorite spot.

She comes on a cry, my name echoing off our bedroom walls as my cock pulses with my own release. I come hard, surging as deep as I can, coating her with me as I worship her body and soul.

She's been my obsession, and now she's my bride. I don't deserve her, but I'll never give her up.

I choose her. I always will. Over her family name, over her brother, and even over my own life. She's mine.

My Brat.

My Rebel.

My Carina.

ALSO BY MINK

Her Christmas Spy

He's been sent to ruin Christmas. She's not going to let that happen, and she may just fall in love along the way.

Unexpected Love

He's the Butcher. He spills blood for a living and enjoys every second. She's a sheltered mafia princess, one who sees him for more than his violence. But can love bloom between such different souls? (Hint: Totes.)

Unexpected Queen

He doesn't expect love when he marries the woman he's betrothed to. Until he sees her and realizes she's the reason for everything he'll ever do.

Protecting Zoe

He's a hardened mafia kingpin. She's an innocent woman caught in the crossfire. He saves her life, but he wants more than a simple thank you in return ...

Guardian's Obsession

He's in charge of her inheritance, but he wants to be in charge of her heart, soul, and her wicked curves.

Rebel Tempts the Beast

She's the virgin daughter of his longtime mentor. He's head of a syndicate with no attachments, no need for love. Until he meets her.

Treasured

He's an art thief. She's a mafia man's daughter. She's also kinda clumsy ... With broken ancient vases and a grumpy hero turned mushy for his woman, these two are a perfect match.

Christmas Crush & Christmas Grump

This Christmas in Reindeer Valley is sure to steam up your Kindle. A second chance romance plus a grumpy/sunshine romance all set in the same small town? Sign me up!

Married to My Stalker

He's so obsessed with her that he wifes her stat. But when she starts to figure out his dark side, she realizes she wants it to come out and play ... dirty.

Plump

He's a mafia boss. She's *plump*.

Obsessed Love

He's fresh out of prison. She pulls him over. So, naturally, he puts her in his trunk and takes her home to make her the queen of his illegal empire. Nice.

Crazy Love

He has a screw loose because of a head injury a while back. But he still knows his true love when he sees her. If only her mouthy cat—whom he can hear—would stop distracting him with all its sassy comebacks!

Claiming His Kitten

He wants her father's fortune and will go to any lengths to steal it out from under her. But, let's be honest, he's kidding himself. What he really wants is *her*.

Vetting His Kitten

A bad man who goes all warm and cuddly for his one true love. Gaaaahhhh, I love this one!

Wrecked

He knows how to fight, but can he learn to protect the one woman who's ever made him feel hope?

Nanny Tempts the Beast

She needs a job. He needs a nanny. And then he needs only *her*.

Unforgettable

Amnesia romance with a sassy kitty and a tantalizing mystery? What's more MINK than that?

Bodyguard's Obsession

He's supposed to protect her, but he ends up needing to stay *very* close to her. For, ya know, *safety*. *wink wink*

His Clever Kitten

She takes him hostage to save her kitty cat shop. It just so happens he's a mafia boss who'll do anything to stay locked up tight just for her.

His to Keep

A bodyguard's work is never done, especially when he can't keep his eyes off his client.

119 Kitty Lane

MINK takes a trip to Cherry Falls in this sweet romance.

Santa Material

A big bear of a Santa and the handy woman he loves. Spoiler Alert: He's going to stuff her full of Christmas cheer.

Taming His Bride

Book 4 of the Blushing Brides Series.

Stealing His Bride

Book 3 of the Blushing Brides Series.

Claiming His Bride

Book 2 of the Blushing Brides Series.

Knocking Up His Bride

Book 1 of the Blushing Brides Series.

Four brides, four rough men with a soft spot for the women they love.

Under His Spell

A haunted house, a ghost story of lost love, and a brand new love blooming under a full moon. This spooky sweet story is sure to get your blood racing for all the right reasons.

Beauty Tempts the Beast

Revenge is his life's work, but when he finds his Beauty in the heart of an enemy, will he be up for a career change?

Loan Shark's Obsession

He knows priceless objects when he sees them. So when he sees her, he *knows*.

His Stolen Bride

Her first husband never touched her. He's dead. Now she belongs to Santino, and there will be much, *much* touching.

His Stolen Princess

They were meant to be ... until they weren't. So, he steals her. Logical. Also, there's a cat.

Stalking Her Sweetly

Who's stalking whom?

Hitman's Heart

He's a badass who kills without remorse. She's a good girl who gets caught in the crosshairs. He saves her, but can he keep her?

His Secret Treasure

He says artifacts belong in a museum. She says he stole an ancient box that belongs to her. Can they come to terms over her box?

My Hero's Secret Baby

He's a hero to her, the boogeyman to everyone else. Can they have a future together?

His Tiger Queen

She's a princess in a heavily guarded tower. He's the prince next door. Did I mention there's also a pet tiger?

His Virgin Heiress

She's a thief. He keeps her safe. But can she give up jewel heists for love?

Cuffed Love

MINK's personal favorite. Seriously. I love this book.

Stuffed

Stuffies, hitmen, true love, and accidental homicide? MINK at her finest.

His Sweetest Sin

He's a priest, not a sinner ... Until he sees her.

Locking Her Down

She broke into an animal shelter. He's the only one who can help her, but this attorney knows what he wants in return (hint: it's not justice.)

Marco's Girl

Marco is the bad boy prince of a mafia empire, but his heart is set on a darling good girl.

Pop-up Love

Mobsters, mayhem, a Hallmark movie, and a pop-up shop full of love? Yes.

Beauty and the Boss

She wants to bring her cat to work. He wants to bend her over his desk. Win-win.

His Virgin Queen

He killed her husband and took her for himself.

His Deadly Darling

She's spicy. He's determined. Together, they're unstoppable.

Hitman's Prey

He always seemed so nice ... (and hot).

Snow Angel

She wants to beat him in the lights competition; he just wants her. This Christmas is lit.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



MINK writes sweet and salty romances that always satisfy with a happily ever after.

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SWEET PSYCHO

SWEET PSYCHO

MINK

Am I the hunter ... Or the prey?

I have a few quirks. Nothing too out there. Not really. I mean, yeah, I like to know everything about everyone around me. I tend to obsess over little things. Round foods freak me out. Social interactions give me hives. But, really, those are completely normal issues. Right?

My world is on lock, except for the part where I have to work for the government to stay out of maximum security prison. At least, everything **was** on lock until I'm tasked with getting to the bottom of Owen Caddel. He's just part of my job. That's all. Except ... the moment I focus on him, I realize I want to know everything. Every last detail. He's maddeningly fascinating, a puzzle I must solve.

I need to figure him out, and I'm just psycho enough to stalk him until I do. But here's the thing ... What happens when I begin to suspect he's been stalking me all along?

MAGGIE

They really make this way too easy. I smile when I see the \$5 million deposited into the account I set up. It no sooner hits the account before I move the money, bouncing it around, covering my tracks as I go. In a few quick keystrokes, I distribute the money out to smaller organizations I know are in need and will put it to good use. Many of them just happen to be cat shelters.

The pharmaceutical company will never miss the small ransom I made them pay. True to my word, I release back the company's private servers that I wiped clean. I might let some of the files leak out in the process. No sense hoarding information that could help others.

I reward myself with eight M&Ms. All brown. It's the only color I can eat. The others are all unnatural.

"Magic." I jump when Ocean's voice comes through my computer. She's the only person in the world I've given a small wormhole to me, only so she can slip through if need be. It still makes me jump every time her voice randomly fills the room.

I pretty much block out all sounds around me when I'm working. Even the loud shots from the video games my father is playing down the hallway.

"We have a problem." Those are four words a girl like me never wants to hear. Especially coming from Ocean.

I might be good with hacking my way in and out of anything, but Ocean is better with hands-on tech. Not that her hacking

skills are something anyone should ever turn their nose up at.

“How long do I have?” I ask, hoping to get a head start.

“None.” How the hell? “Sorry, I don’t know.” Ocean is as surprised as I am.

“Dad!” I call out to my father. “Going dark.” I give him a second heads up as I clear out my system, pushing it over to bounce until I go back to find it.

“Fuck, I didn’t save,” he mutters as I hit our own home with an EMP.

“I’ll get it back.” This is going to be a mess to clean up. My father steps into my room to wait with me. I fold my arms over my chest, getting more irritated by the second. Patience has never been my strong suit.

I’m pleasantly surprised when our front door isn’t annihilated. Two people dressed in all black flood into my room first before I hear the click of heels. That’s all it takes for me to know who’s here.

“The hell!” I jump out of my chair, unbothered by the men in full tactical gear that now surround me. Duffy and I are supposed to have an understanding, and this isn’t it.

Agent Duffy appears, her blond hair pulled back into a tight bun. Her suit—I think she has a million of the same one—doesn’t have a wrinkle in it. I’m always impressed with her sharpness and presence.

“When I let you go to those fancy schools, I thought we’d be millionaires one day.” My dad sighs. This isn’t the first or even second time the government has shown up at our doorstep. I don’t hide from them. In this digital age, no one can really hide. Even people like me who are good at covering their tracks.

“Who said we aren’t millionaires?”

My dad chuckles at my response.

From the outside, we appear to live an average life in suburbia on the cusp of the city. In reality, both my father and I are anything but average. He knows nothing of technology beyond

a video game or some wiring, but he is well prepared for the end of the world if need be. Last summer, we built a killer bomb shelter underground. The zombies will never get to us.

“You haven’t returned my call, Ms. Fox.”

“That might be a hint.”

Her lips purse.

“We had a deal. I stay out of your way, and you stay out of mine. If I happen across something terrible, I’ll toss it over to you.” I’ve tried to not come across terrible things. Ones that would haunt your dreams.

“Something has come up.”

“I’m guessing not a dead witness.” Two years ago, the FBI had a ransom of their own. The whole WITSEC system was compromised. To date, that’s still the hardest job I’ve ever done. I secured their system with the help of Parks. He’s only a few years older than I am and works full-time with Duffy.

“No one is dead.” She glances around my bedroom. It’s clean but also what others might call chaotic. Duffy picks a picture up from my dresser. It’s one of my mother. “You look like her.”

“I know.”

Duffy puts the picture down.

I walk over and shift the frame back to its correct spot at the perfect angle. My mother was my age in the picture. My memories of her have faded over the years. I was young when she died. Sometimes I don’t know if they’re my memories or the stories my father tells me.

“Duffy.” Her name crackles over a radio.

“That thing from the ’90s?”

Duffy ignores me. No wonder we didn’t see them coming.

“Yes,” she replies.

“There is a drone,” the voice over the radio responds.

Oh, crap. Ocean will be so pissed if they shoot down her drone.

“Leave it,” Duffy orders. “I’m sure Ocean, as you call her, will know all about this.”

She’s not wrong.

“Get on with it.” My father’s patience can grow thin when it comes to people being in his space. He’s not a people person.

“We need your help.” Another set of words I hate hearing coming from the FBI.

“Why should I help you?”

“Because we turn a blind eye to your little Robin Hood games.”

“You’re really going to bother me over that?”

“No, the truth is while I think your little games are silly, they are also very telling of your character.”

Is that an insult? I’ll have to ask Ocean later. I might be good at reading between the lines when it comes to network systems but not so much with people. “Besides, aren’t you up to a challenge?” She leans on my desk, her gaze devious. “Parks got us nowhere with this.”

“Really?” Now my curiosity is piqued. Damn it. She’s playing me. I know it, and still I can’t stop myself when she holds out a picture for me to take.

“Owen Caddel.” I stare at the man in the picture. Something about him is familiar, but I can’t place it. I’m not great with faces or names. I can recall every detail of a project, but everything on the outskirts often gets lost to me.

“Is he famous or something?” The man is handsome enough. The strange thought fires through my mind.

“Owen tries to keep himself off the radar.”

“No one is off the radar.”

“No.” Duffy smirks, and I know I played into her hand again. “They aren’t, but he somehow has been able to elude us. We

want you to find out whatever you can about him.”

“That’s all you’re giving me? A name and a picture? Shouldn’t I know why I’m doing this?” I mean, name and pic are all I need, but a why might be nice. I should at least know what type of person I’m dealing with.

“We both know why you’re doing this.”

I hate that she has my number on this. “I know I’m better than Parks.”

“Prove it.” Duffy turns to leave.

“Hey! You’re paying for all this. I have to replace everything.” A small growl rumbles from me, making my dad chuckle. He always finds the stupid sound funny.

“Send an account number.” Her heels click loudly on the floor. I should get carpet, but there’s the whole germs thing.

“Crypto.”

“Of course.”

As quickly as they arrived, they’re gone, leaving me only with a picture. One I can’t help but keep glancing down at.

“Can you really get my unsaved game back?” Dad asks. I try to glare at him, but he’s smiling, making it impossible for me to hold the expression.

“I’ll make dinner.” It’s Tuesday. On Tuesday nights, I eat tacos.

I place the picture down on my desk, forgetting about dinner. My fascination is already piqued.

Who are you, Owen?

Power sparks back to life in my compound as I finish the repair on the solar panel array. As soon as everything is running, I close the panel and sit up. That's when I hear my servers begin to hum and run through all their fail-safe programming in the event of a power outage.

Pulling out my list from my back pocket, I add a squirrel trap to it. The little jerks run the forest around my place. Not content with all the feed I put out for them, they've decided to move on to chewing through electrical wire.

I sigh and stand, stretching as I walk out of the shed and onto the courtyard by the pool.

My garden is already coming along for the spring, the hydroponics towers pumping out winter lettuce and other greens while the weather slowly warms.

The main house is glowing in the early evening light, and the outbuildings shine at intervals. The stables are the brightest, my spoiled horses getting heat lamps even when the temperatures are high enough for them to be more than comfortable.

Something bumps against my leg, and I lean down to pet Alfie. He gives me a sweet meow, his tail twitching as he winds between my ankles.

"You're not much for catching pests. These squirrels are running circles around you." I scratch behind his ears as he gives me a look as if to say *It's 50 acres. I'm just one handsome tomcat. I can't get them all.*

I suppose he's right. That's why I'll pick up a trap next time I'm in town. I can catch them and take them off to some other woods where they can terrorize someone else.

It's a hazard of living off the grid. Dealing with random squirrels and a spoiled cat—all in a day's work.

“Let's get inside. Supper's almost done.” I stride into the house, closing the door behind us. “It's almost time to get back to work. That little power blip didn't hurt us any, but it could've left us open to prying eyes, if only for a millisecond. Then again, maybe it's time.” It's not part of my plan, but it's not a bad development. I'll just have to see who capitalizes on it. I smirk, because I know damn well just who that's going to be.

After a quiet dinner of roast chicken and veggies, Alfie and I head to our office. He takes his perch in the window, his hammock swaying gently as he settles in.

“Let's see if this was the bait we needed.” I crack my knuckles and power on my screens.

Data filters through several different windows, all of it monitoring my targets. Nothing seems amiss so far. It's been a quiet day for the contract killers and the mercenaries of the world. Just a few contracts going out to Brotherhood operatives for foreign warlords and a low-level US politician. Nothing of interest.

A red arrow appears—one of my security alerts. I click it and chuckle. “Duffy, you couldn't find me with a flashlight at high noon.” I swipe through the screens and follow the FBI's clown tracks as they bumbled around my weakest firewall and failed to make headway. “Alfie, you'd be a better operative than whoever she's got on her payroll over there.”

He yawns and stretches, his claws coming out and clinging to the edge of the hammock.

I swipe their attempts from my servers and get back to work. More data piles in. Someone else is sniffing around my security measures. A tingle goes down my spine.

Sitting back, I smile up at Alfie. “Looks like I’ll be headed into town sooner than I thought. In fact, I think I’m in the mood for some coffee tomorrow morning.”

He blinks slowly, deviousness and affection in the movement. I blink right back. “Same, buddy. Same.”

MAGGIE

Owen Caddel doesn't exist. At least not in the same way the rest of us do with our normal forms of identification like passports and Social Security cards. Oh, I have a few others with different names for emergencies, but I've never had to use them before. I do, however, know how to make them. I'm sure Owen has a handful of other names he uses as well. Owen Caddel is the one he's sticking with at the moment.

It had been a major pain in the ass to sort through the data. There are way too many Owens in the world. The last name helped some. When I tracked down his information, it turned out to be all bullshit. It was all so clean. Too clean. I couldn't find any trace of his documents being fake. I thought maybe Duffy was messing with me. I had no choice but to hack the WITSEC system. That was easy enough. I might have left myself a wormhole to get back in before I handed it back over.

I left it to see if Parks would catch it. He hadn't. I mean, it's possible they know about it and are leaving it be. No way to know for sure. Damn it. I hate how the government plays with your head. My father is right. You can never trust them. Either way, it doesn't matter. Owen Caddel wasn't on their list. Leaving me right back where I started.

"Anything?" I ask Ocean with a yawn. It looks like Owen stays holed up in his off-the-grid farmhouse. Or what appears to be a farmhouse. The second I got his address, Ocean was in hot pursuit. I had to pull her back. I didn't have proof, but I

had a sense that if she got too close with the drone, it would be gone in no time at all. It would be way too easy to fly in.

“Don’t do that.” She yawns back. “No movement yet, but maybe if I got just a little bit closer, we could see more.” It’s tempting, but I don’t want to give us up by making a rookie mistake with the drone.

“Don’t do it.” I can’t put my finger on this yet. I don’t care if you’re a farmer living in the middle of nowhere, there is no way that you don’t have the Internet. So far, I’m not picking up on anything.

“I could use a new drone anyways,” she counters like they grow on trees. Not the kind she has.

“Could he have his own satellite?” I mutter to myself.

“What! He got a satellite and I only have drones?”

“Why do you need a satellite?” I ask her even as I steal access to one myself. My patience is wearing thinner with each minute that passes. I’m going in. I’ll clean up behind myself.

“What are you doing?” Ocean asks. I flip my screen to let her see. “Oh, do we have a satellite now? What else can I ask for?” I zoom in as far as I can. “A cat!”

“You want a cat?” That should be easy enough.

“No! There is a cat on his porch.” I grab my glasses and push them onto my face to lean in closer to the screen. Well, I’ll be damned if there isn’t the most adorable fluffy cat stretched out in the morning sun.

“He’s handsome.”

“Like his owner?”

A small growl leaves me.

“What? You’re the one that said the handsome thing about him to begin with.”

“You don’t have to throw it in my face. I only—” I cut the feed, pulling back.

“What happened?” Ocean asks.

“The cat distracted me! I almost got caught.” I blow out a breath. That was a close one.

“By this Owen guy or whoever’s satellite you stole?”

“I didn’t steal it. I borrowed it.”

“You know I can build a satellite. I’m just not sure how we would shoot it into space.”

I snort a laugh. “You don’t need a satellite.”

“Why not? Then a cat couldn’t sneak up on you.”

“You’d need more than one. It’s easier to grab one in a location you desire.”

“Right, I forget that the world isn’t flat.” A giggle pops free even though I’m super irritated at the moment. “Oh, I got pictures coming for you. There isn’t a ton and nothing juicy, but it’s something to start with.”

Images of Owen pop up on my computer. It’s of him randomly out and about. His face had been picked up on cameras. She’s right; there isn’t anything worth crap in them. This man really does keep a low profile.

“We’re going to have to go out there. On foot.”

“Really?” Ocean gets way too excited.

“Maybe, I don’t know.” Another one of those stupid growls leaves me.

“You know you don’t have to do this.”

I’m not giving up now. It’s not only about beating Parks anymore. My curiosity is killing me with this man. I have this need to know more about him. I stare at one of the pictures of him at the grocery store. A pretty blonde is trying to chat him up. I pull the footage, annoyed that there is no sound. I watch as the woman snags his attention. He responds to whatever she says before the woman laughs.

What’s so funny? You could be flirting with a psycho, you dummy. I face grab her from my screen and run her identity even if he doesn’t leave with her or appear to trade information. The conversation looked more one-sided on her

part, but that doesn't stop my level of annoyance from growing.

"Why are you growling now?"

I cough to cover it because I don't even understand why I'm reacting the way I am.

"He's moving! He's moving!" Ocean shouts into my ear. "Statistically he'll be going to..." She rattles a list of the places he's been caught on camera in the last month along with the most likely spots she thinks he'll visit based on the day and time.

"Coffee shop," we both agree at the same time.

"I'm going." I hop up from my chair. "Follow him."

"Of course I'm following him, but what do you mean you're going?"

"Like going to the coffee shop." What should I wear? Why does that matter? He's not going to notice me. I'm mousy and bland. It works in my favor more often than not. It helps me blend in. People can look right over me, and I don't mean just because I'm only a few inches over five feet.

"In person?"

"I like coffee," I lie, hoping she doesn't call me on my bullshit.

"No you don't. You like hot chocolate."

Dammit. "They have that there." I've been to the coffee shop a few times. It sits right inside the city.

"Okay, this might actually work. Do a plant." I freeze. Ocean has lost her damn mind.

"I wasn't going to talk. Just watch really."

"Fine. I'll do the plant."

"You're coming?" Now you can't miss Ocean. Her hair is always a bright blue. Men notice when she walks into a room. So much so they don't notice when she's doing something sneaky while they flirt with her.

“Are you going to plant something on him?”

“No.” I’m too clumsy for that. Ocean not so much. She could pickpocket you if she wanted. I don’t love the idea of her getting so close to him. Not because I’m jealous or anything. I’m just looking out for her. I mean, he could be dangerous.

No, he *is* dangerous. That much is clear. He’s driving me insane.

OWEN

*I*t's a bright day as I park at my usual coffee spot on the western edge of the city. I hop out and step into the building, the smell of a rich brew flavoring the air as people grab their drinks and head out or pick a table by one of the bright windows.

"The usual?" The girl at the counter gives me a wink.

"Yes, please."

"It's nice out today," she says as she starts working on my coffee.

"Beautiful. I think it's going to stay warm. No more cold snaps." I glance around, looking at everyone in the place, but not directly. Just getting the lay of the land so I can decide if I want to sit and sip or take it to go.

"The new park over on Fifth just opened. I hear they have a lot of tulips coming up. I'd love to see them."

I swipe my card and head to the other end of the counter to wait for my drink.

The bell on the door rings, another customer entering. I look up and find a woman with bright blue hair sauntering in.

"I get off in a couple of hours."

The woman with the blue hair walks up to the register and waits, her gaze sliding over to me a few times.

"Here you are." The barista holds out my cup.

“Thanks.”

She doesn't let it go as I reach for it. I pull back before I touch her.

“So about this afternoon...” She looks at me expectantly.

The blue-haired woman clears her throat as the doorbell tinkles again.

The barista rolls her eyes and puts the coffee down, then hurries to take the next order. Grabbing the coffee and taking a drink, I glance in the direction of the door. Another woman enters the shop, her blond hair in a prim bun and her black cat-eye glasses perched perfectly on her nose. She looks around, her gaze hovering on me for a second longer than everything else—or perhaps it's just my imagination.

She takes a deep breath, then walks to get in line behind the blue-haired woman. As she goes, her hips sway, the baggy sweatshirt and loose jeans doing nothing to conceal her curvy body from me. When she nibbles her bottom lip, a jolt of heat courses through me that has absolutely nothing to do with the scorching hot coffee.

She lowers her chin, her gaze on the floor as I decide to grab a table. As I sit, I can't keep my eyes off her.

The blue-haired woman confidently gives her order as the beauty shuffles up behind her. I sip my drink and watch her, silently creating her order in my mind. Not coffee. She isn't a slave to the roasted devil like I am. No. She's soft and delicious with the slightest hint of bitter to make it all the sweeter. Hot chocolate. That's her. Extra cream.

I sit back as the blue-haired woman moves to the pick-up counter and the blonde quietly gives her order. Turning my head to the side, I catch the soft tones of her voice. “Hot chocolate, extra cream.”

Taking a drink, I hide the smile on my face behind the cup.

The blue-haired woman gets her coffee and takes the table at my back.

She bumps into my chair. “Oh, I’m sorry,” she practically purrs.

I keep my eyes on the blonde as she waits for her drink. “No worries,” I say, not even turning my head.

When she takes the hot chocolate from the barista, something crosses her eyes. Maybe it’s simply the glint of light on her glasses, but I could swear there’s something almost devious in her gaze as she knocks the drink over, spilling it all over the barista’s apron.

“Oh!” the blonde exclaims. “I’m so sorry.”

The barista jumps back, frowning at the mess. “It’s all right. Happens all the time.”

“I’m just so clumsy,” the blonde coos, and I could swear there’s an edge to it. “Would you mind making me another?”

The woman behind me snickers.

“Of course.” The barista towels up the mess and grabs another cup.

The blonde takes the second one without incident and heads for a table toward the back.

As she passes by, I inhale, catching her scent. It’s fruity and floral, like some sort of expensive soap. I try to catch her eye, but she keeps her gaze lowered as she takes a seat. For a moment, I consider going to her table and sitting down. But I don’t. Not when I notice the slight shake in her fingers as she reaches for her cup. She’s nervous.

Why?

I glance around, looking for a reason. But there’s only a couple a few tables over, the woman behind me, and the barista. There’s no reason for her to worry.

Rather than spooking her more, I simply sit and enjoy my coffee and the view. I try not to look directly at her, but it’s difficult, especially when she’s so goddamn adorable. I’ve been to this coffee shop dozens of times and have never seen her in here before. I wonder what’s brought her here today? I

want to ask, to get to know her, to find out little details, to tease out the parts of her that she doesn't like sharing.

But as my coffee cools and more time passes, I realize I need to get going. The squirrels could be feasting on my wires again, and I need to pick up a trap and a few other things before I head back out to the house.

Reluctantly, I rise from my seat.

She twitches, her gaze darting to the side as if she's watching from her peripheral vision.

"Hey, sorry again about bumping into you." The blue-haired woman smiles up at me with warmth.

I shrug. "Like I said, no worries."

With one more look at the cute blonde—who very pointedly does *not* look at me—I toss my cup into the recycling bin and head out into the sunny day.

MAGGIE

“*W*hat the hell was that?” Ocean drops down in the chair in front of me. Way too much of her attention is fully focused on me. Ocean can be very paranoid. She’s great with hands-on tech, but she can leave wreckage in her wake.

“What?” I tuck my hair behind my ear, almost knocking my own glasses off my face. My glasses are my outside shield from the rest of the world. It might not be real, but it gives me the illusion it is.

“Okay, I know you’re clumsy, and it’s adorable. In fact, it’s endearing, but you totally hit that skank with hot chocolate on purpose.”

I reach out and fix the tiny menu held up on a metal stand as I try to think of how I’m going to avoid this conversation with her.

“Don’t say skank.” I can’t really disagree with what she’s saying, so redirecting the conversation is my best option.

Ocean rolls her blue eyes at my tactics.

“Nobody is more politically correct than us. But between you and me, I can call that bitch”—Ocean points a thumb over her shoulder back to the barista that has a terrible credit score and uses way too many filters on her social media. I mean I wouldn’t be me if I didn’t check all those things—“a skank if I want. Especially if I think *my* best friend is crushing on the man said skank is flirting with.”

“I don’t crush. Unless you mean in keystrokes.”

Being a good best friend, Ocean gives a small laugh at my terrible joke. “So?” She drums her matte black nails on the table between us.

“The credit card he used. All payments go to a bank account connected to a shell business account. I’ll need my computer.” I tap at my phone screen. There’s only so much you can really do from a phone.

“I didn’t realize you were into older men. I mean, I know you don’t have daddy issues since your dad is badass and super supportive. No daddy issues, right?”

“What?” Her question throws me off. It shouldn’t have. This is par for the course when it comes to Ocean. You never know what’s going to come out of her mouth.

Ocean keeps tapping her nails offbeat. I’m guessing she’s doing it to pull my guard down, knowing it will be hard for me to think with the uneven beat of her nails distracting me. The sound is unlike my father’s video games, which I’ve grown used to as background noise so I can drown it out. This is deliberate, and we both know it. She’s setting me up.

“You want to call him Daddy?” My mouth falls open because that was the last thing I was expecting. Did she really just say that?

“I don’t even call my own dad Daddy! You weirdo.” What the hell is wrong with her? Still, I have to admit that the idea doesn’t sound terrible in my mind. I press my thighs together, my body confused. It’s been this way since I saw Owen’s picture. Is Ocean on to something with this daddy thing?

“Hey, don’t kink shame.”

Oh crap. I totally did.

“Don’t apologize.” She holds out her hand before even I can predict what I’m going to do. I hate that when it comes to human interactions, I’m so predictable. “I’m only teasing you. Owen is just really off the grid. Reminds me a bit of your dad.” She shrugs.

Sure, from a distance he can appear that way, but he's not fooling me. I have to give it to him, he's good, really freaking good actually. I'm not one to crave attention, but I can be competitive.

Owen, I think, is different. He lies in wait, knowing how good he is. There is no need to prove anything. You don't know he's there until he strikes. Why that is so damn appealing and alluring to me? I don't know, but it is. The more I watch him, the more I need to know. It's either that or I'm being really paranoid. It's likely the latter. This man is really throwing me off. Never in my life has someone evoked this sort of reaction from me.

"He can't be my dad. Owen is too clean with his trail. He remains on the grid while still being off it." It's baffling to me how he does it. I need to get closer.

"True." Ocean ponders over the man herself.

I know we joke that no one can ever truly disappear, but that's not entirely true. It's also not something you can do with the flip of a coin; it must be strategically set up for years. It would require a tremendous amount of time, patience, and planning. And no matter how much of those things you put into it, you would forever be looking over your shoulder.

It might appear to some as though in a flip you're gone without a trace, but to the person holding the coin, it was anything but a magic trick. Off the grid doesn't use credit cards or walk into a busy coffee shop in the city. He has to constantly be cleaning up behind himself. Ocean already did a thermal scan of his home. He's the only human inside.

I can't track anything coming in or out of his systems without the worry of triggering an alert to him. I was trying to lay low, but I may have put myself right on his radar. I felt his eyes on me. He saw me. I drew attention with my hot chocolate incident.

On the other hand, I wonder if I'm overthinking everything and giving him too much credit. It's possible the level of security I've made myself believe he has on his system isn't really there. It could be a false narrative I've put into my own

mind because both Parks and Duffy can't get to whatever it is they want to know about Owen Caddel.

Unfortunately, they're no longer the only ones that want to know.

OWEN

I find everything I need at the hardware and head back outside. My mind keeps wandering back to the blonde at the coffee shop, the one in the glasses with the bun.

The coffee place is only a couple of blocks away, so I get into my truck and take a few turns, winding up right back out front where I was before.

I catch sight of the blue-haired woman walking away, her hands in her pockets, but I keep my gaze on the coffee shop windows. Inside, I see the blonde rising from her seat and tossing her cup into the trash.

It's creepy really, the way I'm watching her. I'm not a stalker—at least, I don't think I am. Even so, I take in each of her movements—the way she keeps her chin down to avoid making eye contact, the way she doesn't grab the door handle. Instead, she uses the hem of her shirt to make contact with it.

As she steps into the sun, the blond fly-aways around her face shine, giving her an ethereal sort of look, though it's tempered with 'sexy librarian' because of her glasses. She's a vision, one I can't pull my eyes away from.

She hurries to a small car. It's a reasonable vehicle, a Camry with no bells and whistles, and it still shines like new, making me wonder if she drives much at all.

Sitting behind the wheel, she stays there for a while. Then I see her throw her hands up. It makes me quirk half a smile. When she smacks her steering wheel, the half turns into a whole.

She flings the door open and steps out, then marches to the front of the car, where she stares down at the hood. After a few more seconds, she goes back to the driver's side and bends over, giving me a perfect view of her plump ass. Holy shit.

I know I shouldn't be watching her like this, but I don't stop. In fact, I get out of the truck and lean against it as she stands back up and heads to the front again.

A car passes, and I cross the street right after it as she drops to her haunches and peers at the hood mechanism.

"You need help?" I walk up.

She jerks to her feet and spins, her eyes narrowing on me. "Excuse me?"

"I was just passing by and couldn't help but notice you're having car trouble." I try to make it sound as non-threatening as possible. After all, creeps are everywhere. I don't want her to think I'm one.

She stares.

When she doesn't speak, I clear my throat. "Sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you. I was just trying to help. That's all." I move just a step closer and hold out my hand. "I'm Owen, by the way."

She looks at my hand like it has several extra fingers, possibly even tentacles.

I lower it slowly. "Maybe you should just let me take a look?" I jut my chin toward her car.

Stepping back onto the sidewalk, she eyes me as I walk up to it and feel beneath the hood, lifting it as I peer down at the engine.

"Are you a mechanic?" she asks.

"No. But I know my way around cars." I point to her wiper fluid. "You need more windshield fluid. It's not safe to drive without more than this."

Her eyes narrow. "I thought you said you *weren't* a mechanic."

"I'm not. Just making an observation."

“Does the lack of wiper fluid make the car incapable of starting?” she asks curtly.

“No.”

“Mm-hmm.” She crosses her arms in front of her.

I glance around some more, looking for her problem. “Ah.”

“Ah?” She leans over, trying to see what I’m pointing at.

“Your battery cable is loose.” I grab it and affix it to the battery post. “It wasn’t making the circuit. You want to try it again?”

“Hmm?” Her gaze is on my hands.

“Try to start the car?” I stand, and even though she’s on the curb, I still tower over her.

She seems to remember herself and nods. “I’ll try it.” But she doesn’t move. Instead, she stares at me with a directness I rather like.

I stare right back.

She raises her brows and clears her throat.

“Is ... is there something I’m missing?” I ask with what I hope is a charming smile.

“You’re in my way.” She waves a hand at me.

“Oh.” I back from between the cars and give her a wide berth, since the space she had before clearly wasn’t enough for her.

With a wary glance, she goes to the driver’s seat, and in only a moment, the car starts up.

I close the hood and walk around to her door.

She closes it. Hard.

I have to stifle a laugh, but I manage it somehow. Leaning down, I knock on her window.

She cracks it. But just a crack. “Yes?”

“Listen, I have wiper fluid up at my place. It’s a bit of a drive, but I’m happy to fill you up, if you’d like.”

“Your place?” she asks, her eyes brightening for a split second before she looks away. When she puts her gaze on me again, it’s closed off like before.

“Yeah. Sorry to be so forward, but it’s not safe for you to drive with such low fluid.”

“You said that.”

I nod. “I did. Anyway, I can text you my address. What’s your phone num—”

“Just tell it to me.”

“Are you sure? If you could just give me your number, I could—”

“I’ll find it.” She smiles, and I get the strangest sense that there’s a deviousness in it. “Just tell me where you live.”

“Sure.” I rattle off my address.

“I’ll meet you there.” She rolls the window up.

I knock again.

She cracks it. “Yes?”

“I didn’t catch your name.”

“Oh.” She purses her lips, and for a moment I wonder if she’s going to refuse to tell me. “It’s Roxanne.”

“Okay, Roxanne. I’ll see you at my place.”

She closes the window and pulls away, almost running over my foot in her haste to get away.

I stand straight and watch her taillights. She’s already headed in the right direction toward my place, though there’s no way she could’ve recognized the address.

Lucky guess, I suppose.

In any case, at least I’ll have another chance to speak with her. Maybe I’ll get more out of her than just her first name.

MAGGIE

What the hell am I doing? While I have a solid grasp of technical skills, I don't have one on human nature beyond what I've read and tried to mimic in my life. Not to mention that the people closest to me—I don't think any of them would be called normal. So mimicking such behavior has never been easy. Even when I was in school, every girl around me was exceptional in something.

I don't understand people, but they do interest me. They usually behave in predictable ways. Patterns, really. That is something I can understand. However, it's the most interesting of people's patterns that are the hardest to understand, but we all have them no matter how hard we try to mask them. And within that, there is always a weakness.

I know without a doubt that is the key to me finding Owen's weakness. To figure out who he truly is. I'll need to take my time and watch him carefully. Him inviting me back to his house couldn't be more perfect. He's giving me the opportunity to observe him up close in his environment without him having his guard up.

I reach over to grab my bag to search inside for my phone. I need to call Ocean and let her know what my plan is. Not that I really have one besides going to Owen's place.

Ocean hates that I won't get an electric car. From her standpoint, I understand, but from mine it's never happening. You might not know it, but your car is reporting everything you do in this day and age. It might as well be a cell phone. At

least it couldn't take over your car at any moment. The same can't be said about an electric vehicle.

"The hell is going on? I saw you and that silver fox chatting it up."

"Silver fox, really? He has maybe three gray hairs," I retort. Each of them makes him look sexier.

"Where are you going?"

"Tracking me?"

"Always. That's what real friends do."

"His place."

"Oh, we got a new skank in town?"

"Ocean!" I hiss, my face rushing with heat.

"Not for nothing. Why are you going to his place?"

"My battery thingy wasn't working, and he fixed it. He also said that I needed more of the blue liquid that washes my windshield."

"Your battery wasn't working?"

"When I tried to start it, I couldn't get it to, like, go."

"Hmm." Ocean tsks, sounding suspicious of this whole thing.

"What?" I might be able to hack into a system, but I know shit about electronics beyond the basics. I'm not a freaking mechanical engineer. And I definitely don't know anything about cars. One can only be so great at some things. It's why you need an incredible team around you. Ocean is my engineer.

"Just so happens it stops working on the same day you're doing recon? It's possible, but—"

"He said a cord was loose." I jump in and defend him for some reason.

"Not sure that's the only thing he's hoping is loose when it comes to you."

"Ocean!"

“What? You’re the one headed out to his house in Jeepers Creepersville.”

“Even I know Jeepers Creepers is impossible, and I only understand a little bit of biology.”

“But do you understand serial killers?”

“I really don’t think Duffy would have brought me in over a basic serial killer.”

“True.” I can hear Ocean tapping her nails. I’m not sure if she’s thinking or up to something. “But do you think it’s smart going out there?”

“You got the tag. You can hear everything. This is a chance for me to get inside and interact with him. He’s handing us an opportunity we can’t pass up,” I remind her. It pops into my mind that I could cut our connection at any time. Why would I? I lick my lips as a whole lot of reasons come to mind on what would make me. Ones I shouldn’t even be having.

“I’m not so sure about this, Mags.” Ocean uses my real name. “This man has to be deep into something. He could be really dangerous.” She’s not wrong.

“I wanna go,” I admit.

“So there is no talking you out of this?”

Once my mind is set, there is no going back. “I just wanna go, I can’t explain it.” I chew on my bottom lip.

“It’s weird to see you crushing on a guy.”

“I’m not crushing.”

Ocean ignores me. Pretty sure I’m lying. I’m not sure what I’m feeling for this man. It’s a job. That’s the story I’m sticking to for the meantime.

“What if he’s a scientist and has put a love potion on you?”

“If Owen is in his basement creating brand-new chemistry, and Duffy is highly interested in what he’s doing, then I don’t think it’s gonna be a love potion he’s concocting.”

That doesn't mean he's not making something. A remote spot would be a good place for that. He could be making all kinds of things.

"This is a good thing. You stay close, and you'll know if I need you. If there's an emergency, don't worry about blowing your cover."

"The man does have a cat. There has to be some good in him. You know they say men who favor cats have been proven to be smarter and more highly educated."

"I did not know that, but I do now." I pull down the long driveway to Owen's. It's lush and green. My father would love it out here. This is his dream. He only stays close to the city for me.

"How are you feeling? Need a pep talk?"

I glance at my mirror to try and fix my hair. Before I'd gone into the coffee shop the point was not to draw attention to myself. Now I seem to want it. For him to think I'm pretty.

"Nervous."

"You don't have to do this."

"Not that kind of nervous."

"Ah, crush butterflies."

"I'm not crushing!" I hiss.

"Right, sure. Not crushing. Got it."

"He's coming." I spot him behind me a few seconds later, pulling down the driveway. I grab my lip gloss and put it on.

"Gotta go." I hang up before Owen can say anything else.

When I get out of my car, Owen pulls right up next to me. "It's isolated out here," I say, glancing around at all the land.

"That bother you? I'm not trying to scare you."

"I'm not afraid."

"That's a good thing, I suppose." Owen laughs. It's deep and comes easily from him.

“Fear is a good thing. It alerts you and focuses the mind. Fear is your body’s way of telling you you’re about to engage in something potentially fatal.”

Another deep laugh comes from him. I’m not sure that what I said was funny, but I find myself smiling anyway. What the heck is this man doing to me?

Yeah, fear isn’t at all what I’m feeling. The opposite, really. I shouldn’t be here, but I am. There is only one reason for that, and it’s not because of Parks or Duffy.

Owen has quickly become my latest obsession. It’s never happened with a person before. I guess there’s a first time for everything. I almost wonder if it’s him that should be feeling fear.

Not me.

She looks around, her eyes scanning every little bit of available information. It's almost as if she's casing the place, but that's silly. She's probably just checking that it's safe. I suppose it makes sense for her to be wary. I'm a stranger, after all.

"You don't have to worry. I really only wanted to refill your wiper fluid. Nothing nefarious."

"That's what someone who is definitely nefarious would say." She arches a brow.

I can't stop my half smile. "Well, you certainly have a point there. But all the same, you're safe with me."

"I have friends. They know where I am." She narrows her gaze on me. "If I don't check in with them, they'll definitely show up here. Probably guns blazing. Maybe some grenades. One of them has made napalm in their basement plenty of times."

"Okay." I shrug.

She bows up a little, as if irritated by my agreement. "This isn't going to turn into an episode of *48 Hours*. I just want to make that clear."

"Crystal clear." I turn as a scratching sound meets my ear. Alfie is at the front window beside the door, clawing it for all he's worth. I jog up the stairs to the door and unlock it. He sidles out, his tail straight up as he passes me and heads over to Roxanne.

“Really?” I smirk as he ignores me, trots to her, and rubs against her leg.

“Hi.” She smiles.

I thought she was beautiful before. But now I know she’s got to be the most gorgeous woman I’ve ever seen. Bright eyes and pouty lips—she’s a lovely dream. Her face lights up as Alfie sits down for pets.

“That’s Alfie.”

“Hi, Alfie,” she coos. “I don’t have a cat, but I’ve always loved them. You seem like such a good boy.” She scratches under his chin as he purrs. “Are you a good boy, Alfie?”

“He’s the best. Excels at eating, sleeping, and tracking his litter across half the house.” I walk to them, the sun playing in Roxanne’s hair and setting it off like glowing gold.

I don’t know how, but she’s taken me off guard. It’s not like I have a habit of inviting people to my house, especially not people I just met. In fact, I can’t even remember the last time I had a visitor. But something about Roxanne has made me feel at ease. That’s a feat, especially given the kind of work I do out here. Secrecy is key. But all that went out the window when I saw her.

“How long have you had him?” she asks as Alfie flops onto the ground at her feet, showing his belly.

“I found him when he was just a kitten. Scrounging around by a dumpster in town. He was all by himself. Hungry and scared. I scooped him up and brought him out here. We’ve been roomies ever since.”

“Roomies?” She smiles up at me.

My heart seems to stall, then beat again, but harder. “Yeah, we’re just two bachelors roaming the place.”

“I see.” She stands up and puts her hands on her hips. “Why do you need such a big house and all this land if it’s just you and your cat?”

“I have horses, too. A few cows. Nothing serious. Was thinking about getting some goats, but they might chew the

whole place to shreds if I don't keep a close eye on them." I sidestep her question. "Would you like a tour?"

She purses her lips, and I get the distinct sensation she's on the edge of saying no, but then her gaze turns shrewd. "I'd love one."

"I'm glad. This will give me a chance to figure out where I stored the windshield wiper fluid." I grin.

"You said there are horses?" She looks out toward the stables. "I don't think I've ever seen one up close."

"Really?" I gesture toward the stables and walk with her, Alfie trailing behind us. "I have three right now. All of them rescues. The two mares are stubborn and ornery. But the gelding is gentle as can be. A real sweetheart. He even lets Alfie jump on him and ride him around the pasture sometimes."

"Wow." She glances back at Alfie. "That's brave."

"It would be brave if he tried it on Peanut or Butter. Jelly is just as silly as Alfie, so they're a fun pair."

"I like their names."

"Thanks. I guess I was hungry when I picked them up." I walk her to Jelly's stall.

He comes over, his nose working overtime as he sniffs her. "Jelly, this is Roxanne."

"He's so big." She looks up at him, her eyes going round. "Can I—"

"Of course. He won't bite."

She lifts her hand, but she doesn't move any closer. "I don't know ..."

"May I?" I take her hand, the feel of her skin so soft against mine. "We'll go slow."

She stiffens for only a second, then relaxes as I move her hand toward Jelly's snout. "He's not scared?"

“No. He’d have his ears back if he was apprehensive. He’s as unconcerned as he can be.” I press her palm against his snout.

He steps closer, leaning into her touch. I don’t blame him. I do the same, cradling her hand in mine even though I could’ve already let go.

“This is wonderful.” She beams as she strokes his snout, her hand still in mine.

“I’m glad you think so.”

Butter nickers, and Peanut paws at the ground in her stall.

Roxanne looks at me questioningly.

“They’re just jealous.” I shrug.

Alfie jumps up and prances along the front of the stall, trying to get her attention.

“And they’re not the only ones.” I pop his hind quarters lightly, and he twitches his tail.

She pulls her hand away.

I should let go. Now I’m just standing with her, holding her hand.

She looks up at me, pink coloring her cheeks, but she doesn’t pull away. Fuck, why does that one simple thing strike me as nothing short of life-changing? I don’t know, but I don’t want it to stop.

After another few moments, she clears her throat and steps back, taking her warmth with her. “What about the rest of the place?” She looks around, her eyes shrewd.

“Want to see the house?”

“I’d love to,” she answers quickly. “I mean, um, sure. Yes.”

“Okay.” I walk at her elbow, watching her from the corner of my eye. She watches me right back. It heats my blood, making me think all sorts of things that are entirely out of place for two people who just met.

Then again, I’ve never met anyone like Roxanne.

MAGGIE

I try to take in as many details as I can as I go through each room in Owen's house. He doesn't try to rush or stop me. He and Alfie trot behind me, letting me do what I want. I would make a really terrible spy, but who in their right mind would think I'm a spy? Because I'm not. I shouldn't be here at all, but I can't help myself. I never can. I can try and fight the things that pull at me, but I always lose. Sometimes I wonder why I even waste my time fighting.

Everything is clean and perfectly placed. It gives me a calm feeling. It doesn't go unnoticed by me that a room is, however, missing. The scan we did over Owen's showed there should be something between this living room wall and kitchen. At a glance you'd miss it with the hallway and think there might be a pantry in the kitchen, but there isn't. Something is off, and it's driving me nuts. My eyes linger on a bookshelf in his living room. I run my fingers along it.

"Do you enjoy reading?"

"When I have the time."

"And when is that?" Did Owen ever tell me what he did for a living? Is he a farmer? I pull out one of the books. It's about agriculture. I slide it back between two other books that have the same color binding. I pull a few others out and replace them the way I want them as well.

"This place can be a lot to take care of alone."

"Hmm." I agree as I keep going. "There." I step back from the bookcase. All the books are put back so the bindings match

from size to color. For some reason, this brings me great pleasure.

“Feel better?” I spin around to see Owen leaning up against the far wall, merely watching me.

“Sorry, I ah—” How long have I been reorganizing his books? “That was rude.” I shift on my feet. “Right?” I know I wouldn’t care for the idea of people moving things around in my home.

“It looks better. I shove books in there at random.”

I nod, relaxing. The whole point of inspecting the bookcase wasn’t to organize it but to see if there was possibly something behind it. But once I got started and realized it was a dead end, I couldn’t help but put them back in some sort of order.

To be honest, I was hoping it was one of those super cool bookcases where you pull the book back and a magic door pops open. I’ve always wanted one of those. Sounds badass. I bet Ocean could build me one. That girl can do anything with her hands.

“Are you hungry?” he asks.

“Hmm?”

“Food. Do you want something to eat? I suppose hot chocolate can only hold you over for so long.”

“You knew what I ordered?”

“You’re a hard girl to miss, Roxanne.” My stomach turns. A flare of irritation fills me. I don’t care for him calling me a name that’s not mine. I try to push the feeling away the best that I can. I mean I’m being ridiculous, right? It shouldn’t matter what name he uses.

“What do you mean?” I step closer to him. “I enjoy blending in. What was it about me that stood out to you?”

“You’re beautiful. Your baggy clothes hide nothing.”

I open and then close my mouth. I was not expecting that. Is he really attracted to me?

“Prettier than the girl who made your coffee?” I can’t help but to ask. I mean, a girl needs to know these things.

“Without question,” he says without missing a beat. He also takes a step closer to me, causing me to get butterflies in my stomach.

“Are you a farmer?” What the heck? Why did I choose this moment to ask that? Obviously, my nerves are taking over and I’m just blurting out random things.

“At times.” He moves even closer.

“Are you going to kiss me? You keep looking at my mouth.”

“Would you stop me?”

“I should.”

“That’s not a no.” His hands cup my cheeks. His thumbs go under my jaw to tilt my head back. I don’t stop him. I let my head fall back and watch as his mouth descends onto mine. My eyes fall closed. His mouth is soft. I’m not sure what I was expecting. His hands are rough, but his kiss isn’t.

When his tongue glides across the seam of my lips, I part them for him. He takes that opportunity to dip inside my mouth. I grip the front of his shirt. My fingers take hold of him as I kiss him back. My moan is met with a deep groan from him.

The next thing I know, I’m in his lap, straddling him. My hips rock against the bulge in his pants. “You’re turned on.”

He grins at me. “Yeah, Ace, I’m turned on. You’re in my lap.”

“Ace?”

“An Ace, often unexpected.”

“I’ll allow it,” I say before I kiss him again. Thoughts of anything else leave my mind. I wrap my body around his. I could do these kisses forever. My whole chest is warm. A buzz of excitement unlike any I’ve ever felt before hums through my whole body. It’s addicting.

“Ace,” Owen groans. My eyes flutter open, and I see I’m now on my back, laid out on his couch. “We should stop.”

“I don’t want to.” I press my hips upward to rub myself against him. The throb between my legs is unbearable. “I need —” I lick my lips.

“I got you.” His hand slips down the front of my baggy pants and into my panties. “You’re bare.” He groans again. His nose flares. He likes that.

“It’s cleaner. I try—” My words die on my lips when two of his rough fingers find my clit. He presses them firmly against me, making small circles. “Owen.” I dig my nails into him. Holy crap. Am I going to come already? How many times have I tried to do this myself and failed each and every time? I’ve quit trying.

“Go on, let it out, Ace. Come for me.” His mouth is at my ear. “Say my name.” He nips at my neck.

“Owen!” I cry out his name as the pleasure shoots through my body. I shake with the euphoria of it. He holds me close as my body comes down from the sensation.

Slowly Owen pulls his fingers out of my pants. I watch as he licks them clean. Reality starts to settle in around me. And it doesn’t have anything to do with Agent Duffy’s mission. It’s me remembering the tag I have on and thinking about how Ocean might have heard every second of what just happened.

From nowhere, jealousy fills me. It’s irrational, but I can’t help it.

“Do you bring lots of girls home and do this?” I need to find out about all past lovers. My mission is slowly changing. I could learn something from them about Owen. There would be lots of information there. I could also kill their credit scores or do other things.

“No.”

I glare up at him. He only smiles.

“Well, then you should keep it that way.” I sit up, wondering what I’m supposed to do now. He doesn’t rebuff my comment forbidding him from kissing or touching other women. Did I make it clear enough? “It’s Wednesday,” I blurt out when the silence starts to grow—or maybe it didn’t. I might be cutting

off his chance to get me out of here. I'm not going anywhere. Yet.

"It is." His smile grows.

"I eat spaghetti on Wednesdays."

"Spaghetti?" A deep, sexy chuckle leaves him. My already hard nipples grow almost painful at the sound.

"You asked if I was hungry," I remind him. Does he want me to leave?

"Spaghetti it is." He stands, offering me his hand. I take it.

Ocean might have been right about the whole love potion thing. That or Owen is now without a doubt my new obsession.

“*W*here’d that come from?” Roxanne eyes the fresh spaghetti noodles I made earlier in the day, the pasta still sitting on the counter.

I shrug. “I like to make fresh pasta during the week. It just so happens I made spaghetti today.”

“You grow your own wheat or something?” She sits at the island, her eyes missing nothing as she looks at the stove, the cabinets, and the wine selection.

“I do. This is semolina wheat from last summer, the same variety they grow just outside Rome and all over Italy. My red wheat will come in at harvest this year, in the fall. I don’t grow a ton of it, just enough for some loaves here and there along with my pasta.” I grab a bottle and put two glasses on the counter. “This is from a vineyard I’m part owner of in California.”

“There aren’t any records about—” She bites her bottom lip.

“Pardon?” I ask as I fill her glass halfway and slide it to her.

“Nothing. My mind wanders sometimes.”

“That’s all right, Roxa—”

“Call me Maggie,” she blurts.

“Maggie?”

“Yes.” She sniffs the wine. “That’s what my friends call me. Just a nickname. You know.”

“How’d they get Maggie from Roxanne?”

“Just being funny, I guess. Ha ha, those jokesters.” She takes a big drink of her wine.

“I see.” I sip mine and put cookware on the stove, heating everything up as I take my homemade sauce from the fridge.

“What kind is it?”

“What kind? You mean the sauce? I use San Marzano tomatoes I grow myself. Also basil, onions, and garlic from my garden.”

“Are those the round tomatoes?” she asks, her nose scrunching up.

“No.” I go back to the fridge and pull out one of the tomatoes to show her. “Cylindrical. See?” I hand it to her.

She turns it over in her hand. “Good. Spherical fruits and vegetables kind of weird me out.”

“Hmm.” I nod. “We all have our eccentricities. Makes us unique.” I pull out a pan of meatballs from the under-the-counter prep fridge. “The meatballs are beef and pork. I hope that’s okay?”

“Fine, as long as it’s not lamb.”

“You don’t like lamb?”

She blinks. “How should I know? I’ve never eaten it. It’s just so ... I mean, the sheep have all that wool.” She shivers. “Tangles on top of tangles. Think about it. A million circles all endlessly knotted together.”

“All right.” I can’t argue with her on that. She may be odd, but I find I like it. I feel like I could listen to her talk for hours, and I sure as hell have a million questions for her. I want to know everything there is to know. I’ve only just met her, but I get the feeling we’re kindred spirits, and the connection can’t be denied. Hell, I still have her taste on my tongue, and I only want more.

I loved what we just did on the couch, but I don’t want to spook her with going too far. Even so, my cock still aches

from how hard it was only moments ago. The way she said my name—*fuck*. It makes my damn blood heat just remembering an echo of it.

“You okay?” She stares at my hands where I’m gripping the cheese grater so tightly it warps out of shape.

“I’m good. Just a fan of Parmesan, I suppose.”

“Me too. Any cheese is a good cheese. Except a cheese ball that people have at fancy parties. Why ruin it by making it a sphere?” She drinks her wine, her gaze roving along the back wall of the kitchen. “Is there a pantry?”

“Yes.” I point to the small room off to the right. “Something you want to snack on?”

“No.” She keeps sipping her wine as she focuses on me again.

I find when she’s looking at me that her stare is intense. Like a touch. It’s so direct and appraising, as if she’s judging every minute detail and assigning it some sort of value. Almost like a computer, but far, far sexier.

“You cook like this all the time?” Her voice goes up in pitch. “For other women?”

I shoot her a smile over my shoulder. “I cook, but not for other women.”

“Good. You shouldn’t. I don’t think you should have any women over at your house ever. Just me.”

“All right.” I’m not going to argue. She’s the one I want here, no one else.

She clears her throat. “Because, you know, it’s dangerous. I mean, the percentage of female serial killers compared to males is negligible but never zero.”

“Right. One can never be too careful.”

“Exactly.”

I fry up the meatballs, then add them to the simmering sauce. Before long, the spaghetti is done, and I’m taking the garlic bread from the oven as she licks her lips.

“More wine?” I pour her another glass and one for myself, then make her plate, piling the spaghetti and meatballs high.

“I’ll never be able to eat all that.”

“You said you were hungry. I’m going to feed you.” I sit beside her and lay a napkin across her lap. “Eat as much as you want.”

“It smells so good. Way better than Prego.”

I stifle a laugh. “High praise indeed.”

She smirks and takes a bite, a moan coming from her as she chews. “So good.”

Satisfaction buzzes through me as she enjoys my cooking. “I’m glad you like it.”

“Love it, you mean.” She twirls more pasta on her fork and stabs a piece of meatball. “I’m not much of a cook.”

“You know, Maggie, I haven’t even asked you what you do for a living.”

She stops chewing for a moment, then recovers and swallows. “Oh, I’m just a work from home contractor. Nothing special.”

“I think you’re quite special.” I push the garlic bread closer to her. “So you do contract work? What sort?”

“Just—” She takes a comically huge bite of spaghetti and chews for a long, long while.

I can’t help my smile. She’s fucking cute as can be, even when she’s not trying. It’s adorable.

When she swallows again, she dabs at her mouth with the napkin. “Like I was saying, I just do IT work here and there. Contract stuff. Sometimes people need help with their systems, and I’m the help.”

“Computer work, hm?” I sip my wine. “You must be good at it. You seem to have an eye for detail.”

She gives me a sidelong glance. “I notice things. Yes.”

“Far more than the average person.”

“You could say that.” She rubs her stomach and sits back. “If I take another bite, I might explode.”

“Don’t do that. I have tiramisu waiting for you.”

She moans and wipes her mouth again. “Well, I wouldn’t want to disappoint you. When in Rome and all.”

“And before you ask, no, I don’t make tiramisu for anyone else. Only you.”

She nods. “Good.”

Only ever *you*.

MAGGIE

I watch Owen lick his fingers clean of me once again. My heart hammers. There is something happening to me that I don't understand. It should scare me, but it doesn't. I want more. I never want to lose this sensation.

"You're better than the tiramisu." My face rushes with heat. After he gave me dessert, I told him I would never be able to return the favor. That if I ended up in a kitchen and was left to cook a meal, there would most likely be an explosion. Owen was set on proving me wrong, so he slipped his hand into my pants and gave me another orgasm. I can't help but wonder what he tastes like.

"Really?"

"The sweetest thing I've ever tasted." He kisses me. My taste lingers on his tongue. It makes me wiggle in my seat and want him to give me more orgasms. I don't think it tastes as good as tiramisu, but coming from his lips, he might be right.

I sink my teeth into his bottom lip. He groans against my mouth. "Ever? Out of everything or everyone?" I push. I'm finding that I'm rather possessive when it comes to him. Something I've never been about anything or anyone in the past. It's going to be a problem. I already sense it deep inside of me. I was an only child. I don't think sharing is my strong suit.

"I promise you, Maggie." He brushes his mouth against mine. I love the way he says my name. I should taste him now. Then again, I have no clue what I'm doing. I should google it. I

mean, I've read about it in books, so I know the basics. But reading about it and actually doing it are two totally different things.

My stupid phone starts to go off, disrupting my train of thought and putting a damper on the moment. It was set to silent with the exception of a few people.

"Not a boyfriend, is it?" he asks, the tone of his voice suddenly changing.

"Would that make you jealous?" I ask, intrigued by this idea. It's not that I want to make him jealous, but it might show me that whatever this is I'm experiencing isn't one-sided. Then again, people make out and have sex all the time. It's normal to the rest of the world. I don't like it. Before it didn't bother me, but then I didn't have to think of Owen doing such things.

"Of course."

I beam at his answer.

"Good." I wiggle by him. "It's just my best friend—who's a girl—or my dad." He could never meet Ocean now. He saw her at the coffee shop. Not that it matters. This is a job. I'm here to collect information and move on. As of right now, I've got nothing. Except that he gives killer orgasms and makes the best spaghetti I've ever had.

When I grab my phone, I realize I was wrong; it's not Ocean or my father who was trying to reach me. It's Parks, and he's fucking with me. Does he know I'm here? I'm sure he does. The little fucker. I growl. A sexy chuckle comes from Owen.

"Sorry, I have a small growling problem, according to my dad."

"It's adorable."

"Adorable?" I push my glasses up my nose.

"It's one of the many things you are."

"Sexy?" I fish for more of his compliments.

"Yeah, babe, sexy is high on the list." He smiles at me, not minding how direct I can be.

“I should get going; my father will get worried,” I half-lie. My dad will worry, but I don’t want to go anywhere. Unfortunately, there is no other choice.

“I could make a to-go box for your dad,” Owen offers.

“He’d love that.” An idea hits me. My phone is still in my hand. “Where is your phone? I’ll program my number into it.” He pulls it out of his back pocket and hands it over to me without missing a beat. Then he goes and rattles off the code. Not that I would have needed it. Phones are child’s play for me when it comes to decoding things.

Owen goes to box up the spaghetti for my dad. I clone his phone before using it to call my number. Not my real one, of course, but the one I want him to have. I need to keep reminding myself that he’s a professional and that I’m technically undercover here. I need to make sure my tracks are covered.

“I called myself, so it should be in there.” I set his phone back down on the counter. “You’ll like text or call, right?” I chew on my bottom lip. Owen presses the lid onto the container.

“Yeah, I want you to text me when you get home so I know you got there safe.”

“Okay.” I melt.

He grips my chin. “Are you always this agreeable?”

“I don’t know,” I answer honestly. Am I agreeable? “With you maybe.” He smiles as he leans down to kiss me again. A trace of guilt fills me that I cloned his phone, but I wouldn’t take it back. I also know I didn’t clone it because I want to get information on him for Duffy. No, I want it all for myself. I want to dive into his world and get as much information on him as I can. I need to figure out who he is. I want to know every detail and every move he makes.

Too soon I’m pulling out of his long driveway. He stands on the porch watching me go. The second I’m on the main road, my phone rings. I hit the speaker.

“You were there awhile. I would have busted into the place, but those thermal images didn’t look like he was killing you.”

“Ocean!” I hiss.

“What? I had to check on you. Plus, I placed that tag, remember?”

“Oh my God.” I groan.

“Two orgasms of Magic. The man is a giver.”

“I can’t believe you listened to all that!”

“I tapped out a few times. I’m not a total perv.”

“I want the feed. Send it over. I’ll be home in a bit. I’ve got some information to go over. Also, I want bugs with surveillance.”

“So you’re going back over there?”

“You don’t think he’ll invite me back?” My heart sinks.

“I didn’t say that.” She laughs.

True. Who needs an invitation? I’ll show up whenever I like.

I close the door to the basement, lock it, then exit through the hidden panel behind the kitchen. Once it's all set back to rights, I lean down and scratch behind Alfie's ears.

"Ready to go start the chores?"

He purrs, then gives a big stretch and a yawn.

"I'll take that as a yes." I head out the back door and check on the tomato seedlings I set up in the cold frame. They're coming along well, and so are the cucumbers and the squash. We'll be full of produce in no time.

The horses are happy to be turned out into the pasture, the morning sun burning off the little bit of fog that lingered right after dawn. It's going to be another beautiful day. I didn't sleep great, mainly because Maggie danced around in my mind, catching my attention. Like a crow seeing something shiny, I couldn't look away from her. She's a mystery, one I want to uncover bit by bit. Eccentric and quirky, she's easily the most interesting person I've ever met.

When I jog around the barn toward my solar array, I catch sight of movement.

Slowing my pace, I glance around. Nothing is amiss; everything seems to be the way I left it yesterday. But I could've sworn ...

I shrug it off and keep going, the sun warm on my back as I turn the back corner of the barn.

“Why do you keep squirrels in cages?” Maggie is down on her haunches, staring at the first squirrel I’ve caught in my trap.

She’s managed to slip past my alarms, though I’m certain I’ve caught her on video. I have too many cameras throughout the property to miss her.

“Is this another one of your weird hobbies?” She looks up at me with a quizzical expression.

“Gardening and horses are weird hobbies?” I lean against the barn and cross my arms.

“Yeah. I mean, you’re not an octogenarian, are you?”

I snort a laugh. “No, not as far as I know. But since we’re on elderly subjects, I’ve also tried my hand at crochet.”

She wrinkles her nose.

“I wasn’t any good at it.” I hold up my hands. “My fingers are too big.”

She licks her lips and gets to her feet, her gaze on my fingers. “That’s a fair assessment. What else do you get up to around here?” She steps closer, her eyes narrowing. “Seems like you’d need a lot of money to buy this big property and have all these nice things.”

Alfie trots up and rubs against her leg, his purr already rumbling through him. She gives him the required pets as he fawns all over her. He’s such a ham.

“Have you had breakfast?” I ask.

“No.” She meets my gaze. “You didn’t answer my question.”

I didn’t think I’d get that past her, but I don’t think we’re quite ready for that conversation. “Let’s talk over eggs and bacon.”

“What about the squirrel?” She points.

“He’ll be fine. Stuffed with peanut butter and Cheerios. I’ll drop him off elsewhere a little later. For now, though, I’d love to make you breakfast.”

“Okay. I’m a breakfast fan. Eggs aren’t perfectly spherical, so I respect them.” She chews her bottom lip for a second. “Yes,

I'd like to go inside." She stands again, and I take her hand, leading her to the house.

"You know, you could've spent the night." I squeeze her warm fingers. "Then you wouldn't have had to come all the way back this morning."

"That's presumptuous of you." She stops, her grip growing tight as she glowers up at me. "Do you often invite women to spend the night?"

"No."

She squeezes even harder. "Never?"

"Never." I try not to smile at the way she's attempting to crush my fingers in her sweet little grip. So goddamn cute with the way she gets all possessive—it's almost unbearable.

"And you won't. *Ever*." She glances at the barn and then my garden. "I'd hate for all this pretty stuff to burn."

"Burn?" I pull her toward the porch.

"Yes, I mean"—she clears her throat—"in like, you know, a lightning storm or a freak accident or something. Something unforeseeable that seems highly likely to happen if you were to invite another woman to spend the night."

"Perfectly vague but also oddly specific." I grin as I open the front door and guide her in, Alfie trailing behind her.

"I'm just talking about possible contingencies, that's all." She shrugs.

"Talk all you want." I step toward her, backing her against the door. "I'm just glad you came back." I kiss her, gently at first, lovingly. With her, I want everything all at once. She's all I could think about all night long, and I'm desperate for more of her. But I know just how special she is. Spooking her is the last thing I want to do. I was afraid I may have pushed her too far too fast yesterday, but I couldn't fucking help myself.

"I'm so glad you're here," I murmur against her lips.

She grips the front of my shirt, fisting the fabric and pulling me down for a harder kiss, her mouth opening as I tongue her,

seeking that electric connection that somehow exists between us. I've never felt anything like it before, and I don't want to question it. I just want to let it roll through me, flooding me with sensation.

She moans as I grip her ass and lift her, pressing against her as she spreads her legs and wraps them around me. When I feel the heat between her thighs, I grunt, my cock straining against my jeans as I angle her head to the side, deepening our kiss. She tastes like everything I always wanted but never had. Fuck, I can't get enough.

Her stomach growls.

I freeze.

She keeps kissing me, her hands in my hair. "Owen," she murmurs.

Slowly, I lower her to the floor, her body sliding against mine as I feel every delicious curve. "You're hungry."

"Yeah, for that dick." She slaps a hand over her mouth.

I laugh, overcome with amusement as she smiles behind her hand. She's so unexpected. Every twist and turn only draws me closer to her.

"Come on, breakfast first. Then we can talk about the rest." I take her hand and pull her to the kitchen, a smile still on my face—one that may be stuck there, thanks to her.

MAGGIE

“I ’m so glad you’re here.”

His words repeat over and over again in my mind. I wasn’t sure how he’d respond when I showed up early this morning, but he quickly put me at ease. Since his mouth touched mine, a tension I’d been holding in my body released. I can even breathe a bit easier.

This is bad.

By the time the sun came up this morning, I knew I was in full obsessive mode. It’s a wonderful trait to have when it’s geared toward my work. Once I lock in on something, there is no stopping me. I won’t stop, not until I have an answer unless I’m well aware the answer is beyond the realm of human knowledge or capability. Oftentimes, I’ll still have to run into that wall until I exhaust myself and know I’m never going to get anywhere.

“Oh!” I hop down from the kitchen island, where Alfie and I were watching Owen make us breakfast. “I forgot I brought you something.”

“All you ever need to bring is you.” He gives me a charming smile that melts all my insides. I’m a sucker, and I don’t care. I should. His smiles shouldn’t be so disarming to me, but they are. I bet he could extract all kinds of things out of me.

“It’s in my backseat. Kinda heavy.”

“All right.” He plates the eggs before dropping the pan into the kitchen sink. “Want me to grab it now?”

“Yes, please.” I try to give him a cute smile, but I’m sure it’s awkward. His expression doesn’t say that, though. Instead, he walks over and drops a kiss on my lips before heading toward the front door. This all feels so natural, which should be freaking me out, but it’s not. I want more of it. Of him. But I know I also have a mission to get to.

Quickly, I make my way around the kitchen island and plant a few of my bugs. I’ll have to do a little at a time. Whenever I can steal a free moment. The main one I place is toward the wall that I’ve been suspicious of from the start. I’ve tracked the outside of the home from a satellite, and now having been inside of it, I know he’s hiding something behind this wall. I’m dying to know what’s in there.

I have a secret bomb shelter, but I have to share it with my dad. I can’t go putting up a picture collage of Owen with all the images I found of him. My dad would tease me endlessly. He already gave me a funny look when I brought the spaghetti home for him. Not that it stopped him from eating all of it.

Owen’s phone hadn’t given me much. It was pretty boring. The only activity on it had been him texting me after I left his place and me letting him know I was home. One name did stand out though. Gina Moore, a veterinarian, from the quick search I did on her.

She’s pretty and graduated at the top of her class. Gina is also *very* single, and she and Owen speak almost weekly. I don’t think they’re in a committed relationship if one at all. She is on a handful of dating websites, but I do know she has a thing for Owen. Okay, maybe it wasn’t a quick search that I did on her but a complete background check.

I may have also hacked into her phone and seen her texts with some of her other girlfriends. I don’t like it. Not one bit. I can’t blame her for crushing on Owen, but that doesn’t mean I can let her crush go unchecked. I mean, the woman took sneaky pictures of him when he was at her veterinary clinic. I know they were sneaky because they were at odd angles, and I’ve done a few of my own. I deleted all of them from her phone.

“You didn’t have to do this, babe,” Owen says, entering the kitchen. Did he call me babe? He holds the giant box in his buff arms. I’m sure he doesn’t even have to work out with all the manual labor he does around this place.

“You enjoy coffee. Now you won’t have to go to the coffee shop. I was told this machine is the best.” It grinds down the coffee beans and froths milk. It should fly too. The thing cost over a grand. Not that I paid for it. Sometimes packages go to the wrong places. Technology, you really shouldn’t trust it, but you can’t live without it either.

“Without the coffee shop, I wouldn’t have met you.” He winks at me as he sets the box down on the counter.

“But now that you’ve met me, do you need to meet anyone else?” I fold my arms over my chest. He lets out a deep chuckle.

“I suppose you’re right.”

I drop my arms. Well, that was easy. I guess the coffee shop can stay as-is. The owners were on the fence about selling the place anyways. That makes things easier. “I’ll set it up later. I don’t want your breakfast getting cold.”

He suddenly grabs me by the hips, lifting me back up to sit on the kitchen island before he gets back to making our breakfast. I watch his every move. What is it about Owen that is so alluring to me? Is it the unknown?

“No work today?” he asks, flipping the bacon.

“I did some last night. Is this your way of suggesting I leave?”

“What?” He turns off the stove and pulls the bacon off.

“You know when people say things like *I’m getting tired*. It’s a way of trying to nicely tell someone you want them to leave.”

“Told you Ace, I don’t ever want you to leave.” He’d better be careful, or I’ll start thinking he wants me to move in.

Owen comes over, one hand landing on each side of me. How am I only now noticing the man is at least twice my size? I have no clue what he is capable of or who he really is.

My only defense is behind a screen, and right now, there is nothing between the two of us. I'm utterly vulnerable.

"I like you," I tell him, unable to help myself. I'm obsessed with him but feel under his control too. I have never been more excited or enthralled with anything in my life.

"I like you, too."

I grip the front of his shirt to pull him down for a kiss. "Careful what you say, Owen."

"Promise, I always know what I'm doing," he responds with a soft drawl before kissing me.

I might not know what Owen is up to, but that's okay. If Duffy is after him, Owen will need me. I'll make sure of that.

Once we've had breakfast, Alfie drags over one of his cat toys—a mouse on a string attached to a stick.

“Does he do this a lot?” Maggie asks, a look of chagrin on her face.

“Yes.” I smile as she takes the toy and leads him into the living room with it.

“Catch it!” She waves it around, and Alfie parkours off a few things before launching himself at the squeaking mouse. With a quick flick of her wrist, she saves the mouse from his claws, but he isn't deterred. He keeps trying, even engaging his butt wiggle at times as he lines up to murder the toy.

“You'll have to try harder than that,” she taunts him, her smile warming me as she and Alfie keep playing.

When he finally catches it, he bites down hard and struts away, the stick dragging behind him as he takes his toy somewhere else to gloat over his kill.

I wrap my arm around Maggie's waist and pull her down to the sofa with me. “So what do you want to do today?”

She turns to me, her eyes taking on a mischievous quality. “Oh, I don't know. What do you usually do in a day?”

I'll have to give her an answer that tiptoes around some of the slightly more illegal parts of my business. “Hmm, that's a good question. I always start out with my morning chores. Tending the horses and feeding the chickens. Then I check my

garden, make sure the vine borers aren't ruining my tomatoes, check for fungus, pull weeds, things like that." I pause.

"And?" she asks.

"That's not enough?"

She looks around the house, her gaze flicking to the high-end finishes. "I don't think you got all this from messing around with fruits and vegetables."

"No. You're right about that. I have work, just like everyone else."

Her eyebrows twitch upward just a hair. "Yeah? What sort of work?"

I pull her more tightly to my side. "Is this an interrogation?"

She smirks. "I haven't even begun."

I laugh. God, she is too much. I want it all. "What about you? You've not told me much apart from your name."

"Maybe I prefer to be mysterious," she says airily.

"Let's start small, then. Where did you grow up?"

"I guess that information doesn't give too much away. I grew up in town with my dad. You?"

"My parents traveled a lot. My mother was FBI; my father was in the Navy. I spent time in Germany, Dubai, Indonesia, and plenty of duty stations around the US."

She blinks. "There are women in all those places."

I try not to smile. "Generally speaking, yes. But not to worry; I wasn't much of a chick magnet during my braces and pimples phase."

Her eyes narrow. "So what happened when you grew up? You don't live with your parents anymore."

"No, they're divorced and live abroad. I dropped out of high school and got into tech."

"What sort of tech?"

I cock my head to the side. “What about you? Did you go to college?”

She snorts. “No. The standards at MIT aren’t what they used to be, so I didn’t even bother applying. What would I learn there? Basic coding that any idiot could follow? No, thank you.”

“So you work in tech, too, I take it?”

She purses her lips. “I dabble.”

“And your parents?”

“I still live with my dad. We’re decent roommates.”

“Alfie’s a pretty good roommate, too. Until he gets a wild hair at about 3 a.m., tries to bite my toes through the blanket, then meows until I give him treats.”

“Hmm, my dad doesn’t do any of that.”

I laugh. “Do you have any idea how cute you are, Ace?”

“You think I’m cute?” she asks. “Not ...” She tangles her fingers in her lap. “Not sexy?”

God, the vulnerable way she asks it makes my heart melt. But the fact we’re talking about how sexy she is makes other parts of me decidedly hard.

With a pull, I drag her into my lap, her legs draped to one side. “I think you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. Sexy doesn’t even begin to describe you, Maggie.”

Her cheeks color a lovely pink, and she looks right into my eyes. “That’s ... that’s good to know.”

She’s hedging, keeping her feelings guarded. I get it. This is all so new, but the connection between us isn’t something that’s up for debate. It’s also not something that can wait. I want to show her just how special I think she is, and more than that, I want her to know that I mean every word. She’s remarkable, and I’m so fucking lucky that I found her when I did.

I slide my hand to the nape of her neck and pull her to me. I kiss her gently at first, my mouth seeking permission as my

tongue glances across her lips.

She leans into me, our kiss intensifying as she wraps her arms around my neck. I delve my tongue inside her mouth, tasting her. It only stokes my need. She's like a fucking sex bomb. The demure way she styles her hair, the glasses, the baggy clothes—she's a vixen hiding in plain sight. I'm only glad no one's seen through her disguise. Only me. It was meant to be this way.

Lifting her, I turn her so she's straddling me.

She settles on my lap, her legs spread and the heat between her thighs pressing against my cock through our clothes. When her tongue tangles with mine, my cock surges against my zipper, demanding more of her heat.

I move a hand under her shirt and cup her breast. She moans, her hips beginning to move against me. When I pinch her budded nipple, she jolts. I don't let go of her mouth, though. I chase her, continuing our kiss as I grip her ass with my other hand.

She keeps moving on top of me, chasing the friction between us as I fight the urge to throw her down on the couch and give her every inch of me. She's so fucking irresistible.

“Take what you need,” I groan against her mouth, then kiss down her throat, sucking her tender skin between my teeth.

She rides me, no longer demure, no longer anything except what she is—a goddess. Each stroke of her against my cock sends pleasure tingling up my spine, and I swear if she keeps this up, I might come in my jeans.

Her movements become more erratic, and I squeeze both her breasts, then twist her nipples. That sends her over.

She moans, her nails digging into my shoulders as she rocks against my hips, her body unwinding as I watch her. Her hips still move against me, and she gasps when the orgasm finally subsides.

I pull her to my mouth again, needing her so badly that I think I might come apart. I'm obsessed, can't stop kissing her. The

way I feel for her—fuck—I'm beginning to realize obsession
isn't a strong enough word.

MAGGIE

“Change of plans,” I tell Ocean when I finally get her on the line. I tried to connect to her a few times, and she wasn’t answering.

I didn’t want to leave Owen’s, but I have a few things to take care of. Plus, I need to be out of sight long enough for him to show me how and what he’s hiding behind the west wall in his kitchen.

“What do you mean?” Ocean sounds out of breath.

“What are you doing? Why didn’t you answer the first few times I called?”

“I was just playing with some toys,” she says innocently.

Ocean is far from innocent. In fact, I’m normally the innocent one out of the two of us, but I don’t feel that way at the moment. Actually, I’m not sure what I’m feeling. I’m all jumbled up. It’s confusing, and I don’t care much for it. Things need to be in their place, and for some reason, I’m not in mine.

“You steal something? I need to cover a trail?”

“No!” Her response is fast. Too late, but I let it go for now.

“Finding out why Duffy is so interested in Owen is my new objective,” I inform Ocean. I debate a moment after I utter the words if I should have kept this all to myself. I don’t want to share Owen, but I remind myself this is about protecting him. I’ll do what I must in order to make sure he’s safe. And I know Ocean will help me in any way that I need her to.

“Well, that’s kind of the point here. I think if you figure out what Owen is up to, then you’ll know why Duffy is so interested in him.”

“Interested. You think she’s *interested* in him?”

“Ah, yeah. I’m so confused.”

“As in you think she *likes* him? She wants him for herself?”
I’m starting to get worked up now. Because Owen is mine. No ifs, ands, or buts about it. He did say for me to *take what you need*. Well, I need him. All of him.

“Whoa, I didn’t say that. Well, I mean she might want him.”

I grip the steering wheel. I will make her regret wanting Owen in any way. Destroy a project she loves. I’ll need to find out her interests. That will require me to dig into her personal life a bit more, and I’ll need help with that.

“Magic, are you listening to me?” It’s a good thing I have all the help I’ll need at my fingertips.

“What?” I snap back from being lost in the idea of burning down Duffy’s closet. That way, there would be no more clicking of her fancy heels. It would be easy to have Ocean follow her to see where she lives.

“I meant she’s interested in Owen as in to work for her. You know she went strong for us to come work for her. She knows talent when she sees it.” Ocean has a point. “Like we’d ever pass the psych part, though.” Ocean laughs.

“I could fake it.”

Ocean only laughs harder.

“I’m not crazy.”

The line goes quiet.

“Ocean!”

“I love you, Mags, but I think you’re getting crazier by the day.”

I chew on my bottom lip as I ponder her words. Then, for no good reason, I blurt out what happened this morning. “You

went to his house at the ass crack of dawn? You're going to blow your cover."

"He was happy to see me. Didn't you hear the part about the orgasm? He told me to take what I need!" As I shout the last part, I realize she might not be wrong. "Ocean." I whisper now. "I think I'm obsessed with him. You know how I get obsessed with things."

"Key word is *things*."

"Was things." I pull into the driveway of my house, the garage opening and closing for me without me having to signal it myself. "Okay, we have two missions."

"Oh God." Ocean sighs. But I know no matter if she agrees with my actions or not, that she's ride or die and is going to help me.

"Find out about Owen because his problems are now my problems."

"Mags, his problems are not your problems."

"Yes they are," I snap.

"Well, then. Someone has gotten feisty."

"I love you and my father. Your problems are my problems."

"Ah, love?" Ocean responds.

"Of course I love you."

"I know that. That's also not what I meant, but we'll skip that for the moment. What is the second mission?"

"To make Owen love me."

"Right, I guess we aren't skipping that," she mutters, confusing me.

"I need to know how to make a man love you." I drum my fingers on the steering wheel while sitting in the darkness of the garage.

"People aren't computers. You can't make them do things."

"This is not helpful. Do a search or something. I need a list of ways to seduce a man."

“Mags, I’m worried he’s already made you. Most men would freak out if the girl they just met popped up on them the way you did this morning.”

“Well, maybe he’s so accepting because he’s already falling in love with me.” I wouldn’t mind if he popped up on me. Well, not now because I didn’t tell him where I lived. He told me how to get to his home. Invited me into it. But it might be sweet if he stalked me down.

“You got a pushup bra?”

“A push up what?”

“It’s a type of bra. Makes your boobs look sexy.”

“Bet Duffy has a pushup bra.” I grit my teeth. “Make me a list. I need to talk to my dad.” I hang up before she can respond. When I enter the house, I hear gunfire. I head toward the sound to find my father in the living room playing on his Xbox. I plop down next to him with a sigh.

He glances over at me for a second but goes back to playing, making a kill shot. His shot in real life is just as good. He was in the military for a time. I let out another loud sigh. My father pauses the game and turns to give me a curious look.

“What’s going on, Magpie?”

“Oh, nothing.”

“You sighed twice. Out with it.”

“Well, there is this boy—” My father’s brows rise all the way up. I bet that was the last thing he was expecting me to come out with.

“Don’t tell me his name is Owen Caddel. The *man* a group of federal agents showed up in our house to talk about.”

“You always say don’t trust the feds. So Owen Caddel must be good.”

“Not what I really meant.” He runs a hand down his face. “I thought I got lucky. That I wasn’t going to have to deal with teen crushes.”

“Hey, I’m not a teen, and this isn’t a crush!”

“I know, Magpie. You’re a lot like your mom.”

“What does that mean in relation to this?” He always says that.

“Your mom could be obsessive. She was about me.” He smirks. “I lost her, and I still won’t betray her. I’m hers. Always have been and always will be.”

“That sounds nice. Sweet even.”

I want that. I’ll make sure I get it, too. Maggie Caddel has a nice ring to it.

The squirrel darts out of the cage and into the thick brush on the side of the road.

I grab the empty trap and swing it into the back of my truck, then head back to the driver's seat. As I get in, I see the glint of a car far off down the farm road.

The coffee I made with the new machine Maggie got me is still warm as I take a gulp of it, savoring the sweet and the bitter all mixed together. It's good, far better than what the coffee shop makes. I think the fact that it came from the machine Maggie gave me makes it even better somehow.

I start the truck and roll away, giving a two-finger salute to the squirrel, who's now free to gnaw on someone else's wires for a change.

"Maybe he'll meet a nice lady squirrel and settle down." I glance at Alfie. He's snoozing in the sunny front window. He's loved riding in the car from day one, though it makes no sense. I've never heard of another cat who enjoys car rides. "I think I've already met a nice lady. What do you think about the two of us old bachelors settling down? Maggie is more than we deserve. She's so ... different. Quirky. Fun." I already miss her, and she was at my place just this morning. It doesn't make sense—I just met her, but I already feel like a piece of me is missing when she isn't close.

The car that had been coming down the farm road seems to have vanished, because it never rides past, and there's nowhere to turn off out this way. Odd.

I keep driving back through town, then stop at the hardware store for a few things. “I brought the harness if you want to come in,” I ask Alfie.

He stretches and crosses his paws over his nose, going right back to sleep. “I’ll take that as a no.”

I leave the windows cracked, a nice spring breeze blowing through, and walk into the store.

“Hi, Owen.” Claire waves from behind the counter. She’s always friendly when I drop by, and it’s nice that she’s learned the customers’ names.

“Afternoon.” I stride down the aisles and stop in front of the chicken supplies. I have a particularly broody hen that isn’t producing eggs. I thought I might get her some of the decoy kind to sit on so she feels better. That also means I’ll be able to snag the eggs she and others lay without her trying to peck my face off.

I want to introduce Maggie to all the hens, but if Roberta goes after her because she’s in her broody mood, then Roberta will end up on the dinner table. There’s no way I’d let her peck my Maggie. This should prevent that from happening. Maggie should feel at home on my property, especially with the animals there. I think her showing up this morning is a good indicator that she’s comfortable around me. I smile without even thinking about it. It’s her—she just gives me this good feeling. Like everything is falling into place. I’m usually wary, especially when it comes to strangers. But Maggie is anything but. I feel like I’ve known her all my life.

The front doorbell tinkles as another customer walks in, and I grab a box of the fake eggs, then look at a few of the other supplies. Hens are a needy bunch, but the fresh eggs are worth it. Maggie seemed to particularly like them, so I want to keep them coming.

“Broody hen?” Claire sidles up to me.

“Yes. Roberta’s been a little ornery. If this doesn’t work, I’ll have to get some hatching eggs.”

“Brandon said he’ll have some available next week if you need them. And he has chicks, too, like usual.” She looks up at me, smiling.

“Hopefully, these will do the trick.” I turn toward the register.

Movement at the end of the aisle catches my eye. Must be the other customer.

“Owen?” Claire tugs my sleeve.

“Hm?” I step away from her, and she grudgingly releases my shirt.

“You come in here a lot lately.” She moves closer.

I back away. “Sure.”

Her brows draw together as she steps closer again.

My back is against the snake repellent, an aisle display of shovels hemming me in.

“I was just wondering if maybe there was some other reason you’re coming by so often?” She bats her lashes.

“Other than the squirrels and the chickens?” I cock my head to the side.

“Yes.” She licks her lips. “You know. Maybe you like coming in because you’re interested in more than just farm supplies?”

“You mean the time I special ordered those big battery chargers? Those were for the farm, too.”

“No,” she says sharply, then tempers her tone. “What I’m saying is, maybe you come to the store so much because you’re interested in me?”

“In you?” I think my eyebrows hit my hairline.

“Yes. You want to go out for—” A huge, calamitous crash sounds at the rear of the store.

Claire jumps and spins toward the sound. The back wall is covered in tools—spades, hole diggers, all manner of saws and pruners—that reach all the way to the ceiling. But the wall is failing, the tools falling in heaps as an entire row of hoes drops out of sight and crashes to the floor. It’s as if someone yanked

the backer board free from the wall, which dislodged the hanging hooks and sent it all careening down.

“What the—” Claire runs toward the cacophony.

I think about helping out, but I want to get back to the farm and check on the loaf of sourdough I started in case Maggie stops by tonight.

I hesitate for only a moment as Claire groans, “Oh my God, how am I going to fix this?” Then I throw a twenty on the counter and head out the door.

As I get in, I see a shadow standing at the end of one of the aisles, hidden from me for the most part.

“I’m glad the other customer didn’t get hurt. That was a dangerous situation,” I tell Alfie, who stretches again and continues his nap.

When I look up again, the shadow is gone.

“Told you.” Ocean is smug.

I’m not. “It was a safety hazard anyways. They shouldn’t have so much weight on one wall without making it more stable. One little hacker girl shouldn’t be able to take it down so easily.”

“Right.”

I snort. It was she who told me how easy it would be to make a distraction. I thought about using fire, but that can be chaotic, which Ocean pointed out quickly before she gave me her suggestion.

I think that idea had only popped into my head because I was burning with jealousy. But I knew I needed to take a step back. I couldn’t burn an entire business down because someone flirted with Owen.

I mean I really, *really* wanted to, but that’s beside the point. It was only the girl I wanted to teach a lesson and maybe Owen too. I left him for a few hours, and some other girl was trying to take him from me. If he wasn’t so handsome and charming, this kind of stuff wouldn’t be happening.

I’ve been busy! I can’t keep my eyes on him every second. I have work to do to protect him. And while I’m hard at work, he’s getting flirted with. I poked around to see if I could shake anything from Duffy on my own but that was a bust. It was me that ended up being questioned until I killed our call. Then I was nose deep into the art of seduction when I got an alert that Owen had left his home.

“He wasn’t flirting back,” Ocean says, trying to make me feel better.

“How can you be sure?” I missed part of their conversation. I was so busy trying to go unnoticed that I didn’t realize what was happening until it was almost too late. I’ll never make that mistake again.

“I’m watching the hardware store’s surveillance back before I delete it.” I can hear her clicking away. “Look at us doing things backwards.” We really are. Since when am I out in the world while Ocean sits behind a computer?

“I’m over it,” I growl. My eye goes to the small sledgehammer I kept from the store.

“Really?” Ocean lets out a loud breath. “That’s good. I was worried when you came up with the getting pregnant idea.”

“That wasn’t a terrible idea. I read about it. Science has proven that males often—”

“So you’re not over it.” She cuts me off.

“I’m over the secrets.”

“Oh.” Her voice grows gleeful. “Are we going to destroy something else? Can I go in?” I know she doesn’t mean personally. I’ve been making her keep her drone back. At a glance, I couldn’t see any security around Owen’s place, but there has to be some. Problem is I’m pretty sure some of it is basic. Old-school military; nonetheless, it would alert him, I’m sure.

“I’m going to find out what’s behind the wall.”

“Can I go in?” Ocean begs.

“Yes.” I give as I press down harder on the gas, needing to beat Owen home. He could have more errands. That thought sours my mood. I wonder how many more women will try to proposition my man.

“MOM,” I call out.

“Yes, sweetheart.” The soft but still robotic voice comes through the speakers. I need her right now. I don’t have my

hands free. I can't bring myself to get an electric car. They freak me out, only because I know what I've done to some of them myself. They can be hacked and tracked. A vehicle is a giant weapon.

"All lights green." I give the command. The light in front of me flicks over a second before I blow through it.

"Isn't that fun?" Ocean asks.

"Kinda," I admit. It was always me that was turning the lights for other people. I suppose I still am. I made the system I call MOM. That might be weird or crazy, but I guess that's what I am, after all. It's nice to call out for her help. "Turn them back red on target, Owen." Our tracker is still on him. A few red lights will buy me some time. "Did he get in his truck?"

"Yes, he appears to be following your direction."

Yeah, it's the fast way home. To his house.

"Roads clear?"

"No," MOM responds. "There is a state trooper doing radar on C highway before Montgomery Road." Of course there is. Shit. It's coming up too quickly for me to try and lure them somewhere else. I slow down. The last thing I need is to get pulled over.

"It's a basement," Ocean whispers, talking more to herself.

"Don't blow anything up!" He's got cute little critters all over that place.

"I'm not! I can scan it better now that you're letting me near the damn house."

"Oh."

"But I can."

"No!" I shout at her.

"I'm not going to blow anything up. I want to see what he's got. The wall opens to a small room that only leads to the basement." Ocean is quiet for a long moment. "Wow."

"Wow? What's wow?" I pass the state trooper.

“There is nothing. I can’t read it. I know there is a basement, but I can’t get anything from it. Not a temperature or a full size. He’s blocking me somehow.” Now it’s Ocean who growls in frustration.

“Don’t blow it up,” I remind her as I once again speed up. “I’ll go down there myself.”

“I don’t know. You’ll be going in blind. No signals of any kind are coming in or out of there, but there is something there.” Her anger starts to morph into fascination. “If you weren’t cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs, I’d make a terrible joke about him having a girl down there.”

“Ocean!”

“What? We live off those crime documentaries.” We do, but there is no way *my* Owen who has a cute kitten and gives me sweet kisses is one of those monsters.

“It could all be a lie.” It dawns on me. An act he puts on for a cover. I turn down his driveway as worry starts to eat away at me. Have I been duped? “But there’s no way ... I mean, he’s not ... That’s not Owen. He has no idea who I am or what I’m after.”

“I’m sorry, Maggie, but I have to say it. We never should have gotten close. He has to know who you are if he is tangled with Duffy. If Parks can’t get shit on him.” Was it a lie? The things he told me about his parents?

I should turn around. Get the hell out of here. Instead, I throw my car into park and grab the sledgehammer. To my surprise, when I go to test the lock, the door opens. He really is laying on the country act thick.

My hand tightens on the handle as my mind races with so many scenarios of how the next few minutes of my life are going to play out. It makes me lightheaded.

“Don’t go in!” Ocean shouts at me.

“He’s a mile from his driveway,” MOM announces. I enter the house and head straight for my target.

“Magic! Mags? You can’t be hammering his wall when he walks in!”

“You said my cover is already blown,” I remind her as I raise the sledgehammer and swing home.

The front door is wide open as I pull up to the front of the house. As soon as I open the truck door, Alfie sprints away, dashing inside.

“Wait!” I call, but he’s already long gone.

I pocket my phone, then grab the fake eggs and head up the stairs to the porch. A loud splintering sound comes from inside, then I hear a triumphant “Aha!”

Shaking my head, I stride into the house.

“Wait, what is this? Steel?” Maggie yells.

“I wouldn’t if I were you,” I say as I turn the corner and find her gawking at the steel door that leads to the basement. “You could hurt yourself.”

She whirls and raises the sledgehammer. “What’s going on here? Are there women down there? Is that what you’re doing? Trafficking women or doing some sort of torture sex thing with them or, or, or—”

“Hey.” I drop the eggs and hold up my hands, palms toward her. “What gave you those wild ideas?” Worry streaks through me when I see she’s dusted with drywall, her knuckles white as she holds the hammer. “You didn’t hurt yourself, did you?”

“Hurt myself? That’s what you’re concerned about?” Her brow wrinkles. “You ... you aren’t mad?”

I glance around at the splintered wood and the bits of drywall. “No. I can fix all this.”

“You aren’t even surprised.” She steps closer, the sledgehammer still raised in her grip. “It’s almost like you *knew* I was here. Like you already *knew* what I was doing.”

I shrug. “I did.”

Her eyes round. “*What?*”

“Listen, how about you lower the sledgehammer, let me check your hands, and then we can talk. Okay?”

“My hands are fine.” She brandishes the weapon. “You need to talk. *Now*. Start by telling me what the hell you have in your basement.”

I cross my arms. “Probably a lot of the same stuff you have in your office at home. Computers, burner computers, lots of hardware to do illegal things, and plenty of toys and gadgets to hide my tracks.”

“Y-you’re a hacker?” The sledgehammer drops a little.

“No.” I smirk. “Not exactly. Not the way you are, anyway.”

She finally lowers the sledgehammer, likely only because it’s heavy, since her expression is still wary. “You know about me?”

“Yes.”

“No you don’t.” She shakes her head. “Not possible. I saw you first. I got the drop on you. You don’t even—”

“I know you, Maggie.” I step closer to her again because I can’t fucking help myself.

“No.” She backs against the shattered wall. “I don’t think so.”

I lift my hand, and to her credit, she doesn’t flinch as I reach past her and open the hidden panel on the wall, then enter my code. The door clicks in three different places, and a slight whoosh of air denotes that the door is free.

“Go ahead.”

“What’s down there?” She turns her head. “I know. No, I *know!*”

I wait. Ocean must be going crazy in her ear right now.

“I’m not—no.” She keeps her gaze on me as she reaches for the door handle. “You know where I am, okay? So if you don’t hear from me in like, five minutes, then send in the drones. Okay?”

I try to keep myself from smiling. But it’s difficult. She knows she shouldn’t be doing what she’s doing—and Ocean is yelling that same point in her ear—but she’s opening the door and moving down the stairs all the same.

“Tell Ocean you’re safe with me.” I follow her.

She whirls, her eyes even wider than before. “He knows,” she whispers.

I hear the faintest whine of the speaker in her ear. Ocean just screamed. I pull the earpiece away.

“Hey!” Maggie reaches for my hand.

“She might damage your hearing.” I hold it out to her. “Once she calms down, you two can talk all you want.”

She swipes the earpiece, then—with a bitter look at me—continues downward, the overhead lights turning on as she goes.

Alfie runs down and plops to the basement floor, then jumps onto my chair, causing it to spin and all the lights to come on.

Maggie stops. “You ...” She looks around. Her face stares back. All my screensavers and wallpapers are images of her. They aren’t always the best photos since I had to take them from covert locations, but I have plenty. My favorite is the one on the biggest screen—it’s her sleeping peacefully, her mouth open just a little. I still remember the way she snored faintly as she hugged a cat stuffie that night.

Every night, really. She’s a creature of habit. She likes things just so. That’s why I’m always careful to leave everything in her place the way she wants it. Even her father doesn’t pay as close attention as I do. Sometimes he leaves the cans turned the wrong way in the pantry or turns the blinds a few degrees in the wrong direction. I fix all that. For her.

I shoo Alfie out of my seat and enter my password, booting up all the screens. One set is an array of images of her house, the businesses she likes to frequent, and the inside of her bedroom.

The other screens are various streams of data, all of it surveilling Agent Duffy and her crew of hackers. I've known about her work for the bureau for a long time. After all, that's how I found Maggie.

"I don't believe this." She stares, open-mouthed, at the screens, her brain parsing the data even faster than mine can. I know for a fact she's the best hacker I've ever had the pleasure of coming across.

"You would've found my secret eventually on your own. But I suppose it was time to stop the charade."

She turns and glares at me. "The coffee shop? My car battery getting messed up?"

I shrug. "I knew you'd be there, and I know how to take the power connections on and off a battery. I also knew that you can find your way through a server full of traps and firewalls, but you don't know the first thing about how cars work. It was simple, really."

"You set this whole thing up?" The disbelief in her voice is the cutest thing I've ever heard.

"Of course." I wave a hand at the screens. "I've been following Duffy for quite a while. Her outfit takes down certain criminals and leaves others that she finds too dangerous or too difficult to get to. She doesn't even tell you about those, which I respect. She wants to keep you safe, and so do I. But those criminals can't just walk away—especially not when they've padded their pockets with someone else's retirement money or extorted it from innocent people or even did an old-fashioned hack and theft. I find them, and I make them pay."

"That's why Duffy wants you." She backs away toward the stairs.

“She’s guessed about me, yes. But she doesn’t have any evidence, nothing on me. At least, not until now.” I stare at her pointedly. “You know the truth, and you work for her. You’ve done the job she asked you to do by figuring out what I do and why I make sure my steps are untraceable.”

Warring emotions cross her face, and I move toward her again. I can’t help myself.

“Let’s go upstairs. I’ll make you something to eat, and you can ask me anything and everything.”

She holds a hand out to keep me back. My heart cracks a little at her defensive posture.

“No. I need to think. I need to ...” She shakes her head. “Everything is all out of order. I have to put it back straight.”

“Maggie, I can help.” I try again, but she climbs the stairs backwards.

“Just let me go.”

“No.” I follow her.

“Owen!” She turns and sprints up the stairs.

I stay close on her heels, and she whirls as she gets to the hall, pressing her back to the wall and keeping her eyes on me. “I’m leaving.”

“No.” I step to her.

She gasps and looks up, her eyes wide. “You can’t keep me here.”

I rest my hand at her throat, and she doesn’t fight me. Doesn’t move away. Instead, her lips part as she looks up at me, her pupils dilating.

“I know you’re confused.” I lean closer to her, our lips only a breath away. “I didn’t want you to find out like this, but you *did* come to my house with a sledgehammer.” I brush my lips against hers. “Which is extremely reckless and fucking sexy.”

“This is crazy,” she murmurs, her eyelids fluttering. “Totally psycho.”

“I know. That’s why it’s perfect.” I kiss her hard, staking my claim. With Maggie, I’ll never give up, never give in, and never let her go.

*M*y mind races in a thousand different directions as Owen's mouth devours mine. This man is crazy obsessed with me. So much so that he's been stalking me for a while based on how many photos he had of me. I mean, most people would probably think he's psycho, but I find it endearing. I know I should probably be frightened. That's the exact opposite of what I am. I think I've hit the damn jackpot.

"We can't," I say between kisses. "I've got, like, questions." Owen's hands go to my ass, lifting me off my feet. I instinctively wrap my legs around him. I mean, look—I may want some answers, but I'm not going to pass up a chance to cling to him.

"Ask away." He carries me up the stairs while nibbling at my neck. It's hard to think when he does that. Owen gently places me onto his bed. "So no questions?" He smirks.

I smack his chest. "Don't be smug. I'm the smug one here." I scramble to my knees. Owen pulls his shirt off over his head. My mouth falls open. This man is so distracting. He's perfection, even with the scar on his left shoulder. "What's that?" I reach out and run my fingers across it.

"Bullet." His answer is straight to the point.

"Right," I mutter. "But you have chickens and a cat." Owen is gentle and sweet.

"And now I have you." A deadly glint flashes in his eyes. "Hacking wasn't always my specialty. I've done plenty of ruthless things, *bad* things."

“I have no clue who you are.” I think that’s the first time I’ve ever said that to anyone. Usually, I’m able to uncover anything I want about people. A person’s digital trail can tell you so much about who they are.

“Everything I’ve told you about my life is true, Ace. If you ask me to stop, I will.”

“You’d let me leave?” A stab of disappointment fills me. I was kind of into this being kidnapped thing. It was a nice change of pace.

“Never.” He places his rough hand against my throat again. I’m not scared of him. In fact, I find his hand there rather soothing. I think Owen is lethal to the rest of the world, and only I get this side of him. I really love the idea of that. He could easily hurt me, but I know he won’t. “I’ll stop killing if you ask me to.”

“How about the hardware store girl? Would you kill her for me?” I lay my hands against his bare chest. Even on my knees on the bed with him standing beside it, he still towers over me.

“Claire?”

“You know her name!” I hiss. If anyone should worry for their safety, it’s him. I have a bomb shelter I could put him in. That thing might actually come in handy, though I was sure it would never be useful.

“Ace, it’s on her name tag. I notice everything. I remember everything. It can be both a curse and a blessing. I know every freckle you have.”

“I don’t have many freckles.”

“Seventeen.”

“Seventeen? Why does it have to be an odd number?”

He smirks. Not sure what’s so funny. “It’s seventeen, Ace. You want me to show you?”

He pulls my shirt over my head, tossing it away before he pushes me down onto the bed. I don’t fight him. I want this closeness with him more than anything.

“You’re the only one I want.” He pops the button of my jeans.

“One.” He kisses a freckle next to my belly button.

“Two.” His mouth goes to my hip, kissing a tiny freckle that’s barely noticeable. “We’re almost to my favorite ones. Except that one behind your right ear on your neck. That is truly my favorite.”

He’s kissed me there a few times, I recall. Owen pulls my pants off, taking my panties and everything else with them.

“I’m naked.” I don’t know why I feel the need to state the obvious.

Owen’s breathing grows heavy. For someone that knows every freckle on my body, his eyes still continue to trace me up and down.

His big rough hand comes down on my thigh. His touch is firmer now. I didn’t think he could get more possessive. He spreads my legs open before his fingers drift up toward my sex.

“These are my second favorite.” I glance down to see a few freckles on the inside of my thighs. I lick my lips. That’s not where I want him to kiss right now.

“Forget about the freckles,” I say, trying to get him to speed this up. The throb between my thighs becomes more unbearable by the second.

“I could never forget. Not a single detail of you is meant to be forgotten.” I don’t get time to savor his sweet words of devotion, because he strikes. In a flash, his face is buried between my thighs.

His lips wrap around my clit, and he sucks as he thrusts one of his thick fingers inside of me. When he stiffens his tongue and swipes it back and forth on my clit while working his finger in and out of me, I lose it.

“Owen!” I scream his name as the sudden orgasm slams through my body. I’m so lost in it I don’t realize Owen has moved. His cock is pressing into me. My eyes fly open to meet his.

“You’re mine, Ace.” He thrusts the rest of the way inside. I whimper at the sharp twinge of pain, but the orgasm still lingering matched with Owen’s words make it melt away quickly. I wrap my legs around him.

“Prove it,” I challenge. I swear his eyes darken. He looks like a hunter closing in on its prey. He might not want to hurt me, but he does want to catch me. And I want to be caught.

“I’ll more than prove it.” He pulls out and thrusts back in. I’m so full of him it’s almost painful, but I don’t care. I cling to him as he starts to move faster. He pins my hands over my head, holding me down. “You keep touching me and I’ll come.”

“Isn’t that the point?” I moan. I’m going to orgasm again. This build is different. He’s hitting something deep inside of me.

“Need you with me.”

“I’m with you.” My sex clamps down around his cock. I’m so close.

“Ready for me to prove it, Ace?” I open my mouth, but no words can come out. His lips brush against my ear. “I know everything about you,” he whispers into my ear. “You’re ovulating.”

I go off. My whole body tenses as the pleasure explodes. Owen thrusts fully inside of me, holding himself as deep as he can get. His warmth floods into me.

I take every drop of it whether I like it or not.

I don’t like it.

I *love* it.

“*Y*ou knew. The whole time,” Maggie mumbles, her body warm against mine as the sun peeks into our bedroom. I already think of it as ours. She’s part of me, always has been. Whatever is mine is hers, too. “The whole time!” She snorts.

I shrug and pull her tighter to me. “It only took one look, Ace. Just one. And I knew.”

“I’m so good at finding things and figuring people out and-and-*knowing* what’s going on. I can’t believe I didn’t see it.” She groans. “How? How could I have missed so much?”

I smirk. “I’m surprised you never found the cameras.”

She turns her head, her eyes catching mine. “Cameras?”

“In your house. Though I have to admit, when you do the EMP blast and wipe everything, I have to replace them. It’s a real pain in my—”

“In my house!” She bites my chest.

“Fuck, that feels nice.” I pull her on top of me, her legs spreading to straddle me. When I feel the heat between her thighs, her cunt still slick from our night together, I can’t stop myself from thrusting against her.

“You’re a fucking nutjob.” She grins and digs her nails into my shoulders. “A total psycho!”

“Only for you.” I grip her waist and rub her against me.

She bites her lip. “Owen.” My name comes out on a low moan.

She’s sore. She has to be. I had her so many times last night. But damn, I want more. Still, I won’t hurt her. Licking my thumb, I press it between us.

“What are you—Oh!” Her hips jerk as I swirl my thumb around her clit.

“I want you to get off.” I look up at her, taking in every bit of her—the flush on her skin, the way her nipples harden as she starts to grind against me. “That’s it.”

I cup her breast with one hand, squeezing as I continue to rub her slick skin. “Do you have any idea how sexy you are?” I grit my teeth, my cock desperately hard as she rubs her pussy along it.

“Owen,” she breathes, her head thrown back.

“Take it. Take whatever you need.” I strum her clit faster, my body tense.

“More, I want more.” She lifts up, then reaches down and pulls my cock toward her.

“No, you’re sore. Don’t—” I groan as she slides down onto me, my cock surging into her as her slick walls welcome me.

“Fucking hell, Ace.” I grip her hips and try to get a hold on myself. It’s hard when she’s still riding me, taking every inch and making it belong to her.

“That’s it.” She runs her hands up her body and cups her breasts. It’s the single sexiest thing I’ve ever seen in my life. I join her there and pinch her nipples, twisting them as she moves her hips. Thrusting with her, I follow her rhythm, pulsing inside her again and again as she rides me.

I force myself to breathe, to hold out, to do anything but come inside her. It’s so goddamn hard when she’s on top of me like this, her body on display, her pussy squeezing me until I can’t even form a single thought.

“I’m—” Her hips move more erratically. “I’m—”

“That’s it. Come on my cock, Ace. I need it.”

“Owen!” She arches, and a moan leaves her lips. It sends heat blazing up my shaft, and I come with her, my cock spilling inside her soft cunt as she rides out her release. She’s too much, too sexy, too fucking everything—but I want all of her and more.

When she shudders and lies on my chest, I rub her back, skimming her soft skin as our breathing slows down. My mind clears from the lust haze, but my cock is still inside her. She feels so good like this—sated and boneless, happy in my arms.

“I think you love it that I’m a psycho for you.” I kiss her crown.

She smiles against my chest. “I should be mad at you. You know that, right? I should be calling the cops and screaming and running.”

I scoff. “We don’t talk to the cops.”

She snorts a cute little laugh. “Never. Except Duffy. She’s different.”

“She’s one of the better ones. I’ll give her that. But her authority doesn’t cover nearly enough ground.”

“That’s where you come in?” Maggie props her chin on my chest and looks at me thoughtfully.

“Yes.”

“But is that what you’ve always done? Found bad guys?”

I tuck her hair behind her ear. “I wish I could say yes, but I won’t lie to you, Maggie. I’ll never tell you anything but the truth. No more games. No more hiding.” I cup her cheek. She’s so fucking innocent, so *good*. And she’s always been that. “I wish I were more like you, Ace.”

“What?” She blinks.

“I know your history. You’ve always done the right thing. Every time you’ve been confronted with the choice of doing what’s easy or what’s right—you always choose to do what’s right.” I sigh. “I can’t say that for myself.”

She leans into my touch. “Tell me.”

I’d hoped I’d have more time to woo her before I told her about my past. Then again, it’s important for her to know who I am—who I *really* am—before she decides to be with me forever. Because that’s what she is to me—my forever.

“I started out as an analyst for the CIA, but I only did that for a few months before I was plucked out and put into a black ops division. Dark stuff. The government has a lot of secrets, and they’ll kill to protect them.” I clear my throat and force myself to meet her gaze. “I killed, Maggie. And it wasn’t always the right choice. At the time, I thought it was, but I was fooling myself. I did bad things to protect people in power.”

Her face falls a little, but I keep going. I have to come clean with her. She’s the only one I want to truly know me.

“A few years ago, I was on an op that went bad. Real bad. We were in the sandbox, overseas. I was in the field to hack a localized server setup, download the data, then trash the servers. Run-of-the-mill for me back then. I was in the middle of copying the files when the family who lived in the compound arrived home unexpectedly. Now if it had just been the man—someone wanted by the US for terrorism or other acts—I would’ve taken him out, no problem. But it wasn’t. It was him, his wife, and their two daughters.” I swallow hard, the memories rising up. “My squad got the order to take them out.”

“Oh, shit.” Maggie’s eyes are wide.

I shake my head. “I refused. I wouldn’t do it. But my squad, the other two guys on the mission with me, they took the order and were going to run with it. I tried to talk them out of it, but they turned on me. Said I was siding with the enemy.”

“Owen.” The understanding and compassion in her eyes almost kills me.

“I had to take them out. My own men.”

She scoots up and kisses me softly. “It’s okay.”

It’s not, but the more I’m around her, the more I think it will be. “After that, I cut ties, changed my identity, and left that life

behind. But ... I guess I still carry the guilt of everything else I've done. That's why I do this now. I help people. I try to, anyway."

She just looks at me, and the emotion in her eyes is full of so much warmth and hope—and no judgment. It melts me even more, and I was already a puddle for her.

"You're kind, Owen. I can tell. And you're more than those things in your past."

"I can be. With you." I pull her up my body and kiss her, needing to feel her so close to me that we become one.

A slight hum sounds outside.

She pulls away, her eyes going wide.

"What is—"

"Oh, shit!" She sits up and looks around frantically. "I know that sound."

"What?" I reach for the bedside table and the gun hidden inside it. Then I recognize the noise. Drones. Several of them, by the sound of it.

"This is bad! My phone? Where's my phone? Ocean is going to—"

"I know you have her in there! Send her out now, and I won't have to hurt you." Ocean's voice, stern and deadly, sounds through some speakers. "Refuse, and I'll burn this whole place down, starting with these chickens! Who wants some barbecue?" she yells.

Maggie puts a hand to her forehead. "Hell. Here we go."

MAGGIE

I scoot out of bed as quickly as I can and throw clothes on. This is bad. She's going to start blowing crap up if I don't put a stop to it. Or even worse, she'll call my father, and then he'll be showing up here. That is not how I want Owen and my dad to meet. It would be really freaking awkward.

"Slow down." Owen grabs my elbow when I trip trying to pull my shorts on.

"She's not bluffing. I might be like a crazy stalker, but Ocean is well..." I trail off, trying to think of a nice way to say it.

"Bloodthirsty?"

"Yes! The sort of person that shoots now and asks questions later."

"She's not going to shoot anything with you inside."

I wish that were true, but I know without a doubt it's not. "Oh, she will." I get the rest of my clothes on. "I bet she did a heat scan and knows where we're both standing." The blood drains from my face. "Oh gosh, she probably knows ..." I glance toward the bed. I'll have to worry about that later. Ocean knowing Owen and I were in bed together is the least of my worries right now.

"It's all right, Ace. Calm down. Nothing is going to happen." Owen drops a kiss on the top of my head before he starts getting dressed himself. I take off downstairs, not bothering to find my freaking phone. I go straight outside. Once Ocean sees

me, she'll calm down. The second I step out of the house, the drone lowers in front of me.

"I'm okay. Chill out."

"I know you are, but I had no other choice. I had no contact. Figured this would get your attention."

What the heck? "If you knew I was fine, why did you need my attention so badly?"

"Duffy is at your house." I groan. My dad is going to love that.

"All right." I head back into the house, almost running into Owen. "Can I leave you for a few hours and trust you will not be flirting with random hardware store girls?"

"Why do you need to leave?"

"Don't answer my question with a question."

"Ace, I think you forget who the real stalker is here." He tucks a piece of my hair behind my ear. "Anything you could fathom is the same for me. I feel tenfold crazier about you and another man." That sexy dark glint in his eyes returns, sending a delicious thrill down my spine.

"Duffy is at my house."

"I know." He leans down and presses his mouth against mine with a sweet, gentle kiss.

"She's going to ask about you."

"I know," he repeats before placing another kiss on my lips.

"Owen." I place my hand on his chest. "How did you do this?" He set a plan into motion to bring me right to him.

"I knew I had to get your attention. My brilliant, beautiful girl. Once I got it, I knew it was my chance."

"Chance to what?"

"Get you to become obsessed with me. I've walked past you before. Almost ran right into you at a store, but I could get nothing from you. So I hatched a new plan."

"That's all really sweet," I admit. "I can't believe I didn't see you. You're so handsome." He gives me a lopsided smile.

Goes to show how in my own head I can be at times.

“You’re special, Ace. The way your mind works. I knew if I wanted you, I’d have to work for it.”

“And you did.”

“Always. I’ll always fight for you.” He grips my hips, pulling me flush into him. “And I’ll never let you go. I try to be a good man these days, but when it comes to you, I’ll set the world on fire to have you.” He says the sweetest things.

Actually, I think Owen might have just told me he loves me. Obsession is one thing. Love is another. I’ve been obsessive about many things in life, but I’ve only ever loved a few people.

“I have to go talk to Duffy.”

“Then go talk to her.” He lets go of my hips.

“What am I going to say when she asks about you? I’ve been sloppy.” I hold up my phone. “I have systems in place, but I haven’t been watching and tracking. I’m sure she knows I’m here.” I got lost in Owen. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?” He chuckles.

“You distracted me, and then I wasn’t keeping us protected.”

“Ace, that’s the sweetest damn thing you’ve ever said to me. That I held your attention long enough to forget about everything else.”

Warmth blooms in my chest. It was freeing being with him. The rest of the world slipped away.

“What are you going to do while I’m gone?”

“I can come with you,” he offers. I consider it for half a second. “No, I’ll make her a deal.” There’s got to be something Duffy will bargain for.

“A deal?” He lifts a brow.

“Lots of secrets the government doesn’t want out.”

“Ace, you’re not going to release anything that could harm someone.” I huff because I know he’s right.

“Fine, I’ll let her know that you’re mine, and I’ll keep you in line.” I fold my arms over my chest and hold my chin up.

“If anyone could, it would be you.” He grabs me and pulls me in for a hard kiss.

“You’re going to let me go?” I tease, stepping back.

“I’ll know where you are. Always.”

I bite the inside of my cheek. That might sound crazy to some, but it’s hot for me. “If you tried to hack my system, I might just let you in.” I wink before darting out the door, knowing if I stay longer, I won’t be able to leave. I need to get back to the house and make sure my father isn’t losing it. He’ll deal with the feds for a time, but he has a limit.

I hop into my car and take off toward my dad. As I drive, I can’t help but wonder how he and Owen will get along. They have a lot in common really.

“We gonna talk about what you just did?” Ocean’s voice pops out of my phone. I should have known she wouldn’t last long without all the juicy details.

“He’s obsessed with me. It’s crazy really. Basement filled with information about me.” I can hear the smugness in my own voice. I can’t wait to go back down there so I can be reminded how crazy in love he is with me.

“How fitting.” Ocean laughs. “Sounds like the two of you are psycho soul mates.” I smile, thinking she’s right.

I glance to my side as a black SUV starts to come up alongside me. My eyes lock with two dark green eyes that I know.

Parks.

For a second, I think maybe Duffy sent him to trail me, but as quickly as I have the thought, I push it out. Parks isn’t a field agent. He shouldn’t be trailing me. I try to slam on my brakes, but it’s too late. He swerves the SUV, pushing me off the road and into the ditch.

Glass shatters all around me. I hear Ocean call my name over and over again. I try to respond, but darkness takes me.

I check my phone, following Maggie as she drives home. When the car stops, I get a strange sensation at the back of my neck. Why would she stop there? It's just a stretch of country road.

Before I even know what I'm doing, I'm heading out the front door. When I get in my truck, my phone rings.

"Ocean?" I answer.

"How did you know—never mind." She's talking fast. "I was on the phone with Mags, and she got in a wreck. Or at least, I think she did. She's not answering me. My drone's on the way, but it's not fast enough. I can't get there until—"

"Already on my way." My stomach drops at the thought of Maggie in a car accident. Fuck, I should've driven her home, even if it meant blowing my operation and revealing myself to Duffy. "Call me if you find out anything." I hang up and focus on the road, putting my foot down on the gas pedal as I speed along the road. Out here, cars are few and far between. The land is mostly owned by private companies in big swaths for mining or drilling for oil.

Coming around a curve, I see a plume of steam rising from the ditch along the side of the road. My guts churn as I hastily pull over and jump out. The car is overturned, the engine ticking and shattered glass everywhere.

"Maggie!" I yell and race down the side of the ditch.

Skidding to a stop, I get to my knees and look inside. She's not there. I scramble back up to the road and look around. There are tire marks and shattered glass up here. It wasn't just her vehicle. Someone crashed into her. Whirling, I follow the tracks in the grass.

My phone rings. I answer. "Someone hit her on purpose, then carried her away from the wreck." I follow the line of trampled grass and find a small blood splatter on the faded pavement. Somehow, I know it's hers. "She's hurt."

"What? Why?"

"I don't know." I get back to my feet and look around. "How close is your drone?"

"A few miles."

"Get it up higher, look around for any other vehicles in the vicinity. They can't have gotten far. Focus on the road between here and town. I didn't pass anyone on the way."

"On it."

I get back in my truck, my blood on fire as I run through a hundred different scenarios, all of them bad. With a squeal of tires, I speed away, going in the only direction that makes sense.

"Where are you, Ace?" I grip the steering wheel, my knuckles going white as I concentrate on every mark along the pavement, every weedy side drive or opening in the trees at the side of the road.

"Ocean?"

"I'm looking! I've passed the wrecked car. I can see you." Tension vibrates through her voice. "Where are you?" she mumbles.

"Any movement. Anything." I grit my teeth and take a turn so fast the back of the truck fishtails before catching.

"There!" Ocean yells.

"Where?"

“One mile ahead, take a right. There’s a grown-up driveway that leads to a burned-out house. I can see a shed behind the charred structure. Looks new. An SUV just pulled up. Hang on—”

“Is it her?”

“Wait.”

“Is it her?”

She goes silent. My blood pressure spikes as I hit speeds that make my engine whine. The mile is up, and I slam on the brakes when I see the small opening in the tree line.

Wrenching the wheel to the right, I bounce violently onto the rough dirt road. The ruts are deep, but I hit the gas again, powering over them as the trees grow thicker, blocking my view ahead.

“It’s her!” Ocean yells. “A man has her. He’s taking her into the shed.”

“What now?”

“Hang on. They’re inside. No, wait. The door is opening again ...”

“What?” I go around a sharp curve, the road falling away on the side into a ravine.

“No!” Ocean yells. “He shot the drone.”

“Did you see who it is?”

“No idea. Dark hair. Red shirt, jeans. He carried her inside. I think she might be unconscious.” The fear in her voice matches my own. Maggie is hurt. I have to get to her.

“I’ve got it from here.” I reach into the glove box and pull out my pistol.

“Get our girl back.” Ocean chokes up. “Please.”

“I will.” The call ends, and I skid to a halt next to the damaged SUV.

As soon as I open my door, a shot rings out. My windshield shatters as I duck behind the tire and brace my back against it.

“You shouldn’t have come here!” the man yells.

His voice is familiar. Then I realize who it is. “Let her go, Parks.”

“She’s mine!” he screams. “You think you can take her from me?” Another shot slams into the side of the truck.

“She’ll never be yours.” I edge to the front of the truck, still behind the bumper.

“She will. All I have to do is kill you. Easy enough.” He fires again, the sound of the rifle crackling against the hillsides. Then I hear the bolt action click again as he reloads. Each time, it takes him almost a full second, as if he’s a little unsure with the weapon. I can use that.

“She loves me, Parks.”

“No she doesn’t! Just because you fucking tricked her. I know who you are, and I’m going to tell her all the evil shit you’ve done. When she finds out, she won’t have anything to do with you.”

“She knows.”

The rifle cracks again, the tire on the other side of my truck deflating with a whine.

“Liar!” The bolt action sounds again, perhaps taking a little longer this time.

“I told her. She knows about my past.” I peek out for only a moment. He’s got the shed door cracked open just enough to push his rifle through it.

“Parks?” Maggie’s voice sends warmth through me, relief pooling in my gut as I press myself against the bumper. “What are you do—”

“You’re mine. Tell him you’re mine!” Parks screams.

“She’ll never be yours!” I yell, trying to keep his attention on me.

His rifle goes off again, and I hear the beginning of the bolt action.

I throw myself from behind the truck, hit the ground on my back, take aim, and fire.

The door splinters, and the rifle clatters to the ground.

I'm on my feet in a split-second, and I run to the shed and kick the door in. Parks is on his side, blood rushing from the wound in his neck. He tries to staunch the flow with his hands as he stares at me with wide eyes. I step over him and drop to my knees beside a grubby couch where Maggie sits, her eyes dazed.

"Are you all right?" I move her hair to the side and inspect the wound on her temple. "Did he hurt you?"

"I'm ..." Her eyes water as she looks at me. "I was so scared."

My heart breaks, and I wrap her in my arms, holding her tight. "Shh, I'm here now. I'm here." With a gentle movement, I cradle her in my arms and lift her, carrying her out of the shed and to my truck. "I've got you, Ace. Everything's all right now."

"Is Parks going to ..."

"Yes." I ease her into the passenger seat, then fasten her seatbelt. "Don't worry about that." I'd like to go back in and stomp his head into a pink mush, but getting her medical treatment is more important. "I'm getting you to the hospital." I kiss her softly. "And I won't leave your side."

I step back, about to close her door.

She gasps, and a shot rings out, my left leg erupting in pain.

I whirl and bring my gun up, firing again and again. Parks drops like a weight, the pistol in his hand clattering to the ground as he falls in a bloody, dead heap.

EPILOGUE

MAGGIE

“*I*t’s only a decoy,” I tell Ocean again. We keep going around about this. I’m not sure she is going to let this go.

“That’s okay. I still want it.” Ocean pouts.

She hates the idea of anyone having their hands on advanced technology that she hasn’t gotten to see. It’s funny because once she sees it, she’ll know a few of the patents she sold to Duffy have been used for projects. That woman is on thin ice with all the Parks bullshit, and she knows it.

“It doesn’t do anything. It’s all a show. It’s not equipped with anything. It’s Maverick’s new wingman.” Ocean lets out a gasp.

“I’m not saying I’d replace you with a fake machine!” I rush to add before she loses her mind. “I can steal the stupid decoy plane, but it’s useless. Give it a few more years. There won’t even be a Maverick. Well, not inside, anyway. Soon they’ll all be pilotless with a new F something name. Now that’s one you’ll want to get your hands on.” It will be fully loaded.

I’m not sure what she’ll do with it, but maybe she looks at it like a fancy Ferrari that some men keep in their garages. I actually think she just wants to dismantle it and put it back together. Ocean wants to know the inner workings of it. I would never tell her this, but I think her and Duffy being a team would be good for both of them. It’s easy for me to hack things. It’s not so easy to get your hands on tangible things.

Right now, the decoy fighter jets are just that. They look like all the rest, but they have none of the capabilities of a real one. They're only a distraction that has a high chance of being shot down. That's the whole point of it.

"A few years?" Ocean asks with intrigue in her tone, knowing that I must have some kind of information.

"Okay, maybe a year," I admit.

I'm not the one building the damn things. However, I have been helping with some of the technology behind part of it. Some of Ocean's own mechanics are being used as well. We've played together for so long I know how to weave our work together.

This is probably going to come as a shock, but I've become a little obsessed with evading and stealth technology. Also with scanning and picking up someone trying to use it.

To this day, I'm still annoyed that I never found my husband's planted surveillance in my own home. It made me realize that sometimes using a bit of basic technology can help you go undetected at times.

It also made Duffy and me come to a new agreement. I was kidnapped by one of her agents, who tried to kill my husband. I only agreed to work with *her*, no one else. I know it puts her at ease that when we do meet up, my security detail is Owen, my father, and always my eyes in the sky, Ocean.

"Fine, but I'm getting one." I fight back a laugh. She has no reason to own one, but if that's what she wants, then who am I to stop her from having it?

"Obviously," I agree. It could come in handy one day, I'm sure.

"How's my little munchkin?" I lean over and pull the curtain away from the window. I see my father out in the field behind our new farmhouse taking large steps which I know he's counting. Matilda mimics him the best she can with her little legs as Alfie perches on the fence and keeps an eye on everything. I love watching them together.

I hadn't been wrong about knowing Owen and my father would get along. Owen knew my dad and I were kind of a package deal. In fact, when we looked at this place, he asked if my dad would like it too.

"Busy. I think a new bomb shelter is in the works."

"Really? I've come up with a new locking mechanism. I bet your dad would love it." I let out a small laugh.

"I'm sure he would. Bring it or the plans over for dinner on Sunday."

We have dinner together once a week. Ocean is Matilda's godmother even though she can be a bit crazy at times. Not that I have a ton of room to talk, but I know she'd never let anything happen to our baby girl. She's just as protective and fierce as we are.

I rub my hand against the small bump already forming for our second baby. A boy this time. I wonder what he'll be like. I love that Matilda has a little bit of both Owen and me in her. It's so fascinating to me to watch her bloom.

I've spent my life reading computer programs in order to predict someone's next move. It's not that way with children. They surprise you at every turn. It's refreshing and makes me think this is what I missed with my own mother.

"Owen going to make apple pie?" Ocean asks. I'm married to one of the world's most deadly men, but all my family and friends can think about is his fresh apple pie.

"I'm sure I can make that happen," I agree before we end the call.

"Ace." Owen kisses the freckle behind my ear. "Did you miss me?"

"Kinda," I tease. I always miss him, but I also know where he is at all times. He doesn't let me get far, either.

He turns me in my chair to face him. He doesn't go on missions—or jobs, as you might call them—often, but sometimes there really is no other choice. As crazy and obsessive as I can be, I trust my husband. It also might be

because I always have eyes on him. What can I say? Some things never change.

“Are you doing all right?” He leans down and kisses my small baby bump.

“No more morning sickness, so that’s a plus for me. My dad, however, asked for a ton of concrete to be delivered.”

“I know.” Owen chuckles. “There are far better products we can use for his bomb shelter.” He runs his hand through his hair.

“It’s a cute summer project for him and Matilda to do.” I remember building one with my father when I was a little girl. It’s a memory I always hold on tightly to.

“I agree, but I’d help them along.” I don’t know why he’s so worried about this. I’ll cover their tracts and clean up after them. Order some of the things my dad wants without being red-flagged.

I already know that there’s going to be a fight at dinner over this, but it makes me smile. At the end of the day, we will all come to a resolution. We’re a team. A family.

Besides, if Owen gets out of line, I can always lock him inside the new bomb shelter. Then again, he could lock me inside, too.

Would he? If he thought it would keep me safe. I can’t blame him for that. Everything this man does is in the best interest of our growing family.

“They’re busy. I made sure Matilda had sunscreen on.”

“What are you trying to get at?” I grab my husband by the front of the shirt. My shyness is gone when it comes to him. We both know our obsession for the other is endless.

I love him so much.

I originally set out to uncover his secrets, but in the end, I wanted to belong to him. I’ll destroy anything that tries to take that from us. Oddly enough, our quirky family works.

I don't know if my new path has made me the villain or the hero. Call me what you want, but I'll do anything to protect them. Without them, life means nothing.

I'd burn down the world to save them. They are, after all, *my* whole world. Without them, nothing else matters. It's crazy the lines you'll cross for love.

"You know what I'm getting at." He lifts me from my chair, carrying me to our bedroom. "I need my wife. You know I can only go so long without you."

I stretch out across the bed. I can only go so long without him as well.

My sweet psycho.... or maybe I'm his sweet psycho.

SWEET OBSESSION

Can one die of boredom? I flip over the hoverboard I've been playing around with for a few weeks now off and on. What else is there to do? My best friends are lame. I could go practice pickpocketing. I sigh. It's not as thrilling as it once was. People make it way too easy. All their attention on their phones, no situational awareness.

"Glitch, turn on the police scanners," I call out, wanting to fill the silence in my warehouse. Even though the airwaves are quiet these days too.

"All right. Let's see what we got." I flip the hoverboard back over. Six months ago, I beat the world record for the distance to get a hoverboard to travel. Not that anyone gets to know that. Most of my work stays just that. *Mine*. They're my toys. I'm not looking for any sort of credit.

I've helped a few companies with a handful of patents, but I was always in it for the trades, not the accolades. There are some things in this world that I can't get my hands on. Not a ton of them but a few here and there. The girls and I can do a lot, but there are still only three of us.

"Lights up." Glitch brightens the lights in the room. I grab my sneakers off one of my many workstations and replace my boots with them. I should probably be working on how to get the board to travel longer distances or go higher.

I was doing exactly that until I got my hands on some Zeal Stealth technology. It was a trade for a job I helped the government with a month ago. It's only used by the military.

This is the sort of stuff that excites me. Agent Duffy, who randomly calls for odd jobs, offered it to me. She damn well knew I wouldn't be able to resist and would jump at the opportunity to get my hands on some, even if it was only a small amount. So yeah, I'm making my hoverboard invisible.

I pull my gloves on next. "Wave," I call to the board, holding my hand out. The board flips as it rises from off the ground, flying toward me. I grab her midair.

"Incoming call from Magic," Glitch announces.

She's calling? Weird. Normally, her sneaky ass will pop up on you. The girl really is magic when it comes to the cyber world. I release my board, letting it drop to hover a foot off the ground. I jump up on it.

"Stealth." The board switches over from a bright blue to invisible. To be honest, it takes some getting used to. Even though you can still feel it under your feet, the loss of sight can make you feel off balance.

"Answer." I start spinning around as Magic's face lights up across the screen on the left wall.

"The hell?" she mutters when she sees me.

"What? I can float now." I shrug.

"You really shouldn't be left alone." Her nose scrunches. I know she's going over a million ideas in her head.

"Sorry, Magic, but this not even you can touch." I do another spin. "The hoverboard is magnetic." It's part of how I can pull it to me with my gloves.

"How did you get your hands on Zeal Stealth? That's what you have on it, right?"

"Yep," I chirp. "It bends light waves around it so that—"

"Don't try to flood me with all your engineering stuff to avoid my question. How did you get it?" she repeats. I should have known my tactics wouldn't work on her.

"Maybe I did a job for Buffy."

"What! When? You didn't tell me?"

“You’re pregnant,” I remind her. “I gotta do something. I can’t just sit here.”

“Still, whatever she had you doing, I could have ghosted with you. That’s what we do.” Magic was always the voice in my ear when I did anything.

“You don’t need the stress, plus you’re busy.” I start to sway back and forth on the board. “It’s no big deal,” I lie.

I don’t want it to be a lie, but this is hard. Magic, Rebel, and I have always been a team. They were my family. The problem is they’ve kind of grown and started new lives. They have real families.

I’ve been on my own my whole life. I bounced around a lot. Families often found me to be a handful. I was always getting into something and taking it apart trying to understand how everything worked. That didn’t go over well for me at times, but I never stopped doing it.

Then one day, I got picked up by a fancy prep school on a scholarship. It’s how I met Magic and Rebel to begin with. The three of us clicked from the very start. We were inseparable until the real world came along.

I wasn’t shocked when Rebel got her man. That was only a matter of time. It might have taken a few explosions to get the ball rolling for them, but in the end, it all worked out. Damn, that had been fun. Rebel was more than willing to get her hands dirty. I miss the days of us blowing shit up.

“I’m sorry,” Magic says softly.

“I’m fine.” I think.

She lets out a huff. Magic isn’t always the best at reading people. It can be rather endearing and entertaining at times.

“Well, I’ve got something for you.” I stop swaying curious of what she has. “I got information that Crypris has a new technology. At the moment, it’s completely untraceable. Nothing can pick it up.”

“Cool.” *Crypris*. Of course the name isn’t new to me or anyone, for that matter.

Vane Bartow owns it now. It's been passed down through his family. All a bunch of geniuses. His name and face both annoy me. You don't get to be that smart and hot too. Even his stupid hair is thick and shiny. Then that damn smirk of his. We've been in the same room a few times before. I've tried not to stare, but it's near impossible.

"Cool?" Magic leans back. "She just said cool." I know she's talking to her husband Owen.

"Sounds like she's trying to play it cool," he says from off screen.

"It *is* cool. My board and I can be untraceable one day. I can pop up on your ass then."

"I don't like that very much." Magic's face grows serious. She's not a fan of someone having control over something that could be so powerful. If anything, she wants to know how. I'm with her on that. I don't care for not being in the know. I'm nosy as shit.

"So—" I jump down off the board. It might be fun to fuck with Vane Bartow. I bet I'm only a blip on his radar and likely because my hair is always dyed a different color. It kind of stands out when you're in a room full of people in suits, lab coats, or even men armed to their teeth. "You have a plan?"

"Didn't Crypris try to hire you?"

"I think. Some woman reached out to me a few times maybe." I smirk. "A lot of people try to hire me."

"That makes you sound like a whore."

"Rebel!" I shout. The screen splits in half as Rebel joins.

"She only said it was *cool*," Magic tells Rebel.

"That something could be completely untraceable? She said that was just 'cool'?"

"Yes, she said cool." Fuck me. Now Rebel? She's excellent at reading people.

"Maybe she is a little whore after all."

"Why was I excited to see you?" I roll my eyes.

“It’s Bartow, isn’t it?”

Heat blooms through my face.

“He’s handsome.” Rebel wiggles her eyebrows. Then she lets out a small scream after I hear a slap that I know landed on her ass. “I was just teasing my friend,” she pouts.

“Watch it,” I hear her husband say. She sticks her tongue out at him. They might be married now, but she still clearly loves pushing his buttons.

“All right. Hit me with it before your husbands pounce on you so I can get a start on whatever it is you’re about to get me into.”

The screens that line the other wall start to light up with information. Blueprints of buildings, classified information, and a very detailed run-through of Vane Bartow.

“He’s predictable for the most part,” Magic says. I glance over his schedule.

“Too predictable,” I mutter, already getting sucked into Crypris ... and Vane Bartow.

“*N*ot a single radar ping.” I sit back in my chair as I watch the drone’s video feed. It soars over my estate, the entire thing like a giant bird of prey, one that can’t be seen by the human eye or sensed by any tech currently available.

“No heat signature, not even a sound.” Cass hits a few keys and pulls up another camera, one set below the drone. “Check it out.” She points to the screen.

As far as anyone knows, it’s a clear blue sky. The camera doesn’t detect the drone, not even a hint of it rippling through the image. It’s almost a ton of metal and tech, but it may as well be a ghost.

“The military is going to cream itself for this.” Cass grins and runs a hand across her buzz cut.

“They would.” I tap a key and start the autopilot landing sequence. “But I didn’t create this for the war machine.”

She arches a brow. “Then what’s the plan?”

“The plan is already in action. My trap is set. A tiny leak to a certain hacker has piqued my quarry’s interest. So much so, in fact, that she’s planning a little visit to my R&D campus.” I can’t help my smirk. Leaving a very specific trail of breadcrumbs wasn’t particularly easy, especially considering who I’m intending to lure. I had to make it seem as if my top-secret tech was being leaked unbeknownst to me. As if I’d ever allow such a thing—but I played the part, leaving certain unhackable systems with the door ever-so-slightly ajar. A tiny

sliver of space for Ocean and her crew to sneak in, get a look, and duck back out.

“Are we trapping who I *think* we’re trapping?” Cass asks.

I nod.

She lets out a long breath. “You really think she’s going to fall for it?”

“How would she know it’s a trap?” I shrug. “She has no idea I’m on to her.”

“And what do you plan to do once you have her?”

“Everything.” I’ve been playing this cat and mouse game for long enough. For over a year now, I’ve watched her and waited. I first saw her at a top-secret Joint Chiefs meeting. She was there with the FBI, her handler giving her the floor to answer questions about the new tech she’d discovered on one of her spying missions to China. I’d been mesmerized, my analytical mind utterly failing to function as I stared at her, at the way she moved, at the nervous fidget in her fingers as so many powerful people listened to her, at the way she spoke with confidence and strength.

I knew at that moment I’d met my match. But she wasn’t the sort who’d accept anything less than a worthy opponent. Just like I knew I had to have her, I also knew that winning her wasn’t going to be easy. Even so, I tried to get her on my team, sending Cass to make her offer after offer. She turned them down each time, just as I knew she would. With Ocean, there are no shortcuts. I have to show her who I am, what I can do, and why I’m the only man for her.

“‘Everything’ is a tall order.” Once the drone is in the hangar, Cass shuts down the controls.

“She deserves my best shot.” I turn back to my computer and quickly add video of the test flight into my personal server, then I go into the firewall and tinker with the code before backing out and shutting down.

Cass stands over my shoulder. “Is there a reason you left yet another pinhole in our security?”

I rise. “I think you know there is.”

“You realize those three women aren’t the only ones looking for a way into your files,” she chides. “You sure this is a good idea?”

“I’m aware, but I’m not too worried. Those three are the only ones who could find the breach, let alone exploit it. My breadcrumbs have been surgically precise.” I flip off the lights, and she walks at my side as we stroll toward the main house. “If anyone else shows up, I’ll know.”

“Maybe I should make another run at trying to get her on our team.” She pulls out her phone and clicks on a text from Daphne. A smile grows on her face.

“What?”

“She said the baby kicked.” She breaks into a full grin. “She can feel it, like the flutter of wings under her skin, she says.”

I glance out at the fading sun. “It’s late. Get home to her. We’ll do another test run tomorrow.”

“Sounds good.” She’s already speed-walking toward the east wing where the garage is. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

I can hear her dialing, then her voice fading down the hall. “You really felt it? Our baby? Oh my God, babe! I’m coming home now. Right now. I’m going to rub your feet, and then we can watch that show ...”

Cass got her happily ever after three years back when she met Daphne. The two of them were inseparable from the moment they crossed paths—though there was some gunplay involved since Daphne was working for an enemy government at the time. Their sort of strong, enduring love was something I thought I’d never experience. All that changed when I met Ocean, when I looked into her eyes and saw my own soul reflected back at me.

My phone dings with an alert. I pull it out and open the tracking software I created specifically for monitoring Ocean’s activities. My heart beats a little faster as I follow their hacker through my system. She encounters a little trouble with the piece of the firewall I left intact, but after about five minutes

of wrangling, she busts through and uses the tiny exploit I left behind to enter my server.

Sitting down on my couch, I cast the app onto my large screen, watching each moment as Ocean creeps closer and closer to me. She's in there with her friends, all of them tiptoeing around my files.

I can feel her, sense her, and when I see them open the video from the drone trial, I know I have her.

Once they have what they came for, they quickly cover their tracks and back out of the exploit, leaving no trace they were ever there. With a few taps on my phone, I slam the firewall closed again. Then I click over to my app that's locked into Ocean's personal computer. I view her screen, watching as she starts checking flights that will bring her straight to me.

"This is it." I can't stop smiling. My trap is about to spring shut on Ocean. I'll have her right where I want her, and I'll show her we're meant to be together.

All I have to do is wait for my sweet little spy to come prowling. When she does, she's *mine*.

OCEAN

“*J*owe Buffy a favor now, and this ID is trash,” I tell Magic as I make my way out of the airport. I’m not mad about the ID. Even though Magic named me Anita Boobie. I know she didn’t come up with that name. That was Rebel’s doing, but Magic went along with it.

“You didn’t have to take your board thingy.”

“Her name is Wave. Someone could have stolen her.”

“You’d need a whole SWAT team to break into your warehouse.”

“I’d steal her,” I mutter. “You don’t know how badass she is.”

“That’s not saying much since you steal everything.”

“I do not.” The line goes quiet. “Well, not everything everything.” I pull the Rolex out of my pocket. The man next to me on the plane was a douche canoe who deserved what he got. Not only was he an asshole to the flight attendants, but he kept giving me snide looks. I could tell he was wondering why I was in first class with him. I mean, so what I hack and steal points to get upgraded? That’s none of his business. I think I preferred the initial snobby looks he was giving me because once he got a few drinks in him, he was giving me different kinds of looks.

“Your driver is pulling up in ten seconds.” I glance over my shoulder seeing the closest surveillance camera and know Magic is watching me.

“You’re an asshole!” A girl about my age shouts into her phone. I can tell she’s about to burst into tears. “You’re married.” Oh shit, this situation does not sound good.

“Your lift,” Magic says into my ear.

“I don’t need your money to get myself back home.” The girl ends her call. Something inside me tells me she does need money to get home. Call it women’s intuition or whatever.

“Hey,” I call the girl. “What’s your name?”

“Ah—” She’s not sure if she should answer me.

“I’m a flight attendant,” I lie. “I can get you a flight if you need it.”

“Really?” Her demeanor changes immediately.

“Yeah.” She gives me her name and where she’s headed. “Check in with Durlex. You’re on the next flight out.”

“Omg, thank you.” She hugs me. I do something nice and now I have to hug. I can hear Magic clicking away, and I know she’s handling it for me.

“Men are dicks.” I hand her the Rolex. “Don’t let anyone give you less than eight grand for that,” I tell her before I slip into my waiting vehicle. She stands there shocked as the driver closes my door.

“That was nice of you,” Magic says.

“Whatever. I just needed to get rid of stolen property.”

“Right.”

“Why didn’t one of you marry a billionaire? Then we’d have a plane.” I huff. Then I wouldn’t have to call Agent Buffy to get Wave onto a flight.

“Vane Bartow is a billionaire,” Magic points out. She just couldn’t wait to slide that in there. I bet she’s so proud of herself over there.

“Okay, I’ll go marry him, and then he has to give me half his shit. Then I’ll have what we came for.”

“Do you want to change your plan of action?”

“That was sarcasm. Vane Bartow isn’t going to marry me.”

“You can just make him.”

I laugh, unable to help myself. That is how she perseveres. She wanted her husband Owen and went full stalker mode. Little did we know he had already been stalking her. I thought he was a serial killer. Wait, he might still qualify. So I was right.

“I’m not his type.” I cringe the second the words pass my lips. Not only because I know Magic is about to try and find out if that is true, but I don’t care to hear about his past lovers. I bet they’re tall and blond with perfect everything. The total opposite of me.

“Hmm.”

“Don’t.” I try to stop her from digging into any of his past lovers or hookups. I don’t want to know. All I want from him is his technology. Nothing else. Not one thing. I swear it.

“I’m not. I just realized that in everything I pulled up on him, there hadn’t been any romantic connections. I’d thought maybe he had a secret one that he had his assistant Cass buy things for, but those items were for her own wife.”

“You really leave no stone unturned.”

“When it comes to the Bartow family, you can’t.” She’s not wrong there. I haven’t heard anything dirty on the family, but they have money, and have been in the tech and engineering world for generations.

Vane was barely a teen when he and his father helped create STAR. It was short for Systematic Tracking Array Radar. That isn’t public knowledge. STAR can do a lot of things, but what it does best is save lives. There are a few versions of it, but its powerful radar catches missiles while in the air and it intercepts them before they can strike their target.

God, I wonder what his lab and work area looks like. I couldn’t imagine the possibility of things I could create if I had the resources he did at my fingertips. The possibilities would be endless if I owned my own setup like his.

Oh, I've been offered the opportunity from many companies. I've never accepted any of them, because then I'd been under them and would always worry that whatever I was working on could do more harm than good. In my eyes, at least. Not in others'. I'm also not really a punching in at 8 a.m. and out at 5 p.m. kind of person. I work on what I want when I want.

With Magic, Rebel, and I, we all have a set of skills. I can do some hacking. Nowhere near the level that Rebel and Magic can. I'm not great at sitting and staring at a screen.

"Ocean?" Magic shouts in my ear.

"What?" She and the driver both tell me I'm at my destination. "Thanks. I got my bags," I tell him. I slap down a few bills. I'm sure Magic already handled it, but it's not my money. I'd give him this whole wallet I'd gotten with the man's Rolex, but it might not go down well.

I grab my shit and stand on the sidewalk watching the man pull away. When he turns the corner, I head in the other direction.

"Two streets up, take a left, and it's the fourth door on the right," Magic tells me.

I walk toward my destination. "You know I don't need six bedrooms." I head up the stairs to the front door.

"It's close to Vane's place."

"Close?" I joke. I saw the layout of his estate. It's massive.

"The closest house we could get. The code for the door is 74-"

"I'm in." I cut her off.

"Of course you are. I turned off the alarms. Owen said everything you need was dropped off. There should be a box." I spot it on a table.

"The motorcycle?"

"It's in the garage."

"All right." I drop my shit. Well, everything except Wave—I gently place her on the sofa. "I'll reach out when I'm almost

there.” I check the time. I’ve got a few hours to kill, which I need.

I open the box filled with goodies and smile. A nervous excitement hums through my body. This is going to be so much fun.

She's here.

I can't sit down, can't stand still, can't do anything except pace back and forth, my gaze on my monitors as she moves closer and closer.

She's cocky. Not waiting till dark to make her move. The sun is low on the horizon as she skirts around the back edge of my property. Dressed in a dark gray that seems to change color to match whatever she's standing next to—nice tech—I lose her here and there in the feed. But I can sense her.

Some sort of board is tucked under her arm as she prowls closer and closer.

"You ready for this?" Cass asks, leaning against the door frame and watching as I pace.

I was worried this moment would never come. But now it's here. I grin.

"I guess that's all the answer I need."

"You can go." I wave a hand at her, my eyes still on the screen. "Give Daphne my love."

"You sure? She's not exactly harmless, boss. Quite the opposite. If she gets the drop on you, she could do some dam—"

"Go. Seriously. I've got this." I finally stop pacing when she pauses at a spot along my wall, her gaze focusing upward.

Then my cameras go fuzzy and click off.

Cass groans as the screens go dark one after another. “Have I mentioned how much I don’t like this plan?”

“Only a million times. Don’t worry.” I stride past her, my steps growing quicker as I approach one of my rear doors.

“I’ll be close if you need me,” Cass calls at my back.

“Don’t worry.”

“All I do is worry,” she grumbles, but she doesn’t follow me as I walk out the back door and stride toward my research building. It’s along the side wall of my estate, quite close to where Ocean just made her entrance. Her friends may have disabled my cameras, but I have a backup set—ones that aren’t connected to my usual network. I snagged some old-school closed-circuit units from eBay a while back just for this purpose.

Pulling up my phone, I access the hidden network, then enter the feed. The visuals aren’t particularly clear, but I see movement, and I know it’s her. She’s floating off the ground, easing along the cinderblock wall of my lab, her hand held out as she skates past.

“That looks like fun.” I smile and pocket my phone, then pick up my pace and dash into the front of my building, the door automatically locking behind me.

The hangar is ahead to my right, the drone sitting in its berth, fully visible at present. She’s not here for the drone proper. She’s here for the data unit inside it.

I keep to the shadows, moving around my front office area and into the hangar, making sure I’m out of sight of my cameras. They may be dark for me, but I’m certain Ocean’s friends are keeping an eye on them.

It’s hard to stay still, but I have to. Even though every single cell in my body is vibrating at some unknown, insane frequency, I remain silent and stationary. I can’t spring my trap until she’s within my grasp.

Just the thought of holding her makes my blood heat, and I wonder if waiting like this might push me off the cliff into

madness. To have her so close, to be so near my ultimate goal. It's like fire in my veins.

When I see a shadow move around to the left of the drone, my heart kicks up its pace. It's a wonder she can't hear it beating.

"Well, hello, beautiful," she purrs to the machinery.

Her voice is sultry, so fucking sexy. My mouth goes dry, and my need for her seems to rise inside me like some dark beast. Then again, who am I kidding? I *am* a beast. I lured her here with the sole goal of keeping her, of making her mine.

"Let me help you into something more comfortable." She's beneath the body of the craft, her fingers skating along the metal until she reaches the removable panel. It comes off easily, and she places it on the floor.

I get a better glimpse of her, of her curves—no amount of camouflage could hide them from me. I could swear I catch her scent, something warm and almost sweet. Like a hint of warm honey.

I move closer, unable to stop myself from being drawn to her. She's focused on the drone, and she clicks on a flashlight and holds it between her lips as she unscrews the control unit from the drone's guts.

She doesn't see me as I creep closer.

I'm right behind her when she straightens, the control unit in her hand.

Then she turns around.

"Ocean, I've been—"

A cry catches in her throat, and she moves so quickly all I see is a blur before blinding pain lights up my nose.

She fucking punched me! I don't know why I didn't plan for this. I suppose I thought it would go a little less violently.

"Ocean!" I reach for her, but she darts to the left and yanks something from the air. It's the board she's been working on. It's camouflaged even better than she is.

She jumps onto it and turns it toward the hangar door.

I make a split-second decision. With a jump, I lunge for her and tackle her from the board. She screams as I turn and cradle her in my arms, cushioning her with my body as we hit the concrete floor.

It knocks the breath out of me, and she fights like a cat, screaming and writhing in my arms. I roll her over, pinning her to the floor. She's warm beneath me, her body made for mine.

“Let go! Get off me!”

But I don't let her go. Even though I taste blood from my busted nose and one of my ribs might be broken—I'm *never* letting her go.

OCEAN

Vane keeps me pinned under him. In the few times I've met him, I noticed he was a big man. With him on top of me, he feels twice the size I recall. It didn't go unnoticed that when he tackled me, he wrapped his body around mine to make sure he took the brunt of the fall onto the concrete floor.

Oh, it felt like concrete, but I'd bet my life it is some high-tech flooring that's filled with pressure sensors. It's why I hoped the board would get me inside and buy some time before it set any alarms off.

I don't know who is breathing harder, him or me. Vane could fit in with the Predict Six if they suited him up in their gear. The team has been in a few meetings I was dragged into by Buffy. I hate when she does that to me.

Buffy knows exactly how to sink her claws into me. Flashing pictures of women and children that need to be saved. Ones that I could help. She targets my weak spot to get what she wants. Knowing damn well that I couldn't live with myself if I didn't assist the helpless who needed a hand.

The weight of it can be overwhelming, but then guilt always gets me. How did I get tossed into the foster system with such gifts as mine? Did I waste that all on my silly projects in my warehouse, or did I do what I thought was the right thing?

The Predict Six are the real assassination team for America. Sure, they show you a group of Marines and tell you that they've taken out an atrocious leader, but really it was the Predict Six. Whoever they flashed across your screen weren't

the real people behind the mission. They are just the faces they want you to see.

Few people know who they are. I don't even know their names. Even in meetings, their faces are often covered in black masks with only their eyes showing. I could only make out that at least one of them is a female. A tiny thing but I bet that's part of her surprise when it comes to the enemy. They probably underestimate her and she uses it against them.

Magic might know more about them or be able to find out additional information but it's not something I'd ask her unless needed. I don't always agree with some things our government did, but the Predict Six did what a lot of us couldn't. I'm happy I don't have to make those decisions.

They are a bonded team. That's something I can relate to. As long as they stay in line, I'm not putting my nose where it doesn't belong, and I have a feeling they think the same.

This is why I need Rebel. She is my team. But she can't be rolling around on a hard floor while she's knocked up. Vane would never have gotten the drop on her, but she couldn't have found the panel as quickly as I did. I know it's crazy, but when I simply touch a machine, everything about it starts to bleed into me. Thoughts of what I would do if it was mine and I crafted it myself almost overwhelm me. It doesn't take me long to find what I'm searching for typically.

I'd been so lost in the beauty of the drone and focused on wanting to know everything about it that I hadn't seen Vane. Honestly, I didn't think it would be him I would come up against but one of his security.

"Motherfucker," I hiss in realization. There hadn't been much security at all, which could only mean one thing.

"Are you hurt?" he asks me.

"You're dripping blood on me, and I can't get this dry-cleaned." I glare up at him. Vane smirks, the blood dripping down his nose not bothering him in the least. It doesn't help that my fucked-up brain thinks he's even hotter now.

“I’ll replace it. Pretty sure it’s my technology. I could upgrade it for you if you’d like.”

“Upgrade?” Is there something new? Wait, I remind myself to stay on task here. “It was your very basic design already, but I’ll take what you got.” I smirk right back up at him. “Obviously I made a few improvements.” I can’t help but go in for a small jab. I’m sure it’s my ego. At least I can admit that.

I shouldn’t be so cocky. Vane has a whole lot more power than I do. I bet he even has the president’s number. I’m sure that comes with making some of the best technology the world has ever seen.

Hell, his grandfather helped create the Trench Gun. Its devastation hadn’t been fully intended for what it could do, but it was quickly realized for all of its capabilities. His family was destroying Nazis before it was cool. Thank God it never fell into the wrong hands.

That’s the line you always ride, wondering if what you’re creating is going to do more harm than good. I bet Vane rides that line with every breath he takes. I’m sure more than most people in the whole fucking world.

“I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.”

“I can’t let that comment go. This is going to hurt,” I tell him as I push my wrist upwards to make full contact with his body. “Fire,” I tell my gloves. I hear the shock go off, but nothing happens. “What the hell?” How is this even possible? Vane still keeps me pinned beneath him. I purse my lips. Of all the times one of my creations was going to fail me, of course it chooses now.

“You didn’t think I’d know you’d try to taser me?”

“But how?” I question. I guess he could have something that pulls and grounds the current, but it would still need to travel through the body. I think. Biology isn’t my area of expertise. Clearly, Vane knows all areas.

“As I said, I’ll show you my trick if you show me yours.”

“Let me go, and we’ll pretend this never happened.”

“That’s not going to work for me. You’ve already seen too much. *I’ve* already seen too much.”

“People will come for me,” I threaten.

“I can have a government army surround my home in one call. It would take your friends a while to work past that.” My mind flashes back to how little staff security I’d seen around here. It had been too easy to get in. The stupid red flag was there, and I ignored it. My greed and need to find Vane, I mean the tech, blinded me.

“This was a trap,” I whisper. He set me up. He somehow knew I was coming. What does he want from me? Oh God, is he a double agent or something? Has he gone rogue? Does he think I might have information? Will he try to extract it from me?

I know this is not the time, but with him being so close, my mind can’t help but wonder what methods he would use to get this information. I quickly push those thoughts to the back of my mind. *Focus, Ocean.*

“It is.” His hold on me tightens. “I hate to do this, Liberty, but it’s the only way I can manually lock this place down so your friends can’t creep their way in through technology.”

“You know my name.” No one knows my real name.

“I know everything,” he says before kissing me. It comes out of nowhere, surprising the hell out of me. Just as much as the small prick I feel enter my skin before the world starts to fade away. Everything is like a dream pulling me under. Vane Bartow is the last thing I see before I fall asleep.

But then again, I often see him there.

Her eyes flutter open, and she glares at me immediately, sleep draining from her like water from a reservoir. She's in my bed, the entire compound on lockdown, my trap snapped firmly shut on her just as I planned.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" She sits up and looks around, scanning for a weapon, no doubt.

"I needed to get you alone."

"What?" She yanks the duvet up to her throat.

"You're a tough woman to track down, much less hang on to. I figured if I set a—"

"Trap," she hisses. "This whole thing was a trap." Her gaze darts around the room again. "What do you intend? Sell me to some enemy government? Ransom me back to Buffy?" She gives a humorless laugh. "She'd never pay up." Her eyes narrow. "But you wouldn't want money. What is it? A competitor has some sort of secret tech you're after? You think you can leverage me to—"

"You have quite the imagination." I smirk and sit on the corner of the bed.

She shrinks back. "What is this?"

"Exactly what I said—I wanted you alone."

She swallows hard. "You don't mean to, to ..." Her cheeks burn scarlet as she looks down at the black duvet.

“I’d never hurt you,” I interject quickly. “I need you to know that.”

Her shoulders relax the tiniest bit, but the skepticism doesn’t leave her face. “You drugged me and dragged me into your bedroom. I can’t trust anything you say.” She glances down at herself. “Where’s my gear?” An edge of panic coats her voice.

“It’s safe. Just as you are.” I stand slowly, carefully, doing my best not to stress her more than I already have. “I drugged you so you wouldn’t hurt yourself. I know you’re a fighter.” I press my fingers to my nose. “As evidenced by the fact that you nearly broke my nose. I couldn’t have you trying anything as I put the place on lockdown. It was safest that way. But now, you have free rein.”

She quirks a brow. “Cool. So where’s the weapons cabinet?”

The side of my mouth twitches with the hint of a smile. “In time, Liberty. But for now, how about some dinner?” I stride to the bedroom door and open it. Felix is sitting outside. Typical to his tuxedo cat DNA, he gives me a haughty glance and prances past, jumping onto the bed and walking right up to Ocean, as if he’s asking her who she is and if she’s free later. When she reaches out eagerly to pet him, a bizarre wave of jealousy washes over me. I quickly swallow it down. “He’s bossy, and he leaves hair on everything. Fair warning.”

“That’s okay. I’m bossy, too.” She smiles, the tension leaving her as Felix purrs and rubs his head against her chin. “I bet you aren’t bossy at all. I bet you are sweet. Are you a captive too? It’s okay, I’ll bust us out of here. You aren’t in danger. I’ll take you away from the bad man.” She baby-talks the little brat, and he eats it up, his whiskers at attention.

I want to get in bed with her, touch her, talk to her, tell her everything is as it was meant to be—but I don’t. She needs space. I’ll give it to her. After all, it’s not as if she’s going anywhere. Cass has already canceled every meeting I had on the calendar for the next two weeks. The president was pissed, but she’s just going to have to wait. Ocean takes precedence.

“The kitchen is to the left.” I glare at Felix for a moment as he turns and looks at me over his shoulder. “If you want wet food

tonight, you'll lay off."

"Oh, don't listen to him." Ocean plants a kiss on top of his head. "If there's wet food, you're getting double servings. And then you and I can knife that guy over there, steal all his top secrets, and head out. Sound good?"

The traitorous bastard purrs and butts against her head again.

I grumble under my breath and walk away. I need to start the lemon sauce, after all. Ocean's favorite meal is chicken piccata with a side of garlic mashed potatoes. I've studied the recipes from her favorite restaurant and copied them exactly, right down to the amount of salt and pepper.

Glancing back, I see Felix shoot into the hallway and then Ocean peeking out the door. "It's just the two of us, but I'm afraid I had to lock up anything you could use as a weapon. Once you've come to terms with our relationship, I think—"

"Relationship?" She steps into the hall and crosses her arms, the movement pushing up her breasts.

Heat rushes up my spine as I look at her, the curves of her body on display beneath her black tank top and yoga pants. It's like a dream to have her here, right in my grasp. But I have to go slowly. It's not like she's going to get away—and soon, I'll convince her that this is where she belongs.

"Yes, you and me. Together."

She scoffs and follows Felix as he trots after me, wet food no doubt at the forefront of his mind. "You realize my friends are always mobilizing. I'll be out of here in an hour, tops."

"Oh, I'm aware they're coming." I smile as I walk into the kitchen. "But they won't get anywhere near you."

"So I'm a prisoner then?" She leans against the doorframe as I turn on the burner and start the sauce.

"No, you're my guest."

"Your guest? Aren't guests allowed to leave?"

I pour in the lemon juice, the pan steaming pleasantly as I turn around and grab a spatula. Her attention is on me, her gaze

tracing down my back before she meets my eyes again.

I smirk. “Yes, my guest for now, but sooner than later, also my wife.”

OCEAN

*H*is words knock the wind right out of me. More so than when he tackled me to the ground in his badass warehouse, which I'm guessing is only the tip of the iceberg for Vane and his labs or whatever you want to call them.

His *wife*? Have I woken up in a different dimension? Do Vane and his crazy family know about time travel and black holes? My head starts to spin. It always does when I try to understand the depths of the universe. I can't wrap my head around the fact that you can see into the past.

It was, after all, Vane's family who created a telescope that overpowered the Hubble. Now we have the Bartow Space Scope that fucks with my mind. Just as much as Vane does himself.

I prefer to be grounded. Well, not really, but I do want to remain here on earth and stay in current time. I'm not trying to understand time travel. That's not something you can wrap your hands around—or maybe I could with Vane, but it's the biology that gets me. A human can't move quickly enough to go back into time. You'd die. I know that much. Then again, what if—

“Liberty,” Vane saying my name jerks me back to reality. If this is, in fact, reality. It sure as heck doesn't feel like it at the moment.

“Am I awake? Is this real?” I smack the countertop, making Felix jump. “Sorry!” I apologize immediately to my new furry friend.

“Real?” Vane smirks.

He flips off the stove before moving toward me. I should scoot away from him, but instead, my feet remain planted where they are. Likely because I’m in virtual reality, and he’s pinned them to the ground.

Why else would I let him draw closer? It’s not like I want that in any way. I don’t. Definitely not. His hand cups my cheek before he presses his mouth against mine in a gentle kiss. It’s only a brush of his lips.

“Nothing has ever been more real in my life.” Vane’s words make my chest grow tight.

His hand slips from my cheek to grip my chin in a firm hold. I should smack him away, but I don’t. Obviously, this isn’t real. Nor is the feeling of my entire body being on fire from him being so close.

Vane Bartow is kissing me and declaring me to be his wife. I bet whatever he shot me up with earlier hasn’t worn off yet, and I’m imagining this entire scenario. Well, I might as well enjoy it for a little while.

“Open,” he orders.

I obey.

Don’t judge me. I can’t help myself. There is something about him taking control that melts me in a way I’ve never felt before. It’s freeing, which is insane because I’m his captive and he’s clearly crazy. Like totally insane.

His tongue slips into my mouth. At first it’s slow, trying to lure me in. It works. Vane has a way of doing that to me. I’m a moth to his flame. It’s why from the second I met him, he scared the hell out of me. My mind would dream of what could be with him. That’s all it would ever be. Because dreams don’t come true. It doesn’t matter how hard you try to make them real. That’s not how people work. I’ve determined that dreams are stupid. I hated that late at night they would creep into my mind. And that Vane would be the star of them when I could be thinking about something else.

The reality is that no one ever picked me. Rebel and Magic were my family, but they have other families. I don't. Even though they are all I have, at times I find myself pushing away from them. Scared that I'll become too much and then what? Well, I know what happens after that. When people are overwhelmed by you, they pass you on to someone else. And even though I know Rebel and Magic would never do that to me, the thought still creeps into my mind. I can tell myself they'll stay over and over again, but still I can't fight the need to run.

I'm always alone. I hate myself for how jealous I am of what they have. They should both be happy. I would never dare try and take that from them. It's why I kept quiet about how I've been feeling. I didn't want them to pull back from what they found. I wouldn't want to.

Both of them knew what love was. They got it from their family. I have no clue how it would be to fall for someone. It has to be different from how I felt with Magic and Rebel. I didn't know that until I watched them fall into a different kind of love. Both of them are brilliant. You couldn't fool them into love. The way it consumed them, I knew it had to be real. It also showed me that I've never had that in my life.

Being that far gone for someone is such a foreign thing to me. I can't imagine opening myself up that much. Too many homes had rejected me. In the end, people find my quirks cute or fascinating, but also wearing.

The only people who ever wanted me outside of Magic and Rebel were people that wanted to use me. Buffy was one of them. It wasn't me that they wanted. All they cared about was what my mind could do for them. It's ironic. I love machines. They're my whole life, but I've turned myself into one for people to use.

It's why I turned away from so many companies. I never let myself get pulled too deep. Until now. I let myself be lured in. I want to feel the burn of Vane Bartow.

"Vane," I whimper. Do I want him to stop, or do I want more? I swear he wants to consume me, but I can't trust myself. I

want it too much.

“I’m sorry,” he growls against my mouth, making my heart drop. “I was going to feed you, but I need you.” His eyes are pleading. I don’t have a clue what he means until he lifts me off my feet.

Before I know what’s happening, my panties are down around my ankles, and Vane’s head is between my thighs feasting like a starved animal.

Me being the only thing that will sate his hunger.

At least that’s what I tell myself.

I never should've waited this long to taste her. She overwhelms me, her fucking honey on my tongue as I lick and suck her warm skin.

She jolts, and I pin her hips down, keeping her still as I explore. I need to know what makes her moan, what she wants more than anything. Pressing my tongue inside her, I savor the way she squeezes for me. And when I pull out and stroke her sweet little clit, she gasps.

"That's it," I murmur against her, then suck her clit between my lips.

"Vane!" she cries, the sound so fucking good in my ears.

I don't want her to hold back, not with me, not ever. I pull back and lick her with the broad side of my tongue, and when I focus back on her clit, lashing it, she moans low in her throat.

Giving her more, I tease that little nub, then ease a finger into her tight pussy. Fucking hell, she feels amazing, her body keyed up and wet for me. When she runs her fingers through my hair, I groan.

My cock is surging in my pants, my need for her growing with every second, but I can't give up this taste, this delicious perfection between her thighs.

"Vane, I—" Her nails dig in.

I slip another finger inside, feeling her walls tense even more as I lick her clit faster and faster.

She arches, her body a live wire, and I feel when she unwinds, her body letting go as I thrust my fingers into her and wish it was my cock instead. I lick and swallow, drinking all her sweetness as she moans and finally gasps, her body going lax as I keep tasting her. I don't want to stop. I *can't* stop.

I swirl my tongue, lapping up every bit of her as she shivers.

“No more. I can't—” Her voice is pleading.

I grip her hips harder, needing more.

But she makes the sweetest mewling sound, and it brings me to my senses. I back off, but first I press a kiss to her sweet cunt.

When I stand, I pull her to a sitting position, her expression dazed as she meets my eyes. I bring my fingers to my mouth and lick every bit of her honey away as she watches, her mouth dropping open.

“You just—you ...” she sputters.

“I ate your pussy, and I'd like to do it again.” I pull her to the edge of the island, her wet heat pressed against the seam of my pants. “If you'll let me.”

“You tricked me,” she says breathlessly. “Led me into a trap, and then y-you injected me.” She shakes her head and puts her hands on my chest. “And then you did *that*... And *now* you're asking for permission?”

I lick my lips, savoring what's left of her. “Sometimes I get carried away. Actually, that's not entirely true. When it comes to *you*, I get carried away.” I cup her cheek, so fucking happy when she lets me do it. “I'm sorry about the injection. I just couldn't risk you hurting yourself. I had to get you somewhere safe, somewhere I could show you how much you mean to me, and I needed to do it without interference.”

She blinks. “Are you about to put me down a well and tell me to put the lotion on my skin?”

I smirk. “That's not one of your kinks.”

She cocks her head to the side. “Excuse me?”

I lean down and nip at her throat, enjoying the way her pulse flickers at my touch. “You have a varied porn-watching history, but extreme kidnap kink isn’t in there. Having your pussy eaten, though, that’s close to the top of your list.” I kiss her throat.

She grips my arms. “You can’t hack my system. No one can—”

“I can.” I meet her eyes again, my gaze straying to her lips. “It’s how I know everything about you. It’s also how I know you’re the one for me. The only one.”

“You’re verifiably insane.” She shakes her head. But I notice she isn’t pulling away. She isn’t scared. If anything, she’s even more turned on. The blush on her cheeks, the way her pupils are dilated—fuck, she needs me almost as much as I need her.

“No, I’m the only man for you.”

“You’re totally nutso.”

“Is that right?” I can’t help teasing her.

She nods.

“That must be why you’ve searched me so many times in the past year. I had a running count, but at last check, you’d run my name and info at least two-hundr—” She slaps her hand over my mouth, her eyes going wide.

“That—that was for work!”

“Mmm-hmm,” I say against her palm. Her searches went far deeper than a simple work inquiry, and we both know it.

“Professional curiosity,” she adds and slowly lowers her hand. “That’s all. It’s certainly not a thing between us, and it *definitely* doesn’t mean I’m going to marry you!”

“You seem so decided.”

Her chin tilts up. “I am, and I’m leaving. Now.” She tries to scoot off the counter, but that only presses her even more tightly to me.

I groan from the pressure of her body, the sweet torture of having her without being inside her yet. “How about a wager?” I ask.

She stills. “What?”

I didn’t want to pull this card, but she’s forced my hand. The one thing Ocean can never run from is a challenge. It’s why she’s so fucking irresistible to me.

“Let’s do a wager. If you win, you can leave. If I win, you marry me.”

She scoffs. “Like I said, you’re *insane*.” But there’s a glint in her eye.

“If you’re chicken, I under—”

“I’m not!” she yelps, offended.

“Then take the wager.”

Her eyes narrow. “What is it?”

“Nothing huge.” I shrug. “Just let me take you to bed for one night. If you want to leave after that, you can. But if you don’t, you’re mine—and not just for the day or the week. You’re mine forever. The same way I’m already yours.”

She chews her lip. “This is nuts.”

“So you keep saying.” I drop light kisses along her jaw.

“And that’s cheating.”

I shrug and keep doing it. I can’t get enough contact.

“One night. We’re going to ... you know—”

“Fuck,” I fill in.

“Yes, just one night. Then I go.”

“Who are you trying to convince?” My hands rove higher, teasing her soft skin.

She sighs, and I know the moment her walls come down.

“Fine, I accept.”

I kiss her so quickly she yelps into my mouth, and then I’m carrying her out of the kitchen, beyond ready to make her mine forever.

OCEAN

What am I doing? Now I'm the crazy one. Am I really going to let Vane have his way with me? I mean, his mouth was magical. The pleasure of the orgasm still tingles throughout my body. He made every orgasm I've ever given myself seem pathetic. He drops me down on the bed. I scramble to my knees.

"There's no changing your mind," Vane says.

Obviously, he's some sort of mind reader now. The man really does know me. I should be pissed that he's been snooping into my life. Finding out all my shameful secrets. My obsession with him being the biggest one. It's kind of sweet.

He reaches back with one hand to the collar of his shirt to pull it off. It drops to the floor. I have to keep my mouth from dropping open when my eyes meet his bare, perfect broad chest. The man is a piece of art. I think I could orgasm if I stared at him long enough. He goes for his belt next. It hits the ground with a loud thud. When he pops the button on his pants, I get a nice view of the deep V that you see every male model in the world have.

He's a genius. This isn't fair. You don't get to be a geek and have a model's body. I bet he's slept with a few models. The ones with perfect curves and long blond hair. That thought threatens to sour my mood.

"Maybe we could turn the lights off." I'm loving the view, but I'm not sure how much he's going to love mine. What happens

when he sees me naked? I might not be so sexy anymore to him.

“Not happening.” He reaches for my shirt, ripping it right off me. I let out a small scream.

Vane takes a deep audible breath. The way his eyes are eating up every inch of me make my insecurities start to melt away. I’m completely naked on my knees. My panties are on the floor of the kitchen.

“I’ve never done this,” I admit. I don’t think I have ever felt more vulnerable than I do at this moment.

“I know.” He drops his pants. My eyes go to the outline of his cock in his boxer briefs. Holy crap. How the heck is that thing going to fit inside of me?

“You don’t know everything,” I add in, even though it kinda feels like he might.

“I had my mouth all over your sweet pussy. I felt your virginity.” Heat rushes to my face, and I know my cheeks are bright pink.

“You’re right, though. I don’t know everything, but I’m about to.” He reaches for me. I try to scoot away but fall backwards onto the bed. His hand wraps around my ankle. He pulls me to him. He stops when my ass is on the edge of the bed.

“What don’t you know?” I try to close my legs, but he grips my thighs, keeping me right where he wants me. And if I believe him, he’ll always be there. I’d be lying if I didn’t love that, but it scares the hell out of me too. He could break me.

“What it will feel like to finally have you wrapped around me while my cock is buried deep inside of you.”

Before I can respond, his mouth is on me again. All rational thought leaves me as he licks and sucks me until I’m writhing on the bed. I come so quickly, it’s almost embarrassing. But he has no one to blame but himself. He shouldn’t be so damn good at it, then maybe I could last longer.

“Fuck you’re breathtaking when you come.” My eyes flutter open. Vane is over me. He moves me to the center of the bed.

His bare cock presses against my sex. He must have ditched his boxers at some point.

“I’m scared,” I whisper. I hate admitting that, but he probably thinks I’m referring to losing my virginity. I hear that can be a real bitch, but that’s not what I’m afraid of.

“Liberty.” He brushes some of my hair out of my face. “I’m not going to hurt you. If anyone is going to get hurt, it’s me.” He does know what I’m referring to. “Listen, my love.” My insides flutter. “Never in my life have I seen anything as incredible as you. If you let me have you, I’ll treat you like a queen.”

“Worship at my feet?” I tease, trying to make light of this so I don’t burst into tears.

“Worship every fucking part of you that you’ll give me.” I reach up to stroke the side of his face.

“Okay,” I give, letting myself fall into whatever this is.

“Okay?” He smirks, making him more handsome.

“Don’t get all cocky.”

“Love, you make me cocky.” I gasp when he thrusts down, his cock pressing through the folds of my sex. Vane’s other hand cups my breast, his thumb stroking my nipple. “You have no fucking clue what you’ve done to me.”

“What do you mean?” My hips thrust up on their own, trying to grind myself against him. Vane guides his cock down to my opening, pressing the head of his cock inside of me.

“You think everyone is going to leave. I think everyone is only trying to use me for what I have. That’s why I keep to myself. I work obsessively. Until you.” He grits his teeth when my sex flutters around the head of his cock, trying to pull him more inside of me.

“I could be using you. You have a lot of toys around here I’d enjoy playing with.”

“I don’t care. You can use the fuck out of me as long as you’re mine.”

“Vane.”

“I know. You’re not that kind of girl. You would never play with someone’s emotions. It’s not in you.” The man really does know me. “I just wanted you to know we’re more alike than you think. We both keep people out. Never letting anyone get too close.”

“I’d say we’re pretty damn close.”

“We are.” He leans down, brushing his mouth against mine. “Only you have ever gotten this close.”

“Are you saying—”

“Yes,” he answers before I can finish. His mouth presses to mine as he thrusts all the way inside of me. I whimper against his lips. He never stops kissing me. The sharp pain fades away until I only feel him. He’s everywhere around me. In me. It’s consuming, and I love it.

When I relax, Vane starts to slowly move. He can read my body without me having to utter a word. He knows I’m ready.

Small moans spill past my lips with each thrust of his hips. A different kind of pleasure builds this time. Vane is hitting a spot deep inside of me. The orgasm is already building.

“Vane.” I grip his back wanting to hold on to him.

“You’re always ready to come for me. Give it to me.” I can tell he’s fighting himself not to come. “Come for me love.”

Love.

That one word is all I need to send me over the edge. I wrap myself around him as the orgasm cascades through me. Vane groans my name in my ear. His body jerks as he releases deep inside of me.

I swear I have another small orgasm when I feel his warmth spill into me. My body is trying to milk every last drop of his release into it.

“I’m not on birth control,” I tell him.

He lifts his head from out of my neck. That sexy smirk is back on his lips again. “I know.”

Suddenly, there's a popping sound from somewhere inside the house, and then a familiar voice yells, "You bring her out here right *FUCKING NOW!* Hot Takis!"

Ocean slaps her hands over my eyes as my bedroom door bursts open.

“What—”

A flash bang goes off, my vision only saved by Ocean’s palm. In an instant, I’m moving and snatching my pistol from the holster along the side of the bed. When I turn, I find a gun pointed at my face.

A woman in a black ski mask glares at me. “Ocean, you all right?”

“I’m good.” Ocean sits up and tries to move past me, but I scoot her behind me again. There’s no way in hell I’m letting her get hurt.

“You sicko,” the woman in the ski mask hisses. “Thinking you can do whatever you want just because you’re worth billions. Stealing a woman and bringing her here to this, this—”

“Rebel, it’s not like that.” Ocean tries to push past me again.

No chance. But I relax just a little. Rebel is one of her crew. She’d never hurt Ocean. Me, on the other hand ... I suppose I’ll just have to wait and see.

Felix appears underneath Rebel and weaves between her ankles. That little traitor.

She reaches down and pets him, all while keeping her gun trained on me. Then she stands. “It’s not like what?” She

reaches up and removes the ski mask, her eyes narrowing on me. “This guy is a pervert!”

Ocean snorts a laugh. “Well, sure, but he’s only perverted for me.” She reaches out and presses on my wrist.

I allow her to lower my gun, but I keep my gaze on Rebel. If her barrel strays toward Ocean even a little bit, we’re going to have a problem.

“Did he drug you? Is that what this is?” Rebel asks.

“No!” Ocean swallows hard. “Wait, I mean yes—” When Rebel’s barrel twitches, she hurriedly adds, “But not in a bad way! In an okay way. It’s fine. I’m here of my own free will.”

“Yeah, because you came to steal tech, not get in this guy’s bed. This is clearly some sort of hostage situation. You know the word to say. Just say it.” She stares at Ocean.

“The word?” I raise my brows.

“Code word,” Ocean says, her hand on my back. “Like ‘Hot Takis’ means she’s throwing a flash/bang. But I’m not going to say it.” She pins Rebel with a stare. “Now lower that gun. Everything’s okay. *I’m* okay.”

Rebel slowly drops her gun. “Did ... did you two just—you know ... All the way?” she whispers it as if that will keep me from hearing.

“Yes!” Ocean laughs.

I wrap my arm around her, pulling her against me.

She yanks the blanket up to cover us. “I was perfectly willing, okay? Calm down. I can’t believe you’re here. At least Magic isn’t—” The lights snap off, and a distorted voice comes over the house comms. “You will release your prisoner, or I will rain hell down on your entire existence, you fucking worm!”

Ocean sighs. “Never mind.”

“Magic, we’re clear. She’s safe,” Rebel says.

“Ugh, seriously? I was going to do all this fun stuff with the lights and the”—the lights begin flickering in staccato fashion

—“and his whole house is wired so I can”—the garbage disposal starts running, and my fire alarm blares.

I cover Ocean’s ears.

“Magic!” Rebel cries.

The alarm stops. “Fine. This was absolutely zero fun.” Her voice is normal now, no longer low and morphed. “She’s safe, right? Not harmed. What are you going to do to that conniving asshole Vane?” She laughs. “Ocean, you going to blow him up with his own tech?”

“I’m all good. He’s all good. Look, you two have the wrong idea.” Ocean starts feeling around for her clothes.

But I ripped her shirt clean off, so she doesn’t have one. I quickly yank my shorts from the floor and don them before running into my closet and tossing her one of my shirts.

“He’s not a bad guy.” She beams up at me. “Thanks.”

“But he set a trap for you, didn’t he?” Magic asks over the comms.

“Well, yeah...” Ocean pulls on my shirt, looking absolutely perfect in it.

When she stands, it falls to her thighs. I button it up for her as she talks to her friends. “He set me up to get me here so he could show me that ... well, that he ...”

“Looks to me like he got you here to show you his dic—”

“Rebel!” Ocean laughs. “No!”

“I mean, she’s not completely wrong.” I kiss Ocean on her forehead.

She looks down at my bare chest, then shoves me toward the closet. “Get dressed. I don’t want anyone looking at my man.”

Rebel whistles. “*Your* man?”

Magic gasps over the speakers.

I take Ocean’s hands in mine. “Yours? You mean it?”

She licks her lips. “If ... If that’s what you wan—”

I kiss her hard, taking our breath away with the force of how much I love her. She's made me the happiest man on the fucking planet with her declaration. When I finally let her catch her breath, I cradle her cheeks in my hands. "Really? You'll be mine?"

She nibbles her lip. "I mean, how could I say no to all this tech?"

I laugh and pull her into my arms, holding her tightly as Rebel rolls her eyes and leaves the room.

"We're done here. I need to get back home, anyway."

"About time," a male voice comes from down the hall. "If I recall, you promised me several sexual favors in exchange for this little adventure."

"What the fuck? You brought company?" I ask.

"Hey, Gilly!" Ocean calls from my arms.

"Hey, Ocean. Keep your nose clean, and Vane, if you fuck her over, we'll fuck you up." His voice fades, and I hear the front door slam.

"Yeah, what Gilly said." Magic has the voice morph back on. "Don't fuck this up. Magic out." A metallic click sounds as she exits my home security.

Ocean looks up at me, her forehead wrinkling. "You're the smartest tech guy in the world, pretty much. I know Rebel and Magic are good, but ..."

I shrug. "I may have a left a few doors cracked for them in case they wanted to check on you. I didn't want them doing anything stupid or getting hurt. I knew you'd be upset. And ... I know you feel like maybe you aren't part of that family anymore, like maybe your friends have left you behind. But that's not true, and I wanted to show you just how much you mean to everyone around you."

Her eyes glisten. "You mean you let my friends come rescue me to make me happy?"

"Yes." I kiss her, more gently this time. "I'd do *anything* to make you happy."

“I think ... I think I love you,” she whispers against my mouth.

“I *know* I love you.” I reply, and then kiss the ever-loving shit out of her until the world fades and we fall back into my bed again.

EPILOGUE

OCEAN

“*W*ouldn’t you just hack it, Mommy?” Ariel asks from beside me.

“You don’t always have a computer or technology. It’s good to know how things work on their own.” There have been a few times I’ve gotten my ass out of a jam with only a screwdriver. I want her to be prepared for anything.

“Okay.” Ariel stares at the lock.

“Now remember last weekend when you helped Mommy build that locking mechanism?”

“The one with a hook?”

“Yep.” I tap the car door. “That’s the kind of lock you have in here.”

“There is no lock.” Her little eyebrows furrow.

“There is.” I slide my hand down the door to the underside to feel for the panel. “Give me your hand.”

Ariel leans forward to bring her hand down to mine. “Right here. You feel that?”

“Yes!” She lets out a small, excited squeal. I don’t have to instruct her any further. She pulls the end of the screwdriver off to flip it around so that it’s now a flathead.

Even though Vane had custom tools made for Ariel, her hands are still too little. If it were me, I’d just use a knife, but we’ll get to all that down the road. Right now, we’re learning the

basics. Once she manages to pop off the panel, I hand her the wire.

“The lock is right here.” I tap the spot. It’s about five inches up.

“And I have to unhook it,” Ariel says before I can tell her.

“You have to remember the lock. We can’t see it. Picture it in your mind as if you’re looking through the door,” I encourage her as she tries to find the pull. “Now when-” I hear the click half a second before the alarm goes off. Ariel’s eyes go wide.

“Watch me.” This next part I’ll teach her later. She’s not at that level yet. I pull the door open. Ariel dives inside the car, scrambling to get into the passenger seat. “That wasn’t watching.” I laugh. I know the feeling. It can be a rush when you realize what you can do.

“I got excited.” She bounces up and down, watching me pop off another panel. The alarm clicks off. When it stops, Ariel lets out a squeal.

“Now what?” We both jerk our heads up to see Cass standing in front of her car.

“Uh-oh. We’re busted.”

“It’s a getaway car. We’d take off.”

“Yeah!” Ariel bounces up and down.

“Are you two done with your fun?” She arches one of her perfect brows at me.

“Are we done, Mommy?”

“We’re never done,” I tell her.

She tries to make a wicked face, pulling her brows together, her nose scrunching up. But all that makes me want to do is kiss her all over her face. I don’t get a chance. Before I know it, the passenger door swings open.

Vane reaches in and starts tickling her. “Surrender!” he tells her.

“Never!” she says through giggles. Tears form in my eyes as I watch them together. I’ll never get tired of seeing them like this. I love that Ariel gets to grow up in a happy home that’s filled with love. It’s something I never had.

“That’s my girl.” He kisses her on the cheek. “Why don’t you go with Cass to get some ice cream?”

“Rewarding bad behavior?” Cass tsks playfully.

“Bad? I nailed it. Didn’t I, Mommy?” She looks so damn proud of herself. And she should be.

“You sure did.” I give her a wink. She runs over and takes Cass’s outstretched hand.

Cass has always been like an aunt to her. The same way Magic and Rebel have. It warms my heart to think how we’ve made our own little makeshift family.

“How’d she do?” Vane asks as he wraps his arms around me from behind.

“One thing is for sure: She’s gonna give us a run for our money someday.” I can feel his smile against my neck.

“Like mother, like daughter.” Vane rubs his hand across my small baby bump.

“You’re about to have another girl.”

“Good.” He lifts me off my feet, carrying me over to one of the workbenches in the warehouse. “The hell?” he laughs when Felix comes floating by. He lets out a loud meow.

“We made the Roomba invisible this morning.” Felix loves to ride it around. He can even turn it on himself.

“Of course you did.” Vane sets me down on the table. His hand goes back to my stomach.

“We said we were only having two,” I remind him.

“We’ll have as many as you want or don’t want.” He nibbles my neck.

“You don’t want a boy?” I ask.

He lifts his head. “I don’t want to sound like an asshole, but I love my girls.”

I smile up at him.

Vane always knows what to say. He also always knows what he needs to do.

My whole life I’ve spent taking things apart and putting them back together. Ever since I can remember, I had this need to know how everything worked. To me, it’s simple and safe. There is always an answer to be found. But I learned that my methods didn’t apply when it came to dealing with people. Not for me, at least. But it’s different with Vane; he knows how to take me apart and put me back together. He often anticipates what I need before I do.

“I love you.”

“Love you too.” He leans down and places a kiss on my lips. “Now let me love you.” Vane tugs my pants down my legs, dropping down to his knees in front of me.

See? He always knows just what I need.

ALSO BY MINK

Protecting Zoe

Leone

I meet Zoey at the worst possible time and in the worst possible place. Saving her life is like breathing, something I'm hard-wired to do. She's innocence and sweetness, two things that have no place in my dark world, especially when they make her a beacon for bad men who want to hurt her. But they won't, not on my watch. It doesn't take long for me to realize that protecting Zoey is what I was born to do.

Zoey

My sister is missing. I'll do anything it takes to find her. That is, until I meet the dark, mysterious Leone. He saves me and makes me want things I've never even considered. His touch is addictive, and when he promises me he'll help me find my sister for a price, I'm all too eager to pay up, no matter how much it might cost me.

Guardian's Obsession

Vivian is my ward. I'm tasked with taking care of her and handling all her needs. The only thing is, I was expecting her to be a child, one I could easily hand off to a nanny. But she isn't. She's a grown woman with wicked curves who fascinates me.

I'm in charge of her inheritance. I want to be in charge of her. All of her. I'm the sort of man who'll stop at nothing to get what he wants. I've crushed my competition again and again over the years, and now I'll turn my skills on my young ward, breaking down her defenses until she's completely open to me. When I finally get a taste, I'm hooked, and I realize I'll never let her go.

But her foolish brother has other plans, and he's made deals involving my sweet Vivian. He'll find out just how ruthless I can be when it comes to protecting what's mine, and Vivian irrevocably belongs to me, just as I belong to her. Forever.

Rebel Tempts the Beast

As one of the biggest players in the Yakuza, I do my duty and rule my syndicate with a hard but fair fist. I follow my own rules and adhere to my own sense of duty.

Until Mei.

When my mentor sends his daughter to live with me and instructs me to put her on the correct path, I try to use a strong hand to guide her. But that hand tends to gravitate to her rear end, especially when Mei runs her smart mouth. She's young, fiery, and looking for love.

Though I follow strict rules and enforce them in my life, Mei bucks them with ease. She's a little rebel, one I never want to break. In fact, I fall for her just the way she is. She's the one I never saw coming, and the one I can't live without.

When an enemy sees an opening and tries to use her against me, I'll burn his lineage to the ground and salt the earth behind me. For Mei. For our future. For our family.

Treasured

He's an art thief. She's a mafia man's daughter. She's also kinda clumsy ... With broken ancient vases and a grumpy hero turned mushy for his woman, these two are a perfect match.

Christmas Crush & Christmas Grump

This Christmas in Reindeer Valley is sure to steam up your Kindle. A second chance romance plus a grumpy/sunshine romance all set in the same small town?
Sign me up!

Married to My Stalker

He's so obsessed with her that he wifes her stat. But when she starts to figure out his dark side, she realizes she wants it to come out and play ... dirty.

Plump

He's a mafia boss. She's *plump*.

Obsessed Love

He's fresh out of prison. She pulls him over. So, naturally, he puts her in his trunk and takes her home to make her the queen of his illegal empire. Nice.

Crazy Love

He has a screw loose because of a head injury a while back. But he still knows his true love when he sees her. If only her mouthy cat—whom he can hear—would stop distracting him with all its sassy comebacks!

Claiming His Kitten

He wants her father's fortune and will go to any lengths to steal it out from under her. But, let's be honest, he's kidding himself. What he really wants is *her*.

Vetting His Kitten

A bad man who goes all warm and cuddly for his one true love. Gaaaahhhh, I love this one!

Wrecked

He knows how to fight, but can he learn to protect the one woman who's ever made him feel hope?

Nanny Tempts the Beast

She needs a job. He needs a nanny. And then he needs only *her*.

Unforgettable

Amnesia romance with a sassy kitty and a tantalizing mystery? What's more MINK than that?

Bodyguard's Obsession

He's supposed to protect her, but he ends up needing to stay *very* close to her. For, ya know, *safety*. *wink wink*

His Clever Kitten

She takes him hostage to save her kitty cat shop. It just so happens he's a mafia boss who'll do anything to stay locked up tight just for her.

His to Keep

A bodyguard's work is never done, especially when he can't keep his eyes off his client.

119 Kitty Lane

MINK takes a trip to Cherry Falls in this sweet romance.

Santa Material

A big bear of a Santa and the handy woman he loves. Spoiler Alert: He's going to stuff her full of Christmas cheer.

Taming His Bride

Book 4 of the Blushing Brides Series.

Stealing His Bride

Book 3 of the Blushing Brides Series.

Claiming His Bride

Book 2 of the Blushing Brides Series.

Knocking Up His Bride

Book 1 of the Blushing Brides Series.

Four brides, four rough men with a soft spot for the women they love.

Under His Spell

A haunted house, a ghost story of lost love, and a brand new love blooming under a full moon. This spooky sweet story is sure to get your blood racing for all the right reasons.

Beauty Tempts the Beast

Revenge is his life's work, but when he finds his Beauty in the heart of an enemy, will he be up for a career change?

Loan Shark's Obsession

He knows priceless objects when he sees them. So when he sees her, he *knows*.

His Stolen Bride

Her first husband never touched her. He's dead. Now she belongs to Santino, and there will be much, *much* touching.

His Stolen Princess

They were meant to be ... until they weren't. So, he steals her. Logical. Also, there's a cat.

Stalking Her Sweetly

Who's stalking whom?

Hitman's Heart

He's a badass who kills without remorse. She's a good girl who gets caught in the crosshairs. He saves her, but can he keep her?

His Secret Treasure

He says artifacts belong in a museum. She says he stole an ancient box that belongs to her. Can they come to terms over her box?

My Hero's Secret Baby

He's a hero to her, the boogeyman to everyone else. Can they have a future together?

His Tiger Queen

She's a princess in a heavily guarded tower. He's the prince next door. Did I mention there's also a pet tiger?

His Virgin Heiress

She's a thief. He keeps her safe. But can she give up jewel heists for love?

Cuffed Love

MINK's personal favorite. Seriously. I love this book.

Stuffed

Stuffies, hitmen, true love, and accidental homicide? MINK at her finest.

His Sweetest Sin

He's a priest, not a sinner ... Until he sees her.

Locking Her Down

She broke into an animal shelter. He's the only one who can help her, but this attorney knows what he wants in return (hint: it's not justice.)

Marco's Girl

Marco is the bad boy prince of a mafia empire, but his heart is set on a darling good girl.

Pop-up Love

Mobsters, mayhem, a Hallmark movie, and a pop-up shop full of love? Yes.

Beauty and the Boss

She wants to bring her cat to work. He wants to bend her over his desk. Win-win.

His Virgin Queen

He killed her husband and took her for himself.

His Deadly Darling

She's spicy. He's determined. Together, they're unstoppable.

Hitman's Prey

He always seemed so nice ... (and hot).

Snow Angel

She wants to beat him in the lights competition; he just wants her. This Christmas is lit.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



MINK writes sweet and salty romances that always satisfy with a happily ever after.

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