



WHISPERED SURRENDER

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

VIA MARI

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A NOTE FROM VIA

In our country and worldwide, the business of human trafficking continues to grow in astronomical proportions. While anyone can be a victim, the majority are women and girls.

Most of us think about trafficking as an act of kidnapping and perhaps envision the victim being brutally forced to do something against their will, and while that happens frequently, coercion is often used as a powerful weapon to ensure someone does exactly as they are instructed.

As I wrote the Ruthless Protectors novels, my thoughts wandered to those who, under extreme duress, are pressured to do things against their will. I thought of the many scared and brave victims who are going through these types of trauma, and the scary fact is that these cruelties could be happening right under our very noses, with us completely unaware. They could be our daughters, nieces, granddaughters, neighbors or friends, people who look and act completely normal each day but, unknown to us, are being threatened with something so great, they believe following explicit directions from the people who threaten them is the only choice they have. In some small way, I hope this novel assists in our world's human trafficking awareness efforts.

I hope that you enjoy the romance, the hunky bodyguards, the suspense that always follows them, and the happily-ever-after in this novel.

—Xoxo, Via

WAYWARD

*To my husband, thank you for always believing in me,
supporting my passions, and helping me make all my dreams
come true.*

PROLOGUE

I RERUN the security footage in the dimly lit room. I should be focused on finding a clue, any little thread that will give us more information about the man we're looking for who turned traitor.

Instead, my thumb slides over the keys of my laptop, rewinding it to the beautiful blonde with the accent who turns my dick to stone. Sasha's attempt at seduction is obvious, wearing a see-through little red lace teddy that exposes her erect nipples. "Hello, lover boy," she says in her thick Russian accent.

It doesn't matter that she isn't speaking to me, or that she wants one of the billionaires I've recently signed on to protect, or that he doesn't reciprocate those feelings in the slightest. I still can't bring myself to turn away from the beautiful blonde angel on the screen.

Maybe it's that look in her eyes, or something about the way her voice catches when she speaks that calls to my dominance as though she were put on earth just for me.

Brian clears his throat. "Sasha, I thought I made myself pretty clear."

I'm sure he tells all the woman he meets at the club that very same thing because everyone knows he doesn't do relationships. Everyone but her because she keeps trying.

Her red-lined lips come together in the cutest of pouts. "Oh, don't be like that, lover. I'll only be in the United States for a couple more weeks. I thought we could spend time

enjoying each other until then. I even purchased some new toys,” she says, holding up handcuffs and a riding crop with a silver handle.

My dick shifts against my pants, but my jaw tightens with irritation. I know what to do with that damn paddle even if the man I’m supposed to be protecting isn’t interested.

“Are you listening to me, lover boy?” Sasha asks, pulling the top of her bodice down, leaving those perfect tits and nipples on display for anyone with a need to scour these films to see.

Brian shakes his head. “Sasha, we had a great time, but I told you, we’re through. Please don’t contact me again,” he says, before hitting the disconnect button and causing the screen to go blank.

Yet, the image of her seeking out comfort or solace, unwilling to take no for an answer, even baring herself as a ploy to win him over after being rejected, and the pained look on her face runs rampantly through my mind.

A ruthless protector, paid handsomely to ensure the billionaires and mafia men I work for, and their families are safe, I plan to look out for the wayward angel who’s managed to captivate my attention and could benefit from a very firm hand.

JAY

AN ALTERCATION in the seven-story glass Bel Air mansion's sex club for Los Angeles's most powerful and elite can't be good for anyone. I send a message to my security team who are outside, alerting them to stand by, not knowing what we'll encounter when we reach the playroom. Brian Carrington, my boss's best friend and one of the wealthiest billionaires in the world, someone who our security team has been asked to protect, looks grim as he leads me downstairs in his private elevator.

We enter the very members only lower level of his mansion, and the monitors on the screen, cause my blood to pump with rage. The angel I've been dreaming about ever since I took over Carrington's security screams in anguish as the long whip cracks against her tender flesh.

Brian's moving fast, hearing the sound of a non-consensual exchange. He knows exactly where the weapon and key is in case something like this breaks out in his club, but my job is to protect him at any cost. I'm not about to let him hit the headlines tomorrow or go to jail if I can prevent it. I grab both the weapon and key from him, unlock it in record time and burst through the door of the secured playroom.

The man looks drugged out, but I don't give a shit what his issue is. If he hits her again, he's going to die on the spot. I give him a chance and tell him exactly that, even though taking this fucker out right here and now would give me great pleasure. He knows he's done; I see it in his face as he turns to

glare at me, and then hear it as he yells in protest as my security team overtakes him.

The woman of my fantasies is chained and hanging from the ceiling with angry marks on her back. I know in this community play gets hard. I'm fine with that when both parties want the same thing, but that's not what's going on here.

Brian barks orders to call his physician and starts talking to her, trying to console her while she continues to sob. I just want her down, and after the videos I've seen of them together, I don't want his hands anywhere near her.

Brian is still talking, trying to assure her that she's going to be okay, but I can't wait anymore. I release her and cradle her in my arms before carrying her to the bed on the other side of the room.

When I lay her down, she cries out softly. Her chest and back heave as she tries to inhale and hold back her sobs, gulping in large quantities of air. I know right then and there that the fucker who did this is going to pay severely for every bit of pain that she's feeling right now. I gather her long silky blonde hair, removing it from her back, and pull the blanket up to conceal her legs and ass. The wounds on her back are too fresh to cover with anything right now, at least until they've been treated.

I wish I didn't have to leave her in the care of Brian Carrington, but he has the best physician money can buy and she will be well taken care of while I'm gone.

I get outside, and my team has the dickwad safeguarded, ready to take him wherever I tell them to. The protocol is to secure him until the billionaire we work for decides what he wants to do with him, but this asshole isn't getting that luxury.

"You hit a woman, and we do the same to you," I say, donning my piece and clocking him square in the mouth, feeling his teeth break under my fist before he screams. I grab him behind the neck and bring him down onto my knee, breaking his nose along with every other fucking rule and protocol we have as a security team.

“Deal with him.” I leave my entire crew with mouths hanging wide open and entirely stunned to handle the mess I’ve made. I get back into the lounge, and the scene on the monitor above the bar sends me into a blind fucking rage.

The camera is still fucking on, and the blonde is on show for everyone in the club to see. Brian is rubbing her back, stroking her before he slides his hands lower, caressing the bottom of her back right above her buttocks, and that’s all I fucking need to see to propel my ass forward. I stalk down the hallway, and hear voices in the room, and that’s the only thing that causes me to pause and listen at the cracked open door instead of bursting in as I intended.

I’ve seen the tapes of the same blonde beauty repeatedly making advances to Brian, and time and time again he’s turned her away, and now he’s got his fucking hands all over her.

Jenny is standing at the bedside with him. Her being in the room, the trust she has that her boyfriend is just taking care of Sasha’s injuries and nothing else, is the only reason I don’t knock him on his fucking ass, but she’s still being displayed all over the BDSM bar, and I want that shit turned off right the fuck now.

The cameras are finally turned off, and I watch as the guy places a mask on her tear- and makeup-stained face, letting us know it’s to keep her from going into shock, gives her something for pain, dresses her wounds, and then tells her that the injuries are superficial and she’ll be feeling better in no time at all, but she’ll need some observation for a couple of the lacerations. I know exactly the ones he’s referencing because the bright angry red welts running the length of her back make me wish I had squeezed the life out of that fucker. Superficial my ass!

When she hears him mention that she needs someone to watch her, she manages to free herself from the mask, crying, telling the physician that she can’t go home and that she doesn’t have any family in the country but doesn’t want to stay where she is.

I place my hand on her neck, under her hair, running my fingers along the rapidly beating pulse and rub her nape in an attempt to calm her.

Brian explains to the physician her status in the country and her connection with the Russian ballet and offers his home until she can be alone. He's not kicking her out and will provide her a place to stay, and while I have to admit that's admirable, even though his new girlfriend may not like it, I respect him for making the offer to ensure her safety and have Celia, his house manager, care for her.

I may respect him for how he's handled this, but she's not staying in this house with him if I have anything to say about it. My mouth opens before I have clearly thought things out, letting Brian know that I will take both Sasha and his house manager to his condo in the city. I ask her if that's okay, and she nods slowly before putting her face back into the pillow, starting to drift from the pain meds.

Brian asks Celia a question that I don't fully catch, something about her taking care of Sasha because he needs time with Jenny, and thanks me for taking Sasha to his condo to care for her.

As soon as Chase asked me to take over as head of the Carrington security in addition to Prestian Corp, I researched everything there was to know about Brian. A billionaire with more money than he could ever spend. An inheritance handed to him when he was too young to do anything with it, kept in trust until he turned of age, but he earned my respect spending five years working with Chase Prestian, my boss and the most acclaimed entrepreneur across the globe, learning the industry from the ground up.

A player, through and through, and while I don't hold that against him, the pictures of him and the blonde angel with deep blue eyes, the woman now lying on the bed in front of us, the one that keeps me awake at night, and that he used to date, make me see red.

"Yes, go, I'll get Sasha dressed and situated at your condo," Celia says to Brian as the physician packs his bag. He

turns to me and hands me a bottle of meds and gives me instructions.

I take note of what needs to be done. “Will do, thanks, doc,” I say, taking the bottle from his hand as he removes her mask and rechecks her vitals. Once she’s cleared, Brian and Jenny say goodbye and head out for the night.

“I’ll help her get dressed, Jay. The pain meds will hit her shortly,” Celia says.

“Thanks, Celia, I appreciate that,” I say, stepping out of the room and closing the door to give them some privacy. She’s dressed and sitting up in bed when I return, and I scoop her sleek body into my arms carefully. “This okay with you, Angel?” I ask, looking down into her deep blue eyes.

She nuzzles into my chest and her arms tighten around my neck in response, and something in my chest expands, at the same time my balls tighten, and that’s all the confirmation that I need. I pull her lithe little body against me and walk her out the private exit and toward the awaiting limo. The driver opens the back door, and the grimace on her face as I settle her into the back seat makes me want to go back and pummel the asshole who hit her with that bullwhip all over again.

“Drive slow and don’t hit any bumps,” I say to Chase’s driver as Celia settles into the front seat. Sasha’s holding herself ramrod straight, trying not to lean back against the leather, and her jaw is tightly clenched.

I hit the privacy glass and turn the audible off. “You’re in pain,” I say, and her head nods in confirmation, ever so slightly. I undo my seat belt and shrug off my jacket before releasing her buckle. “Lay across the seat, use my jacket as a pillow,” I say, repositioning her, hoping the material creates enough of a barrier that she’s not uncomfortable with the fact that her face is now in my lap.

She nuzzles into my jacket, and her body visibly relaxes once she’s lying down. “What’s your name,” she says, so softly that I barely hear her.

“It’s Jay,” I say, pushing her long blonde hair to the side so I can take a good look at her in person. She glances up at me sideways, and the deep blue of her eyes mesmerizes me.

“You don’t even know my name, and you’re helping me,” she says, drowsily.

“I knew your name from the moment I saw you. It’s Angel,” I say, and am rewarded with a bright wide smile, a perfect set of shiny white teeth framed by naturally pink heart-shaped lips.

“You don’t know me, or you wouldn’t call me that,” she says, and I see a flash of emotion in her eyes as she begins to chew her bottom lip.

“You let me be the judge of that. In the meantime, close those baby blues and get some sleep before we get to the condo.”

SASHA

THE PAIN MEDS are making me groggy, but not so much that I'm not entirely aware of the man who saved me. The very tall, lean, and muscly man that burst through the door threatening the man hitting me with the whip, letting him know if he didn't stop that he was going to take him out, and I have no doubt the gun in his hand would have done just that. Never once in all my life have I had a man stand up for me, defend me, or take care of me. All I know is that I feel safe nuzzled against his lap as I drift off to sleep.

I WAKE IN A HAZE, cradled in Jay's arms, hanging on to his neck as he walks us into an elevator.

"Where are we?" I ask, glancing at the men around us in embarrassment.

"Heading to Brian's penthouse and these men are part of my security team. They'll keep you safe and secure, and you know Celia, right? She's Brian's house manager, and she'll make sure you have everything you need tonight," Jay says.

I nod, but the night's events are too much to deal with, and my stomach churns with the reality of what transpired.

"I think I'm going to throw up," I say, swallowing hard past the lump in my throat just as the elevator opens to the penthouse.

“Hold on Angel, let me get you there,” Jay says, carrying me quickly through the living room and into an adjacent bathroom. He lowers me gently and pulls my hair from my face as I embrace the toilet bowl and start vomiting violently, round after round until there is nothing left.

I am still strung out over the toilet bowl, with Jay rubbing the back of my neck trying to soothe me through it when finally, about a half hour later, the dry heaves subside.

“Let’s get you cleaned up. Come on, up you go,” Jay says, lifting me from the floor into his arms and carrying me past the living room, through a bedroom down the hall, and into the bathroom that has a sleek black marble and chrome shower and matching whirlpool in the corner.

“I just want to sleep,” I say, the effects of the medication and my nausea leaving me wiped and just wanting to lie down and rest.

“You need a shower, and it will help your back.”

I scowl up at him, really wanting nothing more than to rest, and Jay’s eyebrows raise in response. “Angel, you can do this alone, or I can do it for you,” he says, leveling me with his dark hazel eyes as he settles my feet onto the ground.

He is six foot two of raw manpower and my sex clenches with desire at the way he just takes control. “You are such a bossy man,” I say, narrowing my eyes at him.

Jay shrugs, and his lips turn upward in a smirk as he looks down at me. “I’ve been called worse. Now are you going to get into that shower?” he says, gesturing with a nod of his head towards the glass and steel enclosure.

“I don’t want to be alone,” I say, looking into his eyes.

“You won’t be, on my watch, Angel. I’ll step out of the room and let you undress, but I’ll be right outside in case you need me,” Jay says, turning the water on.

“What if I want you to help me wash,” I say, looking into his eyes, sliding my dress up my waist with a medicated smile, but something shifts in his eyes and before it’s halfway over

my belly button Jay has pinned my hands in place above my head.

“Don’t try topping from the bottom with me, Angel, or you’ll find your ass on fire in short order.”

His husky voice and the sexy threat send an electric thrill down my body that ends and pulses right between my legs.

“I just wanted to have a little fun!” I huff, pouting, trying to tug my wrists free from the muscular arms that hold them above me.

“I think you’ve had more than enough fun for one night. You need to get cleaned up and heal,” Jay says, releasing my wrists and turning to adjust the temperature of the water.

“Shouldn’t I be the judge of that, lover boy?” Every muscle underneath that skin-tight gray t-shirt he’s wearing tenses and then flexes as he turns from what he’s doing in the shower. In two steps he’s hovering over me again, his eyes narrowed, allowing me to feel the intensity of his darkened stare.

“Don’t test me or the next time those two words come out of that delectable little mouth of yours, you’re going to find out what an incredibly luxurious bar of soap tastes like. Now get in the shower, Angel.”

What the hell is wrong with him? Most men take me up on my offers of sex. They may not want to hang around long afterward, but they usually always want to play.

“Fine!” I huff.

“We’ll talk about your attitude later, but for now you’ll find the shower on the gentlest spray. Let it wash over the wounds on your back. When you’re done in the shower, I’ll take care of the rest,” Jay says, turning toward the door.

I strip when I hear it close, and even before the soft pelting drops of the water rain down on my hair or skin, the tears begin to flow. Nobody wants me. Am I that unlovable? The embarrassment and shame of yet another rejection burn through me like fire.

How could I have come on so strong to Brian in the club tonight? It was pretty clear that he only has eyes for Jenny. I don't know why I thought I could make him want me or why I even tried to get his attention. He couldn't have been more honest with me after a few nights of fun. I had held out hope, for what I don't really know, maybe that he would change his mind and suddenly want me in a way that I longed to be desired? Seeing the ankle lock Brian gave his new girlfriend at the club tonight was just too much. Why doesn't anyone ever want to love me and keep me for their very own?

I went to the club to make him jealous, but as soon as my date saw the hot young male cover model with tousled black hair, tight jeans, and a white t-shirt, I became entirely invisible. The man who flirted with me after that made me feel better, made me feel wanted, so I accepted his request to follow him into the playroom. Anything to ease the feeling of being rejected and alone.

"Angel, I'm keeping track of your time. I want you out of the shower in three minutes. Otherwise, I'm coming in," Jay says from outside the door, bringing me out of my reverie a short while later.

I've barely finished washing my hair, so I quickly lather in a deep conditioner before rinsing off, which will ensure I can get through the long tresses with a wet brush.

I step out of the shower and wrap a large cashmere towel from the warming station around my body, cringing as the material rubs against the wounds on my back, before tucking the ends between my breasts.

Jay opens the door to the bathroom. "Time's up, Angel," he says.

"Why do you think you can just barge in here? I invited you, and you said no," I say, still smarting from his rejection, and suddenly feeling completely exposed, although thoroughly covered.

"Your time was up a few moments ago, and I wanted to make sure you were safe and not passed out on the floor," Jay says, looking at his watch.

“Why are you still even here? I’m not interested in security trying to ensure that my safety and well-being is attended to,” I say, standing up tall but even my five-foot six-inch height is dwarfed by his presence.

“Well, that’s a damn shame because I intend to immensely enjoy that part of the job. Now behave yourself and take this,” Jay says, handing me a pill, his eyes sparkling, as he daringly clutches the towel in the middle of my breasts and pulls me toward him.

I am about to sound off, but the look in his eyes is blazing into my own, and it stifles my initial retort, and instead, I end up swallowing the capsule and allowing him to guide me into the bedroom. “Face down on the bed,” Jay says, pushing me gently against its downy softness.

“I’m going to pull your towel down so I can treat your wounds,” he says, and when he talks, for some unknown reason I listen to that husky, velvety voice. My head nuzzles against the pillows, and he pulls the towel down, halting right above my ass, and begins softly stroking my bare back gently with something calm and soothing.

“You showered, but I want to clean the superficial wounds with Hibiclens. These two stripes, we’re going to let heal a little, though,” he says, trailing the liquid over my heated skin.

“How’s that feeling?” Jay says.

“It feels better, it helps,” I say as I start to relax.

“Good, now lay still so I can apply an antibiotic cream. We don’t want an infection to set in,” Jay says, his heavy hand lying against my waist, keeping me firmly pressed against the bed while he gently applies the cool cream to my damaged skin. “I’m going to get you dressed, feed you, and then you’re going to get a good night’s sleep. Stay right where you are, let the cream soak in while I get you something to wear,” Jay says.

My core heats at his words. The thought of him wanting to dress and feed me excites me, but he thinks that I am his responsibility, and doesn’t have any real interest in me. He’s

made that clear. He's only interested in taking care of my security because he's being paid to, and I'll be damned if I'm anyone's paycheck.

JAY

I RUMMAGE IN THE DRESSERS, finding no clothes in the drawers of the guest room, and move to the master suite a few doors down. I quickly look through the contents of that dresser, finding cotton t-shirts that are soft enough for her back, but there's no fucking way I'm dressing her in Brian's clothes, and I shut the drawer with a thud. Brian had his chance with her, and from what I can gather he dumped her after a few quick fucks. She still clearly wants him after he gave her the boot, and I can't get the vision of him and her together out of my mind, and it continues to piss me off.

As soon as Brian's head of security went rogue, Chase Prestian asked me to take over the head of security position for Brian Carrington. I went through the taped conversations between the two after he called it off, her trying to get him back, repeatedly. I still can't comprehend why a beautiful woman like her would waste her time, sacrifice her dignity, calling and messaging him time and time again, even showing up on his Skype account in a hot red teddy, baring her small pert breasts to him, only to be rejected yet again.

I hastily open the next two drawers and find what I'm looking for. Stretchy camis in a multitude of colors. Pure white cotton and spandex ones that look like they will fit, and picturing in my mind the lace around her little tits along with the lace on the bottom of her undergarments covering just the top of her firm ass makes my dick hard.

The next drawer contains a variety of undergarments, all thongs with diamonds, pearls, and other glitz sewn into their

design, but I'm not about to put her into the panties of the new girlfriend of her previous boyfriend. Besides, I like the fact that if I keep her bare, I'll have easy access to that luscious little ass if she gives me any more difficulty tonight. I grab a couple different colors of the cute little camis, along with a pair of stretchy looking pants and a hoodie that are hanging in the closet, and a pair of low top sneakers that are slide on style and should work, at least to get her home tomorrow.

I walk back into the room expecting to find her where I left her, where I told her to stay, where I planned to dress and feed her, but she's fucking gone!

I hit the group message on my phone, alerting my entire security team that something has headed south, instructing them to begin a search of the condo, leaving nothing unturned.

I stalk my way through room after room and eventually run into Celia in the kitchen. She's stirring a pot of chicken soup and looks up in surprise at my unexpected arrival.

"Have you seen Sasha? She's not upstairs, we can't find her," I say.

"That girl is hurting, Jay," she says, seemingly calm and collected when offering her advice. "Check the lower level," Celia says.

I send a gesture to the security team, and in less than three minutes I'm at the door that will open into the lower levels of Brian Carrington's penthouse. I turn the handle, and as the door swings forward, I hear little sobs in the distance. Sasha must be in the playroom off to the side of Brian's safe room. "I'm going in alone, stay at the top of the entrance, and I'll text you if I need you," I say.

"You're breaking protocol again," one of my security team reminds me.

I raise my eyebrows in question, but then just as quickly give him a nod because I respect him for both acknowledging it and calling me out on it. "I know Cole, but I need to do this alone. Go upstairs and take the team with you. I'll be okay," I say, perfectly aware it's the second time tonight that I've

broken our rules, the protocols my men and I usually hold sacred. Cole nods, and they head up the stairs while I venture forward, following the soft sobs that are emanating from the corner of the room.

I find the blonde-haired beauty sitting against the headboard of an ornate styled bed, atop a deep purple bedspread, her knees pulled up against her chest and her chin resting against them. I walk toward her slowly, careful not to scare her, but something makes my chest beat hard as I get close to her. She's sobbing, and the tears are flooding her eyes and running down her cheeks. The fact that she's sitting in this room filled with memories of her and Brian, bawling her eyes out, makes me want to hit something right the fuck now, but I need to focus on what she needs, so I tighten my jaw instead.

"You gonna stay down here all night or you wanna go back upstairs?" I say.

"You're not interested, and I get that. What you Americans say, loud and clear," she says, raising her hands and gesturing quotes in the air. "And I don't need or want your help," Sasha says, looking at me with those sky-blue fuck me eyes.

I let her comment settle. She's not crying over Brian. She's pissed at me because she thinks I'm not interested. I try hard not to smile, but I need to turn momentarily so that she does not see my upturned lips. She has no clue how seductive she is, and I have no intention of letting her know how much I want her, have desired her since the very first time I saw her, or how relieved I am that her anger is directed at me and not Brian.

I turn back around, taking in every inch of her disheveled appearance, and damned if the hurt in her eyes and those tears don't make me feel like a bastard. "I turned down the sexual advances of someone that's been hurt tonight, on medication, and may not be thinking straight, but that doesn't mean I don't want you, Angel," I say, lifting her chin so she has no other option other than to look at me.

It's clear the medication has taken hold of her as the tears continue to spill from her gorgeous eyes. "When I decide our

time is right I'll take care of your little pussy, but you should know your ass is going to be on fire for your disobedience tonight," I say, wiping her tears with my fingers.

Her eyes widen, and her pupils dilate, turning hazy with lust. I watch as her breathing alters and her body physically softens and her eyes lower so I can't see her desire. Fuck, she couldn't be more submissive if she tried. "Angel, why did you run, and before you answer, I want the truth," I say, lifting her chin so I can see her eyes again.

"I just needed to be alone for a while. I didn't think it would matter, or that you would look for me."

"The truth, Sasha, that's what I want right now," I say, knowing that this goes much more deeply and that she's much more likely to confide in me in her medicinal haze. She doesn't respond and instead her head bows.

"Tell me," I say, lifting her face again with the tip of my finger.

"Nobody wants me," she says, so softly that I barely hear her.

The fact that this beautiful woman thinks no one wants her makes my blood boil and at the same time makes me want to pummel every man that has ever made her feel that way, and right now Brian Carrington is at the top of that fucking list. "I told you to stay where you were, that I was going to get you something to wear. I was planning to dress you, feed you, and then let you get a good night's sleep," I say.

"That's your job. You have to do that, but you turned me down," Sasha says, wiping her nose on the back of her hand.

It takes an extreme amount of effort to keep my lips from turning up in a smile. Fucking adorable. My Angel thinks it's just part of my job to take care of her, doesn't recall me volunteering, and has no clue that I've thought of nothing but her, night after night, since seeing her video, but tonight is not the time to deal with this. She may not even have any recollection of what happened or even this conversation in the

morning, and I want her fully conscious when we have that discussion.

“We’ll talk tomorrow. Tonight, I’m taking you back upstairs, and we’re going to get you dressed and fed. Then, Angel, you are going to sleep,” I say, wrapping the blanket around her, placing my hands under her knees and behind her back. She nuzzles into my shoulder, her blonde hair falling over my chest, and that’s all the fucking consent I need as I lift and carry her back upstairs into the guestroom.

We get to the top of the stairs, and the security team is ever present and hovering. “Sasha’s okay. Have Celia send food to her room,” I say, walking past them with her tight in my arms, ignoring the stupid fucking grins of my men as I do.

I lay her on the bed and offer her a cami I secured earlier. “Here, put this on. The material is soft, it won’t hurt your skin,” I say, turning to allow her privacy, although what I really want to do is dress her myself.

“Tell me when you’re done, Angel,” I say, allowing her time at the expense of my sanity and my dick’s raging disagreement.

“I’m finished,” she says a few moments later, and I turn around, seeing the dainty lace of the white cami peek out over the blanket just as a rap on the door lets me know our dinner has arrived.

I ignore the smirk of one of my men as he hands me the tray. I close the door in his face with the toe of my boot and place the tray on the dresser before removing the silver dome from the matching platter. The selections are perfect, including small chunks of beef, vegetables, and fruit that are cut into bite-sized pieces.

I move the tray to the bed and pick up a morsel of the marinated tip, holding it to her mouth. “You need nourishment,” I say as I watch her eyes dilate and her heart-shaped lips encompass the piece of meat I’ve offered. She takes it into her mouth and chews slowly, and fuck if that isn’t the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen. Until now, I don’t know if I

even knew just how much ensuring the basic needs of a submissive meant to me.

I offer her a piece of grilled sweet potato, and she shakes her head. "Take a bite," I say.

"Too many carbs," she replies.

"I decide what you need tonight," I demand, raising the vegetable to her mouth again.

Her eyes widen, and the pupils in her lovely blue eyes turn dark and hazy as her naturally pink heart-shaped lips encompass my offering, taking the delicious piece of potato into her mouth. She chews leisurely and moans softly, causing my dick to instantly harden. I feed her the rest of the meal, watching intently as she drives me crazy with each piece that graces her perfectly parted lips.

"I haven't eaten this much in a very long time. I'll seriously need to fast for a couple weeks after all that food," Sasha says.

I feel my eyebrows raise and my protective instincts kick in. The thought that this woman believes she needs to deprive herself of essential nutrition to meet some fucking ballet industry standard of weight pisses me off. She can barely weigh over a hundred and ten pounds soaking wet.

I realize she's not mine, and I have no right to demand she change her eating behaviors regardless of the almost primitive desire within me to do just that. I pull the down comforter around her after she's fed, watching as she snuggles into the softness and finally drifts to sleep in her medicinal haze. I sit by her bed, continuing to observe her for the next hour, reflecting on the night while I follow the emails and intel coming back from one of our best security agents out in the field. They believe they are close to finding Matt, one of our team members, a previous Chicago Mafia enforcer, who is now undercover, but according to our intel his cover's been blown. If we don't find him fast, he won't live another day.

A message hits my cell, and I read, and then reread it, looking at the angel who has finally managed to fall asleep in

front of me.

Sasha is Bernatelli's daughter. We have an in, a way to get Matt out.

SASHA

I WAKE with a terrible case of cotton mouth, in a strange place, hours later and all alone. I pull the covers back, grimacing as my back tightens with pain from the wounds I've sustained. I pad into the bathroom, taking the lilac robe from the hook. I frown realizing it must be Brian's new girlfriend's, but still slip it on before venturing downstairs to the kitchen.

A quick search through the mahogany cabinets finds the glasses, and I fill one with ice cold water from the stainless steel sub-zero refrigerator dispenser. A long steady drink feels refreshing against my parched lips and dry throat, and I barely take a pause before swallowing again and again, finishing the entire glass. Another quick search for Tylenol or something to keep the pain at bay comes up short. I walk down the hall toward the main bathroom, hoping to find something to take the edge off, but stop short outside the door when I hear Jay's voice.

"You're sure Sasha's his daughter," he says, and my body freezes with a gripping and unparalleled fear. They can only be talking about one person, and that sends a chill down my spine. A man who is revered by the newspapers for all of his community donations, hospital equipment contributions and charity care, a family man and do-gooder, is but a façade, because on the streets of Chicago this man's name is feared more than anything, and as luck would have it he just happens to be my father.

"We need to find out where Matt is. Once we have the address of the warehouse, we'll get in, we'll find a way to get

him out without sacrificing Sasha,” Jay says confidently.

I have no idea how anyone found out that I am related to Bernatelli, but just the fact that someone knows it is a possibility will bring nothing but trouble for me and most definitely for them, too. I pad back upstairs and stop by another bathroom, opening the medicine cabinet, and quickly ferret around its contents, relieved to find a half-full bottle of Tylenol. I down a couple and head back to my bedroom, knowing that I am at least safe for tonight, but that it may be short-lived. I will need to get to the bottom of this quickly. If someone knows about me, they know too much to keep my family safe, or even themselves.

I close the door and slip back into bed before hitting the button on my cell that will connect me to the person that means the world to me. She doesn't answer, ring after ring, and finally, feeling disheartened, I disconnect after the call goes to voicemail. I send her a message instead, letting her know to text me the minute she can talk.

I pull up the pictures of our family on my phone. Three women are in the image, all with naturally bright blonde hair and blue eyes, a trait that is far more abundant in the countries surrounding the Baltic Sea than anywhere around the globe. The two ladies, although younger, and slightly different in body shape and most definitely different in personality, are almost a mirror reflection of their mother in the background.

The woman that holds a secret she will not divulge, out of loyalty, out of fear, or other. I should not and would not know about it, if I hadn't been trying to find my sister playing hide-and-seek years ago, discovering by accident a box full of letters along with newspaper clippings and articles about Frederik Bernatelli, the fearless kingpin of the Chicago Mafia and the father who has no need for an illegitimate daughter.

I hear footsteps coming and quickly slide under the covers, twisting as the wounds on my back graze over the mattress, pretending to be asleep as the door opens and then closes again. The magnetism in the room is palpable and breathing evenly is almost impossible, try as I might. I can feel Jay watching me, the heat of his gaze penetrating me through the

semi-darkness of the room. I have almost convinced myself that he believes I'm asleep when the depth of his voice lets me know that he's very much aware that I am not.

"Angel, you're still awake," Jay says, walking toward me. I can sense him getting nearer, can smell the sexy muskiness that emanates from him, all male and so intoxicatingly sexual that I bring my legs together under the blanket in an attempt to squelch the heat and moistness building.

I open my eyes as the bed dips with the weight of his body, and Jay sits next to me. "How are you feeling?" he says, reaching to turn on the lamp on the nightstand, which sheds a dim light into the room.

"It could be so much worse. I'm really okay," I say, not understanding my rapidly beating heart and intense shyness around this man.

"I'm glad to see that you're on your back, but flip, I need to check for myself," Jay says, his hazel eyes penetrating mine in the light.

"I'm fine, really," I say.

He lifts his eyebrows at me. "Flip, I'll only tell you once," Jay says.

"Okay, fine," I huff, sitting up carefully trying not to brush against my wounds again, catching the narrowing of his eyes as I wince, before turning face down onto the mattress.

"You're still tender," Jay says gently, the warmth of his breath against my ear as he moves my hair out of his way.

"It's not too bad. I took some Tylenol when I got up to go to the bathroom," I say.

"I'm going to lift your shirt up to check and apply a little more cream, Angel. That okay with you?"

I nod, too overcome with the feeling of someone taking care of me to do anything but allow it. Jay pulls the blanket from me as I turn over, and keeps my bottom covered while he begins to slide the thin white cami up my back, his fingers at the sides of my torso keeping it from rubbing against my

wounds. He rolls the material all the way up, and I feel the coolness of the air, but my body soon warms as his fingers skim my back, applying the soothing cream to the wounds that start at the nape of my neck and don't end until they reach the top of my ass cheeks.

“There, this and the Tylenol should help you sleep. No need to put the shirt back on. Just let the cream soak in, Angel. I won't be far away. If you need something just call my name,” Jay says, standing and heading toward the door.

“Thank you,” I say. My heartbeat is still racing with desire, and my thighs are still clenched with the thought of his body, but it's clear as he opens and closes the door behind him that it's all business for him and that he isn't even thinking of me in that way.

Tears start to run down my face at his second rejection of the night, but I stop them. I am thankful for not only what he has done for me tonight, saving me from the asshole in the club, helping me get to a safe place, taking care of my wounds, but most of all for not turning me over to the monster that is Frederik Bernatelli when he could have done just that.

I am still on my stomach waiting, and it seems like hours have passed since I sent the first text to my sister. This is so unlike her, and although I try to rationalize it, my mind keeps going over the number of things that could have happened to her.

“Marenah where the hell are you?” I whisper.

JAY

SASHA AGREES to let me put more cream on her back, and my cock lengthens and hardens with desire. I bare her back and apply it gently to her skin, knowing it will soothe her and that she's already got another dose of Tylenol on board. The heat of her skin under my touch and the way her waist indents and then gently curves out teasing me with what I can't see under the covers is making my dick throb. When she moans softly under my touch, I know that I have to get some space between this half-naked blonde angel and me. I remind myself that I have a job to do and people to bring out of this shit alive.

It is by sheer will and determination that I lift myself from her bed, distancing myself from the one woman that has ever captivated my desire to protect her in any other fashion than the job. I walk toward the door, needing to get out of this room before my resolve not to tell her how much I want her disappears. This woman takes my fucking breath away, her graceful body lying under the covers, thinking she can make me believe she is asleep, trying to act indifferent to what's happened to her instead of showing me the fear that lives inside of her. She'll be surprised when I add that to her list of transgressions, and my dick gets harder just thinking about her lying across my lap when our time is right.

I head back to the guest room down the hall, open my laptop, reviewing all the night's intel, making sure Chase and Katarina's flight the next morning is well secured and plans are in place for them, and that Sheldon who's running point for them has everything that he and the team need.

I pull up the information that Matt has been able to document and upload into our secured repository while undercover. Sasha Koslov, Russian ballerina in the States on a work visa, contacted Frederik Bernatelli several years ago, explaining that she believes he is her father, and asking to meet with him. I continue to stream through the communication trails uploaded to our intel site by Matt as he searched for things that could help vindicate Jenny, Brian's girlfriend, of a murder charge. I hate like hell that he had to go back undercover into the same mafia that he once used to enforce, but it was the only way.

One documented conversation between Bernatelli and his head man catch my eye, and I read further.

“The documents need to disappear, or they do. If anyone ever finds out what happened years ago, it will be the collision between two of the largest crime families on earth. We don't need the Russian Mafia crawling up our ass. Deal with it!”

I look down at the incoming message from Cole. Damn it! We are not getting any closer to Matt. The warehouse we were initially told he was being held in ended up being a dead end.

The informant told us that when we hit the warehouse, it would be wired, that we could expect blowback, so we had a plan in place, but when we ran through that door, we found nothing but an empty room. No fucking Matt. The crew that has him has either moved him, or the informant was dirty.

I settle into the large armchair by the window in my room and stretch my legs onto the matching ottoman, only two doors down from Sasha in case she needs something. After reading the report and Matt's upload about Sasha, I send a message to my entire team.

Huddle now! I text, before settling into one of the most intense nights my crew and I may encounter. I send Celia a request for coffee. One of our own has gone off the grid, on a job to get the intel we need to ensure the Chicago Mafia removes the hit from Jenny Torzial, Brian Carrington's girlfriend.

Our teams have been monitoring and scrambling the flight patterns all night long to provide Chase Prestian and his new wife Katarina the ability to leave at first dawn. The flight is intended to get them into Italy so she can deal with her family, the fucking Italian Mafia, and now this. Sasha is the daughter of the Chicago Mob boss, and there's a connection to the Russian Mafia? I shake my head and run my hands through my hair. It's going to be a long-ass night.

I send a private message to one of my top intel men. "I need a full dossier on Sasha Koslov by morning."

My team signs on to the conference call, and one after another, the beeps keep coming until the entire crew has checked in. "We don't have much time. The location we were given for Matt by his inside man was either a ploy or a location that they moved him from. Initial intel is on the ground, telling us that he was there, but the team is in the process of getting confirmatory blood samples. If he was at that site, it's more likely than not that the person who sent us the message is legit. Our goal is to get Matt out alive, and here's how it's going down."

At the end of the call we are all set, except for one thing. I now find myself in a position of having to ask a favor from the one man that I wish I didn't, but with Chase leaving the country I will need to call Brian Carrington. I'll have to ask him to meet with Bernatelli's top man and make an exchange of an indecent amount of money in the event we can't find Matt and get him out. We have to have a backup plan, and this is it. At the end of the day, money talks, and no one has more money than Brian Carrington and Chase Prestian.

I know Brian's a good man, although a fucking hothead wherever Jenny is concerned. He's decent to every one of my team, and he's done nothing wrong except to date my angel and be the one that she still wants, but Matt's life is on the line, and I need to put my own feelings aside.

I should leave Sasha alone, especially after the call and learning what I have about her, but instead, I find myself marching down the hall and opening her bedroom door to ensure she is okay. I walk in quietly, and this time she's not

pretending. The soft pattern of a medicated sleep has finally overcome her. I walk to the bed, careful not to wake her, and just gaze at her beauty. Her long blonde hair is still pushed to the side, the way I left it, and her back is bared with the marks of the fucking idiot she was with earlier. While most of the surface stripes, which were initially flaming red, have receded in color to a faint pink, two welts, the ones the physician wanted someone to watch, are still prominently angry looking.

I know without a doubt at some point we're going to have a conversation about what she needs and her sexual appetites. I also know we won't be having this conversation tonight and that I will need to be in Chicago to deal with all of this shit tomorrow, so I take her phone, enter my contact information and send her number to my own, and head back to my room to rest.

IT IS BARELY four a.m. when I hear a squeak in the hallway. A distinct sound made when someone tries to creep slowly but scuffs their rubber soles over a wooden floor. It is coming from just outside my room, and I know for sure my security team hasn't let anyone else into the condo and that it can only be one person. I move to the door, careful and quiet, and when I hear another squeak right outside my door I open it, startling the beautiful blonde Russian trying to slip past my room.

"Going somewhere, Angel?" I ask, taking pleasure in her surprised little squeal.

Clearly flustered at having been caught, she manages to straighten herself and tosses her long blonde hair before responding. "I have a flight to arrange, not that it's any of your business," she retorts, flashing her baby blues at me.

I narrow my eyes at her. "Where are you going, Sasha?" I ask.

She is quiet for a moment, and I'm not sure if I'm going to have to ask the question again, but I wait, watching her, giving her time, and she finally answers.

“I need to get back to Chicago. I was supposed to fly home last night with the person I came to the party with, but we all know how that turned out,” Sasha says, looking down again, seemingly embarrassed by her explanation.

“What time does your flight leave?” I ask, tilting her chin upward because I’ll be damned if she thinks that fuck’s decision to leave her has any reflection on her.

Sasha’s cheeks turn a lovely color of pink, and my dick throbs hard. She looks me right in the eye. “I don’t exactly have a flight yet. I checked last night, and there are a few out of LAX to Chicago this morning. I thought the best way to get a ticket was to show up, be prepared to pay a ton, and buy one,” Sasha says, shrugging.

I inhale deeply. This woman is testing every bit of control that I have. I’d like nothing better than to take her over my knee for not asking me to get her back to Chicago. She put herself out there, and while I had my reasons, damn good ones in my book, she believes that I rejected her, that I don’t want her, and I can’t expect her to come to me as a result.

“I’ll arrange a private jet for your flight back to Chicago. We’ll have you in the air sooner than you can get there otherwise. I can think of much better ways to spend your time than sitting in the airport,” I say.

“I appreciate your offer, but you don’t need to do that. I can take care of myself,” Sasha says, looking up at me with those seductive little eyes that flash with interest but then quickly look away to hide it from me.

My hand snakes under her hair and around her nape as I pull her toward me. Her breath hitches and she swallows as her pulse races. She can feel the magnetic draw between us, too. “You remember when I told you that I would let you know when our time was right?” I ask.

“Yes,” Sasha says, and her breathing changes as I slip the hoodie from her shoulders.

“The medication has washed through your system, and that electrical charge between us still exists. It’s time,” I say,

pulling my angel closer, watching her baby blues dilate and turn hazy with desire, before capturing her heart-shaped lips with my own.

She moans and leans into me and the feel of her body softening in submission, her moist, supple mouth opening to me as I capture her lips is beyond imagination. I reach down, lifting her slight frame under her knees, pulling her to my chest, closing the door behind me with the heel of my boot, and carry her to my bed.

I sit with her on top of my lap, kissing her, my tongue exploring her depths as she purrs with pleasure. There is no way that she's going back to Chicago without knowing how much she's wanted. The little hitch of her breath is intoxicating, and my balls tighten, and my dick hardens into a steel rod that feels like it's on fire with the need for this woman.

"Strip for me, Angel," I say, settling her onto her feet in front of me as she reaches for the lacy white bottom of the cami she's wearing. When she pulls it from her frame, my breath audibly catches. I've seen her tits before, but there is nothing like the feeling of her baring them, just for me.

Exquisitely perfect, high, firm, and nipples that are already erect with need. I take them in my mouth, one at a time, and slide my hands down the sides of Sasha's waist. She moans as I suck one of her hardened pink nipples, caressing and then twisting the other one between my fingers, watching her squirm as my dick hardens to the point of no return.

"Yes," she says. One little word, and with that, I finish undressing her myself, sliding her yoga pants down those long, toned ballerina legs and over her red painted toes. I take my time rising, sliding my hands up her calves and around the gentle curves of her muscled thighs before settling on her ass, caressing her cheeks as I kneel in front of her. I stroke her luscious ass and use her cheeks to pull her closer so that I can nuzzle her mound and smell her arousal. Her eyes have already glazed with desire, and her little belly tightens, letting me know how anxious she is for my touch.

Her hands hold the back of my neck for balance, and today I'll allow it since I have nothing to restrain her with standing up and don't want to hurt her back.

"Today we go slowly, but there are rules," I tell her, nuzzling her silky-smooth mound as she moans softly and does the very thing she's not allowed to do.

"No Angel, you're not in charge of your pleasure anymore. You don't get to take what you want by pulling me closer. Next time I'll restrain you, but for now, you can keep your hands where they are but only for balance, understand?"

A flush creeps up her face as the intenseness in her eyes deepens. So fucking responsive. I caress her mound and gently pull her delicate pink lips apart, watching my angel as her breathing becomes quicker. I smile and glance up at her as I keep her lips open and exposed.

"Today we go slowly. I want to taste you and feel you bucking on the end of my tongue, but make no mistake, I do want you hard and will punish you for all your transgressions," I say, and when Sasha's tongue peeks out of her mouth and licks across her lips, my dick releases some more pre-cum. Fuck, this woman is hot!

I've waited long enough, and I need to taste her, and I know her center will be pooled with her cream by this time, and as my tongue reaches her and I take the first taste of my angel, my balls tighten with desire. "Delicious," I say, dragging her wetness across her slit before circling and teasing her clit. She moans gently, and her body pushes forward to meet my tongue, but I slap her ass and firmly grip her hips to keep her still.

She squirms with pleasure and her little pants and the way her hips try to rise to meet my tongue make my dick throb with need, but it's clear my naughty angel will need to be restrained in the future. I continue to lick, returning to her center for a taste of her sweetness and dragging it across her pussy, purposely neglecting her little bundle of nerves.

Her thighs are quivering, so close, but I want to keep her on edge and to hear her scream my name with her release, and

that's precisely what she does as soon as I begin caressing her clit with my tongue. I'm not done with her though and suck her little nub hard once she starts to climax, ensuring she feels the full intensity of her orgasm, wave after pleasurable wave. Only when her body stops trembling do I let go of her clit.

While I would love nothing better than to pick her up and slide my cock into that gorgeous wetness, I hold back until I know more, but her pleasure belongs to me, and I take what is mine, licking her until she is perfectly clean and knows without a doubt she is desired.

SASHA

I WAKE a few hours later wrapped in Jay's arms, bands of steely hard muscle keeping me pressed against his body. I look up, and his deep hazel eyes are open, capturing mine.

"Morning, Angel," Jay says, pulling me close, and something about the way he does that and the way he calls me Angel makes me swoon.

"Good morning," I say shyly.

"How's your back?" Jay asks, running his finger down the length of my spine, feeling for welts delivered by the madman of the night before.

"I'm good, really. I feel so much better. Thank you for taking care of me. I just need to get to Chicago as quickly as I can," I say, still not having heard from my sister.

"I've arranged a plane that will get you from LA to Chicago faster than a commercial flight. You'll go on that," Jay says, pushing my hair from my face as I watch his deep hazel green eyes take me in.

"You don't have to do that, really, but I do appreciate the offer."

He narrows his eyes at me. "I wasn't asking you, Sasha. I've arranged your transportation because I know you'll be safe on the flight. If you haven't noticed, I'm used to being in charge. Do you intend to argue with me about everything?" he asks.

I shake my head from side to side slowly. “No, I really do appreciate your help.”

“Good, then your ass won’t constantly be in a state of heat. No need to thank me. I put my phone number in your cell, and I have your number programmed into mine. My team will get you to the airstrip and make sure you take off safely. I want you to text me the minute you land in Chicago, though, understand?” Jay says, stroking my cheek with his finger.

I nod. “Why are you helping me?”

Jay folds me into his arms and looks at me with those deep hazel eyes, and for a moment I don’t think he’s going to respond, and when he does, he circumvents my question altogether. “I’ll run down, grab us some coffee and a bite to eat,” he says.

“Just coffee, black for me,” I say, but his eyebrows crinkle, leaving me with the impression that I’ll be eating a breakfast of his choice.

I get ready for the day, and when he returns, he’s holding a tray with two cups of coffee and a covered dish in the center. He places it on the dresser before lifting the silver lid. I eye the assorted cheese, fruit, and scrambled eggs. In all, relatively healthy, and with a few simple dance routines will wear off fairly quickly. He fills a small plate and hands it to me.

“Thanks, it looks delicious,” I say and am awarded a wide, genuine smile by my bad boy. “Celia’s a hell of a cook,” Jay says, plating his own food and joining me on the bed.

“How’s your pain this morning?” Jay says.

“It’s not too bad. I thought it would be worse.”

“Good,” Jay says, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a bottle of Tylenol. Take a couple now and then two more in about four hours. It’ll keep you ahead of it,” he says.

I nod, taking a couple of the gel caps out of the bottle he has opened for me.

“Do you live in LA?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “No, in Chicago, not far from you, Angel,” Jay says.

I try hard to hide my smile, but I’m pretty sure that I don’t succeed. Jay has obviously looked up where I live. “Why were you in LA at Brian’s?” I ask.

“I work for Chase Prestian and was with him and his wife who were visiting before their trip to Italy, but I’m heading back to Chicago today, too. Unfortunately, I need to take a different flight so I can be with the rest of my team,” Jay says.

We finish our breakfast, and he guides me downstairs with his hand around my waist. Three of his security men are sitting at the table, and Celia is in the kitchen. The men are all trying to hide grins, and I feel a slow but hot burning embarrassment start to seep through my body, realizing what they must think.

They probably think I’m some wild tramp that can’t keep her legs shut after being with one guy that left me, moving on to another who literally whipped me, and then on to Jay, all in one night. I swallow, trying to calm myself, but the anxiety rises as I consider how they must see me and the circumstances that played out last night. I can’t really blame them and try to take a deep breath, but suddenly everything clicks into place, and I am filled with mortification. This is why he didn’t bring me to breakfast downstairs and will be sending me to Chicago alone.

I dare a glance upward. Every single one of Jay’s men is still smiling, looking at Jay, and now he’s got a smirk on his face, too. I choke back a sob as I swallow hard past a lump in my throat, and all of a sudden I just need to get the hell out of here, far away from those grinning faces and to a place where I can be alone with my shame.

I walk past them swiftly and continue through the great room to the elevator beyond, allowing the door to close behind me even as I hear Jay calling my name. I step out in the lobby and have made it to the entrance. I open it, hearing him call me, but keep moving, rushing through the exit as the glass door closes behind me. The yellow cab turning the corner is just in time, and with a flip of my wrist the driver brakes,

allowing me to slide into the back seat. “Go fast, please, I’m late for the airport,” I say, slowly trying to catch my breath as he begins weaving in and out of the LA traffic before I’ve even finished my sentence.

I hear the beep of my phone alerting me to an incoming message and look down.

Where do you think you’re going?

Away, I’ll find a flight. I need to go home.

If you recall that’s where I was taking you. Go to the airport. One of my team is right behind you. The Prestian jet has to return to Chicago, you’ll be on board.

Okay, I will.

We’ll talk when I get done with this job.

I don’t answer, but I do need to get to Chicago and figure out what’s going on with my sister, and the quickest way to get me there is on that plane. I give the driver instructions, and he pulls onto the private tarmac where the Prestian Corp jet sits. There is also a Carrington Steel Gulfstream parked adjacent to it, and I realize that must be the one Jay and his team are taking back to Chicago. I have barely gotten out of the cab and paid the driver when I feel a hand on my elbow.

“Sasha, I’m Cole, come with me. We’ll get you back to Chicago as quickly as possible,” he says.

“Excellent, thank you,” I say to the big muscle-bound guy that looks more like a football player than a security guard.

“No problem,” Cole says, leading me up the ramp where he talks for a moment with the crew before showing me to the main cabin. “Make yourself at home. There’s Wi-Fi overhead, and you can dial out normally. There’s a satellite transmitter that will route your calls. I’ll be in the next cabin, behind the flight crew. If you need anything, just hit that button,” Cole says, pointing to the remote sitting on the small table in front of the leather sectional.

“I’ll do that, and thanks again,” I say, welcoming a little time to myself to unwind in the comfort of the luxurious cabin,

slipping off my shoes and curling my feet beneath me.

My sister was supposed to be out having fun with her friends on a four-day layover after week upon week with no break as an airline attendant. She had made plans to celebrate and soak in the city with her friends, but I've received no word from her.

I try to relax as the plane takes off and read for a bit before dozing. When I wake, it's a couple hours later, and with the time change it will already be afternoon in Chicago. I send my sister another message, and this time I see the movement that means she's typing a response. I hold my breath waiting, but she just keeps typing and typing. "What is she writing, a dammit book?" I fume, but I'm still filled with relief that Marenah is okay.

I am about to text and lecture her about not taking her phone with her, not charging it or whatever the hell happened when her message finally comes through.

What the hell! I reread the message for the second time, hitting the button that will connect me with Liza, her best friend in the world, who apparently has my sister's phone.

Liza picks up in one ring. "Sasha, I'm so sorry that I didn't catch your earlier calls. I can't go into all of the details right now, but we were at one of your father's joints. Marenah went into the bathroom, and when she came out she was pretty shaken up. She took out a piece of paper, wrote down instructions, and slid it over to me. It said, 'saw a man dragged downstairs. They saw me. I have to stay, get the hell out of here right now. Call my sis if you don't hear from me by a.m.' She sees the bouncers coming toward us and slides her phone into my lap, gesturing toward the door with her eyes. I waited for her to call all night and went over to her apartment and she's not there," Liza says, sobbing on the other end of the phone.

"What the hell were you guys doing there?"

"You know your sister. She didn't tell me anything, but they were accusing her of bringing drugs into their bar when I left."

My chest tightens with panic. This Matt could be the same guy. One of Jay's security men, one he wasn't willing to trade me for after somehow learning of my relationship to Frederik Bernatelli, head of the Chicago Family.

I don't want to talk to Jay after what happened last night, but I need to tell someone in case that man being held is Matt and my sister is with him. Jay and I both wanted what happened this morning, but I don't want him to feel indebted to me in any way, and hit Brian's cell phone instead of calling him.

He answers on the second ring, and I hear the hesitancy in his voice. It doesn't sound like he thinks it was a good idea to pick up the call. I guess it's deserved after all the trouble I've caused, and it fuels my resolve to turn over a new leaf, and it's starting right now.

I inhale deeply.

"Brian, I know you asked me not to call you anymore, but I wanted to thank you for what you and your lady friend did for me last night," I say.

"You're welcome. I'm sorry it happened. How are you feeling today?" We get the pleasantries over, but then I tell him why I'm calling.

"I want you to write down an address," I say.

He doesn't understand at first, thinks I'm still coming on to him, and after my deplorable behavior I don't blame him, but he needs to understand the severity of the situation. "Brian, listen to me carefully. Write down this address; get it to the people that can get your man, Matt, out of harm's way.

"What the fuck do you know about that?" Brian says.

"Got that pen handy?" I say.

"Got it. Tell me."

"Go to 5445 South Ettelmen Street," I say before disconnecting.

JAY

I HIT the accept button on my cell. “Just got a call from Sasha. She knows about Matt’s situation and that he’s part of the team. I’ve got an address,” Brian says, and my jaw clenches so tight that I think my teeth may crack. Why the fuck is she still calling him?

“What’s wrong? Is she okay?” I say, finding it hard to breathe normally.

So many things are running through my mind. Why did Sasha call Brian and not me, how the hell does she know Matt, how does she know he’s part of our team, and how the fuck does she know that he’s being held and where that goddamn location is. “How the hell is she involved in this?” I grind out.

“I have no idea. She said that she’s returning the favor for rescuing her from that asshole last night. I don’t know what the fuck to think either,” Brian says, giving me the rest of the information before disconnecting.

If that woman were mine, she’d be tipped upside down getting the paddling of her life for putting herself in danger right now. The reality is that she’s not, doesn’t want to be, and couldn’t have made things more crystal clear by calling Brian instead of me, but that doesn’t mean that I don’t want to ensure she’s safe.

Bernatelli still isn’t taking the bait. If he doesn’t meet with us, then we have no choice but to use our intel’s information, and goddamn it if it doesn’t mean that the only option we have is trading Sasha for Matt.

Usually these deals aren't too hard, because you haven't made a personal connection with the daughter of the mob. In this case, not only have I done that, but I have tasted that sweet little pussy and know that I want her for my very own, but she's made it clear that she's not mine.

I pull myself from my reverie. I have a job to do, and Sasha's made her choice. One of my team members is most probably under severe duress at the hands of a mafia he infiltrated to get information for us. It is my responsibility to get him out, no matter how difficult, and right now the only other option if Bernatelli doesn't agree to meet and take a monetary trade to free Matt and get Jenny Torzial off the mafia's hit list is to kidnap his daughter and use her as the trade.

I have no doubt that Brian will persuade her to get to the diner, and as soon as he does my team will step in. We'll take her, but there's no fucking way I'm turning my angel over to her father's goons. I just need a way to convince Bernatelli's crew to bring Matt out from hiding, into our sights so we can get him out. I continue to make plans, sending out instructions and then calling one last huddle to ensure the entire team is on the same page before we go for broke.

I am in a limo right around the block from the restaurant, still hoping that we'll catch a break before this shit has to go down, but after a long debrief from our intel team, I know there is no other way and hit the button on my cell that will connect me with Brian.

"Jay here, listen carefully," I say as I give him explicit instructions to ensure that everything we've planned out goes according to plan and that he and Sasha are safe, but hating like fuck that I can't be the one with her right now, the one that could comfort her, but instead the one who will be causing all hell to break loose in her world. Brian will be there to protect her. The very person she wants, the one she's apparently chosen to turn to in her time of need, even though he's committed and utterly devoted to someone else.

I get the signal from my team, and it's time. This is one of the hardest calls I've ever had to make, knowing that Sasha

will be scared, especially after what she experienced last night, but there is no other way, Matt's life depends on it, and so I send the text that will seal her fate.

I watch the cameras that we have in place. Brian does precisely what I've asked, and it's at this exact point when he's pissed with her about an inappropriate attitude toward the wait staff and his seeming reluctance at being tossed into this situation that I get it. He isn't interested in her sexually, but he doesn't want to hurt her either.

He's just doing as he's asked to make sure that Matt gets home. He is a good man and has proven that time and time again, and my attitude toward him lessens a little because I also know that Matt means the world to Jenny, and I've seen Brian in action when he is protecting Jenny. He and Chase will move mountains to protect the women they care about. I don't blame Brian, really. I've listened to the tapes, and he was a gentleman when letting her down and only getting more firm when she continued calling, but never once did he lead her on. I've seen first hand how fucking intense his feelings are for Jenny Torzial, but that doesn't calm the emotions that arise when I think about him and my angel together.

Brian guides Sasha toward the back of the restaurant as I've requested. They move toward the bathroom, having no idea the team has planted mics all over the restaurant listening to the conversation, observing. My team has a directive from me to kidnap them, but at the same time to do whatever it takes to keep them both protected.

The security teams do their job superbly, as usual, bursting through the door, taking Brian and Sasha by surprise and captive. They both resist, but I watch as my team flawlessly executes the predetermined plan. No one watching the tape later would ever think Brian had anything to do with this, and Chase is still up in the air on his way to Italy, which can be confirmed by flight records.

As much as I want to kick Brian in the fucking nuts for being the one that Sasha wants, I can't. He doesn't even know what's happening, and it's a very real kidnapping for him as

well. He tries his best to protect Sasha when my teams get a little rough, and for that, I have a great deal of respect.

I don't know why Sasha's words last night resonate with me. "No one wants me," but at this very moment they come back to me and damn if that doesn't make me want to protect her even more. First I need to get the attention of Bernatelli. One of Matt's uploads with confirmation that the kingpin of Chicago has an illegitimate daughter will do that. If we can get that, we have something to use instead of a trade for Sasha.

I call a huddle with my team, making sure they understand the plan, that they will move Sasha around the city, not keeping her in one place, but instead shuffling her from limo to limo to ensure her safety, and that they will keep Brian in the warehouse while we negotiate, knowing this may take hours. In the meantime, I hit the number for Cassie, the reporter that is now overseeing our communications division.

Brian was right about her skill. He first met her the night of Chase and Katarina's wedding. A little ginger-haired lady with an extremely polished approach to asking questions, one that Brian took a liking to for her ability to cut through the paparazzi shit and ask a question that would allow a person a platform of good discussion. When you're in the spotlight as much as Brian, I suppose you get an eye for these things. He had his team begin connecting with her and dogging her ass until she finally agreed to work for Carrington Steel full-time. Little did they know at the time that the mild-tempered little ginger was really as hot-headed as they come. I chuckle, recalling my team's first encounter with her.

She answers on the first ring. "Hi, it's Jay. I need a favor, and it has to be subtly placed in the event we need to make a more significant announcement later. At a high level, Brian Carrington was last seen at a small diner in Chicago where he was working on a plan for the next Children's fundraiser with one of his colleagues and hasn't been heard from since. I'll send you specifics and the address of the diner, you can add some detail, and do what you do," I say.

"Got it, send it over. I'll have the draft back to you within an hour," Cassie says.

Best damn decision Brian made as far as paparazzi control, and I know Chase is contemplating using her skills as well. She could seriously hire a few folks under her and coach them up, but right now she does everything herself.

I sign back into the monitors. Brian's on ice in case we need him to make a monetary exchange. Sasha's being held in case we need to make a physical transfer, but I also know who we're dealing with, and the fact that the head of the mafia has kept his daughter silent means there's a reason. One that we can use to our advantage or that could be incredibly dangerous for everyone involved.

I also know that once we cross that damn line, nothing we do can ever go back to the same. It takes a while to put safeguards in place to ensure this won't blow back on Brian and Chase if shit heads south. After multiple calls with the various teams, I'm finally comfortable that they are each sufficiently out of the downstream blow, but either way, our teams are in for a long fucking night. I continue to work on the plan for trading money with Bernatelli, but with the arrest of Nick, his Chicago enforcer, for the brutal murder of Ty Channing, Jenny Torzial's ex, he's not taking any chances. We are deciphering additional intel Matt has uploaded to our shared site, and that may be the only fucking way I get them both out of this alive, but first, we need to make sense of the shit he's shared. The intel we have bars none, and I have no doubt they'll put it together, but it's a matter of how quick they can do it because time is running out.

I'm watching Sasha on the cam from my phone, and she looks pissed and nervous. She's had an emotionally charged morning, an even rougher afternoon, and unfortunately for her, things are about to get a hell of a lot harder.

SASHA

I'M JUST ABOUT to tell them to let me out on the corner and that I will spare them the trouble of having the mafia up their ass if they do, but the burly guy with the ski mask turns as if sensing my attitude. "Sit tight, and you might just make it through the night."

The comfort I had that at least Brian was with me was short lived as they separated us and threw a long black hood over his head and marched him out of the door cursing. When it was my turn, I thought I would get the hood, too, but instead, I was pushed none too gently out the back of the restaurant and into the sleek long limo.

I scan the street up and down. It looks completely deserted. Too bad, because my father would bring hell down on anyone that kidnapped someone on their turf without cutting a deal with him first. All the ladies have apparently already partnered up with johns this evening because the typically busy street is not drawing the usual vehicles, the ones that usually slow to a crawl while checking out the offerings.

It makes my blood grow cold. Does my father know? Is he watching and has he choreographed the scene playing out before us to draw my kidnappers in? Is he out there and will he protect me?

If so, whoever we're dealing with, people that would dare take Brian, are incredibly dangerous. My hands are cuffed tightly behind my back, but they've forgotten one thing. I am a ballerina, one known for the most flexible poses in the world,

and they have left me alone in the backseat of a slow-moving vehicle.

I arch my back and slide my neck side to side, working out the stiffness and stretching. My hands move to the cell phone they've left in my back pocket, and when they glance over at me, I arch my body again. One guy's eyes drop to my breasts which have jutted out indecently, but he barely glances before unexpectedly turning away, beginning to talk with the driver in front, instead of watching me.

This moment of chivalry, when most men in their position would be taking advantage of the view, gives me just enough time to slide my hands underneath my butt, inch my way back to position them underneath my upper thighs. Another glance at the men, and then in one slow movement I am able to bring my legs up and slip my legs through my arms and then quietly unbuckle my belt.

Now I wait, and the streetlight ahead turns yellow. The car is going to have to stop, and I ready myself as it does, breathing in deeply, knowing what I need to do to make it away from the vehicle.

I twist my body to the left and prepare myself. "Hey you, asshole," I say, and the man sitting in front of me in the passenger seat turns. I use all the strength of my core to send the blunt force of my elbow right into the man's eye socket, pull the lever to disengage the locks which are standard issue for secure limos, and drop roll out onto the street before the driver can even stop the car.

I pick myself up and tear off. I've combed these parts of the city, my father's territory, for years, getting to know it and the man behind the legend better than I should. I head for the nearest alley, which I know connects to a multitude of side streets that I can get lost in, and that won't always allow for the width of a car, especially a Lincoln like the one I just jumped out of.

We're in the neighborhood my father controls. The men in question are after me and want to negotiate an exchange with him for me. What better time to see if he wants to

acknowledge me or get to know me when he finds out that I'm bringing him information about the very people that mean to do him harm, and what a perfect way to find out what happened to my sister and Matt and see if there's a possibility to save them. I hit the voice recognition button on my phone. "Call Daddy."

The phone rings and rings and just when I think no one will pick up, finally a raspy male voice answers. "Sasha, why are you calling me?"

The assailant covers my mouth with one hand and pulls the phone from my grip. My body recognizes his before I even hear his voice. "She's calling you because she's been kidnapped. Unfortunately, our first plan, the one that was to cut her up, finger by finger, bone by bone, and send her digits each day until you paid us a handsome ransom for your little girl became ineffective when we learned you don't even claim her. A beautiful little Russian angel that you produced. What slimeball doesn't acknowledge his own beautiful baby girl?"

"She's not my daughter," my father says, but Jay cuts him off.

"Unfortunately for you, your DNA says otherwise. In fact, it's a 99.9 percent match and you can't get much better than that. So, it looks like the game has changed. You'll receive instructions if you want to keep her your dirty little secret, and I'll be fair," Jay says into the phone, holding me tightly to prevent me from escaping.

"Tell me now. What do you want?" my father says.

"You currently have Jenny Torzial on your want list. She was an unknowing participant in the laundering of your money by Dominic Mancini. Ty Channing, Jenny's boyfriend at the time, was helping Dominic launder Torzial Consulting, but she knew nothing. As best friends of Katarina Prestian, daughter of Carlos Larussio, and granddaughter to the Italian Mafia, Jenny is more like family and completely protected. If you want a war, you'll have one," Jay says.

"You've made your point. Consider Ms. Torzial off the list, but you make sure Sasha wipes me from her record, her cell,

and her goddamn life,” and my jaw tenses and my heart constricts painfully as I hear those words from my father. I am unable to control the tears streaming from my eyes. I don’t know why I thought that tonight would be different and he may be willing to acknowledge me as his daughter.

“It will be done, but you consider her and Jenny both highly protected by the family going forward. There’s one more thing,” I hear Jay saying. “We want Prez back. We know it’s a big ask, and in addition to our silence we’re willing to compensate you well, but he walks away and doesn’t go on the list.”

“He knows too much.”

“And it’s been documented well, along with you and your daughter’s DNA. We need him back. Unless, of course, your family is ready to accept her into the fold,” Jay counters, not giving even an inch.

There is a heavy sigh on the other end. “I’ll allow it if it’s not too late, but I can’t promise that it isn’t.”

“You make that call right now, and there’s ten more million clear in it for you,” Jay says.

“Capiche,” I hear before the sound of the call ending. Chicago Mafia wants to throw that out at me and doesn’t even know how to say it! Bastard!

“This way,” Jay says, pulling my body snug against his own, guiding me toward the next turn in the pathway. It is a small dark area, no way could a vehicle of any size enter it, but that doesn’t mean there won’t be people waiting for a chance to jump anyone stupid enough to walk into their territory.

He takes my hands and unlocks the cuffs with a key. The confusion on my face is apparent. “Angel, I’ll explain later. Right now there’s a ton of heat heading toward us. Let’s get into that alleyway and my team will pick us up,” Jay says, repeating Nate’s direction into his headset.

“Roger that!” Jay says, taking my hand in his and guiding me forward.

We've made it halfway to the pick up when I slow. I don't know exactly what happened, but all of a sudden, my body feels numb. If Jay thinks my father will allow this, he doesn't know a thing about that man. It settles in my thoughts that he is whispered to be the most merciless person in Chicago and will kill you with a smile on his face.

"Sasha, move, faster than you ever have. We have three blocks to go, and my team will pick us up. Our lives and that of Matt depend on it," I hear Jay saying, and that brings me into the present. The hard sound of his voice, instructing me, propels me forward.

"Ready, set, go, race to the end!" I yell, entirely unprepared for the danger ahead.

JAY

I GIVE HER INSTRUCTIONS, and before I even have my bearings, she's off. Fuck, my angel can move!

Adorable, she thinks she can outrun me, but then the reality that she is ahead and could quickly be snatched from a crossing alleyway in the next three blocks propels me forward. I quickly catch up to her, but purposely don't overtake her. She's on a high, running for her life, and while she's the fittest woman I know, she has no height on me and isn't subjected to the grind that I put myself and my team through every morning before the billionaires we protect are even contemplating waking.

We are three-quarters of the way down a long alley when my headset beeps, alerting me to the danger ahead, but not before the black Lincoln slides into place across the entrance to our north. I listen to Nick's instruction and with a burst of speed catch Sasha around the waist, ducking and rolling with her body pulled tightly against mine, protecting her from the pavement as we skim across the roadside and land behind the garbage dumpster.

She's not hurt, I've made sure of that, but she's trembling in my arms, and I know the emotional tolls of the night are just too fucking much for her. "Sasha, look at me, Angel. You're safe, why are you crying?" I say, stroking the softness of her cheek.

She doesn't answer or lift her eyes in acknowledgment of my question. I swallow, knowing I need to have patience with

her, being kidnapped, being so scared that she made a decision to run, only to be captured by my ass and now being stalked by a mafia Lincoln. What the fuck isn't there to be scared about?

She says it so quietly that if my ear weren't inches from that beautiful little mouth of hers, I would have missed it. "My own father wants to kill me. There has to be a reason nobody loves me."

Dammit! Somehow she's recognized their vehicle, and she blames herself for this! I lift her chin to mine. "You listen to me. He's a piece of shit hood born into the right family, got lucky, made his way up the ranks, and he has nothing to do with you! Got that? He may be responsible for you being on this earth, but he's nothing of a father," I say not intending to be so gruff, but it pisses me off that he can bring her to tears and make her feel unwanted. I know now exactly why she feels so unloved and will do anything to feel loved and accepted by anyone.

She doesn't answer, just shivers in my arms as I hold her close, the tears of her sadness dampening my shirt. The moon and shadows of the alley allow me to see the glistening tears rolling down her cheeks. While I would love nothing more than to comfort her at this very moment, I need to be ready to move as soon as we get the word and revert my eyes back to the long-ass alley. There's a quarter mile of space between them and us and at least three side crossing lanes in between. I know that any minute I am going to get the word that we need to move toward the entrance of one of them, and we need to be ready.

I keep my eye on the car at the end of the alleyway, the parked one standing between me and my ability to get my angel out of this alive. Even with my eyes on the target, I have a deep-seated need to bring her comfort and my hand slides against the long curve of her neck, stroking her against the pulse I feel there.

"Easy Angel, we're going to play a little game," I say, still watching the alley.

“Okay.”

It’s one word, but it’s all the reaction I need. She’s so responsive, so submissive. She doesn’t have a clue what her needs are, and my dick aches with heaviness as I think about teaching her.

“We’re going to play truth or dare,” I say.

“Here?” she asks as I wipe her tears and chance a brief glance into her eyes. She’s interested, and I would love to look into the depths of emotion mirrored in blue eyes, but dammit I need to watch the road.

“Yes here, but we’ll pay up later. Tell me . . . What’s your favorite sexual position?” I ask, smirking, chancing a quick glance in her direction, surprised when her eyes light up. I thought she would at least pretend shock or something, but no, my angel knows what she wants, and she wants this, right now.

“I can say truth or dare?” she asks, and the seductive lilt to her voice and warm breath right against my ear turns me right the fuck on.

“Your pick, Angel,” I say, feeling her heartbeat pulse a little harder against my chest while my dick grows as hard as steel as I watch the car down the alley for any movement.

“Dare,” she says, surprising the fuck out of me. Maybe she thinks we’re going to start off with some small-scale little dares, but I don’t think so.

“Okay Angel, you could’ve taken the easy way out, but you didn’t. I dare you to lie on my bed face down when I take you home. I will give you instruction, and you will obey.”

Her sharp inhalation of breath and the slightest shift of her little pussy against my crotch makes it difficult to move or demand an answer, but before I need to, she responds.

“Okay, you get me home safe, and you can do whatever you choose,” Sasha whispers against my ear, but her body stiffens suddenly, and my chest tightens knowing that my angel is still scared. She doesn’t know we’ll get her out of this shit alive.

“Angel, we’re going to get you home, make no fucking mistake about that. When we do, you won’t ever have to worry about that sorry piece of crap for a father you have ever again. You will lay on my bed, offer yourself up to me, and I’ll fuck you until you’re screaming my name,” I say, still caressing her neck with my fingers.

She nods, her pulse throbbing, leaning into my neck, nuzzling me, and it’s at that exact time that I hear my team back on the headset. Thank fuck! “A garbage truck will be heading across the alleyway, one street up in front of the limo. As soon as it blocks the limo’s view, get to the alley in front of you and take a right. We’re waiting for you,” Nick says into my headset.

“Roger that,” I say, pulling Sasha into a crouching position with me, watching as a huge green and gold garbage truck begins to lumber across the alleyway right in front of us and stops to pick up a dumpster, emptying its contents into the back of the truck.

“Go, go, go,” Nick yells.

As soon as I hear the instruction, I move, pulling Sasha with me. I trust Nick, and my entire security team has taken every precaution necessary to ensure Sasha and I make it across that alley and we’ll get out of this goddamn mess alive.

I have a tight grip on her hand, propelling her forward, but with the first round of gunshot spray under the truck, I pick her up, keeping her protected as the resounding shots of my men fire back in response.

“You okay, Angel?” I ask once we’re around the corner, caressing the creamy skin of her ear and nuzzling into the softness of her long blonde hair as I press her tightly against me before setting her down.

“I’m good, Jay,” Sasha says softly.

“As soon as we get the all clear, we need to move one more block, Angel. We need to get to the alley on the right. We’ll have a cover, but I need you to move fast. Can you do that?” I ask.

“I can move as fast as you need me to,” she says breathlessly, and I feel bad that my entire weight is crushing her body against the wall to the point that I can barely make out her response, but she’s safe, and that’s all I fucking care about.

“Good girl. You do exactly what I ask when I tell you to. Ready when we get the green light, Angel?” I ask against the delicate shell of her ear.

“Tell me what to do and when,” Sasha says, sending a surge of pride through me that I don’t think I’ve ever felt before. My Angel’s so fucking up to any challenge. She’s dealt with so much shit in her life, but today when I give her instruction, she not only obeys but propels herself forward.

“Let’s move, Angel,” I say, wrapping my arms around her, guiding her behind the truck and into the alleyway. We make our way slowly down the dark path and have barely gotten to the alley when more sprays erupt. I knew they were coming and I have her tucked into my arms to keep her safeguarded.

“One, two, three,” I hear in my headset, letting me know they’ve taken out the danger. As soon as we reach the back door, it’s thrown open, and I push Sasha inside. Once we’re tucked safely into the back seat, the door closes and our driver peels away.

I didn’t realize I was holding my breath. Fuck that was close. My angel’s safe, but if she ever pulls another stunt like this again she’s not going to be able to sit down for a week. Right now I just need to calm my own fucking heartbeat which was beating a mile a minute knowing that she was in danger.

I pull Sasha’s slight body against mine, hugging her tightly to me, intending to buckle her seatbelt and comfort her, running my hand against her neck, the one I want to kiss and lick, creating a different sense of pleasure that she won’t be able to ignore.

“Sasha?” I say, but she doesn’t respond, and this time she’s not looking down with that little submissive thing she does. All of a sudden I feel her rigidity and the lack of her breath on my skin.

“Answer me, Angel,” I say, turning to her, sliding my hand to her nape, lifting her to me so I can look into her eyes, the ones that were once full of life and delight and when I shake her, trying desperately to make her answer me my entire body turns cold.

I run my hands over her, a quick assessment, relieved to find her breathing, and just merely overcome. “Angel, wake up,” I say, grasping her creamy nape in my hands, bringing her closer to me.

My heart almost stopped when I couldn’t feel her pulse, thinking that she may have taken a hit. The day’s events have been too much, and panic and anxiety have overtaken her to the point of shut down. One quick message to our doc and I do what he instructs, injecting her with a minimal amount of a routine sedative sometimes needed in our line of work, just enough to relax and put her out for a while. There is no reason for her to be part of what we do next so I have my team pick her up, kissing her forehead as I lift her and transport her into their car and close the door.

I watch on the cam as my security team takes Sasha to my condo, glad to see that Celia has arrived as planned. She greets my men who carry Sasha to my bedroom where I’ve instructed them to place her. They leave her there after conversing with Celia, who assures them that she’ll take care of her. Fuck if I don’t want to be right there taking care of her myself instead of dealing with this shit, but Matt’s life is on the line, and this is the way it has to be for now.

“How much longer?” I ask the driver of the limo, who has slowed at a light. Our team is ready, moving into place around the inner-city bar where we know Matt is being held. I don’t fucking trust Bernatelli. He said it himself. Matt knew too much about his operations, and based on the fact that he couldn’t assure me that it wasn’t too late, Matt’s in a world of hurt. I send a group message to the security leads to close in quick.

I get a text from one of our team members who’s slipped into the bar at the address Sasha provided. “Matt just got brought up in cuffs with a girl. He looks rough but alive. A

team of four with heavy fucking firepower on him. Not sure where they're taking him."

I fucking knew I couldn't trust Bernatelli. If he had given the order to release Matt, his posse wouldn't be transporting him somewhere else. I send a message to my team to surround the bar. Another communication comes in from our undercover at the tavern, and it makes me smile.

Matt just caved in some faces so some girl can get free, but they've overpowered him. They're marching him toward the back-alley door now.

I send a message to one of the teams poised at the alley in case we need backup. "Girl will be coming out of the bar. Follow her and protect her." The driver pulls up at the back entrance after receiving another text that they're dragging Matt toward the door. I fire off messages to my team, and when those fuckers walk out of their protected space, I give them a chance to lay down their weapons, and they don't, so my boys take them out. Four clear rifle shots, four prominent Chicago Mafia boys and four exact hits that render them dead as fuck. One is left standing, the one that's holding Matt with a gun aimed at his head.

"Bernatelli wants to call off the hit," I say, knowing that the person with his gun to Matt's head is one of the Bernatelli Family. A made man and if I had to guess will be taking over for Nikko until he gets out of prison.

"I didn't get that fucking message," the guy says.

"We can do this one of two ways. You walk away, take a message back to your boss, and let him know what happened, or I can have your dead body packed up along with the other fuckers and send him that message myself," I say.

"Your boy will go down, and Bernatelli will kill you nice and slow," he snarls.

"My sniper's just waiting for your finger to move a hair and it's all over for you. You really wanna wager on his aim?" I say, glancing at the four dead men lying on the ground.

"I didn't get no message," he says.

“I believe you. Drop the gun and walk away. I’m done talking,” I say, losing my fucking patience with this shit.

“Fuck!” he yells, dropping his gun to the ground. I might have told him that I would let him walk away, but Matt turns and sends his elbow into the asshole’s face, and his steel-toed boot into his balls. The fucker drops to the ground gasping, and my men go and grab Matt, walk him to the limo, and place him into the back seat.

Thank fuck! We’ve got him. I send a message to Brian, who has already boarded the Gulfstream that is on the way to LA.

Hold the plane when you get there. We have Matt. ETA 10 mins.

I take a good look at Matt, and my blood simmers. The fuckers that did this to him are lucky they’re dead. It’s clear that Bernatelli didn’t call off the hit, but instead informed his team to move Matt.

We’ll deal with that later. I’m just glad that we’ve gotten both him and Sasha out alive, but Matt’s breathing isn’t fucking right. I send a message to our doc. He doesn’t know it yet, but he’s going with us to LA. We just got word that the Chicago Mafia is heading toward Brian’s place in LA and Jenny is in trouble.

My team messages me letting me know that Bernatelli’s crew is after us. So much for his goddam word. He thinks he’s going to take our crew out at the airport, but I’ve already alerted the authorities through Cassie. She’s done an excellent job alerting paparazzi, and as a result, Bernatelli’s crew will think we’re on the Boeing 757 parked on the tarmac. In addition, the inner-city SWAT team has been called in thinking they’re after terrorists instead of the mafia they’ll find instead.

We’ll be on the Gulfstream, and as soon as our entire crew makes it through the doors, we’ll lift off.

Everything happens in fast motion. The limo pulls up as close to the Gulf as the driver can, and Nick and I jump out at the same time, marching Matt up the ramp. Fuck, he’s having

a hard time even moving one foot in front of the other, but Nick and I get him up the ramp and into the plane.

Brian Carrington, richest bastard in almost the entire world, greets us and points the way toward his bedroom where we take Matt. My jealous heart hates the fact that he's the one Sasha really wants, but I need to suck up my pride. I've come to know he's a great guy and we owe him a debt of gratitude for getting Matt and Sasha out of this alive, but that doesn't help my jealousy one fucking bit.

Brian's anxious to be up in the air, and I understand his anxiety because if Sasha were in the heat that Jenny is in right now, I would lose my shit. In fact, retaliation against her is precisely what I'm afraid of and why my men are with her and will do what it takes to keep her safe until I return.

Brian offers to keep Matt comfortable so I can take care of what I need to do. The team on the ground calls to give me an update. I listen as we discuss the plan and how it's about to unfold. "You'll hear gunshots in about five minutes, as soon as you do, veer sharp left through the gates and get him and those men onto this Gulfstream. The SWAT team should take care of the rest; they've been alerted and think they're after terrorists on the Boeing." I say.

Matt's safe, and while he's fucked up, the doc's on the way and he'll live. I wait for his arrival and am in constant contact with the crew on the ground taking care of Jenny Torzial. Shit's not looking good in that respect, but I can't bring myself to tell Brian what's happening until I know without a doubt that Jenny will get through it alive. She's at his LA home, and my men have taken her to the safe room, but fuck. Scottie, Brian's ex-security head, the one that went rogue, is still in the picture, and if that's any indication, then we need to navigate things a hell of a lot differently because this fucker created the goddamn safe room that we just sent Jenny into.

I send message after message to my teams while the doc boards and we take off. I've just finished calling backup to Carrington's place to take Scottie out when I receive a message from intel. I read it over and over. Scottie's working with Interpol. Well fuck me, and after reading the report he

sent over an email on my phone, I'm sure it's true. I alert my men not to take him out, but to observe him.

The doc arrives, and Brian's telling him that he'll be taking care of Matt in the air, and I know his patience is growing thin. The man is a real hothead when it comes to Jenny Torzial, and after all these years I finally understand how that feels. Fuck, and now, I need to have a sit-down discussion with this guy in the confined space of his Gulfstream and tell him that all hell's going to be breaking loose at his estate at about the same time we touch down in LA and that the Chicago Mafia is trying to silence the woman he loves.

He fucking knows something's up. His eyes are narrowed, and his breathing is heavy as he watches me. When I take a seat next to him and my men, he only has one word for us. "Spill," he says as the Gulfstream lifts off into the night.

I'm not going to sugarcoat this situation. That's not what Chase or Brian pay me to do, but I feel good that I can assure Brian that every precaution necessary is being taken and back-up plans are in place just in case shit goes south. I give him the news straight, and then we give him some space to process. I have good men on the ground, and they are providing me with play-by-play updates, and I trust them, but it's going to be a long fucking plane ride if the anxiety on Brian's face is any indication.

He finally settles in and starts working on something that holds his attention, and I go in and check on Matt and the doc. The doc gave him something for the pain, and he's out cold. His face looks like someone used it as a punching bag, but he'll be as good as new in a few weeks.

I click on the app that allows me to check on Sasha through the webcam I've had the team place in my room. She's still sleeping, her long blonde hair cascading around her shoulders, and she looks just like an angel.

We're about twenty minutes from landing when all hell breaks loose. I am in constant connection with my team, and I'm pretty sure any minute Brian is going to lose his shit. All the money in the fucking world and we can't make this

goddamn Gulfstream move any quicker. I've already instructed the pilot to get us there as fast as he can, fuck fuel conservation, and I know he's doing his best. I've even told him to change course and drop us at the private strip that will put us five minutes away from Carrington's Bel Air estate.

The men keep me apprised as things heat up. The mafia soldiers sent to hurt Jenny clearly haven't gotten the message that she's been removed from the list, and that pisses me off. Bernatelli and I will be having a conversation, but I'll wait and send the message with dead bodies if he doesn't call this shit off. The security team on the ground and their execution of the detailed plans we laid out is perfect.

AS SOON AS we land and I know Jenny is safely with Brian and Matt is being taken care of, I give the order to have that fucking plane refueled and flight plans approved to take me back to Chicago. I watch Sasha sleeping from the screen of my phone as the pilot takes off, and I can only hope that she doesn't wake up before I arrive.

SASHA

I PLAY the conversation over in my mind, and it just keeps repeating. “You make sure Sasha wipes me from her record, from her cell phone, and from her life.” Over and over again my father’s words repeat in my head. Why doesn’t anyone love me? Is he trying to kill me? His own daughter? I don’t know how to answer the questions rattling around in my mind, and I can’t seem to get past the pain of it all, even with Jay holding me close. I feel a slight prick, but he caresses my nape until suddenly all the noise in my head finally quiets, allowing me to drift into a deep state of relaxation and sleep.

I am dreaming, deep in slumber, the white puffy clouds against the blue sky engulfing me, embracing me, keeping me protected until I am awakened by the sharp sound of shots that ring out around me. They fall short, missing their target time and time again, until they don’t. The cloud encompassing me is finally hit, and the air slowly starts to dissipate, and it’s at that exact time all hope that I can keep rising above the challenges life keeps putting in my way is completely shattered, and I begin free falling towards the ground.

The steady rush of air as I descend through the sky takes my breath away, but the constant push against my shoulder and movement of my body finally pull me from a drug-induced sleep. I open my eyes, settling on the deep hazel eyes that are watching me intently. “Wake up, Angel,” Jay says, caressing my cheek.

“I was dreaming, something really bizarre, and my mouth feels like cotton,” I say, looking longingly at the glass of water

sitting on the nightstand next to the king-size bed. The clock on the nightstand registers two a.m. “Where are we?” I ask, confused.

Jay reaches for the glass and positions the straw between my lips.

“Small, easy sips, I don’t want you to get sick, Angel. I’ll explain everything later,” he says.

I nod my affirmation and take a small, tentative sip as he holds the lime-green straw to my lips. I intend to do as he says, but find myself inhaling more and more of the clear fresh water, gulp after gulp until he pulls it away from me and levels me with those hazel eyes of his.

Jay lifts an eyebrow. “What wasn’t clear, Angel?”

I slow, and although I would love nothing better than to devour the entire glass of water in one swallow, he’s right, and I have no desire to be sick. “I feel like I’ve been sleeping for hours,” I say.

He smiles. “Come on, let’s get you into the shower,” Jay says, helping me up.

“I need to brush my teeth,” I say as we reach the bathroom. Jay pulls open a cabinet and rummages around before finding a toothbrush. “Medium bristles, go easy. I picked up the wrong kind last time,” he says.

I smile as he opens the packaging and hands me a silvery gray toothbrush to use. When I’m done, my tongue runs over the smoothness of my teeth, and I grin. How can something so basic feel so good?

“You finished, Angel?” Jay says, whispering right above my ear while moving my hair to the side and exposing my nape to his gaze and touch. His fingers glide along my neck, and I watch in the mirror as his tongue slides along its length and settles in the curve between my neck and shoulder. I hear myself moan with pleasure as he sucks the sensitive skin.

“That’s right, Angel, let me hear what you like,” Jay says, slipping his hands under the edge of my shirt and lifting,

denying me the warmth of his mouth on my neck for just a brief moment while sliding it over my head.

His hands cup my breasts, letting his fingertips caress the nipples that are already extended with longing while he returns to feasting on my shoulder, neck, and ear. I moan as his tongue touches the inside of the sensitive shell and his arm around my waist pulls me so close that I can feel his hard cock pressing against my bottom. He slips his fingers under my panties, sliding them over my hips, and lets them drop to the floor.

He turns me to face him, and the darkness of the desire in his hazel eyes matches my own need before he takes me by the nape and pulls me to his body. His lips descend, and my lips soften, opening for him as his tongue reaches mine with a hunger that leaves me breathless and reaching up to wrap my hands around his neck.

He groans and guides me toward the shower, never taking his lips from mine until we reach the walk-in stone shower. He releases me briefly, letting go of my nape, and his hand leaves the small of my back. I miss the feel but wait until he has turned on the water, and only then does he take my hand and place it under the rain of the water.

“How’s the temperature?” Jay asks.

“Good. It’s just right.”

“Get under the spray and wait for me, Angel,” he says, bending down to unlace his boots. He toes them off but doesn’t take his eyes from me as he lifts the white t-shirt that’s glued to his rigid muscles. My core clenches as he exposes his rock hard abs and chest. The physical attraction to this man sends an electric charge through my body and creates hot wetness between my legs.

I follow the lines of his six-pack and realize I’m holding my breath as he undoes the button of his jeans, slides the zipper down, and makes short work of the rest of his clothes before stalking toward me, all male, long, thick, and fully erect and so hot that I can barely breathe.

He pulls me toward him, capturing my lips again, claiming them so hard that I'm sure to have bruises. He guides me under the warmth of the water as he releases me from his kiss, allowing the water to soak my hair.

"I'm going to wash you from head to toe, Angel," Jay says, pulling me close. I can feel the strength of his cock pressing against me and the bristly hairs of his body along the tops of my shoulders as he shampoos my hair. His fingers are strong but somehow gentle as they massage my scalp and neck. I lean into his touch and moan with pleasure as his fingers press against the knotted muscles of my neck before rinsing my hair, applying a conditioner and washing it out under the cascading warmth of the water.

He turns me around to face him and kisses my upturned lips before moving down to my neck, licking and sucking as he goes. When he reaches my nipples, they are already aching to feel his touch and Jay envelopes first one and then the other with the velvety warmth of his tongue. As he moves lower, trailing kisses along my belly, I feel my core tightening with longing and reach for him, but he doesn't allow it, grasping my wrists with his hand. "Reach for the showerhead and keep your hands there," Jay instructs, and I do exactly what he asks.

"Good girl," he says, sliding his silky tongue into my navel, caressing me until I am squirming with desire.

He looks up at me with those deep hazel eyes, watching me intently as his mouth descends and the warmth of his tongue glides over my bare mound, circling, teasing me. I try to push forward, but he doesn't allow that either, holding my hips firm as he runs the length of that wicked tongue from my entrance up to my clit and when I feel his touch there, on the most sensitive part of my body, I hear myself moaning with uncontrolled pleasure.

"That's right, Angel, I want you to tell me what you like," he says, running his tongue over that sensitive spot and through my folds. My body is building, climbing, and won't stop. The strength of his hands around my hips holds me still, allowing no escape. His tongue continues to tease me, bringing me right there before moving off the mark and denying me,

and then right to the edge with the promise of bringing me over again and again.

When I think I can't take it anymore, he captures my clit with his mouth and sucks hard, pinching my nipples between his thumb and forefinger at the same time. The intensity of the feelings, pleasure colliding with pain, push me over the edge and I repeat his name, over and over as he rips the most intense orgasm I've ever had from my body. I sag against the stone wall attempting to pull my legs together as the ripples subside but he shakes his head, looking up at me with those darkened hazel eyes.

“Angel, we're not done, yet. I want to taste every bit of sweetness from your body. It's mine,” Jay says, holding my thighs apart, and he dips his tongue into my overly sensitive entrance.

The feeling is so good, and I want to reciprocate. My hands slide down the wall, intending to wrap around Jay's muscled neck, but he stops their journey.

His eyes capture mine dancing with wickedness as he removes his tongue, leaving me bereft of his touch. “You were supposed to keep your hands on the showerhead. Bad girls get their little pussies spanked,” Jay says, bringing his flat and heavy hand down hard across my wet and bare mound.

I gasp as the sensation goes right to my clit, making it throb with desire. I feel myself lean into Jay's hand as it reigns down on me two more times in quick succession. My sex tightens, wet with need and heated passion and my hips push out for more of their own accord.

He smiles widely. “I think you like that too much for it to be used as a punishment going forward. Hands back up on the shower,” Jay says, and uses his tongue to dip into my center and then slowly strokes all the way up to my clit, holding my eyes with his the entire time. He continues to caress, the warmth of his tongue teasing, building the waves of desire again until he rips another orgasm so powerful from me that it causes me to scream his name over and over as the uncontrollable waves hit me time and time again.

“There Angel. I think you’re wet enough to take me now. Hold onto the showerhead,” Jay says, wrapping his cock before raising and lifting me into his arms. I instinctively fold my legs around his waist.

I grasp the bar above me as he licks my neck and nips my nipples quickly before lowering me onto his rigid engorged cock.

He’s holding my hips firmly, positioning me onto him, bringing me down excruciatingly slow. “That’s so good,” I moan as he pulls me up and then lowers me another inch deeper.

“Oh my God,” I pant.

“You’re going to take it all, Angel,” Jay says, lifting me again. This time he brings me all the way down, and I feel him grind against my cervix.

This is so good, so excruciatingly full. I’ve never felt anything so good. “Yes, I love this,” I moan breathlessly.

“That’s right, Angel. You’re going to feel my cock deep inside you of, rocking against you as I ride you up and down on my cock,” Jay says, and that’s precisely what he does. He controls every movement, the exact depth and speed, lifting me and pulling me down on top of his cock until the ripples start again and the intensity begins to rebuild.

When I start to come, he thrusts right through the waves, pulling me down time and time again onto his rigidness until I am screaming his name, and he shudders through his own release still deep inside of me.

Jay holds me tightly, sucking and nuzzling my neck as our bodies recover. “Angel, that was everything I thought it would be when we came together,” he says.

“It was amazing,” I say because in all my life I have never felt this type of chemistry before. Something so real and electric that it keeps my pulse running a little bit higher whenever we are together.

JAY

I COME, rooting myself deeper as wave after wave of desire engulf us. Sasha's little pussy is still quivering, milking my dick, squeezing it with her spasms and I reach up to pull her hands down from the shower. Her heels are dug into my back, right above my ass, and that's exactly where I want them to be as our heart rates slowly begin to normalize. I kiss her lips, capturing her tongue with my own as her arms settle around my neck and I carry her to the counter and set her down.

Fuck my angel is hot. I pull out slowly, reluctant to lose the heat of her sweet little pussy around my dick, and track her reaction. She doesn't want to lose the connection either, and the look she gives me, her blue eyes that say she's sad to have my dick slide out of her heat, makes my cock hard all over again.

I kiss her lips, and her arms tighten around me. "Angel, don't look so sad. I'm going to fuck you over and over today, but right now we're going to dry your hair so you don't catch a cold," I say, pulling out the hair dryer from the drawer and plugging it in.

"Okay," she says, barely above a whisper, her eyes all glazed over and lusty looking.

"First we need to brush your hair," I say, grabbing my brush and gently starting to comb through her incredibly long, thick blonde tresses. It takes a few minutes, having tangled from our lovemaking.

“Stay here while I get some conditioner. I don’t want to damage your hair,” I say, placing a small amount into my palm before rubbing it into Sasha’s hair and massaging the back of her neck at the same time. She moans, and my dick tightens with a primal need. I’ve never felt this before, a compelling need to take care of every want and need this woman has, and her soft pants let me know that she’s as turned on by this as I am.

When her hair is brushed out, I begin blow-drying it and watch her eyes light with desire. I like that she’s naked for me, sitting on my vanity and letting me do what I want to her. I finish drying her hair, kiss her lips, and scoop her into my arms. I love the way her arms immediately snake around my neck and her legs clasp my waist. She’s hanging on, willing to let me carry her wherever I want to take her.

She should know exactly where that is already because she chose this and I told her I planned on fucking her all day long and that’s precisely what I intend to do. I gave her a choice, and she could have easily selected a truth, and we would have slowly worked up to a dare, but my angel doesn’t go halfway. She chose the dare, and now it’s up to me to give her what she desires.

I place her on the bed. “Do you remember what the dare was, Sasha?” I ask.

She nods, and her blue eyes grow wide.

“I need you to tell me what I told you I was going to do to you,” I say.

She licks her heart-shaped little lips, and my dick hardens into a steel rod waiting for her reply. She’s still contemplating, and those crystal-like blue eyes are watching me, lustful and needy.

“Tell me Angel or I’ll spank your little pussy,” I say, and I take the skin between her shoulder and neck into my mouth, sucking hard.

She moans, and I know if I slip my finger into her cunt it will be wet for me, but I want her to ask for this. “Tell me,

Sasha. What do you want?" I ask again.

I feel her hips rise, just a slight gesture, but it tells me everything that I need to know. She wants this as much as I do, she's just having a hard time getting outside of her head. "Angel, word for word," I say, kissing her lips, capturing her bottom lip with my own and teasing her tongue every time that I have a chance.

She starts talking in that little Russian accent, and my dick hardens into the hardest rod it's ever been. "You will lay on my bed, offer yourself up to me and I will fuck you until you are screaming my name," she says.

"Perfect, Angel. I know that you agreed to that in a moment of heat. You still want that?" I ask, kissing the inside of her ear. I know she's as fucking turned on as I am, but I want to make sure this is something she really wants, not just a promise that I won't fucking hold her to because although we just got done fucking this is going to be entirely different. She raises her head and pulls my neck down and kisses me.

"I don't go back on my word, I want this," she says. My balls tighten, and cock throbs and all I know is that I want in her heat again. I flip her over and push gently on her shoulder until her face is lying on the softness of the bedspread before I lift her hips to me and spread her legs.

"I want to see your ass high in the air with you offering yourself up to me," I say, tracing the curves of her hips and ass, pausing at her little rosebud, rubbing it slightly as I feel her tense. I smile. She's not sure what I want from her right now, but she hasn't moved.

"Good girl, Angel," I say, letting my fingers continue their journey until I feel the wetness of her pussy. I know it's up to me to make her scream my name over and over and I slide into her velvety warmth with one thrust, deep inside of her, and do just that.

SHE'S CURLED up on my chest, and my arms are wrapped tightly around her. I've been watching her rest in my arms for the last half hour. When she wakes, I know I need to tell her that I was the one responsible for her kidnapping. If I were a better man, I would've told her before I took her, but fuck if I could do that. She shifts, her little body moving against mine in sleep and keeping my greedy dick on high alert.

Her sky blue eyes open, looking up at me, and I caress her cheek, pushing back her hair to keep it from falling into her eyes.

"Morning, Angel," I say, kissing her lips gently.

She stretches and I track her movements while my dick hardens.

"I've been watching you sleep, Angel. We need to talk," I say, scooping her into my arms and carrying her into the bathroom before setting her down onto her feet.

"Get ready for the day and then meet me in the dining room," I say, kissing her lips for what may be the very last time.

She nods, but she's smart, and her eyes are tracking, watching mine, questioning. "Okay," she says.

I walk into the kitchen, knowing that when I tell her exactly what went down, she may walk right the fuck out of my life. I don't have long to wait before she strides into the dining room and takes the seat I gesture toward. I've negotiated deals with drug lords and mafia bosses all over the globe, and not one of those conversations was as hard as the one I'm about to have.

"Sasha, there are a few things that I need to tell you about what happened the last few days. I just want you to listen. Save your questions until I'm done, okay?"

"I'm listening," she says, leveling me with those blue eyes of hers.

I lay it out, every sordid detail, letting her know that I was the reason that Brian contacted her, that I was responsible for the fact that she was kidnapped, and that the men who took her

and scared her half to death were under my direct orders. Even that I gave her a relaxer that sent her into a deep sleep.

“You had Brian get me into a bad place and then had men kidnap me,” Sasha says, her eyes lit up with fury I both expected and deserve.

“Yes and no, Angel. I did what I needed to do to ensure everyone came out of this alive, you especially. I wasn’t about to give you over, I just needed your father to think we would,” I say.

“He wouldn’t ever, you know that. It’s like the deep dark secret that daddy dearest is ashamed of,” Sasha says, her expressive eyes connecting with mine, and I know why she doesn’t believe that anyone cares about her, loves her, or wants her.

“Angel, he may be a dumb fuck for not wanting you, but I do,” I say.

“You just think you do, but not really,” Sasha says, trying to hide her tears from me.

“I take care of what’s mine. You don’t need to worry anymore. Got that, Angel?” I say.

She doesn’t say anything for a very long time, and her eyes don’t leave my own. “Jay, I know that you believe that and I wish it were that easy. Thank you for everything that you and your team did. I don’t appreciate being kidnapped, but I understand why you did what you did. The thing that you don’t know is that my sister was in the bar that they were holding your Matt in. She overheard the men talking and saw him taken downstairs. I was the one that called Brian to let him know where Matt may be, but I haven’t heard from Marenah,” she says.

“Uh-huh, I knew that about two minutes after you got off the phone. What I didn’t know was that the girl Matt saved at the bar was your sister or why you called Brian instead of me,” I say.

“What do you know about my sister? How did he save her? He was the one that was dragged downstairs,” Sasha says,

looking up at me hopefully and avoiding my question about Brian altogether.

“Angel, it’s complicated, but she’s completely safe. My team is holding her until Matt tells us what he wants us to do with her. I promise you, they’re taking good care of her.”

“Oh, my God. I can’t believe it! Thank you, thank you!” Sasha says, plastering my face with little kisses.

I laugh at the sparkle in her bright blue eyes, something I haven’t seen much, but know I’d like to see every day.

She suddenly shakes her head and becomes solemn. “I don’t want her in the middle of a mob war,” Sasha says.

“She won’t be. You have my word,” I say.

“She’s all I have. I can’t lose her, but somehow they found her. Liza, her best friend, told me they were accusing her of having some type of product, presumably drugs, but you have to know my sister. None of it makes sense, Jay. They were in one of my father’s bars. What if they know she’s related to me and my father? Maybe that’s why they took her and just wanted it to look like it was about something else,” Sasha says.

“Whoa, slow down, Sasha. There’s clearly way more going on here than I know. You wanna tell me exactly what’s going on?” I ask, lifting the cup of coffee to my lips and waiting for her answer.

“I can’t, Jay. I’ve probably said too much already.”

“I’ll accept that for a short time but I’m going to be looking into it, Sasha. You can count on that. My life and those of my men depend on me having solid information at all times and I can’t protect you from something I’m not aware of. Oh, and before I forget, you know the guy that took you and Brian’s picture while you were in the restaurant? He wasn’t the kind-hearted counselor he was pretending to be. You should be more careful about who you let take your picture, especially with Brian.”

“Okay, so are you going to tell me how you knew what he said to us? Jay, tell me that Brian told you,” Sasha says,

narrowing her eyes at me. I sigh, because I knew this was coming.

“We had you under surveillance, to ensure your safety. We needed ears on all conversations.”

“And it’s your fault I needed security,” Sasha snaps, glaring at me.

She’s fucking furious with me, and all I can think about is taming her wild side with the end of my dick. “I’ll accept that, but don’t forget the fact that if you hadn’t been willing to go with Brian the minute he called, you wouldn’t have ever been in that position,” I say, and the minute her eyes lower and mouth trembles I feel a deep sense of remorse. I reach for her hand across the table, but she snatches it away from me. Just the act of her pulling herself away from me makes my chest tighten. This woman affects me on a primal level that I have never once experienced.

“You know nothing, absolutely nothing,” Sasha cries, emphasizing it with a slash of her hand across the air. Her bright blue eyes are lit with fury; it’s all directed at me and hell if I’ve ever seen anything or anyone so fucking hot in my life.

“Tell me then, if it wasn’t like that, explain it to me,” I say calmly, narrowing my eyes at her little body still poised with anger.

“I was going to apologize. Brian broke it off with me a while ago and let’s just say I didn’t take it so well,” Sasha says. I know she’s telling the truth because when Brian became my responsibility and Chase had me take over for Brian’s rogue head of security my first act of business was to review every video feed in the last few weeks to his private lines and computer.

“So what changed your mind, what did you owe him an apology for?” I ask.

She doesn’t stop to think about an answer, just lets it spill like it’s been waiting to come out forever. “For making more of our relationship than there ever was. The reality is that we got together three times. He wasn’t interested in anything

more, but I was hoping he would change his mind,” Sasha says, and I swallow hard because I would like to beat the shit out of one of the wealthiest billionaires in the world, one that I am paid to protect.

“Because the sex was that great or because you wanted something more long-term?” I ask, knowing her answer, either way, is bound to piss me off.

She raises her baby blues up at me, and I do my best not to let on that I give a fuck, but dammit she should answer the goddamn question and put me out of my misery.

She doesn't though, she just shakes her head, and that gorgeous blonde hair falls like a frame around her as her shoulders drop forward and she places her face in her hands. I give her a moment, but that's all I can fucking stand. I lift her face from her hands and hate the tears that are falling from her eyes.

“Answer the question, Angel,” I say, holding my breath for her response.

SASHA

HE LIFTS my head from my hands, and his dark hazel eyes with the glint of gold seem to bore right through me, waiting for a response. I shake my head and wipe my tears. I don't know why the hell I am so emotional, but everything that's happened is taking its toll and hearing my father tell Jay that all he cares about is that I don't ever contact him again just keeps ringing in my ears. "It wasn't the sex or the long-term thing."

His eyes don't leave mine, and I know he's still waiting for an explanation. He's patient, and I wipe more of my tears, wishing I could make them stop, but now that they have started it seems like the floodgates have just opened. "I guess I'm okay to have around for a little bit and then the novelty of having a ballerina in their bed wears off, and then they move on," I say.

His jaw clenches tightly, and he looks pissed. I cringe. Shit, now he probably thinks I'm trying to guilt him into keeping me around. "Jay, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it to come out like that. I'm not looking for you to make me a long-term commitment."

His eyes darken and narrow at me, and he leans forward over the table and takes my head in his hands, wiping the remaining tears from my face with his thumbs. "You've been handed a shit deal, and you've made a great life for yourself regardless, but Angel, your self-esteem sucks. Your father pushing you away did a number on you, but you're the only one that can rise above this. You need to start believing that

you are worthy of anything you want and if someone else isn't the right match, that's not because you're not good enough, it's just that maybe the chemistry isn't there. That's why people go out, date, get to know each other, see if their chemistry is right, you know," Jay says.

I nod, he's right, and I appreciate his kindness, and in his own way he is letting me down easy, and I try my hardest to keep my emotions in check.

"So true. We go out, and we test our chemistry, and then we move on. I haven't done that very well in the past, but you're right. I can't let what my father's done and how he's treated me continue to impact my life," I say.

"Exactly. I don't know your father's story yet, but you can damn well count on me finding out. Do you know why he wants to keep you a secret, other than the little wife at home knowing that he's had an affair?" Jay asks.

Clearly Jay is not going to stop asking questions. I know exactly why my father doesn't want to expose his dirty little secret, but it's not safe for anyone to know, if I am to stay alive and keep my family safe. He was okay with me reaching out a little bit before, but he made it very clear with Jay and me on the phone. He wants all ties severed, and I know if I don't adhere to his wishes going forward, the amount of heat that rains down on my family will be deadly.

I shake my head side to side because for some unknown reason I can't seem to find it in my heart to lie right to the face of the man that sits across from me.

His eyes are glued to my own, and he tracks my head moving side to side, but his jaw clenches as I do. "Angel, you lie to me, and we're going to have a problem," Jay says.

"I didn't lie," I say.

"You didn't tell me something that wasn't true, but with the shake of that little head of yours, you thought you could make me believe that you don't know without lying, but without telling me the truth either."

I gulp, because I know he's right, but I can't tell him the truth without bringing down a reign of madness. "I wish I could tell you, but it's not something I can talk about, Jay."

He narrows those deep hazel eyes at me again. "I understand you thought you had a reason, but there's a price for telling me a lie, Angel. Don't do it again or you'll find yourself bare-assed, and flipped over my lap," he says.

I look up and into his eyes and my sex clenches with desire. I can tell by that comment and the look on his face that he knows that I know exactly why my father doesn't associate with me. Jay's eyes see it all, but if I am going to stay alive and keep him and his team alive, I cannot tell him the truth.

"While I'd love to hang out and talk about the possibilities, I need to get back to my apartment and get some practice in. We may be on break right now, but there's a production next week and I need to be in shape and ready. Hopefully, the wounds closest to my neck will be lighter by that time. The rest should be covered by my costume," I say, standing and hoping to make an exit.

A clean break. I promise myself this time it's going to be different than the rest. I am not going to blame myself for the split, thinking that I'm not good enough for anyone to love. I'm going to focus on Jay's words, even though I'm pretty sure they were spoken in the act of kindness and not any real sentiment. It's something to focus on, and I try to do just that as I get up from the table.

He stands, and I have a hard time dragging my eyes from his body as he stalks around the table and pulls me into his arms, walking me toward the wall behind us. His arms feel like bands of steel as he surrounds me, and while I should feel intimidated, scared, and overpowered, all I feel is a rush of desire as his body encloses me. "What didn't you understand about what I've been saying for the last half hour, Angel," Jay says, caging me closer against the wall, his breath just inches from my own.

"You want to know my father's story," I say, but he raises his eyebrows and narrows his eyes at me. "And we've had a

great time exploring to see if we have that, what did you call it, yeah, chemistry, and now we'll go on our own way and keep dating to find that right person," I say.

"If that's what you took away from the conversation, your head has been in the wrong place. First, I do want to know about your father and while it's clear you're not ready to tell me yet, you will and soon. It's the only way I'm going to be able to ensure your protection long term. Secondly, I will protect you, because when I was talking about people dating and moving on after not finding a chemistry match, I wasn't talking about us. I want you to look me in the eye and tell me you're not aching with the need for my dick. Tell me that, Angel," Jay says huskily against my ear.

My pussy throbs and I feel myself moisten as he talks and the warmth of his breath caresses the sensitive folds of my skin. I shake my head because my body aches for him whenever he's near. I've never felt the electricity that seems to exist between us. "I can't," I say, shaking my head.

"That's not a good enough answer. Why can't you?" Jay says, pressing the hardness of his cock against my belly.

"Because I'm wet for you," I say, cringing inside because I know after we do this, he's going to walk away, just like everyone else, but something tells me that if I don't take this opportunity that I will regret it forever.

"Goddamn right you are. I want to feel your wet pussy on my fingers," Jay says, before capturing my lips, finding my tongue, exploring each other as his hand makes its way into my panties.

He finds me wet and uses my moistness to coat his fingers as he caresses slowly from my entrance to clit. Gliding over it slow and leisurely as he kisses me, building my desire against the wall of his home, but then with more pressure and friction until I find myself grinding against the palm of his hand and feel his fingers sliding deep inside of me, rubbing that spot that makes me pant with need.

"That's right, Angel, this time take your pleasure, come all over me so I can suck your sweetness from my fingers," Jay

says, and that pushes me over the edge and I cry out as wave after wave overtakes me and he pushes his fingers through my orgasm, prolonging it, leaving me clinging and completely sated.

He pulls his fingers out of me and licks each of his two digits. "You're not finished, Angel," Jay says, sucking all of my come from each of his fingers, right in front of my eyes.

I am helpless, unable to quiet the moan of pleasure that escapes my lips because I am still coming down from a fantastic high as he turns me, walks me backward toward the bedroom, and pushes me onto the bed.

"On your knees for me, Angel," he says. I do as he asks, needy, wanting everything that he has to give, as he wraps himself and tilts me so my ass is upturned for him, and when he sinks into me, I find it hard to breathe. Jay pulls out and then slides into me again slowly at first, inch by inch, pulling my hips back onto his cock, lifting me onto his hardness at the same time. He is hitting something that I've never felt before, and I slide my ass back against the deliriously hot sensation.

"You like that, Angel," Jay says, grasping my hips and pulling me back.

"Oh, right there," I cry, and he doesn't slow. Instead, picks up the pace, grasping my hips, pulling me against his rigid cock, letting it sink in all the way to the hilt, hitting that spot deep inside of me, over and over until I am screaming his name time and time again and my come is all over his cock.

He is still thrusting, and his finger plays with my bottom hole, circling it as my orgasm subsides, and I clench with the intrusion of his finger, but he smacks my ass right before he sinks hard and even deeper into my wetness, and pummels me with the end of his cock.

God, it's so good! I push back time and time again, trying to meet him stroke for stroke and scream his name as a new set of waves hit me. He doesn't let up, pulling my hips onto his cock, riding me through the pleasure. "Come for me, Angel," he says, pulling my hips back, allowing his cock to slide in

and out of my pussy so fast and hard and I shatter, exploding, as we both find our release.

He rolls me with him, still inside of me, folding his arms around me. His breathing is ragged as he nuzzles my neck and ear. “What do you think about our chemistry now, Angel?” he says, but I don’t answer, because I’ve already made up my mind.

JAY

I LOOK DOWN at the woman I've curled into my arms. So fucking hot, but she's not answering me. I turn her in my arms and lift her chin so that I can see her eyes, and she looks away. I turn her towards me again. "You wanna tell me what's going on right now?" I say, stroking her bottom lip with my thumb.

She looks at me for a while, and for a moment I don't think she's going to answer me without further prodding, but then she just shakes her head back and forth at me. I smirk at her naivety. My angel thinks she has the option not to answer. I flip her over onto her back in one quick move and cage her beneath me. My knees are on either side of her hips, and my elbows rest on the bed beside her shoulders. I push her hair back from her face and am caught once again by the intensity of the blue eyes that stare up into mine.

"You think you can shake that beautiful little head of yours and keep secrets from me, Angel? We've already talked about that," I say.

She closes her eyes briefly, and I touch my lips to hers, giving her a gentle kiss. "Look at me and tell me what's going on," I say, coaxing her eyes back open. She finally does, but it's not the answer I want. Her eyes close again, and she shakes her head slightly, side to side.

"I don't want to make you feel like I'm chasing you like I've done before," Sasha says softly.

She's embarrassed about her past, but I won't have it. We all have one, and not one of us has something that we wouldn't

do differently if given a chance.

“Chasing me? Angel, I recall jumping out of a speeding car to chase your ass down an alleyway to capture you for my own. I’m pretty sure I was the one doing the pursuing. I dare you to deny that,” I say, winking at her with a smirk.

Her heart-shaped lips turn upward in the biggest fucking smile I’ve ever seen, and her bright blue eyes light up with delight. I know it’s all for me, and something inside of my chest expands with a feeling I’ve never felt before.

“You like that I had to chase you down, capture you and take what’s mine?” I ask, rubbing my thumb against the creamy skin of her throat.

She leans into my touch and lets out a little moan that makes my dick hard and my balls tighten with a need that I’ve also never felt before. Damn this woman!

Sasha stretches and after a slap on the ass to get her moving, she leisurely makes her way to the bathroom, leaving my dick hard again just from watching her stretch and walk nude across my bedroom.

Bernatelli has finally called off his goons, and it appears this time he has really done just that. Maybe the delivery of four of his men did the trick, even though it cost Brian another ten million dollars for that fucking privilege, but Brian had no issue with me releasing those funds when I told him what happened. I have to give it to him, he’s a solid man, and he would have done anything to get Matt back. Matt is the one that has taken care of his Jenny since right after we learned that she was raped. He’s kept her protected, took care of her, and went after her when she got kidnapped by Bernatelli’s soldiers.

It’s finally over for her, but my sixth sense is telling me it’s not quite over where Matt’s concerned. He was their enforcer, he knows too much for the mafia to feel comfortable with him out on the street.

He knows a lot about their industry, but they don’t know who he is in the outside world since they couldn’t get that

information out of him. I know they could have used far more harsh tactics than the beating they gave him, and I have no doubt they were moving him to do just that. They were probably just letting things cool down a few days with the arrest of their enforcer. Whatever the reason, Matt's been fortunate until now, but I send a note to our top intel guy to have a team follow him.

He'll blow a fucking gasket when he finds out, and as good as he is, they may not be successful following him without being caught, but it's my fucking call, and that's how it's going to be for a while, at least until I know they're going to keep their word.

I hit the button that will connect me to Chase and listen as he gives me an update. I know from my team they are dealing with unexpected guests outside of his complex in Italy and that things with Katarina's family are not going as planned. My team has intercepted the group that tried to get communication plugs into the estate of the Italian family while Chase and Katarina were on the compound. Scottie's intel from Interpol gave us the who, but if my teams hadn't been in place, it could have been much worse.

I listen as Chase tells me again about his plan for us to branch out security-wise and to contract out to all of the friends and family they have, but I am only half listening as my Angel comes out of the bathroom with just a towel wrapped around her. Her towel dried, but still, damp hair is sexy as fuck, hanging around her face utterly devoid of the makeup she usually wears.

I let Chase know that I'll consider his proposal, and I have already talked to my team about it, but I can't focus on that right now, not when my dick is throbbing against my stomach, begging me to get off the fucking phone. "I'll be there soon," I say before disconnecting.

We seem to be getting heat from all sides of the globe, and while I trust every single one of my teams, I have been with Chase for a long time and if he and his family are in trouble, that's where I need to be. I send a note to have the jet readied and to Charlie to have the helicopter pick us up in fifteen

minutes. If we're in the air by five thirty, we'll be in Italy late tonight, their time.

Sasha walks toward me and smiles. That chemistry is electric and pulls us together like a magnet whenever we are near each other. It's almost palpable, and if anyone had told me I would ever feel this way about a woman, I wouldn't have believed it, but damn it if I don't now realize why Brian and Chase go out of their fucking minds when they think their women are in danger.

I throw my phone on the bed and sit up, grasping her waist with my hands, pulling her closer to the bed, sitting on the edge and letting her settle in between my legs.

I trail my finger up the soft plushness of the towel wrapped around my Angel and let it undo the fold that she's created between her cleavage.

The towel drops and I hear myself audibly inhale at the sight of her beautiful body, still dewy from her shower and freshly moisturized. She smells like vanilla and arousal, and I inhale deeply. All I want to do is suck on her nipples, part her folds and taste her, but I know we need to talk because I have a plane to catch in a very short time.

"Sit up on the bed, lean against the headboard," I say, trying to get some distance between us so I can concentrate enough to tell her what it is that I need to share.

She does as I ask, but not before sliding that perfectly pink little tongue across her bottom lip, causing my dick to leak even more pre-cum.

"You should know that my life isn't always easy. I work long hours and am in and out of the country a lot. Now that we have you and Matt secure, I need to get to Italy. Chase and Katarina are there. Sheldon and his team are doing a great job, but Chase and Brian are asking me to put a proposal together to develop a more fully developed security team that could be hired out to others," I say, leaving out the part about the stuff we need to deal with once we get there.

“That’s a wonderful opportunity. How long will you be gone?” Sasha says, sitting on the bed, thankfully covering herself, pulling her knees up against her chest along with the blanket and leaning against them.

Fuck, those baby blues get me every time even though it was exactly what I was expecting. She’s fucking mine, and I’m apparently going to have to spell out what that means to her.

“Angel, what don’t you understand when I say that I want you for my own?”

She looks up at me all sultry and sweet, and I wait for her answer with bated breath.

“I want to be with you, I just don’t understand what you’re asking,” Sasha says, and I inhale deeply.

“Angel, if you agree to be mine, that means I’m not about to let you out of my sight. Unfortunately, whether you agree to it or not, I’m not about to let any harm come to you, which means that where I go you go, at least for right now. I’m headed to Italy, and I want you on the plane with me until everything settles out with Bernatelli and his crew.”

She doesn’t answer the question about being mine, and I don’t blame her because she doesn’t have a clue what that would really involve.

“How long? The ballet tour is on a break for the next two days, and if I need to miss more than that, I need to have a good reason, like a doctor’s excuse. If I miss without one, for any other reason, it can affect my visa and position on the ballet circuit,” Sasha says.

I know all of this already because I have had an extensively detailed report sent to me.

“It will be taken care of. Brian is head of the board, and he asked them to provide you with a leave of absence to go on a marketing shoot for the Children’s work. It means you’ll need to take a couple photos with Chase Prestian, who also funds a lot of the infrastructure, but it’s not something that you

wouldn't have needed to do for the upcoming fundraiser. Now it will just be in Italy and with Chase," I say.

"You already looked into this, talked to Brian, and he's already put things in motion?" Sasha asks, and I can feel the heat of her anger from here.

My jaw tenses. I don't like the fact that Sasha wants to know if Brian agreed or not.

"Like I said, Angel, you're coming with me," I say, attempting to pull her back into my arms, but my little submissive is anything but at this very moment.

She shakes her head at me. "I can't go with you, Jay. We have different lives. I have a life here, and I know we have this, chemistry, but it will wear off, and then we'll move on, and when it does, I still need my life, my job. The ballet means the world to me, and I won't give it up for chemistry, even though what we shared was absolutely amazing," Sasha says.

She said *was*, as if it is already a thing in the past even though I just pulled my dick out of her greedy little pussy and she just washed my come and scent from her body. Fuck, she messes with my head, has since the very first time I saw her on the security feed.

I initially thought I could fuck her right out of my system if I ever met her in person, but I already know that's not the case. I could fuck my angel forever and never get her out of my system. I'm still trying to figure out what it is that we have, and I don't know how to describe it, but what I do know is that it's more than fucking chemistry and I'm not letting her go, and she is going to be mine in every sense of the word.

Sasha's sweet, her eyes are sad, and my angel thinks she's letting me down easy and that I'll just let her walk right out of my life. She's watching me with those baby blue eyes of hers waiting for some sort of response.

"We're going to Italy, and we can do this the easy way or the hard way," I say.

SASHA

I THINK I may have misunderstood him at first, but the narrowed look in his intense hazel eyes tells me that I heard exactly what I thought I did. I don't want anything from Brian, no favors. I hate the idea that Jay went to him and asked him to help me after what I've done and how I've acted and I know I owe both Brian and Jenny an apology. I feel horrible that they got Chase Prestian involved. I didn't even know that Jay knew the man that put up most of the money for the Global Children's Network efforts.

Jay just wants me to go to Italy with him until the novelty of the sex wears off. That much was validated by the fact that he didn't even reply to my comment about the chemistry wearing off and what would happen then. I asked him, gave him every chance without sounding clingy.

"I know you mean well, but like I said, I'm not going overseas. You don't owe me anything, Jay. Let's just walk away with good memories. I will always think of you with fondness," I say, sliding out of bed completely nude, walking across the bedroom, feeling the heat of his gaze on my skin, but he doesn't say a word. Maybe it is easier on his conscience if I just walk away. Then he doesn't have to feel bad that he's just another guy who has let me down. I pull the clothing off my chair and go into the bathroom to dress. I can't help the tears that fall, knowing that I am going to have to say goodbye.

I don't understand why it's so hard after such a short time, but I feel an ache in my heart that's never been there before. I

blow dry my hair, brush my teeth, slip into my under things and pull my clothes back on. As good as it's going to get until I get some rest and some makeup, so hopefully the paparazzi aren't lurking around ready to plaster my face all over the front page of some entertainment page.

I straighten myself, standing tall before walking back into the bedroom. I will not let Jay know how hard this is. It will be a clean break because I don't want him feeling bad about this. I grab my purse from the chair and walk toward him watching as he places his phone into his pocket. Jay's gazing at me intently, but he doesn't say a word. It's up to me, and I reach up to pull his head down. One more kiss. I touch his lips with my own and wrap my arm around his neck as our passion ignites. I knew it would be hard, but not this hard. I struggle not to cry and pull away slightly.

"It's been good. I will always remember you. Goodbye Jay," I say as he takes both of my wrists in his hands, while he's kissing my mouth. He pulls back and looks at me, and a flash of emotion crosses his face, and then I feel a pinch.

I look down and try to pull my wrists apart, but he has them locked together with a set of steel handcuffs. "What the hell?" I say.

"I don't think you understood a few things, and I didn't want to drug you again. You've had a lot of medication in the last couple of days. Now sit down and listen to me," Jay says, pulling me tight against him, and frog-walking me back toward the bed.

I feel the electricity between us in my core, and the erection pressing into my body tells me I'm not the only one, but we both know that chemistry fizzles over time. "You can't hold me against my will. I will scream this fucking place down," I say even though I am anything but scared. The feel of his control and his cuffs on my wrists sends that electricity right to my center.

"You can't seem to make good choices. I don't plan to chase you again, although I have to say, it was one of the highlights of the last few days," Jay says, smirking.

“You can’t just make me stay,” I yell.

He narrows his eyes at me and doesn’t even respond. Clearly, he can. “I thought we could just stay here and talk awhile until you’re comfortable with the idea of coming with me,” Jay says.

I shake my head. “No, I don’t want to be involved and then have it go, what do you say, south. I don’t want to see something good turn into a bad memory with you and then have to say goodbye. I would rather our time together be shorter but with the good memories,” I say.

His eyes are holding mine captive. “You’re so sure it will turn south,” Jay says.

“Relationships always do. Nothing lasts, and chemistry will fizzle out like a candle when it gets to the end. You’ve made your point with the cuffs. Can you take them off now? They’re not that comfortable,” I say, gesturing with my eyes to where they have me captured.

His brow furrows, and he takes my wrists into his hands, slipping his fingers between the metal and my skin and then narrows his eyes at me.

“They’re not tight, and you lied. You’ll find them even less comfortable if I cuff you to my bed while I’m spanking your luscious little ass,” Jay says, and everything south clenches with the thought of him doing that very thing.

He lifts my chin. “Your eyes, your hard little nipples, and the way your breathing is changing tell me you like that. You still think this chemistry between us is going to die?”

I start to answer, but he holds up his hand. “Don’t even answer that question. You don’t need to get yourself in any further trouble by answering a question with a lie. Here’s what’s going to happen. Bernatelli has assured us that both you and Matt are safe, but I don’t trust the fucker. He even got paid more than we intended to ensure that they don’t come after you or Matt again. Matt’s out of the country, and we’ve got teams around him to ensure his safety. I need to go to Italy,

and I want you with me. That way I can make sure that you're safe, too," Jay says.

"So, no strings attached, no relationship, you just want to make sure I'm safe? Well, that I can live with and appreciate," I say, and his jaw clenches and his hazel eyes darken.

"You are going to be the death of me," Jay says through gritted teeth, unlocking the cuffs from my wrists.

"Let's get going," Jay says, guiding me to the elevator and keying in the button to the helipad, where Chase's chopper and the pilot are waiting.

He hoists me into the ride and slides in next to me.

"Thanks for picking us up, Charlie. Let's get this thing in the air," Jay says.

"Roger that. Your coffees are in the holders and there are some breakfast rolls for you and the little lady in the bakery bag," the pilot says as he navigates the takeoff and heads out and around the bay toward the airstrip.

JAY

WHEN SHE WALKS out of the bathroom, I can tell she's trying to be strong. My angel doesn't want to leave me but thinks she has no choice. What Sasha doesn't understand, at least not yet, is that being mine means that she wouldn't need to worry about this shit. I would take care of everything for her, and that includes ensuring her life in the ballet is not put in jeopardy and that everything her little heart desires is taken care of, but she doesn't have a fucking clue about any of that and reaches up to pull my lips down for a goodbye kiss instead.

As soon as my cuffs affix her wrists, her eyes turn hazy with lust and my dick throbs, watching her eyes dilate in front of me, but she's still clearly afraid of it ending with me taking what I need from her and then walking away.

I try to explain that I want her with me and that I can protect her, but all she fucking hears is that I want to keep her safe. Fuck, I wish I could rewind that goddamn part of the conversation but I can't, and I need her on that plane before it takes off. She's agreeable to go as long as she thinks it's for her safety and not because I want her with me.

So fucking be it, I'll deal with it in the air. I key in a message to my team and let the men know we'll be on the tarmac in twenty minutes, unlock Sasha's hands from my cuffs and lead her to the awaiting chopper. When our pilot touches down, he lands as close as he can to the awaiting Gulfstream.

I walk her up the ramp of the sleek white jet with the black and gold Prestian Corp logo on the tail with my security team

surrounding us. They aren't taking any chances that someone could have a sniper watching and could take her out. They also don't know that while they work underneath me now, I will soon be the full-fledged owner of the entire security team and we will be expanding our assignments to others that Chase and Brian want protected.

I shake hands with the pilot and introduce Sasha to him and the crew before guiding her into the main cabin, telling her to make herself comfortable, intending to have a sit down with my team about the situation in Italy. Instead, they've settled into the security cabin and are taking seats when I peek my head in. "What gives? We always travel in the main cabin when we're on our own," I say.

"We're good, boss. We thought we'd give you and the ballerina a little private time," Nick says, and I smile as they try to keep their grins to themselves. They are like family to me, and they've never once seen me with anyone that I care about like this, and I can't help the smile that breaks out on my face.

"Roger that," I say, closing the door and walking back toward where she sits waiting for me.

"So you think my father's going to have his men come after me," Sasha says, sinking into the leather sectional. She's accustomed to flying in luxury with the ballet troupe and makes herself comfortable, tucking her feet now devoid of shoes underneath her.

"I'm not taking the chance that he won't, but we both know that he doesn't want that information leaked to the public. Right now he's agreed to keep both you and Matt off the list, but if he could figure out how to ensure the information couldn't be leaked, yes, I believe he would do whatever was in his power to get you two off the grid for good," I say.

She is about to pull the throw lying on the back of the seat across her, but there aren't any seatbelts on that couch, and I'm as much of a safety guy as Chase when it comes to takeoffs and landings. If something's going to happen, that's when it's

going to be. “Here,” I say, taking her hand. “I want you buckled up for takeoff,” I say as the engines of the G650 roar to life.

She rolls her eyes at me, and my dick hardens in my pants.

“Angel, you ever roll those baby blues at me like that again, and I’m going to pull your lacy little panties down around your ankles, bend your bare little ass over my lap and set it on fire,” I say.

I expect her smart little mouth to say something else that will get her into trouble with the palm of my hand, but she doesn’t say a word. She’s just looking at me with wide blue expressive eyes, and they are now full of lust and desire.

Fuck! “You like the sound of that, Angel?” I ask, settling her into one of the armchairs next to the windows that have seat belts and buckling her in. She doesn’t need to answer because I can feel the hard little points of her nipples against my chest and the rapidness of her breath, but I still want to hear her admit that she does.

I settle myself in across from her and buckle just as the jet starts zooming down the runway. “I asked you a question, Angel. I don’t like to repeat myself, and we’ve already talked about honesty,” I say as we lift off and leave the windy city below.

She looks down and I know she was going to give me some bullshit story, but she’s processing, and I give her the time she needs. When she’s ready, she raises her eyes and looks me straight in the eye. “I love the sound of that,” Sasha says, looking up at me with those glazed over baby blues, and my dick, which has been hard since we started the conversation, now throbs with desire for this woman.

“Good, I like honesty and the fact that you like that turns me right the fuck on. We have a long flight, so we may as well play a little game. You just told me the truth, so it’s your turn to ask me to choose. Truth or dare, Sasha.”

She smiles and leans back in her seat. I love seeing her heart-shaped lips turn up with happiness. “Okay, truth or

dare?" Sasha says.

"Truth." I can't expect her to open up to me any more than she has if I don't do the same.

"Why did you come after me when I left, and capture me in the alley?" she asks.

I nod because I now know exactly what she thought. She thought I came after her only to protect her or to handle her father and not to claim what I wanted, but it's hard to answer because it was a combination of all three. "Because I protect what's mine," I say, and that's the most honest answer I can think of because that's exactly what I was fucking thinking about as soon as I saw her roll out of that car and head toward the alleys.

She contemplates this for a moment, but I can see the wheels moving in her mind, still stuck on the fact that I'm paid to protect. "Okay, your turn to ask the question," Sasha says.

"Truth or dare?"

"Truth," she says, and I breathe a sigh of relief thinking she may choose a dare to avoid baring her feelings to me.

"Why did you take off after the night we spent? You ran Sasha, even after I told you I wanted you, fed you and clothed you, you still ran. Tell me what that was all about," I say, tilting her chin to ensure she has no choice but to look me in the eye when she gives me the explanation I demand. "I was going to take you to the airport," I say.

Her head drops as she hears the question and I don't like that one fucking bit, but I've already learned that I need to give her time to process. "I'll explain if you want to know," Sasha says, but she's still looking down at the ground.

"Look at me when you tell me, Angel," I say, reaching across the table to tilt her chin upward so that I can read her emotions and I don't fucking like what I see one little bit. She's holding back tears so whatever the fuck this is about is not just her being bratty, and it makes me glad that I pushed to learn why.

“When we came downstairs, all of your men were grinning. They all knew that I used to be with Brian, came onto him that night right in front of his new girlfriend, was there with someone else and then went with someone different into the entertainment room. When I came downstairs with you and they were grinning it was just too much, and then I saw you smile and shrug your shoulders like it just wasn’t a big deal. I just needed to get out and deal with my feelings,” Sasha says, and a little tear leaks from her eye, but I am too quick and catch it before it falls down her lovely alabaster cheek.

I taste it from my finger and watch her eyes grow from sad back to lusty.

“A couple things we should clear up before we continue our little game. One, I did come after you when you got loose of my men because I wanted you safe, but the reason I wanted you safe wasn’t that someone was paying me to do it or that I was trying to prevent you from getting to your father,” I start, but she cuts me off. She’s clearly got something on her mind, and I let her get it out.

“Jay, you don’t need to feel bad. I just had to get out of there. The way your men were grinning at me was humiliating. When your men started grinning, something just sort of snapped. It became pretty clear that you were embarrassed to have me eat downstairs with you. Then I started thinking about what it must have looked like to them. I go to the club with one guy, hit on another one that’s clearly in a relationship, and then go into a playroom with someone else only to even fuck that up. I’m not sure what I did to set him off,” Sasha says, and the fact that my angel thinks that what he did to her was somehow her fault makes me want to snap, but more than that, it tells me that she has little to zero experience in the lifestyle and has nothing but rotten experiences with men.

“Angel, before you go any farther, make this any harder, let me set the record straight,” I say. “One, you don’t ever think that what that madman did to you was your fault. Even the doms into the heavier shit would never have struck someone like that, would have dropped that fucking whip as

soon as you safe worded the first time. I don't ever want you to think that was your fault. Do you understand me?"

She doesn't answer and just lowers her eyes. She has so much to learn, and my dick aches with the need to teach her.

"Understand, Angel," I say, attempting to lift her chin.

"It was my fault for going into the room with him. I came with someone else," Sasha says as tears slide down her lovely cheeks and I catch every single one as they slide down her face.

"Who? Are you talking about the guy that brought you to LA so he could have someone newsworthy on his arm and then take off with the model boy?" I ask.

"How did you know that?" Sasha says, her eyes instantly flashing.

"Angel, I didn't have my eyes on anyone else once you walked through that door. At least until we had to go upstairs and deal with some things."

"Hmm, so you must have been privy to the little scene with Jenny," Sasha says, and her lips tighten, and her cheeks flush.

"I saw the entire thing. Like I told you, Angel, him not wanting you like he does Jenny has absolutely nothing to do with you not being as good as she is or any other such nonsense. It's chemistry, a match you either have or don't have. You feel what we have? Did that exist with the two of you?" I ask. Those baby blue eyes drop again, and when I place my finger under her chin to lift her eyes to me, she shakes her head from side to side, but still keeps her eyes down.

"We'll talk about the rules later, Angel, but right now I want you to tell me why you won't look at me," I say, tilting her lovely little face towards mine. She still doesn't say a word. If she were mine, she would know I don't find this acceptable, that I always want us to be honest with each other, to see what's going on in her expressive eyes, complete

transparency, but she doesn't, and that's my fault, so I let it slide for now.

"Angel, I don't like repeating myself," I remind, brushing a blonde lock of hair that has fallen over her face and tucking it behind her ear so I can see her face when she looks up at me. The emotion in those blues eyes is hesitant, fearful, and swirling with doubt.

"It was absolutely nothing like what we have. I haven't felt anything like this with anyone else," Sasha says finally, and my teeth physically ache with the pressure applied to them while waiting for her response.

"So we can put behind us any self-doubt on your part. It's absurd. And about those grins? When my men saw me come down those stairs with you, they were happy for me. Nothing more. They weren't judging. You had that all wrong, Angel."

"It's my turn now. Truth or dare," Sasha says, smiling at me.

"Let's go with truth again," I say, and she nods.

"When you say you consider me your own, what does that mean to you?" she says. I smile widely. My Angel's starting to get past the noise in her head and now I need to make sure she knows exactly what she'll be agreeing to.

"It means that I want you with me, Angel. I want us to be together, with you by my side, and I want you to let me take care of you, all of your needs: basic, sexual, and emotional, but make no mistake, I will heat your ass up if you need it," I say, rubbing her bottom lip which has begun to tremble. "Can you agree to that, Angel?" I ask, unbuckling and moving over to the other side of the table to undo her belt. She's looking up at me with hazy, lust-filled eyes, but tears are still falling and I know her emotional state is partly because of the sedative that's still working its way out of her body. "Angel," I say, lifting her into my arms and pulling her close to my chest. "I asked you a question, and I don't like asking twice," I say, capturing her bottom lip with my own and giving it a little nip.

She shifts in my arms and looks up at me with those seductive eyes, her long blonde hair falling over my arm and hanging down part of the length of my body. "I want to be yours," Sasha says, and my dick throbs hard. I walk with her in my arms to the master suite, push open the door and close it behind us with my foot.

I lay her on the bed and begin removing her clothes. She raises her hips while I slide her panties and stretchy pants down, pull them from her and slide her shirt up her waist, taking my time. We have hours in the air, and I intend to make the most of every single one of them. I kiss and suck my way up her body and only when she's grasping the sheets do I finally remove her shirt, pulling it from her head, leaving her completely naked except for the little white lacy bra that is keeping her gorgeous breasts and nipples from my gaze.

I lift her to me and kiss her sweet-tasting heart-shaped lips as I unfasten the last piece of material that keeps her hidden from me. I run the lacy fabric over her nipples, and she moans, lifting her hips, and I know we are going to have a lot of fun exploring her boundaries with pleasure and pain. I lay her back just to take a moment and admire the angel in front of me, the raw emotion and the need I see in her eyes, and my dick hardens to stone. I want to explore and taste every bit of her so I start at her toes, caressing her instep with my finger and then my tongue. She moans, and I spread her legs because I intend to slowly make my way north.

SASHA

HE STARTS AT MY FEET, caressing my instep and licking as he goes. His tongue and lips follow the pattern of his fingers and then take each of my toes, one by one into his mouth, suckling each digit before moving onto the next, and I hear myself moan with pleasure.

My hips rise, but he holds them down and slaps my mound with the palm of his hand. “Stay still, Angel,” Jay says, giving me a moment before he pushes my legs apart and continues to head north, his tongue licking and sucking the tender skin of my inner calves and thighs, causing my center to moisten with desire. I arch my back and push my mound forward delirious with excitement as he reaches my center, but he continues to tease, circling around it, nipping the sensitive skin before using his tongue to part my lips and dip into my folds.

I moan and lift up again which earns me another hard slap to my mound. “Still, Angel, I control your pleasure, remember?” Jay says, kissing along the sensitive skin he’s just spanked.

“Yes.” I have no idea why him being in control is such a turn-on, but it makes me lusty with need, and I love it.

“Very good, now spread your legs even wider for me, as open as they can go. I want to see how wet you are for me,” Jay says.

I slide my legs apart, spreading them right in front of his face and turn my head into the pillow beside me as I do. “Angel, I haven’t given you any rules, but I want to see what

you like, how your body responds to what I'm doing, and I can't tell if you tuck your head into the pillow," Jay says, and just the fact that he is giving me instructions while looking at my most intimate parts makes me even wetter.

He dips his finger into all the wetness and slides a finger deep, then pulls it out dragging it along my front wall, caressing me on the very spot that sends shivers down my spine. I can't help but push my hips up at the feel, and he brings his hand down hard right onto my mound, correcting me.

He told me not to move, I was warned, and even so, my body didn't listen, and the pleasure is too tempting, but in the absence of his lips on my thighs or his fingers in my pussy, his hand reigning down on my mound supersedes everything.

I gasp, and he doesn't stop until I am coming and coming, unable to stem the flow or hold back the waves that overtake my body. I look down, and he's watching me intently with those hazel green eyes. "I'm done," I say breathlessly, trying to shift away from him because I'm still so sensitive.

Jay smirks. "Angel, that's not how this relationship works. I tell you when you're done and we're not even close. Right now I want to taste how sweet your come is, so you're going to open your thighs and let me taste your cream," he says, coaxing my legs apart. I do as he asks, and he slides his tongue through my folds, tonguing the sensitive flesh leisurely and causing me to cry out before he dips that magical warm wet tongue into my dripping center. As soon he does, my body spasms in another orgasm that rips my body apart, the most consuming orgasm that I've ever had.

"Feel good, Angel?" Jay asks looking at me from between my legs.

"Mmm, so good," I say, utterly embarrassed that he's still between my legs looking up at me.

"Going forward, I tell you when you come. There will be times when I want you to hold back, and it's going to drive you crazy. I won't push you any more than you can stand but I

will push you, and you won't come again until I tell you to, understand Angel?" Jay says.

I nod my agreement because he is so incredibly hot. When we finish, he pulls me close and kisses my lips and then taps my nose. "I seriously thought I was going to have to kidnap you to get you on this goddamn plane," Jay says, holding me close.

"I didn't want to be a burden. I really didn't know if you wanted me or not."

The incoming sound of a message causes me to glance at my phone and my face breaks out into a wide grin.

"What's so good, Angel?" Jay asks.

"Matt is in Russia and with my sister," I say, smiling at her message.

He smirks. "I know, I cleared the flight plans," Jay says, grasping my neck and pulling me closer.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I huff.

"Put that little pout of yours away. It's not my story to tell."

I nod. "You're right. I'm just a little over protective and after all that happened to my sister the last couple of days, I was pleased to see a message that she seemed so happy about," I say.

He nods, pulling me in and kissing my lips gently. "Agree, they'll tell us when they want us to know."

"You think I am . . . what do you say in America, a nosy Nellie?" I ask.

He kisses me on the nose. "That's exactly what I think you are. Let it be," Jay says trying to look stern, but his eyes reveal his amusement.

"He saved her from all of those bad men and then flew all the way to Russia to find her? I love my sister, and it's so romantic!" I say.

He smiles down at me. “Let’s let them find their way, Angel, and we’ll find ours,” Jay says, pulling me close.

“I can’t believe we’re really going to Italy,” I say.

He lifts my chin and kisses me gently. “We are, by way of a few stops, but right now we need food. Get dressed, and I’ll go see what’s in the refrigerator,” Jay says, and I slip into my panties.

I laugh. “What in the world,” I say, gesturing to the large spread. He has an entire smorgasbord of dishes laid out on the bar in the corner of the plane and his mouth is already full of something. A ding below the counter sounds; he finishes chewing and pulls out an egg dish laden with red peppers and what looks like sausage.

“This stuff is the best. Gaby calls it egg bake,” Jay says, digging in a drawer to find a utensil to serve the food. I open one of the bagels and spread it with cream cheese, swirling it high with the thick whipped cream, and place it on his dish. He smiles widely as he pops a donut hole into his mouth and places a generous amount of the fresh mango and pineapple on our plates. I take a seat at the barstool and he slides in next to me. We just enjoy the quiet, content with each other and our need to regenerate.

When we are completely sated, he takes our dishes into the galley and I place everything back into the refrigerator, and then he undresses me before we curl into bed to get some well needed rest.

JAY

THE OVERHEAD BEGINS TO BLARE. “Hostiles headed in our direction. ETA ten minutes!”

“Get dressed Angel, and then get your ass in a seat belt. Move now!” I say, pulling her from the bed, handing clothes to her before I jump into my pants and drag on my t-shirt. Her eyes have widened, but she doesn’t miss a beat or bother with panties as she slides into leggings, throws a cami over her head, and grabs the hoodie on the chair.

“Let’s go,” I say, taking her hand, pulling her into the main cabin and buckling her into one of the recliners adjacent to the fireplace, in the middle of the fucking plane, and not next to the goddamn windows. I head into the security cabin, grab a Kevlar vest, and bring it back out. “Put this on and then wrap up in the blanket to keep any glass shards off you,” I say.

She nods and starts doing exactly what I say. “Good girl, Angel. I need to take care of a few things, but I’ll be back. Do not get out of that fucking chair or you won’t be able to sit for a week,” I say.

Her eyes light up, and even with the shit we’re dealing with, my dick notices the fact that she loves it when I take charge and threaten to spank her little ass, and it starts to rise to the occasion. I turn, heading toward the security cabin, but pause when she calls my name.

“Jay, be careful.”

“Always, Angel. I’ll be back soon,” I say.

“What’s the ETA now?” I ask Nick as I walk through the security room.

He’s watching his monitor. “I’m putting them at six minutes, no more. They were able to catch us on radar flying this low. We need to refuel, or we’re going to need to redo all the flight plans,” Nick says.

We’re not changing course. When the crew lands the plane, my team has it coordinated with the landing of the Carrington jet. Our teams cover both jets while they’re coming in and landing on the runway. We have two squads on the ground and snipers in the field. “Make sure no one gets a shot off and that this crew and the people on board are safe. As a backup, the Augusta will be flying overhead,” I say, sending a text to make sure that the fastest chopper on the market is in place.

“Roger that,” my team says and they get to work.

I call Scottie, Brian’s head of security. No time like the present to test his loyalty and skills. “This is Scottie,” he says, answering on the first ring which is a point in his favor.

“No time for formalities, we’re in a bad way and landing to refuel. The Augusta is scheduled to be circling us while we refuel but we have incoming, and I can’t be certain it’ll be enough. The Carrington Gulf is landing at the same time to create a diversion, it’ll fly right by in about four minutes, and our hostiles are about six minutes out,” I say, testing him because my gut tells me we want him on the team I’m about to build, but I want to see what he brings.

“I’ll round back with you, lad,” he says, disconnecting before I even know what he’s thinking. I scowl at the phone, and while I do trust him after he proved himself to be on our side when things went down with Jenny, I’m not fucking happy about not knowing exactly what he has planned.

Precisely three minutes later a buzz hits my phone with a message from Scottie.

Keep your heads down, and land to refuel. The Augusta’s got a wingman by the name of Interpol.

Fuck yeah! “Let’s land the plane, refuel and get this baby back in the air. We’ve got the Augusta and Interpol covering us. If you don’t have your gear on, put that shit on now,” I say, hefting a Kevlar over my t-shirt, buckling it, and throwing more from the hooks on the wall to each of my men. A couple of our younger crew look at the armored vests like they don’t want to. Fuck that.

“Get that shit on, do it now. No one fucking dies on my watch,” I say as the jet makes a sharp descent. Every one of us has our eye on that monitor, and when we land I watch as the Carrington jet lands at the very same time. Jesus, these pilots are badass and have precision timing. I smile with pride. Let’s see what these assholes bring because our snipers are in place and ready to take these fuckers out as soon they see even the slightest movement of their trigger finger. Three helicopters, the Prestian Corp Augusta and two others I don’t recognize, circle above on the screen.

“Nick, you gotta lock on the incoming?” I ask.

“We’ve got locks, but another one is right behind it and now another one,” he says, calm as fuck, just focusing on his job as I message Scottie.

Tell me the three birds heading towards the airport are with you?

One is an incoming hostile; two Interpol choppers are right on their arse.

The chopper intended to send shell fire our way flies right by with Interpol helicopters on its ass, and my team doesn’t even have to take a shot.

I smirk. Scottie’s so fucking on the team!

“I need to know who they are and where they’re going. Get a communication lock and let our intel group do the rest,” I say.

“Roger that!” I hear in unison. My men have this covered, and I return to the main cabin. The green-and-gold plaid blanket is covering Sasha’s head and frame on the couch. She’s done exactly what I’ve asked her to do with no

questions, and I feel a surge of pride that she trusted me enough to follow my instructions.

“They’re refueling the jet and running the routine clearance,” I say, stroking her back and feeling her trembling. “Angel, you’re safe,” I say, whispering into the shell of her ear.

“Jay, they’re not going to stop,” Sasha says, just as a text comes through to let me know we’re going to be delayed on the ground for maintenance. I send Cole a message with a shopping list and ignore his fuck-you emoji as a response. If we’re stuck here for any length of time, we can at least get Sasha a change of clothes or two.

“Angel, we dealt with it,” I say, lifting the blanket so that I can see her face, and when I do it terrifies the fuck out of me. The resolute look on her face is ominous.

“The secret’s out. They’ll come after me and anyone that stands in the way of getting rid of me,” Sasha says, and the fear in her eyes is palpable.

“You need to tell me what we’re up against if I’m going to protect you,” I say.

She shakes her head. “No, you and your teams shouldn’t have to fight this battle.”

“Who knows you’re his daughter?” I say.

She’s still looking at me with those baby blues.

“Angel, you tell me what you’re scared of, or I am going to light your little ass on fire,” I say.

She shakes her head back and forth, and at first, I don’t think she’s going to tell me, but then she finally does. “You can’t take these people on. I think they are the Italian Mafia,” Sasha says.

SASHA

HE DOESN'T LOOK PISSED. Instead, he looks at me with disbelief.

“Angel,” he says, pushing the blanket from my body. “I need you to tell me exactly what’s going on,” Jay says, lifting my chin so my eyes are level with his own.

“I can’t tell you, Jay. Please don’t ask.”

He watches me with those deep hazel eyes, contemplating what I’ve told him. His jaw grows hard and firm with resolve.

“That’s the wrong answer,” Jay says.

I want to tell him so badly. I love that he takes care of me, but there is no way that I am putting my entire family or him and his team in jeopardy. “Leave it, Jay, it will go away,” I say, trying my hardest not to shed even one little tear.

“It won’t go away until we deal with it,” Jay says, sitting beside me.

I shake my head, side to side, “No, you don’t understand. I need to get out of here,” I say, sliding the blanket off of my lap.

He grabs my waist, pulling me onto him. “Angel, you might as well tell me because I’m not letting you go,” Jay says, settling me into his lap. The door opens, and Nick starts to walk into the cabin, but Jay shakes his head and points to the door. Nick closes it, but not before I see his smile.

Jay's arms come around me protectively, pulling me close and rubbing my back with his hand.

How can someone so fierce and protective be so kind and gentle at the same time? He pushes the hair out of my face, brings my ear close to the warmth of his mouth, and runs his tongue around the shell of my ear. "You have two minutes to tell me what I want to know or I'm going to take you into the bedroom and light your ass on fire until you do, Angel," Jay says, and I don't know if it's the threat or his voice or both, but my core clenches and body shivers with desire.

"I just don't want you to get hurt," I say, looking up into those penetrating hazel eyes.

"You let me worry about that. Tell me what's going on," Jay says, still comforting me with his hand.

I am still contemplating when he lifts my chin so that my eyes meet his. "You're down to thirty seconds, Angel. Don't let your first spanking be one for punishment," he says.

I lick my lips because damn that's just so hot, but I know there are security people all around this plane, and the last thing I want is an audience to me getting my ass spanked. "The Italian Mafia and my father's family have been rivals for years. It escalated this past year when my father started suspecting his number two in command of stealing from him and working for the Italian Family," I say, and Jay's eyebrows rise in surprise.

"You wanna tell me how a pretty little ballerina that's not supposed to have any knowledge of her mafia family knows about that?" Jay asks as his face crinkles with confusion.

I falter, not sure how much to tell him. "He may not have wanted to get to know me, but I needed to learn about him and my family. I know it was stupid and probably dangerous too, but I have this entire family that he won't let me be a part of, and it really hurts," I say.

"It has nothing to do with you, Angel. He's scared of the truth getting out. His wife has a trust that's worth more than he's made in his entire career," Jay says.

I nod because I know it's true. I think that's why my father didn't leave her for my mother years ago, because I know for a fact that he cared for her. I've read her journals, documenting every detail about their relationship.

"You haven't answered the question, and I'm growing old over here. Tell me how you know about your father's second in command," Jay says while his eyes bore into me.

He's not going to back down, and I don't want him to walk into danger because of me. I'm not proud of what I've done, but there is this inherent need to get to know my father and our family, and it was the only way I could get close and learn. I feel tears start to prick the back of my eyes but I will them away. I will not cry and act ashamed, because I honestly don't know if I would change what I did regardless of what happened. I inhale deeply and look him square in the eyes. "It's because I knew my father's second in command in what you Americans call the biblical sense," I say.

Jay's eyes darken, his jaw locks and for a moment he is absolutely still and silent. "Sasha, you're telling me that you were Dominic Mancini's girlfriend?"

I shake my head. Jay's obviously going to push and dig for details, and he's going to get the full truth because it is what it is, and I can't take it back.

"I used to hang out with a couple friends at this club in Vegas on the weekends. I would get them home safe. You know, to catch the cab for us all, make sure they didn't go home with anyone unsafe, and make sure they could waddle into their hotel room if they didn't go home with someone. You know, ballerinas usually drink water and not alcohol, so I was the perfect babysitter, although maybe on a good night you may get me to share a Vodka," I say, trying to immerse some humor in the story, but he's not amused, and I feel the need to look away from his glare.

"So you were a babysitter for your friends on their nights out. How does that story end with you belonging to Dominic Mancini?"

“I didn’t belong to him. It wasn’t that way. I heard that he loved to gamble, get extremely drunk, and take someone up to his room after he played. I paid for my friends to go with me to Vegas to have a cover and a reason to be there. While they were out on the strip having fun, I made myself available at the roulette table and engaged him in conversation so that I could learn more about my family. He would buy me drinks, and I would hand them down the table and he really never seemed to notice that I wasn’t drinking with him. He would always hit on me, wanting to take me upstairs and I would flirt back. I thought I could handle it, but then he started introducing me to people around the table and his men as his girl. I thought I could deal with it for just a while longer, get a little more information out of him, but one night he lost big, and I learned a lot,” I say.

“What did you learn Sasha? How to spread your legs to get what you wanted?” Jay says.

I will myself silent for a moment and try to get a grip on my feelings, but nothing could have prepared me for what he just said or how bad his comment would hurt.

“Unfortunately, I learned that men like that take what they want whether the girl wants to, how do you say, spread her legs or not,” I retort, grabbing my purse, walking past the security guards who are conversing with the maintenance team.

JAY

SHE STARTS TALKING about being with Dominic fucking Mancini in the biblical sense, and I already know that I'm going to lose my shit. I am cool, collected, and always controlled, but fuck if I feel anything like that right now as I sit here and listen to her talk. As soon as the words come out of my mouth, I want to take them back. The look on her face is enough to give me a wake-up call on what an asshole thing that was to say, but when she drops the fact that he fucking took her without her consent, it's like a punch to the gut.

I can't believe I lashed out like that when she was telling me what happened, confiding in me, but fuck, I didn't know. I think back to all the reports that I read about Jenny, Brian's girlfriend, and what she went through after being brutally raped by her ex. The thought that something like this could have happened to my angel makes me physically ill.

Nick walks into the main cabin as Sasha starts walking down the ramp and away from me. I don't blame her after what I said, but she's not going anywhere by herself on my watch, not until I know she's not in any harm, and if I'm honest with myself maybe not even then. "Secure Sasha and put her in the bedroom. She's not safe on her own," I say. Nick looks at me like I've lost my fucking mind and maybe I have. "Just do it, Nick," I say, heading into the security cabin knowing that even if he doesn't agree, he will do as I ask at least until he knows what's going on.

She won't need to see me for a while, but there is no goddamn way I'm letting her navigate around a strange city

when I know that she may have a fucking target on her back.

I know exactly when he's safeguarded Sasha and she's back on the plane because I hear her screaming at the top of her lungs in protest, and then I hear him yell, "Son of a bitch, Jay, your woman needs a fucking leash! She just bit my fucking finger off."

I can't help the grin that overtakes me. I know that I need to get my feelings sorted to deal with what Sasha has gone through, what she needs and then navigate her to a safe place. Until then, I need to get my head back in the game and not let my dick and my heart rule my actions.

The men in the security room are all smiling. "What's so funny, did Sasha really take Nick's finger off?" I ask, watching on camera as Nick takes out the cuffs. I know he plans to restrain her to the bed because it is protocol, get her secured and comfortable, and that's what he thought I wanted when I gave him direction, but something in me snaps at the sight of her and those restraints.

I won't have her tied up against her will. "Kill the order, then leave her, and lock the door."

"You want me to keep a watch on her through the camera? I can engage it if you want," Cole says.

I shake my head. "No, this job is on me. Send the link to my phone, and I'll monitor her. You guys keep your eyes on the enemy, and I'll keep my eyes on her," I say.

"Roger that, boss," Cole says with a smile before turning around and typing into his keyboard to send me the link. I click on it, and it takes me to the live cam which has now been activated on my phone.

Nick is putting away his handcuffs and telling her that he's not going to tie her up because it will be uncomfortable, but instead he wants her to go into the bathroom and change, get into something comfortable, and hands her a large shopping bag, presumably with the clothes I've asked for. I scowl because I don't fucking like the idea of her coming out in any sort of nightwear that anyone will see but me.

“I’m not about to undress while you perverts are watching the bathroom with some stalking camera. I’ve been on these private planes before, don’t think I don’t know what high-tech shit is built into these dammit things,” Sasha huffs.

Nick grimaces and I laugh out loud at her slip of the word dammit instead of damn. She’s so fucking adorable when she’s pissed. Nick, however, doesn’t think it’s so funny. He doesn’t have the patience for dramatics. “I gave you a chance to shower and change. When you land in Italy you’re going to wish you had taken me up on that very generous offer, but that’s not my issue to worry about now,” Nick says, as he walks out of the master bedroom, through the main cabin and back into the security compartment.

“Your woman is a little hellcat,” Nick says, raising his bitten finger to me.

She really sunk her teeth right into him. “How’d she get the drop on you?” I ask, trying to hide my smile because no one gets the best of Nick.

“Don’t ask. Fucking being chivalrous because I thought she was yours,” Nick says, opening the cabinet that holds the crew’s medicinal supplies.

“Thanks, Nick,” I say, unable to tell him anything else at this point because I don’t fucking know myself. What I do know is that I need to process my feelings about whatever happened between her and Mancini, and then get a better understanding of what she needs both physically and emotionally in a partner that will help her get past the feeling of not being wanted.

I get an update on all the happenings in Italy and in a couple hours head to the main cabin and settle into a chair to be alone before sending a message to our intel team to get my report finished before we land. In the meantime, I pull up the link I’ve been given and watch as my angel places the book she’s been reading on the nightstand and slides under the covers. She tosses and turns for a bit and just when I think she’s settling down to rest, peeks her head over the comforter, looking around the room.

It's as if she senses me watching her and my dick gets hard just thinking about our chemistry. "I hope to hell that you have all the cameras off because if you don't, you and your entire crew are about to get the show of your life," Sasha threatens. Dammit! I know I've told my crew that I'll manage her surveillance, but after her last message, and the video she did for Brian stripping right on the Skype session, I don't know what the fuck to expect. I do know that my fucking security team isn't about to see any show she's threatening because she belongs to me.

All cameras and audio in the master bedroom go off except for my link. Go silent!

Roger that! It's done!

I talk into the microphone that will go overhead into the cabin of her room. "I've turned off the cameras and audio to my crew. I'm the only one watching you, Angel. You have something to show me?" I ask, unable to control my hardening dick that has a mind of its own where she's concerned.

"I do, what you Americans call this gesture," Sasha says, lifting her hand in the air to give me the middle finger, effectively telling me to fuck off, before turning away and snuggling deep into the covers.

A million things go through my mind. First I want that little finger of Sasha's in my mouth after it's been in her pussy, and then I want to set my angel's ass on fire.

I've seen firsthand how bad her father not wanting her has scarred her emotionally. I wish to fuck there was some way I could take back what I said to her because right now it just continues to replay over and over in my head and whatever happens between us, I will forever regret what left my lips in a state of anger.

This is what fucking jealousy does, and something I've never felt before. This woman fucks with my head in the worst and best possible ways. I need to reason and start playing with my head instead of my dick, but goddamn my angel makes that near impossible. I want to go in there, apologize, make this right, but I know she needs time. I send a message to

Scottie to see if his team has made any progress, but they haven't been able to identify the choppers that were at the airport when we refueled. He lets me know that he'll call me back momentarily.

I use the time to watch her as she tosses and turns. True to Scottie's word my phone lights up with his name in less than five minutes. "Jay here," I say.

"Lad, I just got a report from Interpol. The helicopter they were following is registered to an overseas holding company, but I doubt it's real. Intel is tracing the origin right now. I had the team pull back when they landed at another airport because it looks like they are booked on a flight somewhere. We're just waiting for them to go through customs to get bloody facial recognition so we can find out who these wankers are."

I smile to myself. Scottie uses the word bloody like I use fucking. I'm sure I'll have to google wankers so I don't look like a bloody dumbass to my crew when they ask me later.

"You think they're part of the Chicago Mafia? I thought Bernatelli was settled."

"No, it's not that crew, but I'll know more once we get a little farther up their arses," Scottie says, and I have to put my phone on mute for a minute so he doesn't hear me laugh right the fuck out loud. I have no goddamn idea how I'm supposed to explain this colorful badass to my crew, but I know that he's going to be on the team if I can persuade him to be after what went down with him and Brian.

"Excellent," I say, nodding my head. "Great job and thanks for all the help, Scottie."

"You're welcome, lad," Scottie says disconnecting, and I shake my head. No fucking idea how I feel about being called a lad in front of my men, but I'll have to deal. I hit the button for Nick because I don't feel like answering any of the questions I'm sure my men have for me, and I don't want to stop watching the angel on my screen.

"What's up," Nick says answering.

“Can you get intel to go through all the uploads of information that Matt provided with a fine-tooth comb and then cross-reference them with any information collected on the Chicago and Italian Family?”

“I can. Are you looking for something specific?” Nick says.

“Yeah, Scottie doesn’t think it was the Chicago Family that stormed us earlier, and there’s gotta be something more here than someone wanting to take Sasha out because she’s Bernatelli’s daughter,” I say. It just doesn’t make sense, and I hope to fuck that isn’t the case since my boss is by marriage now a part of the goddamn Italian Family!

SASHA

HE THINKS he can just keep me prisoner in this damn little room after the way that he talked to me, well he's got another think coming. My cell phone rings and I grab it in surprise, it prompts me to hit Wi-Fi calling, and in less than thirty seconds I am connected with my sister.

"Marenah, Jay told me you were safe, but what the hell happened? I've been so worried about you," I say.

"No need, I can't talk now, but I'll catch you up when we're together. I'm doing well, actually much better than that honestly," she says.

"Yah? Is it because you have a certain protective man in your bed?" I ask.

"Oh, that doesn't even come close to describing this man. I don't have a clue what happened, but what he offers is appealing on a level that I've never felt, and you know what? I'm just going with it," Marenah says.

I can hear my sister's happiness through the phone and am elated for her and Matt. The fact that he took down an army of men to let her escape, tracked her down and went to Russia to find my baby sister is like a fairy princess story and I am so happy for her.

"You embrace it, Marenah! Hold onto that man! It may be a once in a lifetime," I tell her.

"I will try to do just that, Sasha. I have to go now. Love you and will call you soon," she says.

I try to hold back the tears. I am so emotional, so happy for my sister and so sad about my own dismal relationships. The men I thought could be my happily-ever-after have never been, for one reason or another, but there is something different with Jay, and while it hasn't been long, it's something I have never felt before. It's that chemistry he talks about. Like every time he's anywhere near me, I want him to be closer, touching me, buried deep inside of me, and I want his promises. The ones he teases me with, the ones to paddle my ass, and my pussy. I recall the way he took care of me that first night, the way he fed me with his fingers, and my pussy clenches with the desire for the man that believes I will spread my legs for anyone.

We are going to Italy, one of the most romantic places in the world, and if I didn't have a shit ton of baggage, Jay would want me, but once I told him what I did and what happened, it was over. Whatever was between us, it is no longer. I saw it in his eyes, the distance. I'm too soiled to want and how the hell can I blame him after what I told him. I'm surprised he even wanted me in the first place after the spectacle I made in the lounge at Brian's.

I take a sip of water, knowing what has been weighing heavy on my mind needs to be done. I owe Jenny an apology for coming on to her man in public. I also know that if Jay hadn't intervened, the picture of Brian and me in the café would have gone viral with a bunch of false stories, because the sleazebag that took it was selling it to the highest bidder. I do a Google search, and Jenny Torzial's picture and company come up.

She owns the Torzial Consulting firm that is doing all the work for the Prestian Corp medical centers, and I'm pretty sure that is where Brian met her. I click on the phone contacts and scroll through until I find a phone number for her. I hit the link to call, expecting to be taken to an automated recording but am surprised when she answers herself.

I apologize to her for my behavior at the club and thank her for her kindness that night. She seems gracious and appreciative, and when I finish with the call, I feel better about me. I have left a part of my past behind, and just as I told

Jenny, I am going to continue to work on myself because regardless of whether Jay wants me or not, he has left an impression on my soul. I am going to find myself and stop carrying around the baggage from my past.

I only wish that I had discovered this before I felt the need to dig into Bernatelli's family, but there is no use looking back. I need to put the entire heartache my father has caused for my family and me behind us. I am not strong enough to keep finding a way to connect with him only to be rejected. My future is not there, and I need to focus on what I want to achieve in the next one to two years professionally and personally.

That's something that excites me, and I go through a list of all the milestones I want to hit as a ballerina because nothing has ever meant more to me than being able to perform. The professional column was easy to fill in, and now I sit staring at the blank columns in front of me on my laptop. The relationship goals are not as easy.

I have severely messed up every one I have ever had, and I try hard to think of something to put into the relationship column, but I continue to draw a blank, looking at my computer.

Jay's voice over the intercom interrupts my thoughts. "If you're trying to identify critical qualities of your ideal man let's start with a few basics. I'll ask a few questions, and you have to answer truthfully. Wanna play?" Jay says huskily.

Fuck him and his damn intel team! He is probably watching everything I type. I cringe knowing he probably heard my conversation with Jenny, realizing I told her that I was going to try to find myself and that I didn't think the person that I had met and that helped me down this path would appreciate me talking with Brian. If he was listening, he's sure to know I was talking about him. "Sasha, I need your choice, truth or dare," Jay says.

"Truth," I say, and everything south clenches with desire. I love this game that he plays with me.

“Accept the invite when it comes through on your laptop,” Jay says as a flash on my screen appears and asks me to allow video chat.

I wipe underneath my eyes and finger through my hair. I have no idea how bad I look right now after crying. I hit the accept button, and the screen expands to show him watching me on the camera. God, he is hot. Those hazel eyes are like magnets, and he looks like he can see right through my soul. “Excellent, so I’ll ask you a question, and I expect an honest answer,” Jay says.

“Okay,” I say, sitting up straighter against the headboard, crossing my legs and sliding a pillow underneath the laptop.

“Why do you find it so hard to articulate the type of relationship you want?”

“That’s easy. I honestly don’t know why it’s so hard,” I say.

“Let’s start with physical looks. What do you find attractive?”

You, I almost say, catching myself in time. “Tall, dark, and handsome,” I say flippantly, but cringe internally as Jay’s jaw tightens, realizing it also could describe Brian. Damn.

“My turn?” I say, racking my brain for a good question to ask him.

“No, I ask the questions in this game,” Jay says.

I frown. This is not how you play truth or dare, but he’s already firing his next question at me. “So you can write down tall men. How tall are we talking, Sasha?” Jay asks.

How tall are you? “Over six foot, maybe six one or six two,” I say and again I know he must be thinking of the similarities.

“So you can type taller than six one,” Jay says. I nod, but that’s not good enough. “Do it now, Sasha,” Jay instructs. I scowl. Bossy much? But I don’t have time to contemplate because he’s already firing the next question.

“How many men have you dated since you came to America?”

My eyes rise to meet his in the monitor. The intensity I see there is palpable, and the charge I feel from the chemistry we share seems to sizzle right through the screen. “More than I want to admit,” I say, lowering my eyes from his gaze. Ashamed that so many men wanted to take me out, and out of all those men, not one of them wanted me for their own. They just like what they see on the outside, a pretty blonde with a toned body to keep their bed warm for a few hours.

“How many Sasha?”

“Maybe twelve,” I say, refusing to lower my eyes. Jay asked, and he’ll get the truth. His eyes darken, and I cringe with shame.

“Does that include Mancini or would that be thirteen?” Jay says.

I know he’s angry that I would use my body to get information out of the mafia’s enforcer. Whatever this chemistry is between us, it affects Jay like it does me and I do not want to hurt him even if he doesn’t want to be with me but for a short while.

“No, you didn’t give me a chance to explain earlier. He fell asleep, Jay, he may have told people I was his girl, but what you think didn’t happen,” I say, watching my words sink in, the tightness of his jaw loosens slightly, and I know it’s not my imagination when the tenseness of his shoulders visibly relaxes.

“You said that you were together in the biblical sense and that it wasn’t consensual. For the record, in the biblical sense means you’ve fucked,” Jay says, penetrating me with his hazel eyes.

“He pawed me, got me half-naked. That ranks as fucking biblical sense in my world,” I yell at him.

“Too much information, Sasha! Just answer my questions,” Jay says as his eyes go dark again.

“Why are we even playing this stupid game anyway? You don’t want me, I understand, and that’s it. At least you were nice and tried to let me down easy and are protecting me until things settle down. We can take care of whatever it is in Italy that you need to do and then you never have to see me again,” I say.

“One more question for you, Sasha,” Jay says.

JAY

MY HEART IS BEATING like a goddamn freight train. This woman is fucking with my mind, and she tells me twelve men, just since she's been in America. I know that she's had a shit life emotionally caused by her dad's rejection. I also get that seeing so many people could be a way of feeling wanted, but I can't believe she put herself in that position. She could have been killed, or worse, fucking raped and brutally tortured. A shiver goes down my spine at the very thought of what Mancini would have done to my angel if he had known that she was trying to use her body to get Mafia information, but no one, his enemies or business associates alike would want loose ends and if anyone thinks Sasha belongs to Mancini, that is exactly what she is. I text Nick back to get ahold of Scottie and see if the two of them can make any connections between Mancini's enemies and the recent attacks.

She actually let him take her to his room so that she could find out more about her dad. Time and time again it comes back to that no good lowlife father. If that fucker were here right now, I would beat him to within a foot of his life. I have no clue what has come over me, not once in my goddamn adult life have I felt so out of control or violent. I watch her for a moment on the screen, her eyes lowered with the shame I saw in them when she was talking and her words circle in my mind. *"You don't want me, I understand, and that's it. At least you were nice and tried to let me down easy."*

She thinks I don't want her and that's not how this fucking thing is going to end.

“One more question for you, Sasha, and I want your eyes on me,” I say because I already know the answer to it before I ask it. I felt her melt in my goddamn arms, watched her eyes dilate, and her nipples grow as I did it.

She raises her eyes to the screen, and they are shiny. My angel is doing an excellent job of holding her tears at bay, but it is not without effort.

“What was the most erotic thing you’ve ever done with a partner outside of the sexual act itself?” I ask.

Her eyes widen, and I see the wheels moving. “I want the truth,” I say. She looks down for a moment. “Eyes on me, Angel,” I say and hear the hitch in her breath as she processes my question. I give her a moment, time to think about her response.

“When you fed and took care of me. No one has ever done that for me before,” Sasha says, and I’ve already walked across the room and opened the door.

She lays her laptop on the nightstand as I close the door behind me and sit beside her on the bed. She is the most beautiful creature I have ever seen, and her honesty guts me. I take her face in my hands and pull her toward me. She tilts her head, looking at me intently with those bright blue eyes, and that’s all the consent I need to capture her heart-shaped lips with mine.

I want to be gentle and know I should be. Sasha is so emotionally fragile on the inside and so fucking hot on the outside and I know I have a responsibility to take care of her in entirety.

I pull her into my lap and cradle her, exploring her mouth with my tongue, her sweetness and the soft little moans making my dick so hard that I need to shift to get a little relief from the goddamn zipper my growing length is rubbing against.

“Angel, no one is judging you about the number of men you’ve been with. I sure as fuck am not. It was before my

time, but the thought that they may have made you feel bad does piss me off.”

“You were so mad,” Sasha says.

I nod because it’s true and she should know how furious it makes me.

“Correction, I’m still pissed. The thought of you being anywhere near Mancini, a man that would kill you if he knew what you were trying to do, and the thought that you intentionally let him put his hands on you in that way makes me madder than you would ever know. I’m just glad it stopped there, Angel.”

She nods, and I pull her closer to my chest, arching her neck back with one hand on her nape. “The men in the past? You have absolutely nothing to be ashamed of. I’m no virgin myself,” I say.

She’s contemplating that and smiles, showing her lovely white teeth surrounded by those perfect lips that I am dying to have wrapped around my raging hard dick.

“You might not be a virgin, but I am, Jay,” she says, still smiling up at me.

I narrow my eyes at her and can’t help but smirk. She’s so fucking cute and hot at the same time. Another language mix up, clearly, because I know for a damn fact that I have known her in the real biblical sense and while she was tight as hell, a virgin she was not. She knew exactly how to move those little hips and squeeze my dick just right with her pussy.

“I’m going to need you to elaborate a little bit on that statement, Angel,” I say, grazing her lips with my thumb.

Again with the big smile, and her eyes are dancing with mischievous delight. “Maybe not in the traditional sense, but I saved something I consider important for someone special,” my angel says softly.

I rewind our encounters in my head and shake my head. It could be one of two things and based on a conversation I heard on tape when I took over as head of Carrington security I’m pretty sure she’s proficient in oral. The option that’s left makes

my cock throb in my pants. “Angel, have you ever given anyone your ass?” I ask, keeping her eyes held with mine as a slow sexy little smile turns up her lips. “Angel? I asked you a question, you owe me an answer.”

She shakes her head from side to side slowly, and I grasp her nape, pushing her long blonde hair to the side, out of my way so I can sink my mouth onto the length of her neck, gliding my tongue and lips along the sensitive velvety flesh until I get to her ear.

I caress the delicate shell of her ear, and she shivers at the same time she moans with pleasure.

“Truth. You haven’t given your ass to anyone yet, Angel?” I ask against her ear, blowing on the sensitive flesh before exploring deep with my tongue. I am rewarded with another soft moan, and she grinds her hips on top of my erection.

“I’m saving it,” Sasha says softly, almost proudly, and it is with an extreme amount of effort my load doesn’t blow right the fuck now.

I lift her cami slowly, caressing her nipples. They are straining against the black lace of her bra, and I slide the delicate straps down her arms slowly before exposing her breasts and letting the sexy lingerie fall to the floor. Small creamy mounds sit high on her chest with erect nipples just begging to be stroked. I answer her need, caressing them with first my thumb and then taking each, one by one, into my mouth until she moans softly against me.

I shift her from my lap, and she lifts for me while I slide her pants down her waist. I pull them over her gorgeous hips, taking her matching panties with them, tossing them onto the chair and make quick work of my own clothing while watching her little tongue rub against her bottom lip. I lean down to kiss her, and she reaches for me, sliding her perfect little hands over my cock’s hardened length. My balls tighten as she strokes me. The chemistry we have is palpable, and we’ll scorch each other if we’re not careful, but we’re not going to worry about that.

“What?” Sasha asks, looking at me with those smoky blue fuck-me eyes.

“I’m just thinking about what you said. Make no mistake, when our time is right, I won’t ask for your ass, I’ll just take what’s mine,” I say, and am rewarded with a moan of pleasure that I drown out with a kiss, one that leaves us both panting, feverish for more, on fire to touch and to be touched by the other. I make my way down her body, kissing, licking, and sucking and watch as she grasps the bed sheets when I part her legs. Her mound is entirely bare and feels silky and soft against me as I nuzzle and kiss it, gently teasing her.

I run my fingers along her thighs, and her crease, circling with my fingers, running my tongue along her mound, teasing her until she moans. I won’t touch her until she begs for it, and when her hips rise and then the little pants that have been playing in my head since the first time begin, my dick is ready to go.

“Jay, please,” she moans, and I lose some more of my come as I lift her hips so that I can feast on the cream of her beautiful pussy. I lick her from center to front and then focus on the little bundle of nerves I find beneath her hood. She moans softly with desire as I sink two of my fingers into her pussy while I lick and suck on her clit. She squirms, right on edge, exactly where I want her and I slide a third finger in and go deep, curving up to hit that little spot I know she loves. She moans loudly, and I am rewarded with a feast of cream all over my fingers as she trembles and bucks her hips through her release.

I suck my fingers, tasting her sweetness as I slide her thighs farther apart, knowing that she is wet and stretched enough so that I won’t hurt her. I wrap my dick as I line up to her entrance, running the tip of my throbbing cock through her soft, wet folds. Fuck, I have never craved someone so much in my life. I want to be gentle with her, but I want her to know that I take what’s mine and do precisely that, sliding right in to the hilt as she gasps with pleasure.

Her pussy trembles and clenches around my dick as I hit the end of her. She shivers, and she’s right to, because that’s

only the first stroke and we're going hard.

I pull out slowly, and it is excruciatingly painful to hold back, but I want her to feel every movement before I slam back into her and she does, crying out with pleasure, grasping the sheets. I repeat it, again and again, until I feel her thighs and pussy clenching and trembling, the tip-off that she is very close. I take that opportunity to drive into her, hitting that spot at the very end of her that causes her to moan every fucking time, the one that causes her to scream my name when she is no longer able to control her pleasure. "Come for me now, Angel," I say, and at the sound of my command she starts to come apart, thrashing on the end of my dick, her mouth held open in ecstasy while I release my load, stream after fucking stream. I am breathless, panting against her. Fuck, sex has never been this good. We haven't yet caught our breath when I curl her in my arms and roll us over so she is in my arms and my weight is not on top of her.

"Fuck Angel, that was amazing," I say, pushing the damp strands of her hair out of her face so I can see her beautiful baby blues still smoky with lust.

"Our chemistry is off the charts, yeah?" she says, in that sexy-as-fuck accent of hers.

"Completely off the charts," I say, kissing her lips. I know these customized Gulfs have spared no expense to ensure the bedrooms are designed with soundproofing, but I've been on the other side of that wall, and I'm pretty fucking sure my crew just heard at least part of that.

"I need to take care of a couple things, Angel. Stay here and rest, I'll be back shortly," I say, kissing her lips as I slide off the rubber, head to the bathroom and get cleaned up. I come back out, and she's lying under the covers. This will never do. "Angel, when we finish, you keep your legs spread for me so that I can clean you," I say, pulling back the covers, and dipping between her legs to run the warmed washcloth through her folds.

She watches me and shivers, and my fucking dick gets hard with the knowledge that she is a submissive in the

bedroom in every sense of the word. I finish washing my angel and put the washcloth in the bathroom and am heading out the door when she stops me.

“Jay, where are you going?” Sasha says, and that question, asked that way, makes my blood pump hard and fast. What she’s really asking me is if we’re finished, because that is what she’s used to. That is what my angel has fucking psyched herself up for because that has been her experience and it guts me that Sasha thinks that is why I’m leaving. Ever since the very first time I saw her in that video she has kept my emotions in a knot. Fuck if she’s not going to be the death of me!

“I’m going to get something for us to eat, Angel. I want to feed you. Keep your legs spread for me while I’m gone,” I say and watch as her baby blues dilate with desire before I walk out the door to deal with the grinning faces of my men.

SASHA

MY BREATHING IS shallow as I do what he asks, keeping my freshly cleansed lady bits open for him until he returns. I thought we were through, and maybe we are, and this is just how he treats all of his lady partners. I am surprised by the sudden surge of jealousy that runs through me, hot and molten at the very thought of him doing something so intimate with someone else. I try to shake the feeling. I am trying to be a different me, not a clingy partner looking for a relationship or a love that is not there.

“Make no mistake, when our time is right, I won’t ask for your ass, I’ll just take what’s mine” runs in loops in my mind. Jay thinks we’re going to have another time, and I am elated, but he doesn’t think that time is now.

When the door opens, my legs, which are spread obscenely open, instinctively slide together. “No, Angel, you always stay open for me. You trust that I will protect you from eyes other than my own,” Jay says, and I let them fall back apart. He lays a tray on the nightstand and dips onto the bed.

“Can you do what I ask, Angel?” Jay says against my lips. I have no defenses against this man. I will do whatever he asks me to do and willingly.

“Yes,” I say softly.

He nods and pushes my hair from my face. “Now it’s time to replenish,” Jay says, as he takes the dome of the serving dish off the tray. He is now fully dressed in his jeans and tight white t-shirt, and I am spread open on the bed, completely

nude, and he is going to feed me, and it is the hottest thing I have ever done.

He brings a finger-size bite of grilled chicken to my lips.

“Taste, Angel,” he says, watching me with those intense hazel eyes that darken with desire as I extend my tongue to taste the lemon and butter-infused meat. “Lick the buttery flavor, Angel,” he says, and my center clenches with desire and need. This is hotter than I could have imagined.

I lick the marinade from the tender morsel, and I want to take a bite, but he shakes his head. “I’ll tell you when I want you to stop sucking, Angel,” Jay says, and I feel my center moisten with desire.

“Your eyes just dilated, and your breathing pattern changed. Will I find you all wet and creamy for me after just a few sucks?” Jay says, running the piece of chicken against my lips.

I nod but I know he expects an answer. “Bite into it and chew slowly,” he says, and as I do, I watch his eyes darken with desire. I finish chewing, and he’s watching intently. “Swallow, Angel, I want to feed you some more,” Jay says and reaches for another piece of chicken, doing this a few more times. “This time, I want you to do exactly what you did before while I prepare our dessert,” he says, placing a piece of the buttery chicken to my lips. I lick, and then suck the flavoring before I chew as Jay holds it to my mouth.

He has taken a spear of pineapple, and as soon as I swallow the piece of chicken, he holds the pineapple spear to my lips.

“Suck, Angel. I want to watch you eat from my fingers,” Jay says, and my core begins to drip with desire as I slowly suck the delicious juice from the sweet tasting fruit. “Eat now, Angel,” he says, and I bite into the delicate flesh of the delicious fruit, chewing and then swallowing.

I am entirely sated and full, and he places his hands under my knees, lifting me, and takes me to the shower, sliding me down the length of his body, pressing me against the hardness

covered by his jeans as he does. “I’m going to clean you, and then put you to bed. You can rest or read while I work,” Jay says, shedding his clothes and walking me underneath the luxurious showerhead that rains down on us.

He positions my head so that my hair gets saturated and then pulls me close to him as he lathers my hair, soaping it and massaging my scalp and nape. I moan with pleasure and feel his cock expanding against my backside. He tilts my head so that he can let the rain pelt down against me and rinse the suds from my hair.

He applies a creamy sweet-smelling conditioner to my hair, pulling me back against him, out of the rain, while it soaks in and he rubs his cock against me. He caresses my nipples and twists the perky nubs at the same time. Oh, God, it sends a volt of electricity right to my core, and my hips move needing to feel him closer, pushing back against the solid wall of muscle behind me.

Jay laughs a soft velvety laugh, right in my ear, mixed with the warmth of his breath and the heat and wetness of his tongue.

“Angel, bend and brace yourself on the wall. I don’t plan on being gentle with you,” he says.

He moves the stream of water, positioning it around us, allowing me space to face the wall. “Hands on the wall, feet all the way apart, ass out and up for me, Angel,” he says, and my center tightens with desire. I do what he’s asked, and feel so open, so exposed and desperate to feel him inside of me. I gasp as I realize he’s behind me, on his knees and he’s washing me, there. He’s using his fingers, circling with soap around my sacred bud. I know I need to stop this, but the feeling is incredible, and he continues circling as he slips his tongue into my center, slowly in and out.

“Fuck my tongue, Angel,” he commands, and my hips begin to move, up and down on top of that big wet tongue that is dizzying.

He turns on the secondary showerhead and uses it as a vibrator against me, letting it pulsate against my clit with a

delicious wet warmth that adds to the stimulation he's already causing. He has been edging me up for the longest time with his tongue in my pussy and his finger circling my ass, as soon as the jets reach under the hood and find my bundle of nerves, and he tells me to come, at the sound of his command I am convulsing around him and screaming his name. "Jay!"

"Angel, push your ass back and hang onto the shower. I'm going to drive into your pussy so hard that you won't be able to sit without feeling where I've been for the next week," Jay promises as he slides in with one quick thrust.

I feel him all the way into my lower belly, and he pulls out and shoves in again. My center instinctively wants more, and I brace myself better against the shower. God he is strong and I have less than a thirty-second wait before I find out just how powerful he is and just how hard he fucks!

I AM LEANING against the shower panting, and he is still inside of me, but he pulls me up, close against the steely hardness of his body as he withdraws from me and tosses the condom into the garbage next to the shower. "Let's rinse the conditioner out of your hair," Jay says, kissing my neck before he repositions the showerhead, massaging my scalp and letting the water rinse it out of my hair.

He helps me out of the shower and takes a large towel from the warmer, wrapping the velvety material around me before handing me one for my hair. It is long, and it usually takes a while to dry, so I flip upside down and wrap the towel turban-style around my head.

"Fucking hot, Angel," Jay says, his eyes lingering on the cleavage the towel pushed between them has created.

I look down because this entire time with him has been a dream, and I don't want it to end, but I know that it will, just like all the rest of the times. It will end, and my heart will be crushed just like always, but I am not going to think about that. I am going to let myself enjoy our time together.

Jay has just dried off, and my eyes have followed that lucky little towel for the tour. He rubbed it against his dark brown hair and his neck, playing it back and forth across his torso to get the rest of the water droplets from his chest. Then he slides it lower, running it across his tight, toned, and muscular ass and then dries each leg separately. His thighs bulge with power and I imagine how powerful they looked while he was pushing his cock into me over and over. Fuck he is hot.

I am caught up in my little dream, my little fantasy when he lifts me.

“Cross your legs when I turn you around,” Jay says, placing me on the granite counter, facing the mirror, completely nude. He slowly removes my towel and my hair spills out over my shoulders in all of its tangled glory, and I watch him in the mirror.

“Angel, you are so beautiful, I want to take care of your every need,” he says, starting to slowly slide the brush in his hands through my hair.

He’s surprisingly gentle, and before long he has brushed through all of my tresses and rid it of any tangles. “Ready to dry you now,” Jay says, reaching for the hairdryer that is hanging from a copper-colored holder on the wall. He turns it on and begins to slowly dry each section of my hair, brushing and straightening as he goes. When he’s done, he captures my nape with his mouth, sucking my neck and licking me as he watches my reflection.

“You like it when I take care of you, Angel?” Jay asks.

“You have no idea how much I love it,” I say, shivering as he holds me.

Jay’s eyes dilate in the mirror. “Let’s get you into bed. I have work to do and you need to rest,” he says, scooping me up from the counter, spinning me into his arms so that my face is pressed against his chest as he carries me to bed and kisses me. I lie tossing and turning, unable to rest. Too many naps and the time difference, along with delays with refueling and maintenance, are messing with my mind more than they

usually do. I slide into my clothes and head into the main cabin to see if I can find water. The entire crew is sitting around watching some sort of footage on the big screen. I walk behind the couch and toward the bar, open the refrigerator and take out a bottle of water, downing its contents before taking another one to keep with me.

I don't see Jay and go in search of him, opening the security cabin door. Jay is sitting at a computer desk and a tall blonde air attendant with a beautifully curvaceous body, one that ballerinas can only dream about, is draped around him from the back.

"Sometimes I despise your job. You know I hate it when you make me wait, especially for shit like that," the blonde says, wrapping her arms around Jay's neck.

JAY

I FEEL Brigett's arms wrap around me, and I am just about to tell her that we're over but after being with Sasha, I can't be one of the guys that are in her head. I need to let Brigett down easy, not be an asshole. She is a nice person and has admittedly made a lot of cross-country trips pleasurable. It is not her fault that we don't have the chemistry, the heat that I feel when I'm with my angel.

I am trying to find the words to tell her that our in-the-air adventures are through when she starts talking.

"Sometimes I despise your job. You know I hate it when you make me wait, especially for shit like that," Brigett says, wrapping her arms around my neck and squeezing me tight from behind.

I am not about to hurt her, knowing the damage it's caused Sasha, and am about to sit her down and have a talk with her, but I see a shadow slipping toward the door, it opens and closes, and I would know that fucking body anywhere. Fuck! One woman at a goddamn time! I pull Brigett off my shoulders, bring her to the couch, and sit her on it facing me. I see a longing in her eyes that I've never seen before. If I had, I would have called off our little cross-country escapade long ago.

I run my hands through my hair. "I want you to know how much our fun has meant to me the last few months, but you need to find someone that feels an insane amount of chemistry with you, and that will move anything on earth to ensure you

are happy and safe. You will find someone that feels the same about you as you feel about them,” I say, knowing she will because we’ve been far from exclusive.

“I thought that was you,” Brigett says, and tears start gathering and pouring down her face. While I don’t want to be one of them, one of the same types of men who have hurt my angel, I’ve also heard about her escapades on other flights.

I take the next ten minutes making sure that she does not feel like a heel or used, but that’s all I can spend because my heart is hammering with the thought of my angel and what she’s thinking and feeling right now.

I walk through the main cabin, and my crew raises their eyes at me, wondering what the fuck is going on as I walk past them and into the bedroom to find Sasha.

She is under the covers, her body hidden to me, and I realize how much I hate that. Her breathing is erratic, and her hair is lying by her side in a neat and tidy ponytail. If she were asleep, my beautiful angel would be spread out for me, her breathing would be in sync with my own, and her hair would be down and tangled.

“Angel, I know you’re not asleep, and I need to explain what you saw,” I say.

She shifts and lifts her body, pulling the blanket with her, still covering herself from me as she gets into a sitting position.

Her blue eyes are smoky with emotion, but she hasn’t been crying, and I should find solace in the fact that she doesn’t seem as hurt as I thought she would be, but I don’t, because right now Sasha is looking at me like she just doesn’t give a fuck one way or another.

“So explain,” Sasha says, watching me with a concentration that sets my limbs on fire. I have never felt such an intensity of feelings and swallow hard. No explanation is going to make this better. She has been hurt time and time again by people just like me, meaning no harm but casting her aside when they decide to move on. I feel a deep sense of

remorse for allowing it to go on so long with Brigett, and for what Sasha walked in on.

“Angel, Brigett is one of the flight attendants hired by Prestian Corp. She’s been traveling on many of my team’s overseas flights. She and I have hooked up more than a few times over the last few months, and I’m not going to lie to you and tell you that we haven’t enjoyed each other’s company, but that was the extent of our relationship. You’re always going to get honesty from me.”

The depth of her blue eyes is unnerving as she watches me, but still, she says nothing. No tears, no trembling of the lips, absolutely nothing.

“What I am going to tell you, Angel, is that we’ve never shared chemistry or a relationship that went beyond a couple hours of sex on a long trip across the country,” I say, and her eyes are still riveted on me, just watching me as I speak, devoid of emotion, and just nothing.

She may have already made her mind up, but she’s going to hear me out. “I intended to tell her that we were done the next time I was alone with her, but I didn’t expect it just at that moment. The guys usually would have texted me to warn me that someone was on their way in, but they must have been busy with something on the monitors when she slipped by. I know you saw her with her arms around me. I was just trying to figure out how to tell her that we were done without hurting her. All I could think about was the way men have made you feel over the past years, how that’s impacted you, and I couldn’t make her feel cast aside and discarded. I didn’t want to be one of those men, and instead, you walked in, and I ended up hurting you. I’m sorry, Angel,” I say, looking at her.

“You think you hurt me?” she asks, and I swallow the lump in my throat and can feel my jaw clenching. She’s not even fucking angry, just cold and indifferent and that’s worse than any of the heated tirades I imagined.

“I can only hope that I didn’t and that you know what we have is special. This chemistry, this feeling for you, it’s never happened to me before, and as soon as I had a chance, I was

going to tell her. I was just trying not to be a prick about it,” I say.

She watches me for one of the most extended moments of my life. “She reminds me of myself in some ways. Manipulative, striking out when she knew there was someone else instead of just asking what was happening, understanding that what we shared was good, but wasn’t a what you say, forever thing? Jay, she knew you were with me in this bedroom, we weren’t exactly quiet. She knew exactly what we were doing, which is why she searched you out when she knew you were alone. You remember her comment, about hating to wait especially for shit like that?” Sasha says, and I cringe not realizing she heard that.

I nod. “I remember what Brigett said, Angel, I just didn’t put two and two together.”

“She’s apparently used to being tossed aside by lovers who have side flings, and you’re right, as soon as I heard that, it really made me realize just how bad my coping skills have been, but I am turning a new leaf over,” Sasha says with a broad grin.

“You are? What’s that?” I ask.

“The time I have spent with men in the past has been really good, excellent at times really. I don’t begrudge that you and your flight attendant hooked up and enjoyed each other. I just feel ashamed and embarrassed as I look back on things. When it was time to part, it wasn’t easy for me. I didn’t make it very easy on them either, and when I really think back, they didn’t tell me anything but the truth,” Sasha says.

I swallow down the jealousy that rages up when I think about her with someone else, especially Brian, but appreciate the honesty reflected in those deeply expressive blue eyes of hers.

“I’m glad you took the time to talk to her, tell her you were exploring other relationships, you know, looking for that chemistry and let her down easy,” Sasha says, pulling her knees up against her chest while she penetrates me with her baby blues.

I walk over to her, sit on the bed beside her and clasp her nape with my hand, pulling her closer. Her scent is fucking intoxicating, and my dick tightens with the need to be inside of her. “Get this straight Angel, I’ve found the fucking chemistry, and the search is over,” I say, pressing my lips against her, and it takes a moment for her to thaw, but then she softens, her heart-shaped lips molding against my own as I slide my tongue over her lips, parting them to explore her velvety depths.

She moans against my lips, and I kiss her with a passion that takes our breath away. “I’m so proud of you Angel. I love that you’re not jealous of something that was in the past.”

“I never said I wasn’t jealous, but I’m glad you did the right thing. Make no mistake, though, if that curvy creature comes near you on the plane, so help me, I won’t be held responsible,” Sasha says with a fire in her eyes. This woman and her spark makes my dick throb but more importantly make me feel alive, spurring feelings like anger, jealousy, happiness, contentment, and a vision of what could be that I’ve never contemplated before.

My phone buzzes and seeing who the caller is I hit the accept button. “Jay, we need to talk, and I hate like fuck that I’m the one that has to tell you this, but we just got an intel report. Interpol has Sasha marked as a spy,” Nick says, and then disconnects, leaving me looking at the phone and down at the blonde-haired angel I’m holding in my arms.

SASHA

JAY LEAVES the bedroom to make a call. He still hasn't returned awhile later so I head to the main cabin. I find him and his team at the table adjacent to the long oval window that showcases the beautiful blue sky swirling around us.

Jay stands and walks toward me, taking my hand and leading me to the seat next to his. "Hungry Angel?" he whispers into my ear.

I shrug my shoulders, smiling, and moistening my lips because damn if every single morsel doesn't look delicious, but it's not the food that I want. I survive on little to no calories, but it makes me think about Jay feeding me and causes my center to clench with desire.

"How are you planning to feed me?" I ask, watching as his eyes dilate.

Jay's eyes shadow over like he's contemplating. "I think my crew has other things to do in the communications room," he says aloud, and almost simultaneously they grab their coffee. Cole takes the plate of cookies on their way to the next cabin, and I can't help cringe at the grins on their faces. They clearly know what's going on between us, and it just confirms my resolve.

"You want me to feed you, Angel?" Jay asks.

"I can't think of anything that I want more at this moment," I say because it is honest and that is the one thing that I can share with him without allowing my heart to be broken.

“Fuck that makes my dick hard,” Jay says, pulling me into his lap and I can’t help but nuzzle into his strength as my center moistens even more.

He picks up a bright orange piece of the cantaloupe and places it into my mouth, instructing me to suck its moistness, and I do, relishing in the sweetness as I taste its nectar before chewing on his command. I remember his question. What is the most erotic thing you’ve ever done outside of the sexual act? This, exactly this!

Little by little I eat the remainder of cheese and pineapple from his hands and after a half hour I am wet with need, still curled into his strength and there is nowhere else that I want to be, but I do not want, ever, to be that clingy, needy girlfriend again. Especially with this man because he makes me feel things I have never felt before and if I let him in any further he will destroy me for anyone else in the future.

“Jay,” I say.

“What Angel,” he says, holding me tight.

“Jay, no one has ever fed me, dressed or washed me, conditioned or dried my hair. I just want you to know how much that it has meant to me. I want you to know that I have never had this level of intimacy with anyone and when we’re no longer together, I will always remember our special time,” I say, shifting in his lap.

I don’t want to embarrass him, but I do want him to know the time we have spent together has been extraordinary and that I will cherish it. I have determined to modify my behavior, and this is the first trial that I will have at that change.

His eyes darken, and I turn away to slip off his lap, but he grasps me by the waist and pulls me back against him before I can get a step away from him. “Where do you think you’re going, Angel?” he asks against the sensitive flesh of my ear.

I turn, and my eyes search his. Somehow I need to find the strength to be the one to leave because I don’t know if my heart can survive getting dumped by this man. We are not in a relationship but a hot and frenzied chemistry attraction.

I clasp his face on either side with my hands. “Jay, you have been amazing and in just a few short days have made me think about my behavior, and instead of blaming past lovers for leaving me, I will try to always look upon each new lover as a gift, a present to be cherished, and when the time to part comes, it will be fine. Just like it will be our time to part soon,” I say, looking bravely into the storm that has gathered in his darkening hazel green eyes.

The hand at my waist grabs me tight, pulling me right between his legs, so close that I can feel his pulsing erection against my belly. His other hand grasps me firmly around the nape, pulling my face closer to his own and I wince as the small hairs at the back of my neck pull with the intensity of his hold.

“You thought I wanted to end us?” Jay says. “You don’t have to answer that. I can see it in your eyes,” he says, looking down at me with those deep stormy eyes.

I want to avoid that look at all costs and shake my head, attempting to turn away from him. “It doesn’t matter, Jay. I want to be a stronger person, not depend on my dates to make me feel good about myself and try to overcome the overwhelming need to seek love from a perfect stranger. Sex is just that, but love is deeper, and I need to explore to find that thing you talk about, that chemistry,” I say, and at the same time I deliver the message with actress quality skill, my heart is breaking in two.

His hand snakes into my hair. “Angel, I’ve wanted you since I first saw you. I’ve fantasized about the way you might smell, the way you would feel pressed up against me, the sight of your body, nipples erect with desire and longing, the taste of you on the end of my tongue. These pictures just keep rewinding in my head every single fucking day since I first saw your picture. I’ve dreamt about you, sticking my fingers inside of you so I could lick and taste you, and of you shattering on the end of my dick,” Jay says, and his intensity makes me wet and needy while captured by his hold.

He nuzzles his mouth and tongue against my ear, and I don’t know how much more I can take as he nips into the flesh

of my earlobe. I cry out, but then he holds me steady while he kisses the sensitive flesh of my neck from jaw downward and the feel of his warm mouth on me is overwhelming.

He tips my head and licks the length of my neck and sucks me. “Tell me you want this, Angel,” he says, his eyes dark and demanding.

My breathing is erratic, and I know there is really no choice to make. Who am I kidding? I know that whatever he wants I will give him. When he is like this, I am powerless against our chemistry.

I decide right here and now to be honest. This is what he promised me, and I owe the same to him. “I want you, too, Jay, so much,” I say, looking up, into his darkened eyes, hazed over with lust and that alone sends a thrill of electricity throughout my body.

“That’s good because when I get through with you, you’re not going to be able to walk straight and you’re going to feel where I’ve been for a week,” Jay says, scooping me into his powerful arms, throwing me over his shoulder and stalking toward the bedroom.

The other airline attendant, the one with long dark hair and eyes, looks up, startled as she walks into the main cabin. “So sorry, I was just going to clean up the bar. I’ll come back later,” she says timidly.

I close my eyes, hanging upside down as he carries me into the bedroom and closes the door behind us before setting me down, throwing his holster and cell phone on the bed, and shucking out of his shirt.

“Don’t undress until I get back, Angel,” Jay says, walking into the bathroom while I sit on the bed to wait for him. His cell phone buzzes beside me and I look down at the message.

Send you Sasha’s dossier soon. Not looking good.

I knew he would try to find out more but not this quick, and I have no doubt, when he learns the entire truth he will want to stay far, far away.

He strides into the bedroom freshly showered and sits on the bed next to me, pulling me into his arms, holding me tight, kissing my lips and then my hair.

I tense in his arms because once he finds out, he will let me go, and then he will feel guilty, and it just adds to my resolve to let Jay go before he discards me. As much as I love our chemistry, I have to protect my heart. It is already starting to ache at the thought of goodbye, and if I don't do it soon, I won't be able to, and then I'll be the same clingy, needy person that I despise, and I will not allow myself to be that person going forward.

“Jay, thank you, lover, for the time we've spent together, but we both know I could never be with a security guard. The world I live in as a ballerina . . . well, you understand, it just could never happen,” I say, shrugging my shoulders.

JAY

HER WORDS SHOULD HIT me like a fucking arrow, wound me, but I have been trained in emotional intelligence, and her body language and words aren't matching. Her eyes are fearful, pensive, and I assess the situation just like I am trained to do. She's moving too fast, averts her eyes, and her breathing is becoming labored.

The report I've requested from our intel on Sasha should be in within the hour. I know if she is working for the Russian Mafia like the initial reports suggest, our little relationship is over, and she already knows it. Maybe this is her way of breaking it off before I find out.

I systematically tick through the conversations we've had, what I've learned about her and previous relationships. She has been fighting against her feelings for me because she doesn't want to be portrayed anymore as the victim or the clingy person that holds onto a relationship that doesn't exist, but she's developed insight at the most inopportune time. She thinks that I'm going to let her get away with this and I fucking won't. "Angel, talk like that is just going to get your ass punished. You wanna tell me what you're really thinking about?" I say.

Those blue eyes of hers are contemplating, she's never had anyone that wants her and I know she's trying to overcome the need to cling to me, she's trying to break the pattern, but fuck if she didn't pick the wrong man to start with.

“We both know the chemistry is off the charts between us, tell me why you said that, Angel,” I say.

She looks up at me and then backs down quickly, trying to hide those beautiful eyes from me, but I won't allow it and lift her chin to explore the swirling emotion in her eyes. “Why didn't you just let me go, appreciate that I wasn't clingy? I provided the perfect reason why I can't see you anymore, and you just dismiss it! Do you just want to make sure you end it with me instead of the other way around?” Sasha asks, raising her usually calm voice and eyebrows at me.

She just went there. The very reason she's been leaving me, and I can't help the sigh of relief I exhale. I can feel the fucking chemistry whenever we're anywhere near each other. Fuck, we don't even have to be near each other. How many times did I just look at her picture and feel my dick grow hard with the need for her?

I knew that it was a ploy to save her from being the one rejected and to protect her heart, but that doesn't mean that hearing her acknowledge it doesn't make my heart expand. I am known for my ability to remain calm under extreme and volatile situations, but fuck, this woman has managed to get under my skin, pisses me off and drives me crazy at the very same time.

She starts talking again, and I imagine her bent over my lap with her little skirt pulled up, exposing her ass cheeks only decorated with a bit of lacy G string as I bring my hand down on her wayward ass, but her sassy mouth brings me out of my reverie.

“Why don't we take each of your questions, one at a time,” I say, raising my eyebrows at her haughty behavior. “First, I think the first night we met we talked about honesty. I'm going to let that go because you were clearly under the influence, but, make no mistake, going forward, if you are dishonest with me I will set your ass on fire, and you won't be able to sit down for a week. Two, it's not okay to lash out like that, tell lies, and deflect your feelings while making someone else feel bad. I'm also going to let that go because your intentions

weren't bad, but in the future, we're honest with each other, no lies, understand Angel?"

"I just didn't want to be a bother, to be clingy to you like I was with everyone else. I thought you would be happy with that. I'm sorry, Jay," Sasha says softly.

She's acknowledged her need, her reasoning, and apologized.

"Apology accepted, Sasha." I smirk. While I would never hurt her, I intend to take full fucking advantage of the opportunity to teach her the pleasures of consensual spanking. "Tell me, truth or dare," I say.

"You don't play fair," Sasha says, licking her bottom lip and causing my dick to twitch.

"I play to win. I'll ask you one more time, truth or dare," I say, watching her as she contemplates. She drags her eyes away, looking around the room, her little pink tongue comes out, and she looks back into my eyes while her heart-shaped lips part for me as she ponders my question.

Fuck she's gorgeous. I'm having a difficult time holding it together waiting for her answer, but I will not give her the satisfaction of asking again.

"Dare," she says finally, her voice barely above a whisper and I can almost feel the pounding of her heartbeat.

My dick hardens and elongates on the spot, throbbing as she begins to speak and I hear that seductive lilt and accent. She would rather do whatever I want as a dare than bare a truth that I may ask at this point. I know right now she has something to hide, and the knowledge that she may indeed be a spy comes to mind, but I am known for my calmness, and I plan to put it to good use tonight and wait her out.

"Excellent. I've wanted to bare your ass and show you the pleasures of spanking since I met you. I dare you to lay your body over my thighs, lift your skirt and let me spank your little ass, unless, of course, you want to answer the question," I say.

Her hitch of breath makes my dick harden, but while she's worked up thinking about it, she's apparently still trying to get

her head wrapped around the idea. It takes long moments, and I allow her the time she needs.

“Stay here,” I say, walking out the bedroom door and turning on the stereo system in the main cabin. The security team is in the small area behind the flight crew, and this should absorb the sound. I text them to stay out of the main cabin for a while and hit the remote to turn the satellite to a thumping beat and smile at my soundproofing skills.

Sasha would clearly instead take a spanking, having no clue how hard they can be, rather than telling the truth. I find that disturbing and realize I have a long way to go in breaking down the walls that she has created to safeguard her heart.

When I return, her breathing has changed and her nipples are erect telling me everything I need to know. This turns her on, my beautiful little submissive is willing to play. “Angel, I’m going to bend you over my lap and then I want you to bare your beautiful ass to me. When I bend you over, I’m going to tip you so that you’re on your toes, stretched out in front of me, graceful and beautiful, the same way you are when you dance. If you tell me to stop, I won’t, but if you use your safe word, which is going to be red, then I will stop immediately, do you understand?” I ask, settling into the bedroom chair.

She nods in agreement, and I hear her breathing hitch and catch the lusty gaze that passes over her features. She looks at me as if in a trance as I pull her over my lap. Her arms dangle and I can feel her body’s pulse through the dress she’s changed into. I settle her in and slide the bottom of it up, revealing her sculptured legs and thighs, before sliding it all the way over her hips and ass to rest at her waist.

The pretty white panties and the way the lace dips between her cheeks and frames the curve of her ass makes my dick throb with need. Fuck she’s just so perfect and my cock hardens underneath her belly. She feels it, wiggling her little pussy into my thigh. “Who gives you your pleasure in the bedroom, Sasha?” I ask, pausing, giving her a moment to realize what she’s done.

“You do,” she says and the soft sound of her submission is almost too sweet to bear.

“That’s right, Angel. I’ll always give you what you need, teach you, explore what you like and don’t like. Ready?” I ask, wanting to make sure she has an out if she wants one, but I already know she won’t take it because I can feel the heat from her pussy through the material of my pants.

She nods her consent and my hand rubs her cheeks, allowing her anticipation to grow before my open hand lands on her curvaceous little ass. She yelps in surprise and goes to put her hands behind her in an attempt to ward off any further spanks, and I smirk.

“Tell me your safe word or put your hands down. Otherwise we start over each time you do it,” I say and am rewarded with an exaggerated huff, but she does exactly as I ask.

She should know by now that I do what I say. I bring my hand down, alternating over her delicate ass cheeks, warming her up, and smirk as she rubs her mound into my thighs. I go easy, wanting her to enjoy spanking and find it pleasurable and am rewarded with soft little moans as I increase the intensity and delivery, letting me know she’s just as turned on as I am.

She has her safe word, hasn’t used it, and if she did my hand would stop immediately, and she knows it. One word from her and this would be over in an instant, but instead her panting increases and she moans with unreleased desire. I know it’s hard for her to control rubbing herself on my thigh and she’s doing so well.

I shift and slide my hand beneath her so I can feel her slickness and rub her clit. She moans and her body tenses with the effort to control herself and she does so perfectly. My angel is the perfect submissive and I reward her by stroking her clit. “Let yourself go, Angel, come all over me,” I say, and she does, crying out my name as her body trembles through wave after wave.

I cradle her in my arms for the next half an hour and she falls asleep with her arms around my waist. I stand up and

walk her to the bed, and lay her down, but then crawl in bed beside her because I need to feel her in my arms. The reality that any minute intel could be providing me with information about my angel that will make or break a relationship is all I can think about as I gaze down at the woman who has managed to captivate me.

SASHA

I WAKE from a brief nap and find myself alone and starving. I head into the bathroom to shower and pull on a nightie and robe to cover with and walk into the main cabin. There is a small light attached to a table next to the large chair in the corner, and the dark-haired beauty that I saw earlier is curled up in the chair reading.

I look around to see if Brigett is here, too, but she's not.

"Hi, I'm Sasha. I didn't have a chance to meet you when we came aboard," I say.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't know you were awake. I'm Serena," she says, shuffling out of the chair.

I shake my head. "No, please stay. I was just going to see if there was something to eat. I'm ravenous," I say.

"Yes, of course, let me prepare something for you," Serena says nervously.

"I am what they say in America very self-sufficient," I say, walking behind the bar and opening the refrigerator to see what is available. There is an assortment of sliced cheese and dips, sausage trays, and meatballs. Uggh! Hmm, shrimp! Protein! "Score," I say, triumphantly pulling the glass covered platter of shrimp with cocktail sauce out of the cooler. She smiles widely. "Well, I'm glad someone on this flight likes it! Those men barely touched them today. I have more in the refrigerator up front marinating in lemon juice and cracked pepper. Would you like me to get some for you?" Serena asks.

“Yes, please, but only if you’ll join me. Do you like shrimp?” I say.

“I do, but that’s not necessary. Let me go and get the other appetizers for you,” Serena says as I put a few of the plain ones on my plate with a little sauce. She returns a few moments later with a dish and places it in front of me, opening the lid. “Mmm, it smells lemony and garlicky,” I say, and my mouth waters as I add some to my plate.

“Here, I hate eating alone,” I say, handing her a plate.

She looks uncomfortable, and apparently is not going to eat.

“Serena, I’m sorry you saw what you did. I didn’t have any idea that your friend Brigett was, um, keeping company with Jay or I would have never been on this flight,” I say.

She sighs and places some shrimp on her plate. “She’s not my friend. I don’t do what she and a lot of the other girls do. I’m not wired that way,” Serena says, quietly nibbling on a piece of the lemon shrimp.

I raise my eyebrows. “You mean keeping the boys, shall we say, comfortable at night?” I ask.

She nods. “These jobs are highly sought after by women in the industry. The people that own private jets pay extremely well, and obviously it’s a lot nicer than having to be a waitress to a gazillion people on a commercial flight. Brigett enjoys flirting and, well, a lot more than that. She is trying to snag a husband that has access to this luxury,” she says, gesturing around the opulence of the main cabin we are in.

I nod. “I’m glad you told me, that makes me feel better about the situation. Where is the little whore now?” I say, finishing the last of my lemony shrimp and swiping another.

Her face falls.

“Are you going to tell me where she is?” I ask.

“She’s in the security room, probably trying to cozy up to Jay.”

I raise my eyebrows. “I think I’m going to get dressed and have a little fun. Give me a few moments,” I say, heading back into the bedroom and to the bathroom. I brush my teeth and put a bit of makeup on, brush my hair until it shines, and slip out of my robe. The nightgown is pale, not see through, but it doesn’t hide much if you have a good imagination.

I slide into a pair of my signature stilettos and walk back into the main cabin, where Serena is putting away the shrimp. Her eyes widen, and slowly her lips turn up into a broad smile. “I think the boys may be hungry, let’s take them in some snacks,” I say, sliding a couple platters of cheese and sausage out of the cooler.

“Are you serious?” Serena says, smiling widely.

“Oh, honey, I am so serious right now. Come along, you wouldn’t want to miss the show. Curtain’s up in two minutes,” I say, handing Serena a tray and sashaying past her holding my own dish of snacks as we head toward the door that will lead me into the security room.

She opens the entrance with her free hand, allowing me to sashay into the dim room before she cuts on the lights. The men all look up as we enter and their eyes widen as I walk toward them with Serena behind me. Jay is sitting at a table with four other men, and Brigett is seated next to him. He is scowling, focused on the iPad in front of him.

“Fuck,” one of the security guards says, and Jay looks up, taking my apparel in from the lacy top of my nightgown right to the tips of my toes, painted red and encased in Louboutin five-inch fuck-me heels.

“Hello boys, I woke up hungry and Serena and I thought you may need some refreshments for the evening. I know Jay does since he’s expended all of his energy and needs to recharge,” I say, sauntering to the table and placing the platters of cheese and sausage in front of them before walking around the table to where he sits next to Brigett.

He is livid and pulls back his chair in an attempt to get up, but I slide onto his lap before he can. “Lover, you work so hard, I brought you some food,” I say, placing my arms around

his neck and kissing his lips as I curl my body into his lap. His arms come around me and pull me closer. “Throw me that blanket on the couch,” he growls to one of his men, and in less than a minute he has covered me from their sight. Brigett stands up, glares at me, and marches out of the room, slamming the door behind her. Serena’s eyes are dancing with delight, and I give her the thumbs up.

“Dammit, we were hoping with Jay off the market we could get a little action tonight,” Cole says.

“Oh, I like the sound of her banging anyone but my man. Let’s play a little game. First one that gets her into bed tonight gets 500 dollars,” I say, and Jay laughs out loud, gripping me by the nape and pulling me back hard against his body.

“Game on boys! She’s all yours,” he says, smiling widely at all of us.

“Serena, please join us,” I say, gesturing to the evacuated seat next to Jay and myself.

“It’s okay, I can come back to replenish and clean up later,” she says awkwardly.

“Please sit here, the guys aren’t going to hit on you. Are you, boys?” I say, narrowing my eyes at each of them as I make my way around the table. They shake their heads in agreement. “Serena is not like that skank, and I don’t want her to feel uncomfortable to be in the same room with all of you wolves,” I say.

“Serena, I give you my word, you have nothing to worry about. Take a seat,” Jay says, gesturing to the chair beside us.

“Thank you,” Serena says demurely, walking around the table and sliding in beside us. “So what card game are we playing?” I ask.

“New game, let’s play rummy,” Jay says, scooping up the cards that are in front of him and the person to his side, but not fast enough for me to grab the ones sitting in front of Dereck.

“Hmm, so we were playing poker?” I say, flipping my fingers one by one through the cards. “Give me the hands you have,” I say to Cole.

He lowers his head and passes them over. I look at the two hands and compare them to the ones in my hands. I point. "You would have won this round, no doubt," I say, and smile widely at his look of disbelief. "So, let's play. Who's dealing," I say, and turn to look at Serena. "You know how to play rummy?" I ask.

"I do, my brothers all play rummy," Serena says, smiling widely.

"Can you take your eyes off that computer for a few minutes and play with us," I ask Jay and am rewarded with a smirk.

"Deal, Angel," he says.

An hour later I'm still curled up in Jay's lap, under the blanket with this hard cock pressing into me as we play cards with his team and Serena. She is winning and grinning from ear to ear, clearly enjoying the dismay of the men.

I take my phone out and send Jay a text.

What would you like to bet if you had a better hand?

Angel, we've bypassed those little games. You've taken this to a new level. I want your ass.

I read his message for the third time and try my hardest to get back into the game. I may have been with a bunch of men over the years, and I have not regretted our time together, but I have always wanted to hold back, to give something unique to that special someone. A shiver runs down my spine at the thought of giving Jay something so intimate. I wanted to save it for the person that I would be with forever, but what if I don't have a forever with my perfect someone, what if it's only now?

I ponder this as the next hand is dealt and the game continues. Jay's team has made Serena feel very comfortable, and for that I am grateful. She is enjoying the game and laughing at the security team's antics as we play. The entire platters of food we brought in have disappeared, and I shake my head, wondering where they put it all, but they are all large virile men, and I have no doubt that they wear it off.

The hand is over, and the men get up, stretch, and begin to watch the overhead screens with interest. “Jay, we’ve got a little company when we land,” someone says.

“Scramble the flights again and get the men on the ground,” Jay says, lifting me as he stands. “Call me if you need me,” he says, walking with me out of the room, through the main cabin, into the bedroom, kicking the door closed behind him, and placing me onto the bed in front of him.

“I think tonight is the night that I claim you for my own. Spread your legs for me,” Jay says as his cell phone rings. He answers it in one swipe, irritated. “Jay here, what do you need?” he says.

He pauses, and his face goes pale as he listens, glancing back to me. “Fuck me,” he says.

JAY

MY PHONE RINGS and I see the caller. I'm annoyed at the intrusion, but I need the intel about Sasha. The thought that she may be a Russian Mafia spy gleaning information from her position in the ballet troupe is weighing heavily on my mind.

"What do you need?" I say.

"Intel just came back. This is so much more than we thought. She's not a spy; we think that she's the granddaughter of the fucking Russian Mafia. We need to get blood work and DNA nailed down."

"Fuck me," I say, trying to process what I have just heard as she lies on my bed in her silky nightie with fuck-me heels still on. If she was working to get intel from the Chicago Family, which is what I thought may have been going on, I could understand, given her hate for her real father, but that is clearly not what's happening here.

I turn from her and walk out the bedroom door and into the main room, which is still thumping with music I put on earlier. "You need to get blood types and details and have them into my hands by morning. Her DNA matches identically to Bernatelli. She's his daughter, we got the information from Matt, and that's how I was able to make the deal and get them to back off. Get a team to work on this all night," I say, disconnecting. How can she be Bernatelli's but related to the Russian Mafia also? What a damn mind fuck!

I walk back into the room, and she's still waiting for me, and those smoky blue fuck-me eyes are watching me intently. I want nothing more than to claim this woman like no one else has ever done. I will not take something that's so special to her, that she has not given to any of her previous lovers, until I am completely sure what the hell is going on. The Italian Mafia, who I now work for in a roundabout way, does not play nice with the Russian Mob, and I need to fully understand where she stands in this family puzzle.

"You want my ass?" Sasha asks.

I exhale my breath and my dick twitches. Fuck yes!

"Who wouldn't want your ass? It's gorgeous," I say, closing the door behind me.

"So it's just a physical conquest to you," Sasha says, looking up at me with those baby blues, and fuck, I hate this, but she's just given me the perfect reason not to take her ass tonight without telling her the real reason. I can't claim her in all good consciousness until I know that she is mine to claim.

"Angel, I won't take your ass until I know for sure that we'll be together long term. It's too special that you've saved it, and I want to take it when we're both certain."

I watch as the light in her baby blue eyes goes from sparkling with lust to hurt, and then the mask I've seen time and time again comes on.

"It's for the best because I do want to save it for someone special, someone that knows in his heart that I'm his and that's obviously not you," Sasha says, sliding her legs over the side of the bed and leaning down to remove her shoes.

I swallow the lump in my throat because she's all I ever think about, but just because I know I want her for my very own does not mean that it will be. There are too many unknowns, and I will not let her get attached any more than she already is until I know what we're facing, and I have a plan.

She wiggles her red painted toes into the creamy carpet and looks at me still standing by the door. "Whatever this

thing is that we had,” she gestures with her finger first to me and then to herself, “it just ended for the last time. You see, I am, too, what do you say, vested and I am not going to be that clingy girl that tries to hang onto someone that doesn’t want her. Now, if you don’t mind I’d like some time alone, please,” Sasha says.

I nod because I can’t say a fucking word right now or she’ll be in my arms, and I can’t do that to her. Instead, I turn and close the door behind me, trying to swallow the lump in my throat and the burning in my chest. I turn the music off in the main cabin and sink into a large comfortable chair and pick up my cell phone, thumbing mindlessly through all the photos I have of my beautiful angel, the one that I’ve just hurt for the very last time.

I type out a message to get that report done and back to me ASAP and look down at the incoming signal and sit up in my chair. Dammit, that’s all I need. I pick up the phone and connect to Matt.

“Hey,” he says laughing. “I just talked to Brian about the security plan.”

“What’s so funny! I’m not in the mood for Carrington’s shit,” I say.

Matt continues chuckling. “You knew he was going to go ballistic when he found out what the plan was.”

“I thought Chase talked to him,” I say, running my hand through my hair in frustration.

“He did, and he was all for it, but I don’t think he realized that would mean I wouldn’t be working directly for him anymore. You know how he gets over Jenny,” Matt says.

“Yeah, fucking crazed is what he’s like, and I don’t need his bullshit today,” I say, seeing Brian’s name light up on my incoming. “Gotta go, he’s ringing through,” I say.

“Jay here,” I say, but Brian cuts me off, and I grit my teeth.

“Jay, I just got off the phone with Matt, and he tells me that he’s one of the men selected to branch off into the newly developed security team,” Brian says.

“He’s one of our best men. I thought that would have been clear at the start,” I say.

“He’s not fucking leaving Jenny. She’s been through enough, Goddammit. She feels safe with him. He’s not going to be on your team. I will triple his salary, whatever I have to do, but the answer is fucking no!”

“All respect Brian, but this is his decision to make . . .” and he cuts me off again. “The fuck it is! He’s staying,” he yells, and I pull the phone away from my ear. Fucking hothead!

“Did you give him the chance to explain that I’ve asked him to be a full partner?” I say, and he starts to cut me off again, and I’ve had enough of his shit and this day.

“Would you let me finish? If he’s a partner, that means he won’t be sent out on jobs. Matt will be the one helping to organize the assignments, and he can do that from anywhere. He can do both if he wants, Brian. Like I said, it’s completely up to him. This is a great opportunity for us, and I thought you would be as happy as Chase. You’ll have all of your best men running security ops for all of your families,” I say.

I hear the heavy sigh on the other end of the line. “Matt didn’t tell me that, but I probably didn’t give him a chance either. I’ll give him another call, and I’m sorry,” Brian says.

I raise my eyebrows at my cell phone. “It’s okay, I know how much Jenny means to you,” I say.

“Are you taking Keith, too?” he asks, and I grimace because he’s on the list. “If he’ll sign on. He and his wife have a little one and are trying for another. He’s going to want an assurance of local work,” I say.

“Jenny feels comfortable with him, and he did a superb job while we were away. Maybe he and Matt could work out shifts or something,” Brian says, and I nod, thinking. That could work, very well in fact.

“Talk to him and then I’ll catch him later. I have some things I need to sort first,” I say.

“Will do, talk to you later,” Brian says before the line goes dead and I send Matt a text.

He's calling your ass next. He seems open to having Keith with Jenny, too. Your call. When do you land?

I'll think about it. Keith's a good man. I'll be at Chase's in about 2 hrs.

Roger that!

I send Chase a message to let him know that our team will be landing in Italy in about two hours and that Matt will meet us at his home. I smile at his reply and can picture Gaby, his rotund and lovable house manager bustling around the kitchen preparing for our arrival.

My eyes gravitate to the bedroom door of the jet, and I shake my head at the mess. I need to know answers before I can put a plan together that involves Sasha and doesn't hurt her any more than she has been already.

I walk into the security room, grab a Coke out of the fridge, and take a seat in front of the monitors. "Why don't you guys knock off for a while, I've got this," I say, turning my attention to the screen.

"Any report on the ground situation?" I ask Dereck. He's been with us for a long time, and he's the quiet one. He doesn't say much, but when he does, everyone listens, and the fucker can fight. I've seen him take out three armed men single-handedly with no weapon. Judo master or some shit like that. Quiet and deadly.

"We've got another team surrounding the strip and intel is keeping me posted real-time. We don't think we're their focus. The Larussios have a plane on the way back to Italy, and we think they may be the target," Dereck says.

"No time like the present to start helping the new family. You made your decision yet?"

"It was made the day you asked, I'm in. We should have a passenger list coming over shortly," Dereck says, and I nod as I send a text to Chase.

A Larussio jet is about an hour from landing in Italy. They've got company waiting. Intel is processing, we'll have a plan in place shortly.

Thanks, Jay.

Roger that.

Dereck heads out to the main cabin to get some sleep, and I am alone with the monitors and my thoughts. I know I shouldn't, but I just need to make sure she's okay. My finger hovers over the button that will engage the bedroom camera. I push it forward and look closer, not seeing her curled up in the bed where I expected her to be. I look at the other monitor, and my heart beats faster. What the fuck is she doing?

She's in her panties and bra, has one leg firmly planted while her other leg is slithering up the fucking wall and my dick hardens like a stone. Fuck I'd like to slide my fingers inside of her little panties while she's in that position, make sure she's dripping wet and then slide my dick in nice and deep. She extends her arms over her raised leg, and her beautiful hair falls to one side so I can't see her face. Sasha finally brings her leg down and repeats the process with her other leg, then she spins in some sort of dance, extending her legs in front, then up and outward. Her phone rings and she pauses to listen before speaking.

“Excellent! I'll meet you there. We land in a couple hours. Love you.”

SASHA

HE WALKS OUT THE DOOR, and it is only then that I let my tears fall. Time and time again this happens. He seemed happy to be with me, but then doesn't want to be with me? I cry into my pillow and feel like my heart is breaking into a million little pieces. I sob for what seems like forever, and I know without a doubt that I can't be anywhere near him. I know he's going to balk if I try to leave, and I know there is a risk that my father will not keep his word and have his men come after me, but he could have killed me several times and hasn't so I decide to take my chances.

I send my sister a text, and she writes back that she is on her way to Italy with Matt so that he and Jay can work out some business deal to form a new security company.

When will you arrive? I am not staying with Jay. I'll get a ride to a hotel and catch a flight back to Chicago tomorrow.

I am so happy that she's found someone that makes her happy, but I can't help the twinge of jealousy I feel.

A steely determination overtakes me. I am no longer going to allow my happiness to depend on the men in my life. I will focus on my career and make all of my dreams come true. A relationship will just cut into practice time anyway. I head into the bathroom to wash my tear stains away. "No more!" I say into the mirror. "No more!" Never will I let my heart be exposed like this again. Never! I slide out of my nightie and put a bra on to go with my panties and decide to burn some energy. I hit one of my exercise playlists, and the soft and

lilting music fills the room. I begin to stretch, relishing in the burn after a few days off with no practice.

My phone rings and I pick it up seeing my sister's name flash across the screen. "Hey, we're going to land in two hours, and Matt says we can pick you up and make sure you are checked into a hotel," Marenah says.

"Excellent! I'll meet you there. We land in a couple hours. Love you," I say before sliding to the floor in a full split, bending through it to feel the stretch from my inner thighs running all the way to my pointed toes. I follow through to stretch over my right leg, allowing my body to bend and my fingers to grasp my toes. I feel the stretch all the way down my side and waist and arms. I let my muscles soak in the movement and then do the same with my other leg. This is what I needed, and I begin to sink into my routine and for the next hour stretch, squat, and lift, using the dresser and mirror as my dance table.

I feel completely refreshed when I'm done and unclasp the small clip of my bra and walk toward the bathroom to jump into the shower. The warm water pelting over my skin feels invigorating after a long workout, and the shampoo smells amazing. I lather it into my hair, massaging my scalp and neck before I apply the thick creamy conditioner, allowing it to soak into the long strands while I shave. When I'm rinsed, I dry off with a towel from the warming station, slip into my robe, and wrap another towel around my hair before heading back into the bedroom. I pull up the listing for flight options from Italy to Chicago tomorrow. There are several choices and a couple with a few first-class seats left, so I'll book once at the hotel. I look up hotels and then surrounding boutiques until I find one that will have what I want. One quick call and everything I need to feel dressed to the nines and like me again are purchased and will be waiting at the hotel when I check in, along with a brand-new suitcase.

I get dressed and packed, placing a change of clothes and my baseball hat into my weekender bag. Jay's t-shirt is laying on one of the chairs in the corner. I pick it up and inhale his scent and hold it against me before slipping it into my purse. It

is all that I have left except memories. I hold the tears back once more and steel myself to walk through that door where everyone will be. His entire team will know that Jay is done with me, just like Brian. I raise my chin with a determination not to let my feelings show, and open the door.

To my surprise, it is entirely empty. Not one person is in the main cabin. The captain announces our final descent, and I slip into a seat by the window and watch the lights of the city looming far below in the night. I should be happy that Jay isn't sitting in this room and has left me to my own, but the sense of finality hits me even harder. We are finished and not even the fact that I was the one to end us helps diminish the hurt I feel.

I pull up the news on my phone and scan through the top stories of the day, skimming over them because I can't even pretend to focus. When the pilot announces that we will be landing momentarily, I brace myself, just like I always do, until the wheels are on the ground and we are flying across the runway, coming to a complete stop and then taxiing in close to the airport.

The security office door opens and out walks Dereck, Nick, Cole, and Brigett is next while Jay holds the door open for her as she passes through. I lower my eyes. I can't stand the looks that will most certainly be sent my way or the cattiness of that cheap whore. As if sensing the need for someone on my side, Serena appears from the service area and opens the door. "I'll walk out with you, I'm not flying back with the crew," she says.

"No?"

She shakes her head. "They will get a hotel for the night and then leave on the next assignment. My grandmother, my nonna, is close by and I'm going to spend some time with her," Serena says.

"That's wonderful. I'm sure your nonna will be excited to see you," I say.

"I can't wait to see her, either. She is such a blessing," Serena says shyly.

“Thanks so much for everything,” I say.

“Let’s go,” Serena says, leading the way down the ramp to the private airport entrance. I stop and turn, and Jay almost runs right into me. The look on his face is icy, but Brigett is standing by his side, smiling at me. I would love nothing more than to smack that look right off the bitch’s face, but I won’t give her the satisfaction of knowing how badly I am hurting.

I take a deep breath. Might as well get the conversation over. “I’m not going to Chase’s with you, Jay. Matt and my sister will be picking me up shortly and taking me to a hotel. I’ll catch a flight back home tomorrow. I need to run to the restroom before I meet them,” I say, spinning on my heels and heading toward the restroom sign.

My heart is pounding as I walk into the stall. Jay didn’t say a word, just like I knew he wouldn’t. The thought that Matt wouldn’t text him my plan is ludicrous. They are on the same team, and as soon as I hung up with Marenah, he probably sent Jay a text. I unzip, slip out of my heels and pull the dress over my head. I slide into a pair of skinny jean leggings and a cami, into my flats, put on a hoodie, tie my hair in a pony and slide it underneath the baseball hat that I angle sideways.

I pull my purse out of the weekender. The heels I’m wearing won’t fit into my purse; I’ll have to leave them. Dammit! I hang the weekender on the hook on the back of the stall, apply bright red lipstick, check my reflection in the mirror, throw my purse over my shoulder and walk out the door. I keep my eyes averted, on the ground in front of me and stride right out of the airport heading to the ground level which will take me to the taxi area.

I don’t speak a word of Italian and pull up the hotel I’ve reserved on my phone to show the driver when he stops. I get into the back seat angling my phone towards him, and he nods, smiling.

“I know exactly where that is,” he says in perfect English as he navigates us into the oncoming traffic.

I wait until we are clear before I send my sister the message. I don’t want her to worry, but I am also not foolhardy

enough not to know that if Jay thinks I am still in danger he will try to keep me with him and I'm not staying.

Change of plans. I will see you next month in Russia. Love you!

What's going on? Where are you? I'm at the airport looking for you.

Bathroom on the second floor by the shoeshine vendor. I left a bag in the bathroom stall. Can you grab it for me?

You are SO pissing me right off!

I'll explain later. Not now, please.

I just need some private time, and I sigh with relief when the calm washes over me. The driver pulls up beside the luxury hotel. I slide my card and add a fifty percent tip for payment.

Once checked in, the elevator takes me to the penthouse; a luxury of being a successful ballerina on tour is that money is never an issue. I throw my purse on the bed and pick up the room service menu.

I haven't slept well any of the times I tried to nap during the flight because I'm too wound up and have too much on my mind. The shrimp Serena gave me was the last I've had to eat.

I order decaffeinated coffee, tomato juice, bottled sparkling water for later, and an omelet with Egg Beaters, mushrooms, peppers, onion, pepperoncini, and a dusting of feta cheese. It may be late night in Italy but I feel like breakfast food. I strip out of my clothes and into the hotel robe as I wait for room service. The knock on the door less than twenty minutes later is unexpected, and I belt my robe tighter as I stretch to look out the peephole window.

There is a man in uniform with a cart in front of him, and I open the door hesitantly. "That was so fast," I say, and the man just nods and smiles at me. He pushes the cart into the room and places my breakfast on the table and hands me a slip to sign. I add a generous tip and know it is good when his face lights up in a smile before wishing me a good day in perfect English.

I lift the silver dome from my plate, and the scent of fresh peppers and onions waft through the air. The food is absolutely delicious, and the tomato juice is ice cold, just the way I like it.

The coffee smells delicious, bold and full of hazelnut scent, and tastes as good and creamy as it looks. It doesn't have the usual caffeinated kick I like, but I plan to snuggle into the king-sized bed and try to get some much-needed sleep before I deal with booking flights and maybe a little sightseeing tomorrow.

Looking at what remains on my plate, my mind drifts back to just how erotic it was to be fed while sitting in my lover's lap. I don't know if I will ever get the memory of that out of my mind.

I finish my meal and take two of the sleeping pills that I have with me, pull the drapes closed, and slip beneath the silky sheets. I snuggle into my pillow and am finally almost drifting when I hear the sound of an incoming message. I am sure it's Marenah, and I don't want her to worry, so I reach for my phone, already hazy from the effects of the pills. I read the message with blurry eyes as the pounding on my door starts, and my eyes widen. Holy fuck!

Chicago mob has tracked you. Open this fucking door, right the fuck now!

JAY

I'M STILL WATCHING my angel. What the hell is she up to? Who the hell is she meeting and who the fuck does she love? I need that fucking report, and I need it right the fuck now. I finally know exactly why Brian Carrington acts like a fucking hot head over Jenny Torzial, because if I don't get some answers soon, I am going to come off the fucking rails. I text Cole and Nick to get intel double time knowing that Dereck is probably fast asleep by now.

We're on it.

I sit behind the monitor and watch my angel dance in her white lacy panties and bra, stretching gracefully through her moves, and I think my heart is pounding harder than my dick. She spins, pivots and stretches and I imagine scooping her into my arms and letting her show me just how flexible she is in my bed.

She is slowing, spinning in slow motion, lifting her leg to guide her beautiful body around and around until she spirals slowly and gracefully, finishing with her hands outstretched on the floor. I don't think that I have ever seen something so beautiful and I know it's wrong, but I hit the range record and send the zip file of her dance to my phone.

If I have nothing left after tonight, at least I will have this. Sasha stands up, and as soon as my angel twists her arms to her back I know what she's going to do, but I can't avert my eyes from that screen as she removes her bra and her perfect breasts and pink nipples are exposed to me. Fuck she is just

too gorgeous, and then she walks out of the camera's view. I shift to the other monitor and watch her walk into the bathroom and close the door.

There is no way that anyone going through security tapes is going to watch that and I rewind, intending to delete these scenes but go too far. She is crying in bed, sobbing uncontrollably, and I make myself watch the hurt that I have caused the woman that has had enough pain to last a lifetime. The lump in my throat grows, but I could not in all good conscience take her special gift even though I was desperate to claim her.

I hit the delete button erasing all the footage of my beautiful angel and look down at an incoming message from Matt.

Sasha called her sister to pick her up at the airport. We'll get her safely to a hotel.

She's not going to a hotel. She's not fucking safe.

Get it sorted and let me know.

I smile, it was her sister she was talking to. Matt's the best friend I have, and he doesn't take my shit. What the hell is she thinking? I decide that we'll just act like nothing is different. Matt and her sister can meet us at the airport, and we'll all convince her to drive back to Chase's with us. She's not staying at a hotel in the middle of Italy when the mafia is all over town.

I turn the cameras off just before the door to the office opens, and Dereck, Nick, Cole, and Brigett walk in. She's smiling like a Cheshire cat, and I scowl at her from across the table. Her eyes drop, but Brigett just doesn't take a hint and keeps hanging around, cozying into the spot next to Dereck. Hopefully, she's working on getting one of the other guys because we're finished.

Nick and Cole set up at a side table running the intel feeds while Dereck grabs a Coke from the refrigerator and a sandwich. "Want anything?" he asks the group.

“Throw me a water would you?” Cole says, and a bottle goes soaring through the air, and he catches it.

I shake my head. I just want this fucking day to be over with, and I want the intel that will tell me what’s going on with my angel.

Cole and Nick begin typing feverishly in response to incoming messages and I am dying to know what’s happening. Fucking Brigett, go away, but she doesn’t. My phone beeps and I look at it long and hard. Fuck. Members of the Chicago Mafia are on the ground and are awaiting the landing of the Larussio jet. Snipers are in place with a hit order on one of the Larussios. I breathe a sigh of relief. They’re not after Sasha, but that means the men on the ground need to work hard to identify the snipers and take them out before they can get to Larussio.

We are still texting, and I keep glancing over at Dereck to see if he’s trying to make a move with her or not. If not, then she needs to get the hell out of here, but he doesn’t seem concerned either way and just keeps his eyes on the monitors as he downs his Coke.

The captain announces the touchdown before we hit the ground and taxi in. The men fold up their laptops, and I hold the door for them as they carry their stuff, with Brigett bringing up the rear following Dereck out the door.

I glance up, and Sasha is glaring at me, and I realize what she thinks. She turns and spins away from our group, keeping her eyes down, and my heart fills with regret, realizing that she’s embarrassed at what my team is thinking and seeing us come out with Brigett I’m sure did not help.

Sasha knows how I feel about lying and deceit and she intends to deceive me until Matt and her sister pick her up. Well, I’m onto her, and that’s not fucking happening on my watch. She’s coming back to Chase’s with us where I know I can keep her safe if I have to throw her over my shoulder and carry her kicking and screaming.

Serena comes out of the galley and talks with her for a moment before they both smile and walk down the ramp. They

stop abruptly, and I almost run into them, but Sasha turns and finally tells me what she has planned. She's waited until the very last minute, knowing that Matt and her sister will be here any moment, and then turns and heads to the restroom. This woman is going to be the death of me. I wait patiently for her to come out, but then an incoming message hits my cell. I glance down, and a shiver of apprehension goes through my body.

They have eyes on Sasha. We're sending additional teams in. The order is to take her alive.

My team is all reading their messages at the very same time, and I have no doubt they see the fear in my eyes. "Sasha should be done by now, I'll go get her. Bring the cars around and get eyes on their movement," I say, entering the women's bathroom. There is no one in there and only one door that is partially closed. I panic and stalk to the door, pushing it open and my angel turns around and glares at me.

"Excuse me! You wanna tell me why the fuck you're in the women's bathroom acting like a goddamn stalker?" she yells, and her foot flies out suddenly, connecting with my fucking nuts.

My eyes widen in pain as I back up, hanging onto the sink while I grab my junk, trying to catch my breath. Fuck that hurts like lightning, but I quickly overcome my shock and take off after Sasha's retreating frame. Cole has her captured in his arms, trying to get her to calm down and now she's crying. "Matt," she screams when she sees him, and it takes him less than three seconds flat to reach Cole, and deliver a punch to his face that sends him flying. He takes Sasha in his arms and kisses her forehead. "I'm so sorry, Princess. I don't know what happened, but I'll get it sorted," Matt says, running his hand down her face and now it's him that may just get punched right the fuck out.

"You wanna explain what the hell is going on here? Why do you have your goddamn hands all over Sasha and why the fuck did you just call her Princess?" I grind out.

They both look up at me like I have lost my mind and I just may have. Sasha ran from me and yelled for Matt to protect her instead of me, and if he doesn't get his hands off her, he's going to end up minus a few teeth. I am about to tell him just that, but he is the first to speak.

"I have no fucking idea what's going on, but this is the woman I told you about, my Marenah. Why do you keep calling her Sasha?" Matt says, and his eyes grow wide as he finishes that sentence and looks down at the woman in his arms.

I look closer too, stunned with dawning realization. This woman has the same height, hair, and baby blue eyes, but she's not looking at me the way my angel does, and I glance at her clothing and frown. She's wearing jeans and Sasha was wearing a dress, and just as I realize that we are dating beautiful blonde Russian twins, the fact that Sasha is now missing hits me like lead and fills my body with dread.

"If you're not Sasha, she's been taken. She went into the bathroom and never came out. Dereck, get a crew to get the air shafts checked. Cole, have intel focus in the on-camera footage. I want to see anyone that came in and out of this room in the last three hours. Home in on the last half an hour first. Nick, I need you to get a track on her phone. Here's her number, put her credit cards in the system, see if anything comes up."

"Wait, wait. Sasha is okay. She sent me to the bathroom to get the bag she left," Marenah says, pulling open the bag's zipper and retrieving the heels that my angel was wearing before entering the bathroom and the ones she'll be wearing when I light her little ass on fire.

"Jay, we've got problems. The Larussio plane is about to land. Giovanni Larussio is on it, and that's their mark. There is a mounting mob on the ground. I have two teams called in, and our snipers are in place."

"Safeguard him at all costs. Take them out if necessary!" I say, realizing my team doesn't have a contract in place yet, but I'm doing this for Chase. How would it look if his security

team knew one of his family members was about to get hit and didn't try to protect him. Chase can deal with the Larussios and the contract side. For now, I've made the call.

We walk quickly to the sidewalk, and our driver pulls up in the long black stretch. "Let's go," I say.

"I'll take Marenah to Chase's and then rejoin you," Matt says.

"No, she's my sister, and I want to find her. I'm tougher than I appear," she says, staring up into Matt's eyes and it's the weirdest feeling watching her. The exact same look, but without any fucking spark, no goddamn chemistry to speak of. Twins, what a mind fuck.

I glance at Matt. "Save your breath. We don't have time, and if she's anything like her sister, you won't win the argument anyway," I say, awarding me the first smile from her that I've seen as we all pile into the stretch.

Marenah nods. "I think we're going to get along just fine," she says to me and smiles mischievously at Matt who is scowling down at her. "I'm Marenah, Sasha's baby sister by about five minutes," she says to everyone.

"I'm Jay, and this is Nick and Dereck. Cole is the one who just got punched out by your boyfriend," I say, grinning as Cole glares first at me and then at Matt.

"Sorry, man," Matt says, grinning widely and extending his hand to Cole.

Cole takes it reluctantly and shakes his head. "No fucking drama for years and now you two hook up with the drama twins," he says, winning him a half scowl, half smile from Marenah.

Nick looks down at his phone. "We've got Sasha, she just checked in at a hotel not far from here. The bad news is that the Chicago Family is watching her card, too. It just popped up on their surveillance, and they've just given the order to move in."

"Floor this fucking thing," I growl to the driver.

SASHA

I READ the message with blurry eyes as the pounding on my door starts, and my eyes widen. Holy fuck!

Chicago mob has tracked you. Open this fucking door, right the fuck now!

I look at the message for a few seconds, trying to shake the haze before getting out of bed and walking to the door. I still don't understand how Jay has found me. Am I dreaming? I stand on my tip toes, look through the peephole and see Jay glaring at me, and open it. "I'm sorry. I didn't think my father would really come after me."

He stalks into the room. "We don't have time to talk, grab your purse," Jay says, opening up my suitcase to throw the shopping bags lying around into it.

"Stay behind me," Jay says, half dragging me to the exit door and into the stairwell, closing the door behind us quietly just as the ding of the elevator alerts us of an upcoming visitor. I have the floor to myself, and room service has already delivered my food. No one should be on this floor right now, and it is difficult to keep my head upright.

He grasps my waist and pushes my head into the crook of his arm, and we walk down the stairs. One floor, then two floors, then three floors and fear so intense runs through me.

The adrenaline, all that has happened, the sadness I feel of losing Jay, and the overwhelming feeling that my father has decided to end my life are all too much. It happens time and time again. No one wants me, and now the sleeping pills are

overtaking me. I feel like I am on the outside watching as I shut down. I try to warn Jay, but no sound comes out before I fall into the black oblivion.

JAY

ALL OF A SUDDEN she stops walking and starts to sway. I put Sasha's suitcase down just before she passes out in my arms. I hit Dereck's number. "I'm in the stairwell, far right looking in. Three flights down and have to leave her suitcase."

"Roger that."

"Have the driver pull around to the right front," I say, making my way down the stairs with her pressed to my chest. Her breathing is shallow, and my heart is beating like I'm in a fucking war zone. This shit goes on daily in my life, but it's a whole new ballgame when my angel is involved. I hear the stairwell door open and hear the shoes of the enemy clicking quickly against the concrete stairs above us, then hear the muffled exclamations when they find the suitcase and realize she's just ahead of them. They are excited that they have found her, and then I hear Dereck take the fuckers out with one precise shot to each of their heads.

I reach the bottom of the stairs, Matt opens the car door, and everyone makes room to let us in. "Sasha, what happened?" Marenah cries when she sees her sister's lifeless body.

"She passed out, but she's breathing on her own," I say. My thumb hasn't left her pulse in case I need to breathe the fucking life back into her.

Dereck raps on the trunk of the limo a few minutes later, and the driver pops it open. He throws Sasha's suitcase in and then slides in next to us. "Let's move," he says to the driver.

Dereck scowls when he looks at Sasha crashed out cold in my lap. “Is she okay or do we need the doc?” he asks.

“I honestly think she’s just passed out,” I say, shaking my head, unable to take my eyes from her sleeping form.

“She doesn’t like flying. She usually takes a couple sleeping pills when she travels overseas,” Marenah says, digging around in her sister’s purse until she finds what she’s looking for and holding the packet of sleeping pills for us to see.

“After the night she’s had, that would probably do it,” I say, brushing her hair out of her face so that I can watch her sleep in my lap, knowing that my finger won’t come off of the pulse in her neck until she awakens.

“The angel sleeps,” Dereck says before leaning his head back against the seat rest and closing his eyes.

“Did you call the cleanup team?” I ask.

“You know that I did.”

“I have no doubt, but you know I have to ask,” I say.

“Uh-huh, sent their pics to intel, too,” he says.

“Status on the ground?” I ask.

“Mission accomplished, and Giovanni Larussio is on his way home. The cleanup crew is working overtime tonight,” Nick says, smirking at me and saving me the trouble of asking. Bunch of wise guys I have working with me, but I wouldn’t trade them for anyone. The only ones we’re missing are Damian and Keith, who are tied up with Jenny and Brian and a situation with her niece, and Sheldon, who is already with Chase and Katarina.

It is another thirty-minute car ride until we get to Chase’s and we enter the gates. Nick keys in the passcode to the guest house and I carry her up the stairs. This house has ten bedrooms, all with private bathrooms. While there are enough for her to have her own room, I take her to the one I’ll be using.

I slip her robe off and tuck her underneath the covers with nothing on but her white cami and lacy undies. I push her hair out of her face and kiss her again before making my way back downstairs to my men.

True to her word, Gaby, Chase's housekeeper, more like a surrogate mom to all of us really, has filled the refrigerator with beverages and lots of food. She's going to put my men into a sugar coma with all of her pies, but they seem completely happy with their fate as they sit around the bar and consume the desserts and food she has made.

Matt stands up and helps Marenah with him. "I'll tuck her in and be back down in a bit," he says, and she blushes.

"Thank you for taking such good care of my sister even when she was fighting against it. She seems to think that one day our father will somehow come to his senses and declare his love for us. The sad reality is we are a constant reminder of what he lost and will never have. He chose the money instead of love, and he will never put himself in jeopardy of losing it," Marenah says, turning and walking up the staircase with Matt, who has his hand on the small of her back.

"You're welcome," I say, low enough that no one but myself can hear. I open the refrigerator, grab some water, and sit down with the team.

"Matt and I are going to meet with Chase tomorrow and conference with Brian. If you're still in, we'll let them know that we're going to take the deal. It will mean that we need to expand the team quite a bit, get a recruitment and training plan in place. Since Matt and I will own the company, we'd like to set it up to provide equal profit sharing to the ten people on our core team, and you will each be responsible for your regional areas."

Matt walks downstairs, and Nick starts counting out loud on his fingers. "I don't get it, there are nine of us," he says, and I smirk at the smartass as he continues. "Cole, Dereck, Sheldon, Matt, Jay, Damian, Nate, Keith, and me, who's ten?" Nick says.

“We should decide as a group, but I’d like to bring Scottie on board. He’s been Carrington’s head of security for years, and like a father to Brian. He’s proven his loyalty and skills, and his connections with Interpol would be invaluable,” I say.

“The one that calls everyone lad,” Cole says, smiling before he pops the last bite of a piece of pie into his mouth.

“That would be the one,” I say, knowing it was going to be a thing.

“He’s got my vote. I talked to Damian after shit went down with Jenny, and he said Scottie was willing to take a bullet to keep them from getting to her,” Dereck says.

One by one they give the vote. “I’ll make the call tomorrow before I talk to Chase and Carrington,” I say.

“Everyone okay with the way we want to set it up?”

“It’s more than generous. You’ve secured our salaries on top of the contracts, and you’re bringing us in as partners with profit sharing. It couldn’t be better,” Cole says.

“They want their families and loved ones protected and are willing to put in a system and structure that provides that security long term. They’re good men,” I say, and everyone on my team nods their acknowledgment, and I have no doubt that each and every one of them would sacrifice their own life for those in our care.

“It’s been a hell of a day; I’m going to turn in. Who’s on tonight?” I ask.

“I’m wide awake, and Marenah needs her sleep. I’ll cover the first shift,” Matt says.

“I’m still running communications intel. I’ll take the first shift with you if you want to take over in a few hours, Cole,” Nick says.

“Roger that. I’ll get a few hours of sleep and then join you,” Cole says, snagging another piece of Gaby’s pie as he walks by the counter. “What? It has baby Snickers bars in it,” he says, grinning as he bites off the tip of the triangular dessert.

“I’ll catch the next shift,” I say, but Dereck shakes his head.

“You and Matt get a good night’s sleep and finalize the deal in the morning. We’ve got it covered,” Dereck says, and the team nods in agreement.

“And you are positive that every single one of you wants to sign up for taking care of not only Chase and Brian but the families, and you know what I mean by that. Once we agree, we don’t ever go back. It means we contract out, but Chase and Brian’s extended family will also be protected,” I say, observing each of them.

“We’ve all talked about it. I don’t think any of us were too keen on taking on a contract to protect the Italian Mafia, but the bottom line is, we already have. Carlos Larussio may not be dabbling, but you know he’s running the strings, and we’ve been protecting him and his family since the accident. He’s Chase’s dad’s best friend and hell, if things hadn’t been different for Chase’s dad, he’d be part of the mafia himself. Bottom line, they’re good people, they’re good to our families and us, and we’re in. It’s an honor that Chase and Brian want us to run the teams that support their loved ones and friends,” Cole says.

I glance around the room, and the team is all nodding, going in eyes all open. I look to Matt to see if he has any questions, and it’s clear he doesn’t. They’ll take this on knowing that it means we will all be working for the entire Italian Family and they are a vast and complicated family. “Alright, we’ll finalize the deal in the morning,” I say, walking out of the dining room, still contemplating what changes that may mean for our team.

The sender’s name on my message makes my heart race and my feet stop dead in their tracks. I open the note and read it slowly, wondering if I made the right decision to send the DNA that Matt identified on to our intel team.

Detailed report in your inbox.

I head into the den and slide into the recliner, unlace my boots and toe them off as I sit back and pull up the email on

my phone.

I skim through the initial two pages documenting her name, place of residence, current occupation, and description, but slow when the report winds to birth. Born in a hospital in Moscow, as Sasha Koslov. Mother nineteen and father twenty. Sasha's mother is the daughter of Ivan Vlasenko, head of the Russkaya Mafiya, a man rumored to lead the Bratva with an iron will. My heart is pounding as I read on. The remains of Koslov, Sasha and Marenah's father, son of the caretaker for the Vlasenko estates, were found wrapped around a tree after Koslov visited the hospital the day before Sasha's mother and her twin daughters were released in the care of Vlasenko.

I spend the next few hours reading and rereading every piece of this document, trying to find any possible way that it may work and swallow hard.

I am a man that deals with cold hard facts, assesses the situation, develops a plan, and acts accordingly. The hard plain fact is that I can't have a relationship with a daughter of the Russian and Chicago Mafia while working for the Italian Family.

SASHA

I WAKE IN A HAZY MIST, my throat dry and lips parched, feeling like they will crack at any moment. I try to sit up, but it is a struggle. Damn, I should have only taken one tablet last night, and then all of a sudden I remember Jay. I look around at my surroundings, and I have no clue if it is the same hotel room or somewhere different. But no, there was danger; Jay got me out of that room, and then I remember, they were coming after us and my heart was beating, faster and faster, stair after stair, and then I don't have any recollection of what happened.

I look down at my clothing and blush. I'm only in my cami and panties. Jay must have undressed me, and the thought of him doing that makes my center clench with desire. He took care of me again. When I needed him the most and didn't even know it myself. No one else has ever done that for me, and I lie back on the luxurious pillows, dreaming about what I want him to do to me as the sun rises and starts to shine into the bedroom windows.

I grab my cell phone and send a message to my sister.

I'm with Jay, and okay.

I know! I'm coming up to your room!

I slide up and look around at my surroundings and have no idea where I am. What does Marenah mean she's coming up to my room? How does she know where I am? I grab my purse and pull out the sleeping pill packets. I took two, I usually take one, and I remember going to bed and Jay gathering my stuff

and getting me out of the hotel. I just don't remember what happened after that. I rub my throbbing head trying to remember.

I look up as the door bursts open, and she stands there, staring at me. "I'm okay, Marenah," I say, and she jumps on the bed, grasping me in her arms.

"It's okay," I say, wrapping my arms around her, pulling her close. The only person that I have cared about except for our mother, the only one that I will sacrifice whatever it takes for.

She's still nestled in my arms, and I look down at her as she looks up at me. "We're dating best friends," she says, smiling, and her sparkling blue eyes are dancing with happiness.

"Is that so?" I say, hugging her tight against me.

"I'm with Matt, and you are with Jay," she says.

I let that sink in for a few minutes, and as much as I wish it were true, I can't lie to my sister. "Baby, he and I spent some time together, and it was wonderful, but we're not what you would call exclusive," I say.

My sister sits up and looks me straight in the eyes. "Tell me you did not just tell me that he wants to screw you while he's playing around," Marenah says, her baby blue eyes heating up like fire.

"Calm down. It's not like that. We're just not really a couple," I say, not wanting Marenah to think badly of Jay. He's been honest and upfront with me, and that's a hell of a lot more than I have had from anyone else in my life. "We had a good time, we were exclusive while we were together, but it's no more than that," I say.

Her crackling blue eyes penetrate mine for a few moments and hold my gaze. "You honestly don't know, do you?" Marenah says, watching me intently.

"What are you talking about? I really don't remember much about last night," I admit.

“Jay is in love with you,” she says softly.

I let the words sink in and with every fiber of my being wish it was true, but I know that it is not. Jay is just a very honorable man that will protect anyone in danger. I will not be that terrible, clingy woman again. I breathe deeply because giving him up in my mind is one thing, but expressing it to other people is entirely different and sharing this anguish with my sister cements the hurt.

“He’s not in love with me, Marenah. We had a great time, and I will never forget him. He showed me such kindness, protectiveness, and romantic things that I can’t even share with you right now. It breaks my heart to see him go, but I can’t beg for someone’s love. I’ve done it for a lifetime,” I say, and while I hate how her head hangs in despair, I know that she, like me, understands how deeply our father has hurt us, both in different ways.

“Jay wouldn’t let you out of his lap the entire way home, carried you upstairs and put you to bed. He cares about you, Sasha. You can’t let your father continue to rule the way you think about men,” she says.

I narrow my eyes at her. “That man is your father, too,” I say.

She shakes her head. “He’s not to me. We feel different about him. While you’ve always tried to find a way to make him love you, I have hated him from day one, and watching him reject you makes me hate him more each and every time. I don’t want his approval. I want to find out all his dirty secrets and bury his ass with them,” Marenah says.

“Yes, and now that we’re together, you are going to tell me what that stunt in the bar was all about. You could have been killed. What were you thinking?” I admonish.

She suddenly looks fearful and shakes her head again. “Sshh. Voices down! I promise I’ll tell you, but not here. I don’t know where the cameras are and it’s not something I want Matt and his team to find out about right now.”

“When then? We’ve been putting it off for too long. God, Marenah, what happened?” I say. If she thinks some knight in shining armor can just waltz in and get her away from Bernatelli’s goons, she is sadly mistaken. They will come for her and when they find her— I shudder.

“Soon, when we’re alone and when I can, I’ll tell you the whole story,” Marenah says, hugging me tightly.

“Hmm, we’ll talk,” I say, honoring her request to speak about it later.

“Are you going to come downstairs and be sociable?” she says.

I roll my eyes, sliding my legs over the side of the bed. “If I must,” I say, gaining a tinkling laugh from my sister. “I need to shower, then we can go for breakfast and you can tell me about your man,” I say.

Her eyes sparkle with delight.

“There’s so much to blab about. I don’t even know how to describe it. Matt’s just, I don’t know, everything I could have ever imagined,” she says, looking up at me and then catching herself. “Go. We can talk about this later, after the guys are at work or something. Over wine,” Marenah says, and I laugh, nodding my agreement before heading into the shower.

I slip out of my clothes and underneath the shower, contemplating our conversation. I am delighted for my sister, and that happiness is only dimmed by the sadness over my own failed relationship, but I am determined that she is not to see it. Marenah has never been one to commit.

The thought of getting close to someone was always a hard limit for her, where I had a burning need to find someone who loved me, and of course, they never did. They liked my body and the passion we shared but wanted nothing more, but that’s not how my sister rolled. She rejected each and all the suitors clamoring at her door. I think our father’s rejection of us has left each of us with different wounds to heal. A tap on the door brings me out of my reverie.

“Matt sent me a text. They’re having breakfast before they have to go into a meeting. I’m going to head down. Hurry,” Marenah says.

“I will,” I call out, rinsing my hair and wringing it through my hands before I get out and dry off.

Do I really want to see him, or is it best that I just stay in my bubble until he’s gone? I will be forever grateful for him rescuing me last night. I shudder at the thought of what they would have done to me if they had found me, out cold and lying helplessly at their mercy. If he wanted to pursue this relationship, he would have stayed until I woke up or given me some sort of sign.

He didn’t, and while it pains my heart, I know that I need to get over hoping that he will. Jay is the most honorable man that I have ever met, has protected me time and time again, been open and honest with me about our relationship, and I owe him the same. I finish dressing and swirl, assessing myself in the mirror.

It is time to let him go for good.

JAY

I HAVE GONE through the scenarios over and over all night long. It boils down to one thing. I can't be with the granddaughter of the head of the Russian Mafia and daughter of the head of the Chicago Mafia if I am signing on to protect the Italian Family.

There are a few scenarios, and they play out in my head almost all night long, but one just keeps repeating and repeating.

We continue the course we were on, and Matt and I agree to become sole owners of the security company that spreads across the globe, with our top men respective leaders of their regions. The connection between Sasha and the Russian Bratva is learned, and war explodes between the families. My head lolls with the enormity of what that could entail. Chase and Brian and their families as well as my entire team could be decimated as a result of my desire.

Regardless of the articles about the twins' father dying in a crash on his way home, I am holding the DNA that proves without a shadow of a doubt that they are not even a close match to the caretaker's son, but are in fact a perfect match to Bernatelli, which is undoubtedly why someone found Koslov wrapped around a tree. The only good news is that she is not a spy, she just has questionable lineage. But that doesn't change what I have to do. I glance down to read the text on my phone, and suddenly understand why she was so scared. The men Dereck took out weren't the Chicago Mafia, but Dominic

Mancini's men, the same ones that split from the Chicago Family and tried to get into bed with the Italians.

She must have thought they would come after her, but those bastards are dead now and she'll never have to worry about them again. Her piece of shit father, however, is another story.

I spend the next few hours reading and rereading every piece of this document, trying to find any possible way that it may work between the woman sleeping in my bed and me. I go and check on her and she is still resting peacefully. I don't dare take her in my arms, but instead kiss her forehead before covering her with the blanket and head back downstairs. I finally drift, sleeping fitfully in the recliner, and wake to the sunrise over the vineyards in the distance. I walk to the bathroom to get ready for the day, looking in the mirror and gearing up for the conversations that are to come. It has to be done, and it will be, but it doesn't make the pounding in my heart any slower or easier as I walk toward the main house and into Chase's office.

He's already behind the long mahogany desk in his office. It always makes me smile when people think billionaires have a life of luxury. The guy sitting in a three-piece suit has already worked out for over an hour, taken in the stocks, showered, and is sitting here ready to take care of whatever I'm about to bring him, and the sun has barely risen.

He looks up as I come closer and gestures to the chair.

"Jay, tell me what's on your mind," he says.

"I appreciate you meeting with me before Matt arrives. The situation that I find myself in is not good for any of the people that I work for, it could become a conflict of interest, especially as we look to expand," I say.

Chase's eyes narrow in on my own. "You look terrible and clearly haven't slept much. I read the intel reports last night. Sasha took off, and you and your team found her," he says.

"Yes, I thought our enemies had her. I was wrong, she was running from me," I say, and until I say it out loud, I don't

know just how bad that hurts.

“But if you hadn’t gotten there, I understand they would have taken her,” Chase says.

I nod. “What I’ve learned about Sasha is a conflict of interest, Chase. As much as I love working for you and appreciate all the opportunities that you’ve provided me with of late, I have to decline your offer. I don’t know what it is about Sasha, but it’s something primal. I need to take care of her. I knew that her father was the head of the Chicago Mafia when Matt brought that intel back to us, but what I didn’t know and just recently learned is that her mother is the daughter of the head of the Russian Mafia, the Bratva. The team is fully supportive of your offer, but her family puts me in a direct conflict of interest. If you’re interested, I will stay with you and Katarina. You can put someone else in charge of the new company unless even working for you is too much of a conflict,” I say.

Chase looks from his laptop up to me. He is always a fucking businessman regardless of the situation. “What does she really mean to you?” he asks.

I don’t even have to think about a response. “Everything. I want Sasha for my own, but I won’t bring trouble to your doorstep. I’ll resign, do whatever you want,” I say.

Chase nods and looks at his computer for a few moments.

“I know exactly how that feels and I appreciate your honesty, Jay. When you meet the one, there is no going back. Katarina is that one for me and clearly Sasha is the one for you.”

“Chase, I’ll do whatever it takes to distance myself from you and our team if that’s what you want, but I won’t lose her,” I say.

He nods. “It’s unfortunate our work is now intersecting with the Chicago and Russian Mafia, but I appreciate your honesty and forthrightness about the entire situation. It’s the reason I feel comfortable with my family in your care, but nothing has changed for me, and I’m sure Brian will feel the

same. I will take responsibility to clear it with the family, and you and Matt will remain at the helm. I understand the ladies are twins,” Chase says, smiling.

It takes a moment to process. “And you know things can come up that will put us in the position of taking care of them?” I say.

“I’m more than fully aware. If there comes a time that a conflict arises, you come to me, and we decide together how to proceed,” Chase says.

I nod, trying my best to hold back the emotion I feel. “Of course I will, but there’s one more thing. I don’t think Matt knows the full extent of the family history. I just got the intel last night,” I say.

“Like you, Matt would never do anything to put the people he cares for at risk, especially Jenny. I have no concern, but the same thing applies. A conflict of interest arises, and you come to Brian and me.”

“I don’t know how to thank you.”

“Safeguard my family.”

There is a knock on the door, and Chase opens it for Matt and shakes his hand. “Thanks for coming. If you are both ready, let’s get Brian on the phone and get this contract set up,” Chase says, grinning widely.

WE WALK OUT of the office with smiles on our faces. Fucking Chase and Brian! They’ve just handed us the opportunity of a lifetime and Matt and I both know it. The salaries and benefits alone are ridiculous but went up exponentially when the Italian Family learned that our team intercepted a hit and saved the hotshot of the family, Giovanni Larussio, from getting in the crosshairs of an itchy trigger finger.

We can’t wait to tell the crew about the salaries. They’ll be pumped, but they’re going to flip the fuck out when they find out that we’ll be starting the company off with three jets of our

own and unlimited access to vacation homes around the globe. These men work hard and play hard. We already know they're going to love it, and best of all I am free to have Sasha for my very own.

The two of us walk into the guest house. "Jay, there's something I should tell you," Matt says. I know he just wants to make sure I know about the family connection and stop him.

"Let's touch base later," I say, parting with him in the hallway. I take the stairs to our room and look around, but she's not there. I head back downstairs and find Marenah curled up in Matt's lap and he's showing her something on his phone.

"You know where Sasha is?" I say.

She looks up at me and nods but doesn't say anything.

"Um, you gonna tell me where that might be?" I ask.

"She went back to Chicago, Jay. I'm really sorry," Marenah says.

"What the hell do you mean she went back to Chicago? How the fuck did she get out of here and how is she getting home?" I say, bewildered beyond words.

"I arranged it for her. She was going to try to find a commercial flight. I sent Nick with her, and we have a team safeguarding her once she gets on the ground. She's safe, Jay," Matt says.

"Why did she leave?" I ask Marenah.

"She doesn't think you care about her. I told her that you do. Hell, anyone can see that you're crazy about her, but that's not what she feels, and she's been through a lot over the years. She has an overwhelming need to feel loved, and unfortunately although our mother loved us dearly, we didn't ever get that from the men in our lives. It's affected each of us in different ways. Sasha, unfortunately, has a habit of being clingy with breakups, and she's trying to be different this time," Marenah says, and her eyes tear up, and she looks so much like my angel that I have to look away.

SASHA

I WALK UP the ramp of the plane, surrounded by security. Nick is right by my side, takes my arm and leads me to the main cabin. “We’re by ourselves on this flight. Make yourself comfortable,” he says, gesturing around the room. “This remote turns on the stereo, the fireplace, and the overhead television,” Nick says, running through the settings with me.

I nod, wrapping my arms around myself to keep warm. With every fiber of my being I just want Nick to leave, let me be alone to wallow in my despair, but he doesn’t.

“The bedroom is through that door, and there’s another bathroom, too. Full disclosure, the cameras are on in the main cabin, but we’ll keep them off in the bedroom if you want us to,” Nick says.

“If I want you to? What does that mean?”

He looks a little uncomfortable. “It’s usually turned off by the command of the person in charge of the flight.”

I grit my teeth. “I see, so a free movie for anyone that wants to watch if the person in command doesn’t shut it down,” I say.

He shakes his head. “Partially, but not exactly. You see, the camera is only on when one of our people thinks there’s danger.”

I nod my head. “Thanks, Nick. I don’t mean to be what you Americans call pissy, it’s been a long few days. If you

don't mind I'm going to take a nice long rest in that amazing looking bed, but without cameras," I say.

"You know it's none of my business, but are you sure you want to do this? Jay cares about you. He's never been like this with a woman before," Nick says.

"I know he does, but not the serious way. It's for the best, Nick," I say.

He looks doubtful. "Here, give me your cell phone," he says, reaching out and taking it from me, playing with the keys and then handing it back to me. "I've placed my name in your contacts. One message or call to me and I'll be on my way. You have nothing to fear, okay?"

I nod. "Thank you for your help. I just desperately need sleep right now," I say.

"Very well. Text or yell if you need anything," Nick says as he closes the door behind me.

Finally by myself, but it doesn't bring the peace that I crave. I remember Jay rescuing me from the madman, threatening his life with his gun unless he let me go. I remember Jay capturing me in his arms and taking me away. I remember him whispering into my ear, making sure that I was okay and everything that happened afterward.

I slide out of my clothes, letting them pile onto the floor as I climb into bed and pull the sheets and comforter around me.

JAY

IT IS with the gravest of resolve that I don't stop that fucking plane and try talking my angel into staying with me, forcing her hand if I need to, but her sister's words keep ringing in my head. "She doesn't think you care about her. I told her that you do. Hell, anyone can see that you're crazy about her, but that's not what she feels, and she's been through a lot over the years."

As many lovers as she's had, she has held out giving anyone her special gift, and she wanted to give it to me, and I turned her down. The look on her face before I walked out of the room will always haunt me, but as much as I wanted to, I couldn't take what she had saved and damn if that's why she thinks that I don't want her for my very own. I turned down the most precious gift she had to offer to a lover.

I head back into my room, the one that still has the scent of my angel on the sheets, slide into the chair behind the desk, and get busy putting plans in place to ensure her safety and capture her for my very own. Nick is with her, and I trust him with my life. He keeps in constant contact, assuring me that she is okay and sleeping soundly. Our intel units haven't come across any chatter that would lead us to believe that the Chicago Family is onto her today, but they've been coming after her, and until I talk to Bernatelli again personally, I want her completely safeguarded.

I send a note, and the fucker keeps me waiting, but if he thinks I'll back down, he doesn't have a clue. In the meantime,

our security team has surrounded Sasha to ensure she is safe, and Nick is giving me hour-by-hour reports.

I allow Bernatelli two excruciatingly long and painful days before my patience is done. I send him a message with the results of the DNA test proving that he is Sasha's father, along with a headline Cassie has provided that suggests his involvement with the murder of the caretaker's son reported to be their father. It lets him know in no uncertain terms that if he doesn't rein in his goons, his love affair with the daughter of the head of the Russian Mafia will be splashed all over social media and chat rooms of the underground. The Bratva will come for him, they will have to uphold their honor.

In less than five minutes flat I receive an answer and know that all of his teams have been alerted and will now back the fuck off. I can finally breathe easier, knowing my angel is no longer on the mafia's hit list, and this time I know it's true because we have documented confirmation. Anyone that disobeys, even looks at her wrong, will be killed on the spot.

I send a text to Nick to find out how she's doing and wait patiently as he begins typing a message back to me.

She's safe, but not so good. Sasha acts like she's fine during the day, going to practice and stuff, but she's got bags underneath her eyes and looks terrible. You need to get this shit worked out or watch her yourself.

Just keep her safe, please.

She doesn't think I care about her in any way except sex, or our chemistry, and that is on me. But I am a very patient man, trained in identifying an objective and developing very strategic plans to ensure the end game is achieved. In my world, nothing is left to chance, and in the next three hours, I prepare myself for what's to come and get on a plane to Chicago with the people that mean the most to me.

THE CURTAIN RISES, and my chest tightens as my angel finally glides onto the stage. For the next hour, my eyes track her and

follow the production, never for a moment losing sight of her beautiful body as she floats over the stage.

When the curtain closes, the cast receives a standing ovation, and the thundering applause brings her and her team back onto the stage. On cue, my security detail delivers flowers to her, placing the beautifully wrapped stems of the forty-eight long-stemmed perfect red roses entwined with baby's breath into her outstretched arms so that I can watch her reaction through the camera link they've uploaded to my phone.

My eyes don't leave my phone, watching every breath she takes and every single emotion that passes over her face as she realizes they are from me. She bows for the crowd and then rises up, and I can tell exactly when she sees the note nestled into the stems and she's searching the audience for me. If she had the advantage of the light not pouring directly into her eyes, I'm sure she would find me in the crowd, but instead, she bows again with the group and then heads backstage.

She reaches her dressing room and pulls out the note tucked into the stems, unwrapping it and rereading it. I watch with nervous anticipation as tears begin to gather in her beautiful eyes. I thought she would be happy, and my chest tightens as more tears continue to fall from her bright blue eyes and slide down her prominent cheeks.

"YOU WERE HERE," she says barely above a whisper, wiping her eyes as she caresses the message I've sent. I was, and still am, Angel. I watch her bring it towards her, and when her heart-shaped lips touch the note, my dick hardens on the spot. It makes the anticipation of the night I've planned and the risks of either winning or losing her just so much harder to think about.

SASHA

THE DANCE, it is the only thing that has kept me sane in the last few days, able to keep Jay out of my thoughts, at least by day, but it will no longer work because the man I can't stop thinking about is here, in this very arts center. He must have deliberately found out where I would be performing and had flowers sent. I couldn't see him, but I felt him. The palpable energy focused on my heated skin.

I slip under the luxurious jet streams of the double-headed shower, letting the warmth of the water and silkiness of the body wash take me away from everything that I've been thinking. I slide the towel around my body, and fasten it in front, letting it hang down the length of my body. I investigate the dress in the bag hanging from my dressing room closet, the one that Jay had delivered during my performance and wants me to wear tonight.

When I'm ready and dressed, I spin around admiring the short black dress with the open back, so low it dips just above the curve of my ass. I slide into the Jimmy Choos that he's sent over with the ensemble and gasp. Everything fits like it was tailor-made for me. Just like on every other night of a performance, I go and congratulate the cast before making my escape. As I head into the crisp night air of the windy city, the solitude surrounds me and reminds me of all the nights that this feeling of loneliness after a production led me to try to find someone that made me feel just a little bit better about myself.

A hookup hasn't even crossed my mind since I met Jay, but dammit, the loneliness and heartbreak of missing him has not eased at all. The sex is scorching between us, but I know in my heart that if I allow myself a repeat with Jay, I will end up feeling used and unworthy. I inhale deeply, knowing that I am walking away from a night of ecstasy at his hands, but also that I am guarding my heart. If I go home with him for a night of sex, my heart will hurt even more tomorrow.

A cab driver pulls to the curb and rolls down the passenger window to see if I need a ride, but the hand on my nape catches me off guard, and I spin around to face Jay watching me intently with those deep hazel eyes.

“Angel, I told you to congratulate your cast and wait for me. You didn't spend much time with your team,” Jay says.

I did visit with them less tonight, excited to see him again, but scowl.

“And just how do you know how much time I normally spend with them, mister stalker?” I say.

Jay smirks, and he leans into the door, handing the driver a wad of bills. “For your trouble,” he tells the man, spinning me around as the taxi navigates back into the crowded streets in search of another fare.

His eyebrows lift, and his lips shift. “Angel, I already intend to light your ass on fire for running away from me and making me worry, let's not add to your punishment,” Jay says, and my entire sex clenches with desire, but as much as being bent over Jay's lap with no panties turns me on, I will not settle for another one-night stand. His rejection of what I have saved for someone special is still too fresh.

He pulls me close as if sensing my internal struggle.

“Angel, I'd like to take you on a date, but I won't be fucking or spanking you tonight, so if that's all you're looking for, you'll be disappointed,” Jay says, affixing me with those deep hazel eyes.

He wants to take me on a date with no sex. I am wrapping my head around this, and his eyebrows raise, expecting an

answer. I nod, not really sure what I've just agreed to as he places his hand on the small of my back. "Let's go. The car's waiting," Jay says, walking me toward the most impressive sports car I've ever seen, taking the enormous bouquet from my arms, opening the back door, and placing it gently on the back seat.

He then opens the passenger door to the dark blue Aston Martin, allowing me to get settled in before securing my buckle.

"I do know how to strap myself into these sports cars," I say.

"I'm sure you do, Angel, but tonight, I'm in charge. I strap you into everything I want you secured in," Jay says, and everything south clenches, moistening at the thought of being restrained by him.

He walks around the back and slides into the driver's seat and looks at me with those deep penetrating eyes. "Ready?"

I have no idea what his plans are, but I do know that I am unable to deny myself. I am proud of myself because I didn't chase him. He pursued me, and my mind is still swirling around that, trying to understand what it is that he wants from me, if not sex.

Jay pulls into the street and accelerates. "This car is amazing," I say, hoping a little conversation will minimize my nerves.

"It is. The Vanquish Volante is my favorite of all the Aston Martins," Jay says, shifting and accelerating so quickly that the speed sucks me back into the soft leather seat as we barrel down the road and onto the lit-up ramp of the highway.

"Where are we going?" I say.

"On a date," Jay says, turning briefly to show me his broad smile.

"That doesn't answer my question," I say, crossing my legs in front of me. We do have magnetic chemistry, and Jay's eyes track my movement for a second before turning his attention back to the road.

“Tonight is going to be very challenging for you, Angel. Every time you try topping from the bottom will result in another five swats to your bare ass. I’ll let you do the math for tonight and would suggest you just enjoy the evening that I have planned for you,” Jay says.

I try to formulate a rebuttal, but he sees too much. I was trying to draw his attention to my legs, crossing one over the other with the high heels of the Jimmy Choos he selected. I tug at the short length of my dress and resign myself to watch the lights of the city buildings and cars as we cruise down the highway. He takes an off-ramp, winds around a few city blocks, and pulls up to one of the most prestigious Italian bistros in the city of Chicago. One does not get reservations without a full bank account or a personal request from one of its regular patrons.

“Jay, I’ve always wanted to come here. I’ve heard the food is amazing, but literally takes, what do you say in America, an act of god to get a reservation,” I say.

He glances at me briefly and smiles widely. “It just so happens that I love this place. I come here often and was hoping one day to bring someone special with me,” Jay says before getting out of the car as the valet opens my door. Jay takes my hand to assist me out of the vehicle, guides me into the skyrise, and presses the penthouse floor in the elevator to the restaurant.

I’m still processing what he just told me as we enter and the hostess takes his name, immediately signaling someone to escort us to the back of the restaurant, into a private room overlooking the vastness of the Lake Michigan area skyline. My chair is held for me while I settle in, and a bottle of wine is brought to the candlelit table a few moments later. The server pours a small amount into Jay’s glass. He lifts it, swirling and inhaling before tasting it. “Very nice. I’m sure it will be a perfect complement to the meal,” Jay says as the man fills our glasses and a waitress arrives with bread, dipping oil, and an exquisite glass filled with tiger prawn shrimp, lemon wedges on lettuce leaves, and parsley.

“You remembered limited carbs,” I say, smiling up at him.

“I remember everything about you and what you like, Angel.

I usually barely indulge but take a sip of my wine, letting it settle on my tongue before swallowing. “It is absolutely delicious,” I say.

“I’m glad it meets with your approval. Let’s hope the rest of the night goes as well,” Jay says, as he lifts his glass in a toast with me. “I think we should get to know each other a little bit better over our drink. Wanna play, Angel? Remember the rules?” Jay asks, his eyes leveling me with their intensity.

My thighs come together, squeezing. “Yes.”

“Okay, then we’ll start with you but if you lie, you go across my knee, and it won’t be for fun,” Jay says, and my sex clenches.

I nod. “Ask me,” I say.

“Is having me feed you still the most erotic thing you’ve ever done?” Jay asks.

“Yes, most definitely. I absolutely love it,” I say, feeling my cheeks heat.

“Your turn,” Jay says as those hazel eyes watch me search for the question that’s been on my mind since he told me. “You really don’t want to have sex with me tonight?”

He grins widely. “Angel, I never said I didn’t want to have sex with you tonight. I said I won’t be fucking or spanking you.”

I crinkle my nose. “That wasn’t really an answer. I think I should get another question for that response.”

His eyes light up. “I’ll give you another question and will add five swats to your next spanking for trying to top from the bottom,” Jay says, leveling me with his serious face.

I pretend to pout while my panties moisten at the thought of lying across his lap, completely bare. “Deal! Why did you turn me down when I offered you . . . what I was saving?”

The waiter arrives with our food before he can answer my question.

“This looks amazing. What is it?” I ask.

“Linguine all’aragosta o’ all’astice,” the waiter says, placing two platters of pasta, with large chunks of lobster meat covered in marinara, freshly minced garlic, and parsley on the table.

“It smells amazing,” I say.

“Linguine with lobster,” Jay says, picking up a piece of delicate meat with his fork, sliding it through the red sauce, and placing it against my lips.

I chew the succulent morsel as he watches. “Good?” Jay asks as I swallow and take a sip of my wine.

“Absolutely delicious. Thank you for bringing me here tonight. You didn’t answer my question though, and it’s okay if you don’t want to,” I say.

“I wasn’t avoiding your question. I just got lost watching you, Angel,” Jay says. “I didn’t want to take the gift you offered until I knew for sure we could be together. I needed to make sure the people I work for were okay with us, given your relationship to the Russian Bratva.”

“Oh My God! How do you know? How did you find out? Who else knows?” I ask.

“Calm down, Angel. Very few people, but your father is very aware that we have proof and that’s what’s going to keep you and your family safe in the future. You need to know, it was Dominic’s crew that came after you at the hotel and they are no longer a threat. Your father will keep them at bay if he wants to keep the secret,” Jay says.

“It’s good to know it wasn’t my father that sent men after me that night, but if my grandfather ever finds out, there will be a war that no one will survive,” I say, shuddering at the thought of his retaliation at such a grave deception.

“Angel, it’s been taken care of. No one will find out, but it crosses a line of conflict now that Chase is married to Katarina

and we've taken on the responsibility to ensure the entire family's security."

I nod, and suddenly it comes together a bit more clearly.

"So you had to ask your boss if you could be with me?" I say.

"Not exactly, I had to ask him if I could still work for him and be with you. Being with you was always going to happen, Angel. I've wanted you since I first saw you on Brian's security film. Don't ever think that I didn't want you or the treasures you were offering. I needed to make sure you were safe and that the timing was right for the two of us. I was going to tell you everything when I learned from your sister that you were gone," Jay says.

I try to wipe at the tears that are starting to pool, but he reaches out and does it for me, tilting my chin to look in his eyes.

"Why did you wait to come after me, Jay?"

His deep hazel eyes penetrate mine while he takes my hand in his own. "Because I love you Sasha, and at the time there was no way you could have known that. You needed to leave, to show yourself that you were strong enough to walk away from someone you didn't believe cared for you. You needed the time and space, Angel."

I find it difficult to breathe or speak, trying to swallow the lump in my throat while tears pool in my eyes. "You love me," I say.

"I think I've loved you since the very first time I held you in my arms," Jay says, gently pulling me from my seat and onto his lap. He pushes my hair from my eyes and wipes a tear that has fallen onto my cheek. "Don't cry Angel, I'm sorry I couldn't tell you sooner. I needed to make sure that we had a plan for the future," Jay says, holding me tightly against him as all of his security team, my sister and Matt, my closest friends on the ballet circuit, Chase and Katarina, Brian and Jenny and people that I don't even know make their way into the room.

They take their seats, and I am left breathless as he grasps my hand and stands up with me, settling me onto my feet before he drops to one knee. “Sasha, I’ve loved you from the very first time I held you in my arms. I can’t imagine my life without you in it. Will you marry me, be mine, and let me take care of you for the rest of our lives?” Jay asks, looking up at me with the intensity of those deep hazel eyes.

“Yes,” I say, one word, without hesitation, and he takes my hand in his own, and slides a two-carat diamond ring onto my finger. It glitters and shines the same way my heart feels.

“I thought I was the only one that felt this way. I love you so much. I just thought . . .”

“Shh . . . I know what you thought, Angel. That’s why I gave you a little time before I came for you, but you were never alone. I was always watching over you,” Jay says, standing and wrapping his arms around me. “I love you so much, Angel,” he says, grasping my nape and claiming my lips, while our friends and family clap loudly and whistle in the background.

I gaze into his eyes. “Were you really watching me the whole time I was gone?” I ask.

“You’ll get no apologies. I protect what’s mine and make no doubt about it, you are mine today, tomorrow, and always, Angel.”

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newsletter.

UNDERCOVER

*To my husband, thank you for always believing in me,
supporting my passions, and helping me make all my dreams
come true.*

MARENAH

THE NEED TO unearth the dirty secrets of my father drives me more than it should. A mafia kingpin that has shunned and denied his offspring for years. A man apparently in love with our mother, but who couldn't trade the life of luxury his wife's trust fund afforded him and his control over the city of Chicago for the love of my mother and the twin daughters he brought into the world.

This is only part of what fuels my anger, the other is the suspicion that he is part of an underground network helping to pluck innocent women and children from their homes and sell them to the highest bidder. It is that belief that has me hanging out in one of the most notorious bars in the city with my best friend Liza, who doesn't have a clue why we're here. I just want to snoop, check it out and gain more insight into the bastard's life and I take in all the comings and goings in the bar while we chat and have a couple mixed drinks.

A couple hours later, I've decided we'll go when I come out of the restroom and see two men dragging another man down a flight of stairs at the end of the hallway. The door hinge squeaks and the big burly guy glances up and I slink into the wall, hoping he didn't see me. They don't come after me, instead go about their business and close the door, but I know that if they saw me, they will.

It gives me a short window of time to get back to Liza, hand her my phone and give her instructions while I push the button on my necklace to call for backup. I'm seated at the bar when the bodyguards stalk toward me and I glare at Liza to do

as I've instructed. She hesitates for a moment, and I know she's scared to leave me, but when finally she walks out of the bar I can breathe a little easier knowing that she can get a message to my sister.

The two men grab my hands and their touch makes my skin crawl but I pretend to be friendly, smiling at each of them while they make a show of accusing me of hustling drugs in their establishment. The one shows me the gun he has drawn, hidden to everyone but me and it sends a shiver of apprehension down my spine, but I'll be damned if these pricks see it.

I watch for any opportunity to escape, but it is nonexistent with the way they're restraining my hands, holding them behind my back, so high that my shoulders ache with their hold. I know how to handle myself but one misplaced kick could cause an innocent bystander to get shot in the cross fire if the dumbass decides to shoot.

"One word and this gets a lot worse," the burly guy says as they guide me past the backs of people at the bar who are talking with the bartender and paying no attention whatsoever to anything going on around them as they march me toward the back of the bar and through the door that leads downstairs. The tall lean guy closes it behind us, staying upstairs and as soon as he does the burly guy puts his gun away, grabs my hair and wraps it around his hand to drag me down the rest of the stairs.

He shouldn't have left my feet and arms free at the same time that he put his weapon away, though. I grab hold of his hand, the one on my hair as we get to the bottom and he turns. I use his arm to keep my balance as I drive my knee straight into his groin, and before he can even react, slam it right back into him again, this time harder than the last and push him roughly as he keels in half with the pain of the blow.

I shoot up the stairs, taking them two at a time and as I reach for the door, ready to sprint through the bar and out to freedom it opens and the lean guy points his gun right in my face. "Down you go, doll," he says, seemingly in no hurry at all as I walk backward trying to catch my breath. He watches

my chest heave up and down with angst. I hold onto the long wooden banister tightly as I carefully try to gain my footing before taking a step backward, one step at a time until we reach the very bottom.

I turn, and the burly guy who's upright but in obvious pain crashes his hand against the delicate cheekbone of my face, striking me hard. I try my best not to react, instead, leveling him with a gaze of indifference. This seems to infuriate him even more. He grabs my hair, dragging me over to a set of chains suspended from the ceiling and connected to the cement floor. He quickly restrains my hands behind my back and attaches them to the chain, leaving me secured but with the ability to move.

The man is leering at me, raking his eyes all the way down my body and then grabs both of my breasts with his meaty hands. He moves in closer, intending to kiss me but my knee drives straight into his groin again. "Fuck! Fuck!" he yells, hauling his hand back and smacking me right across the face again.

"Quit dicking around over there. Boss just called. We need to go, we'll deal with her later," the tall, lean man says, leering over at me. "We'll make her pay when we have a lot more time," he says to the burly guy still holding his nuts.

"Why don't you spend some time taking in all of the toys on the wall? Fantasize about how we're going to take care of you when we get back. Scream all you want, no one will hear you, these walls are completely soundproof for a reason," the tall guy says as the two of them take off up the stairs.

I shiver because these people are merciless and this bar is owned by their boss, kingpin of the Chicago Mafia who is rumored to be even more so. Frederik Bernatelli, beloved trusted husband, father, and grandfather and upstanding community member to all on the surface, but the most feared mafia kingpin to ever rule the streets of Chicago. The man that has denied my sister and I exist, and the man that will always hold a place in my heart, hatred of the worst kind, my father.

I expect them to come back any minute, but they don't and they're right about the sound-proofing. I should be able to hear people walking around in the bar upstairs, but instead, it is eerily quiet. The dim light casts shadows of some of the equipment on the walls; tools of torture, weapons the old world family would have used and instruments they clearly intend for me. I need to focus on a way out, keep my head clear and not let the thought of what could happen get the best of me.

They will come back for me. What I need to figure out is how the hell to get free from these restraints. I need to get one of those weapons, because the moment I do, those bastards won't live to see another day. Try as I might, hour after hour, it is useless and the realization that they will soon return and my backup is not coming hits me hard. These binds are not going anywhere and now I need to rest if I am going to be ready when they come for me.

I don't know how long I've been asleep when the pain in my wrist wakes me. I twist my cuffs to get a little relief. I do a quick assessment of my fingers, pinching them together. I still have feeling, they haven't gone completely numb. The bastards probably have something far worse in store for me and want me to feel everything they do to me. I shake my thoughts and try to relieve some of the pain as I contemplate how I can get the drop on them when they come for me.

I hear the door above me open and close, and mentally prepare myself for what comes next. I know these animals, I've been studying my father's empire for the last four years.

The only way to get out of this alive is to get a gun and I know exactly what that means. I need to draw one of them in, make them want to release me from the chain so that my hands are free. The thought makes me shudder and shameful, but it's the only way I'm going to get free. I'm contemplating my options for seduction when the big burly guy walks down the steps. Excellent! He's alone, and I play my seduction line over in my mind, but the door opens again and his partner scrambles down the stairs to join him. They walk right by me and enter another door across the room, closing it behind

them. In mere moments, they are half-dragging a man into the room. He's giving them a run for their money, his lean muscles rippling with every twist or turn he makes, but even in the dim light I can tell his face is bruised and battered and that he's been roughed up pretty badly. They finally manage to restrain him to the chain suspended from the ceiling next to me and they're both out of breath when they stand back to gloat at their victory.

“Let them hang for a while. We have orders, and need to talk,” the tall, lanky but muscly man says to the burly guy. He rakes my body with his eyes, slow, taking me in, head to toe. “Soon,” he says before he and his partner make their way up the stairs, leaving me alone with the man dangling beside me.

MATT

THE HEAVY BASTARD with knuckles of steel is back and yanks my head up to face him again. I brace myself for another round of his fists, and whatever else he has in store for me. As this mob's enforcer years ago, I know what's happened to this point is mild compared to what the Chicago Mafia can and will do to me now that my cover's been blown.

Instead of pounding my face some more the man unlocks the chains that hold me from the ceiling, and when he does I pivot, trying to get out from under his hold, but it takes considerable effort to remain on my feet. I might be able to overtake just one, but his partner joins in on the fun and they nearly drag me through the door into a room faintly lit by a lamp sitting on a desk in the far corner of the room. I know what they intend and fight them every step of the way.

A beautiful long-haired blonde with narrowed blue eyes is restrained by her wrists to the chain hanging from the ceiling. Her face is marred with red marks, her lip is split, and she has a trickle of blood that's run downward to her chin. Everything I know about what this particular family does to women they capture makes my insides tighten as I look at her.

They pull my hands behind my back, restraining me to the vacant chain, leaving me standing beside her. "Let them hang for a while. We have orders, and need to talk," the man I know as Dirk says to the heavy-fisted bastard.

Dirk sweeps his eyes over the blonde chained next to me slowly, leering at her sleek and sexy body until he finally

reaches her eyes. Her lips tighten and entire body tenses, but she says nothing, leveling him with a stare that says what she doesn't. Fuck you!

“Soon!” he says as if hearing her thoughts, turning on his black boot, and walking out of the room with my handler.

We're so close that I can feel her body physically shiver as they leave. “What's your name, Princess?” I ask as the door closes with a resounding thud and click of the lock.

“Marenah,” she says, twisting on her toes to look at me. It is with great resolve that I don't let my eyes rove over the long, lean, toned body I saw secured there as I entered the room.

Instead, I focus on her eyes, and even in the dim light they are the brightest color of blue that I have ever seen, full of spark and steely resolve.

“This room is inescapable. I've looked for every possible route. Absolutely nothing,” Marenah says with obvious disgust, her eyes drifting to the sadistic equipment on the wall. All obviously intended to create mind numbing fear in their captives and then ultimately pain.

“How long have you been here?” I ask, trying to avert her attention, to shift the fear I see in her beautiful sky-blue eyes to something else.

“Only a short while, but long enough,” she says. My chest tightens and fists clench behind me with the need to do them strong bodily harm for touching one hair on this beautiful woman's head.

“What's your story?” Marenah asks. The soft melodious tone of her voice is even attractive. Soft and soothing, and her little Russian accent is sexy as fuck.

“My name is Prez. They think I'm a cop,” I say.

“I'm surprised you're still alive,” she says, swiveling on her square-heeled boots to face me again.

She acts so tough, but then she looks at the wall past me. I twist to take in every tool that she's looking at and cringe. It's

clear she's trying to be strong but is absolutely petrified as she takes in all of the devices. She should be scared because I have an intimate knowledge of exactly how each of these implements are used. While that was never my job, I know the characteristics of the men who use them. They like pain and suffering and those tools are their favorites.

"Tell me, did they hurt you?" I coax, because although she acted indifferent to Dirk's leering, she's still focused on the horrors they could have in store for her. I can tell, her eyes are just taking it in, but her body is rigid and the scent of fear is pouring from her in waves. I have an overwhelming need to protect her from her own thoughts and to get her mind off of everything that's happened or that causes her fear.

She shakes her lovely blonde head. "No," she says softly, and my pulse begins to race, while my dick hardens with her defiance and flat out lie.

"If you were mine, you wouldn't lie to me when I asked you a question, or you'd end up on my bed, getting your little pussy licked until you couldn't come anymore and told me the truth," I say.

I watch as her sleek and toned thighs covered in skinny jeans come together with desire, the shadow of her breasts tighten, and her nipples harden underneath the silky button-down shirt she's wearing.

"Look at me Marenah," I say, convincing her with my voice to do as I ask.

She starts to tell me but doesn't raise her eyes to meet mine. She's embarrassed about her situation. "Look at me when you tell me. You have nothing to be ashamed of, Marenah."

It takes her a minute, but then after contemplating, she finally nods, leveling me with her gaze, fixating on my eyes and mesmerizes me as she speaks with that soft melodious voice and clearly Russian accent. "The big guy slapped me around after I kicked him in the balls, and grabbed a few handfuls, but that was it. They got a call and left in a hurry last night. It could have been much worse," Marenah says.

She's right, it could have been a hell of a lot worse, but that doesn't diminish what happened or change what I intend to do to the person that laid hands on her. I'm sure Jay, is looking high and low for me. If that's the case, and I'm betting it is, we have to bide our time. The fact that someone put such intimate hands on this woman and she's trying to act strong, like it didn't hurt her emotionally, casually shrugging it off infuriates the fuck out of me.

She still hasn't told me why she's here, and I don't know why I feel such an inherent need to know, but I do. "I can get you out of here, but need to ask you a few questions, and you'll be honest with me," I say, drawing the breaths to speak in longer sentences with difficulty after the beating to the chest I took.

Marenah nods. "I'll tell you anything that you need to know."

"Why are you here?" I ask, twisting in my own chains to come face to face with her.

She contemplates for the briefest of moments. "They think I'm a drug dealer, from a different territory, from out of the country, but I'm not."

Fuck! If the Chicago family think she's dealing in their turf without consent, she has a death sentence on her head, and the slaps to her face and even the split lip aren't anything compared to what they would generally dole out. It just doesn't add up. They would want an answer, would obtain it quickly and painfully, get rid of her and go after the gang infiltrating their market.

"Princess, I asked you for the truth. Lies will get you nothing but thrown over my lap and keep you in danger."

"I'm telling you the truth! I was with a friend, just happened to have some product on me, and they sniffed me out. It was personal, I wasn't dealing."

I assess her carefully. Marenah's eyes are bright as the sky, her skin is pale and alabaster underneath the abuse she has

sustained, and I know she's lying. She's not a user, and if they've already interrogated her, they know that, too.

“The mafia may have orders to move me. If we're lucky, they don't want the people looking for me to find you either. They have no choice but to take us upstairs and when they do, there will be a distraction. When it happens, you run and get as far away from here as you can, understand?” I say, just as I hear a key in the door.

“I need an answer, Marenah, because I plan to find you and lick your hot little pussy for lying to me when all this is over,” I say.

She swings her face back to look at me, and I am rewarded with an upward turn of her lips, but she cringes in pain as they part with an attempted smile. Her full and luscious lips, marred and painful by a blow she's received, are still stained with her dried blood. My eyes have adjusted to the dimness of the room. The marks on her face are in outlines of a handprint, and when our captors both walk back into the room, those are the images that are seared into my mind.

Dirk and his burly sidekick unlock our chains and cuffs, replacing them in the front and frog-marching us out of the room and up the stairs. As the door upstairs opens, I survey the surroundings. “Remember what I said,” I whisper into Marenah's ear as our captors are joined by two more men and they march us down the hall and into the bar. I see one of our own sitting on one of the stools pretending to nurse his drink. I know at that very moment that Jay's got the entire building surrounded and has an extraction strategy. He and our team would never put a plan into place that is not thoroughly thought out.

As if on cue, a bottle shatters onto the floor and cussing from the bar ensues. I use that diversion to kick the largest of the two assailants in the balls, catching him with my steel-toed boots. He goes down, clutching himself, and I send another thrust into his face, spinning as Dirk comes after me. I pull my arms down and rotate, squeezing, sucking the life out of him as the steel cuffs he's placed me in now become the weapon that overcomes him.

The Chicago Mafia wasn't prepared for an attempted breakout, but I was, and as the men come for me, I systematically take them out, breaking one man's nose, turning and landing another with a solid kick to the groin, and the last one with a well-placed stomp of my boot to his throat. They'll live and it won't take them long to regain their bearings.

Two more men come from the door and Marenah spins, sending her heeled boot into a man's nose, and kneeling him in the groin before spinning to grab the other man's hair, using it to bring him down on top of her knee, effectively breaking his nose. I move in and knock them unconscious with a couple of well-placed blows, using my cuffed hands to form a club.

The entire bar is swarming with these fuckers! Two more men come at us from the back room. "Do what I said and get the fuck out of here," I tell her and she looks around, hesitating, but when I growl at her to go again, she does exactly as I've instructed and heads straight out the door as I overtake the next two men and no more appear to be coming out of the woodwork.

I get the nod from our man sitting at the bar, gesturing to the bartender. I stalk toward him. He's no longer serving drinks, but watching with undisguised interest. I grab him around the throat just as he reaches underneath the bar, grasping his hand before he can connect with the gun he undoubtedly has and he freezes.

I lean in close. "You put up a half-fight, I walk away, and the people you work for don't know you didn't try. Anything else and you're dead," I say, clocking him in the mouth.

He sways with the hit, knows they're watching on the camera and gets back onto his feet. I have no desire to kill a man working for a living, and let him come at me, making sure it's believable.

I duck his half-hearted attempt, but this needs to be real if he's going to walk out of here alive. The first double-handed blow sends my fists across his mouth, and then his throat. He goes down gasping, but he'll live to see another day. I look up

and am suddenly surrounded by four mafia men and feel the very distinct cold steel of a gun placed to my head.

They march me out the back-alley door and I exhale a breath of relief as Jay and our team surrounds the assholes who came after me from the bar, but it doesn't seem like the men are going to back down quickly. They circle, five in total and although Jay gives them warning to walk away, they don't take it. Instead, they engage their weapons and in four clear shots, my team take the four prominent Chicago Mafia boys out. Only one is left standing, and that's the fucker with a gun to my head.

"Bernatelli wants to call off the hit," Jay says, knowing that the person with his gun to my head is a made man in the Bernatelli family. The very same man that will be taking over for Nikko, the family enforcer, until he gets out of prison.

"I didn't get that fucking message," the guy says.

"We can do this one of two ways. You can walk away, take a message back to your boss and let him know what happened, or I can have your dead body packed up along with the other fuckers and send him that message myself," Jay says.

"Your boy will go down, and Bernatelli will kill you nice and slow," he snarls.

"My sniper's just waiting for your finger to move a hair and it's all over for you. You really wanna wager on his aim?" Jay says, glancing at the four dead men lying on the ground.

"I didn't get no message," he says.

"I believe you. Drop the gun and walk away. I'm done talking," Jay says.

"Fuck!" he yells, dropping his gun to the ground. Jay might have told him that he would let him walk away, but the prints on the blonde princess's face fuel my anger and I send my cuffed fists right into the asshole's face, and my steel-toed boot into his balls. The fucker drops to the ground gasping, and suddenly, my team is surrounding me and half-drag me to the sleek black limo that has pulled up curbside.

“Find the blonde that ran out of here,” I say to Jay as they push me into the Lincoln and it peels away.

“Relax, our undercover let us know she was helping you, it’s already done. Dereck and Nate just picked her up. She’s safe, Matt,” Jay says, unlocking my cuffs. I try to catch my breath as we navigate through the back roads. About ten minutes later we come to a sudden stop on the far end of the tarmac and I’m thankful for my team as they lug me up the ramp of the Gulfstream.

“Get him into the back bedroom. What the fuck happened to him?” I hear Brian Carrington say.

“We’ll explain later. We’ve got a few more of our team, and one of our physicians that will be joining us any minute, and there’s a world of heat behind us,” Jay says.

“I’ll let the pilot know to hold the plane, you just get him comfortable,” Brian says as the world goes dark.

MARENAH

AS SOON AS Prez starts fighting, his steely grey eyes gesture me to the door. Three men come at him and he takes them out single-handed, but two more are heading his way and I can't just leave him there to deal with this alone. I turn and bring one after another to their knees and then watch while Prez knocks them unconscious. Jesus he can move, stealth and sleek like a panther, and all that raw power.

He gestures again toward the door. "Do what I said and get the fuck out of here."

I hesitate, but he growls at me again to go. This time I obey him, running and hitting the door with the only strength that I have left. As soon as I exit the bar, headlights almost blind me and a car squeals to the sidewalk. I try to outrun it, but a large man with strong arms scattered with tattoos jumps out of the vehicle and grabs me.

Instinctively, I swivel, and my foot captures him, kicking him in the groin and then projecting up to catch him mid-sternum. Another man comes at me, but the one I've hurt gestures him away, instead overpowering me and pushing me into the car before someone else slams the door closed.

"Got her. Drive," the man holding me yells to the person behind the wheel.

"Easy, we're the good guys," the man says, looking back at me.

The driver peels away and then navigates the city traffic, slowing for all the intersections and crosswalks and then

stomps on the gas as we clear the congestion and he heads for the residential area.

I've lost my first opportunity for now, but I'm watchful. As soon as another one surfaces I plan to pop the lock and roll out, but I never even get that chance.

"Who are you and what do you want?"

"We're friends of Prez. We're trying to keep you safeguarded from the mafia.

"What? By kidnapping me? That does not make one bit of sense," I say.

"We're taking you somewhere safe until we get the word from Matt," the tall, broad neanderthal says.

"Where, just where do you think you are taking me?"

"Somewhere safe."

"You already said that. I asked where," I say, narrowing my eyes at them. One of them laughs right out loud. "You are a little wildcat! Where the hell did you learn to fight like that?"

I glare at him. "I need to get ahold of my family, let them know I'm okay."

"No can do, not yet. Sit tight, everything will be over shortly," the man says as they pull into a side street and stop at the very last house in a cul-de-sac. There are candle lights glowing on a dining room table visible from the street. Anyone passing by would think it was a family residence and never in a million years think it was a safe house for the mafia or whoever the hell these people are. The car pulls into the three car garage, the door rolls closed behind us, and they let me out of the vehicle.

"You good with her?" one of the men asks the neanderthal beside me who takes my wrists and unlocks my cuffs.

"Yep, she's not going to give me any problems. She's going to be appreciative that we got her away from the mafia. She's going to eat dinner, shower up and then go to sleep," he says, narrowing his eyes at me. "Aren't you?"

“Sure, whatever you say, big guy,” I say, because I have no clue who these people are and for all I know they don’t even really know Prez.

He gestures me ahead of him into the house and the others leave, rendering us alone in a completely furnished two story home. He turns on the lights, closes the door behind us, and guides me into the foyer. Through here,” he says as we walk past the living room and head into the kitchen.

“You hungry?” he asks, opening the refrigerator.

I shake my head, but my stomach growls at the very same time calling attention to my lie. He scowls at me. “No one’s going to poison your food or hurt you. I was being honest. We’re friends of Prez and if he wants you safe, we’re going to make sure you are.”

“Okay, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to seem ungrateful. Everything happened so fast and I’m still having a hard time putting all the pieces together,” I say.

“No need for apologies. Take a seat. Lasagna okay?” he asks, pulling out a square pan from the refrigerator and then placing a round glass dish filled with lettuce onto the counter along with four zip locked bags containing cherry tomatoes, cucumbers, red onion, and what appears to be either romano or asiago shredded cheese for the salad. My stomach growls again. Who are these people? “You wanna toss the salad while I heat the lasagna and breadsticks?” he says.

“Sure. Where did you see bread?” I say and he smiles. “Gaby takes good care of her boys. She wouldn’t let us go hungry. If you’re good, I may even share my dessert with you,” he says, scooping generous portions of the lasagna into two separate dishes and placing them in the microwave above the stove while I open the bags of veggies and mix them into the lettuce.

“We’ve got wine if you’d like a glass,” he says.

“After this day, yes please. I’m sorry I was such a bitch to you.”

He looks up and his face crinkles with amusement. “I’ve seen worse. Apology accepted, consider it forgotten,” he says, pouring me a glass of red wine, then pulling out the lasagna, and placing the breadsticks into the oven in its place.

“Aren’t you going to have a glass?” I ask, gesturing to the bottle on the counter.

He shakes his head. “On duty, have to protect a little wildcat from the mafia,” he says, winking at me. His phone beeps and he glances at the incoming message and smiles widely.

“Is that Prez or Matt or whoever the hell he is? Is he okay?” I ask.

“He’s going to be,” he says, looking up at me.

“Are the guys that left bringing him back here, too?” I ask, all of a sudden feeling warm at the thought of seeing him again. The way he looked at me with those steely grey eyes and just the thought of his lean well-muscled body chained beside me, talking to me, giving me hope, calling me princess, the raw power of him overtaking those men. I clench my thighs and take another sip of my wine, wishing he would walk right through that door right now.

“Sorry wildcat, not tonight,” he says and I try not to show my disappointment. Maybe I felt a connection that wasn’t there, but he did say he was going to find me and I feel myself flush at the memory of his comments, so wicked and naughty that I had to clench my thighs to stem the wetness.

I eat the meal placed in front of me, relishing in each ricotta and mozzarella laden bite of lasagna. I’m so hungry and it’s so good and so gooey. I finish it before I have even touched my salad and the man across from me laughs.

“I thought you weren’t hungry,” he says, grinning at me as he finishes his lasagna, bites into a breadstick, and gets up to throw two more pieces into the microwave.

“A gentleman wouldn’t remind me. It’s so good! Who in the world cooks like this?”

“One question at a time. First, I’ve never been labeled as such, quite the opposite, in fact. Two, Gaby is like a second mom to all of us. She keeps us stocked up and has a staff ensure wherever we are we don’t starve,” he says, grinning.

“So what’s your name big guy,” I say, and he smiles.

“I could tell you, but then I’d have to kill you,” he says.

“Ha-ha, funny man. That’s so cliché. Seriously, you kidnap me, take me to some rich home that’s supposed to be a safe house, ply me with wine and food, but can’t even tell me your name?” I shake my head. “Not so cool.”

His eyes soften before he walks to the refrigerator and pulls a pie plate out of it. “Tiramisu cheesecake. There’s no way you want to pass this up,” he says, separating two pieces onto small plates.

“I am so full,” I say, laughing as I scoop the sauce left on my plate with the last piece of my breadstick.

“I’m telling you. If you pass this up, you’re missing the best dessert you’ll ever get a chance to eat. Gaby’s family recipe. At least take a bite,” he says, sliding the plate over to me.

“Will you tell me your name?” I ask, sliding my fork into the gooey mess.

He nods. “I go by Nate,” he says as I groan with delight at the decadent dessert.

“Easy woman. You keep moaning like that and someone’s going to think I’m giving you more than dessert!”

“Hmm. I can’t help it, it’s so good,” I say, but after a few bites of the rich dessert I push it toward him. “You finish it. I think I’m going to be in a food coma,” I say and his eyes light up with amusement.

“Do you think I could take that shower before I fall asleep?”

“Upstairs, first bedroom down the hall is the guest room and it has an adjoining bathroom. You’ll find a few things laid out for you. Hopefully something fits.”

The wine and all the food are starting to make me drowsy. “Thank you very much for all that you guys did for me and Prez. I still don’t know what’s going on exactly, but I appreciate how comfortable you’ve made me feel tonight,” I say, heading down the hall to my room.

“You’re welcome, wildcat.”

I lock the door to my bedroom and head into the bathroom and lock that, too. It’s not like I think he’s going to come bursting into my room, but still. The shower spray is heavenly and I take my time, washing my hair and relishing in the scented moisturizing soap as I lather my body and rinse under the pelting rain. I finally drag myself out of the shower, pat dry and snuggle into the long purple cashmere robe hanging on the back of the bathroom door, blow dry my hair and brush my teeth with what’s been laid out on the vanity. I am emotionally and physically exhausted and grateful for the comforts of a real bed. I snuggle in under the luxuriously silky sheets, relishing in the softness of the pillow and pull the light down blanket over the top of me.

I am just beginning to drift when I hear the faint sounds of someone rattling my door lock. I tense, but slide out of bed quickly. He won’t catch me like some docile little woman that he can take advantage of. I quietly get to the side of the door and wait. When he enters, I plan to take him by surprise, but I continue to wait, long drawn out moments, watching the door handle intently and listening for any faint sound outside the door, but still nothing.

I finally decide to use the element of surprise instead, and quietly reach for the handle and turn it, meaning to wrench it open quickly, but it doesn’t budge. The realization hits me fast and hard. I’ve been locked in. I am a prisoner.

MATT

I WAKE, groggy, but the pain in my ribs causes me to catch my breath as I try to inhale and sit up. “You’re gonna be sore for a while. Doc taped you up and gave you some pain meds,” Nick says, walking into the bedroom.

“Where the hell are we? Where’s Jenny?” I ask.

“Brian’s penthouse in LA. We had to half-carry your sorry ass from the plane to the limo and then to the elevators,” Nick says with a wide grin.

“Fuck you!” I say, but even those two words hurt right now.

Nick scowls. “Doc left some pain meds if you need them.”

I shake my head. My mind is groggy enough without adding to it. “No, I could use some Tylenol though. Where’s Jenny? I remember part of the conversation last night but that’s all.”

“She’s with Brian and couldn’t be better. Keith and the team on the ground did an amazing job keeping her safe,” Nick says.

“And the blonde, Marenah?”

“She’s under wraps. We had to pull in a few of our new guys with everyone spread across the globe, but they got her out and took her to the safe house. We’ve had Nate sitting on her all night,” Nick says.

My eyes narrow at the very thought of anyone that physically close to Marenah, especially the ladies' man of our team. "Tell me he didn't touch her."

"Jeez, hell no. He fed her, and then she took a shower. She was a little pissed when she found out her door was locked for the night. Good thing those rooms are soundproof," Nick says.

"He locked her up like a prisoner?"

"Matt, she took out men in the bar. She fucking knows how to fight. You don't learn that shit from a lot of places. His assignment was to keep her safe and he did that. I would have done the same thing," Nick says.

I nod, because he's right, but it doesn't make me feel any better about the beautiful blonde-haired princess who was scared and slapped around having to feel like she was still captive last night while I slept peacefully through it all.

"You hungry? There's an egg bake with sausage that I can heat up for you. I've got dibs on the chocolate donuts, though," Nick says.

"Yeah, that sounds great, man," I say, pushing my hands down into the mattress to help leverage my body into a sitting position.

"Sit tight. I'll get you some food and Tylenol. The team drew straws and I got stuck with babysitting duty," he says, smirking.

"Fuck you!"

"That's not included in the service. Besides, from what I hear the pretty blonde may have that service wrapped up," he says.

I smile, because fuck . . . I don't know why I'm so attracted to her, but the vibes were off the chart. She felt it, too. I grab my cell phone and hit Jay's number.

"Hey, welcome back to the land of the living," he says.

"Yeah, thanks to you and the team," I say, knowing that if they hadn't been there at that very fucking moment, the mafia

would have moved both myself and Marenah and we would have been put through more than I even want to think about.

“You would have done the same for any one of us. We’ve got the blonde and she’s safe, but she’s giving Nate a hard time. She says she needs to get back to Russia, and she’s pretty adamant. I wanted to make sure she was safe and that you were awake to weigh in, but we don’t keep people against their will,” Jay says.

“I need to sort a few things out, but can you have one of the planes take her home or find a flight for her? Oh, and have one of the shoppers send her some clothes. Tall size six and small to medium shirt size. I’ll pay for it,” I say.

“No problem. I already had the shopper send some clothes for her on your behalf. The flight is standing by. Just wanted to make sure we were good. We’ll get her on it.”

“Thanks Jay. Hard to find the words to express my appreciation for everything,” I say.

“No need. Get some rest, and make sure that Nick takes good care of you. He’s on babysitting duty for the next couple of days.”

“Fuck you!” I say and he laughs out loud before disconnecting and Nick walks back in with a plate of food.

“Gifts from Gaby,” Nick says, holding a tray with a plate piled with her egg, hashbrowns, and sausage casserole, homemade biscuits, and a bowl of fruit.

“Put that tray across my lap,” I say, eyeing the food like the starving man that I am.

“Roger that! Eat up and let me know if you need anything.” He looks at the clock on the wall. “You should take some of that Tylenol after you eat, keep ahead of the pain,” Nick says.

“Yes, mommy,” I say, as he gives me the finger and heads toward the door.

“Fuck you!” Nick says, closing the door behind him, not having any clue how much he and the entire team mean to me.

I've just finished the platter of food when Brian calls.

"Hey, how's Jenny?" I ask.

"She's doing great and thanks in large part to you. I hear we no longer need to worry about the mafia stuff," Brian says.

"I had quite a bit of help, but let's just say it's finally at rest. Bernatelli doesn't want the fact he fathered an illegitimate child out of the bag. He knows the information has been stored in a secure place and that at the first glimpse of trouble from them Jay will have it spilled onto every social media outlet available."

"Can't thank you guys enough. How are the ribs today?" Brian asks.

"Nothing that a few weeks won't fix."

"Take all the time you need, Matt. We've got everything covered here."

"Thanks, Brian. I'll be fine, nothing was broken, just bruised, but I'd like to take some personal time off. I need to make a trip out of the country," I say, surprising myself with the sudden decision.

"Whatever you need, Matt. Any place special?"

"Russia."

"Don't tell me you used to belong to the Russian Mafia, too."

"Don't make me laugh," I say, gasping.

"Sorry man couldn't resist, but seriously. You're not in any trouble?"

"Woman problems," I say.

"Well, in that case, take one of the planes," Brian says.

"You don't have to do that, Brian."

"I know perfectly well I don't have to, but I want to. I can't repay you and the entire team enough for keeping Jenny safe. You can sleep comfortably on the way over," Brian says.

“In that case, don’t mind if I do. I need to wrap up a couple things but was hoping to catch the next commercial flight out,” I say.

“Just let the crews know what you need, and they’ll set it up like normal. Have a good trip and let them know when you’re planning to return. Keith’s with me and Jenny for the rest of the week in Bel Air, and then we’ll be heading back to Chicago. Jenny wants to spend some time working on some of the plans for the Vegas expansions, and I’m sure Keith will be happy to be home,” Brian says.

“Sounds good. Give Jenny a hug for me. I’ll give her a call a little later,” I say, before disconnecting with him and reconnecting with Jay to get the trip to Russia set up so I can find the blonde-haired princess that I can’t get off my mind.

I WAKE hours after we’re in the air, glancing at my phone with a grimace. It’s an almost thirteen-hour flight from LA. I’ve been asleep for most of it. I down a few more Tylenol and calculate our landing time. Three hours to touchdown. Shit, I have to pee something fierce and push myself out of the queen-size bed of the Gulfstream and into the adjacent bathroom. I return to the bedroom a half hour later relieved, showered, and dressed feeling much more like myself.

The first order of business is to send our intel team, the one renowned for their accuracy, a request to find out where they dropped Marenah off and where she’s at now. In less than ten minutes I know exactly where my long-haired, blonde princess is, and my team has a plan to get me from the airport to her apartment.

MARENAH

WHEN I FIND the door locked, I try my best to scream the place down, but to no avail. They are not letting me out and it appears the safe house they've brought me to has walls of steel and sound-proofing to match. I just wish I knew for certain if they were keeping me for the mafia or protecting me from them. Dammit!

I resign myself to a night of no answers. The shower has revived me though and I keep watch, waiting to see if the person that I trusted is going to come through the door. He didn't seem the type, at all, in fact I felt completely safe with him, but that could have all been a ploy.

At some point in the night, I must have fallen into an exhaustive sleep and in the morning I'm awakened by rapping outside my room. I march toward the door and turn the knob and now it opens. I pull the door back, glaring at him.

"You okay?" he asks and my leg draws back, and heaves forward, the intended target his balls, but he's quick and captures my ankle in one stealth move. "Easy wildcat. I didn't mean to piss you off. I just needed to keep you safe and we both needed some sleep," Nate says.

"You told me I was safe with you and then you kidnapped me. I want to go home," I huff.

"Where's home?" he asks.

"Russia. Moscow to be specific, and if you aren't kidnapping me and holding me against my will then I want to go now. Just take me to the airport and I'll find my way."

“You think we’re the bad guys?” he asks and I almost feel a bit of remorse. “We knew you were with Matt inside the bar and that you helped him. We were just trying to keep you protected. We knew Matt would want you taken to one of our secure houses. That’s what we did. Nothing more, just kept you safe until we could check in with him.”

“Take me home! If he wanted to talk to me he would have come by last night.”

He frowns and levels me with an intense stare. “Clearly Matt’s going to have his hands full with you. I’ll have the team connect with Matt. In the meantime, get ready for the day and then come downstairs. Gaby had breakfast made for us. French toast with pecans and maple syrup,” Nate says before leaving me to ponder my situation.

I wash my face and brush my teeth with the stuff that was laid out for me before sliding into some clothes.

“How did you know my size?” I say, inhaling the aroma of cinnamon and coffee as I waltz into the kitchen..

He turns from what he’s doing at the sink to look at me. “First off, it wouldn’t hurt to say thank you for making sure you had clean clothes, second, Matt wanted to make sure you were comfortable. He probably guessed, and our shopper took it from there. Any more questions?” Nate asks.

“No, I’m sorry,” I say, feeling ashamed of my reactions. “I appreciate everything you and your team have done to get me out of the situation I was in. I just freaked out a little bit when I found my door locked. I’m sorry.”

“Apology accepted. I wouldn’t have locked your door if I didn’t think you might take off and get yourself into trouble. The Chicago Mafia is still out there, probably looking high and low for you.”

“They won’t dare come near me on my family’s turf,” I say and he raises his eyebrows in question.

“You don’t even want to know. Now, I thought you promised me this great breakfast or was that just some fancy line?” Nate chuckles and shakes his head. “No wildcat, sit

your ass down and I'll give you something to eat," he says, gesturing me to the stool across from the breakfast bar. "Maybe a good meal will tame that little growl of yours."

"Perhaps," I concede.

"The car will be here shortly. We'll take it to the private strip and the jet will get you home from there."

"Do you think I can call my sister?"

"No can do. Not until Jay and Matt give the all clear and we know you're not being followed. Let's get you into the air and we'll take it from there," Nate says as we finish our meal.

"Breakfast was very good. I'm just going to brush my teeth and I'll be ready to go," I say, taking my dish to the sink to rinse it.

"Leave it, it'll be taken care of. The jet will be at the strip waiting for us shortly. You'll find a small suitcase and some clothes in the closet in your room. Pack up your clothes, Matt wants you to take them with you," Cole says, glancing down at his phone.

"That's seriously nice of him, but I do have clothes at home," I say.

"Take them. He went out of his way to have them purchased for you," Nate scolds.

I nod, because it was an extremely nice thing for him to do and I make a note to get his mailing address and send him a thank you note.

When I return, Nate's waiting for me with a light jacket thrown over his arm. "What's that?" I say, gesturing toward the luggage sitting on the floor next to him.

"You didn't think you were getting rid of me that quick, did you?"

"Yes, I did, actually. What gives?" I ask, eyeing his bag and then him.

"It's not safe for you to be without protection until we get you home."

I scowl and he narrows his eyes at me. “Don’t even start, wildcat. You’ll have the back bedroom of the plane all to yourself. Read a couple books, watch a movie, catch up on some sleep. Whatever you want to do. You won’t even know I’m around, but in case they’ve tracked you back to Moscow, you’re not going alone. I’ve got my orders,” Nate says.

“Matt?”

He nods toward the door. “Let’s move, Chicago Mafia are still swarming and my job and my team’s is to get you from here to Moscow without incident,” Nate says, ushering me through the kitchen, into the three car garage and into the back of a black Lincoln. “Head to the private strip,” he says to the driver while sliding in beside me.

“Buckle up and don’t get any ideas,” Nate says as two other men climb into the car, one in the back with Nate and me and the other one up front by the driver. Clearly no escape with one of these baboons on either side of me. The garage door raises and we back out. The black car parked on the side of the road pulls out behind us as we make our way down the street. The driver navigates the residential area, a few turns left and then right before we reach a main thoroughfare, follow it for a mile or so and then hit the on-ramp to the highway. Another couple miles, a few turns and we come to a private airstrip and a sleek looking Gulfstream parked on the tarmac waiting for us to board.

THE PLANE TRIP IS UNEVENTFUL, the entire time spent reading, watching satellite TV, and spoiling myself with a long, much needed nap. Customs is efficient and rigorous as it always is in Russia. I’ve been through the drill more times than I can count but always with trepidation and a little fear that someone will dig a little deeper. But no, the same questions, and same protocols are used by everyone, never a deviation if they value their jobs and the livelihood it provides to their families who depend on the income.

If I thought I was getting rid of Nate once we touched down, I was sorely mistaken. He hails a cab when we step outside and I turn with astonishment as he gives the driver my address using perfect Russian, just without an accent. Who the hell are these people? I reach for the handle and am about to get out of the car when he tuts his disapproval at me. “Wait a moment and I’ll assist you,” he says, walking around to open my door, and then taking my small suitcase out of the trunk, before leaning in to give the cabbie some cash. He walks with me up to my apartment and the doorman recognizes and greets me. “Welcome home,” the big burly uniformed doorman says to me.

“Great to be back,” I reply, heading to the elevator that will take me to my haven, far, far above.

“Thanks for bringing me home and for everything you guys did,” I say, extending my hand to Nate outside of the elevator.

He just laughs. “You’re more than welcome, wildcat. I’ll escort you up,” Nate says, his eyes looking on with amusement.

I huff, and turn just as the private elevator arrives. When we reach the door, he spins me to face him. “You’re officially home. Call your sister, let her know you’re safe. She’s been worried about you. We just had to make sure everything came together and that neither one of you were being followed. Nice to meet you, wildcat,” Nate says, walking away before I can ask him any questions about my sister. I stick my key in the lock of my penthouse apartment and have just barely kicked my shoes off and have every intention of taking a long bubble bath to soak the worries of the last few days away while I call my sister when there is a knock on the door.

I open it and at first the words just don’t come. “What are you doing here?” I ask, so surprised that I can barely imagine how he got here.

I told you I’d come for you,” Matt says, flashing me a bright grin. His steely grey eyes are watching me, waiting for a response or something. I take a deep breath, trying to get a

hold of the delicious thrill floating through my body caused by his nearness. The same feeling as when we were in the bar together, but somehow, so much more palpable now that he is standing right in front of me.

He finally takes pity on me. “I thought we could go somewhere for a cup of coffee and get to know each other,” Matt says, looking at me with a little smirk.

I nod, smiling, still trying to find my tongue which has embarrassingly forgotten how to move. “Of course, you just surprised me. You’re actually here, in Russia!” I shake my head, flustered by my embarrassment. “Do come in for a minute. We have quite a few places within walking distance we could go,” I say, opening the heavy white door and allowing him through before I close it.

He glances around at the open concept space. “Great view,” Matt says, gesturing out the living room windows which overlook Red Square and the high-rises that encompass Moscow and the Kremlin.

“Thanks, I sorta love it, too. I wanted a place city-center, right in the middle of all the action. I love the hustle and bustle of city life,” I say.

He looks at me and something flashes across his eyes, but then quickly disappears. “I know what you mean. It’s got a vibe about it that just energizes you, somehow makes you a part of it. I have a condo in downtown Chicago, right in the heart of things for the very same reason,” Matt says.

“Let me grab a pair of shoes for walking,” I say, heading toward my bedroom, slipping into a pair of low heeled boots. He’s looking out over the city when I return. The intensity of my desire for this man washes over me, and each delicious little tingle thrumming through my body has me on edge. I cringe at the thinness of my t-shirt, knowing he can see the hardened peaks when he turns to gaze at me, but I find that I can’t look away.

“It’s still there, that energy between us. You feel that Princess?” Matt says.

There's no sense in lying. I've never felt something like this before, and I nod slowly. I may not have ever been interested in starting relationships and certainly am not now, but this thing between us-it's exciting. "I do, why do you call me Princess?" I ask, looking up at him.

"Because you look like a princess and you hang out in a white ivory tower," Matt says, gesturing at the view in front of us.

I can't help but smile widely. "You know princesses aren't always what they appear to be. Sometimes they are . . ." I contemplate, looking for just the right words.

"Disobedient and willful," Matt says, finishing my sentence.

"I would have described it a little bit differently," I say, pretending to pout.

"No, I gave you a direct order, and you made the decision not to listen, but instead to put yourself in danger," Matt says.

"I took two of these men out. Don't act like you couldn't have used the help," I say.

"I appreciate the fact that you put your own life in jeopardy to save mine. That was sweet Princess, really sweet, but also disobedient. If I had needed intervention, it would have been there. Come on, let's go to a coffee shop and you can catch me up on everything. I hear you've had quite an adventure since we were last together," Matt says, taking my hand in his own and guiding me out the door.

"Would you mind a quick stop? It's on the way and I need to replace my phone."

"Not at all, lead the way," he says.

It's a small shop and it doesn't take long for them to replace my phone. We walk from the cell shop to the local café where we are seated at a high table at the back of the establishment. "What would you like?" Matt asks, as I slip out of my jacket and place it on the seat beside me. "Chocolate cappuccino, please."

“Hmm, a girl after my own heart. I think I’ll take the same,” Matt says, requesting it in perfect Russian when the waitress comes to take our order. I look at him over the small table and meet his steely grey eyes. “Who the hell are you people?” I ask, and his eyes dance with delight.

“We’re the good guys, Princess,” Matt says, smiling widely.

“Oh, yeah, you wanna tell me why the good guy gets captured and held in a basement where the mafia torture people?” I ask, leaning in so only he can hear me.

“You first,” Matt says, gesturing to me with his head.

“I told you already.”

He levels me with his gaze. “Try again, Princess. I don’t like lies, and that one’s going to cost you, especially since it’s been told twice. I want the truth.”

“What makes you think I lied?”

“You said you were using and you’re not. Your skin is too clear, not blotchy from toxins or decreased circulation. You’re too healthy looking. Your hair shimmers and your fingernails have a healthy pink tint to them,” Matt says.

“You caught all that while we were hanging around?” I ask, giving him my wide-eyed look.

“Not all of it, but enough. The rest I see now and just confirms it. So, you wanna tell me what you were really doing at that bar and why those mafia goons took you?” Matt asks.

“I was curious. Perhaps I was hoping to find my father in one of his joints. I heard they had a package getting moved into Chicago and I wanted to catch him in the act. Should have known the bastard wouldn’t soil his own hands anymore.”

“Who’s your father?” Matt asks.

“I think I answered your question and it’s my turn,” I say.

He smiles widely at me and then shakes his head. “Okay, that seems reasonable to me,” Matt says to me as the waitress

brings us our drinks. He takes a sip and holds it up. “*Nazdorov’ye!*” he says.

I laugh with delight. “All you tourists think we sit around drinking vodka and toasting like that,” I say.

He shrugs good humoredly. “I know better. You sit around toasting with chocolate cappuccino,” Matt says, his eyes twinkling.

“Better! Now, how is it that you know my language but live in America?” I say.

“Easy, it’s a prerequisite of our profession. We all know at least five or six languages and often more. Anything else you want to ask me?”

“Yes, what’s your real name and your profession? I heard them call you Prez, but then your men called you Matt.”

He contemplates for a moment, assessing me with those deep steely grey eyes of his. “I answer to both, depending on the job. You can call me Matt. Matt Benagert.”

“Okay,” I say, taking a sip of my steamy drink.

“My turn,” Matt says.

“Sure,” I say, swirling my tall mug to mix the chocolate before taking another sip.

“How did you really find yourself in that basement?”

“Hmm. Wrong question. That one I can’t answer. How about if we finish our drinks and I give you a little tour of our amazing city,” I say, smiling as his grey eyes narrow at my obvious attempt to circumvent his question.

“Fair enough, Princess, but I am a persistent man,” he says, and I have no doubt that he is. He pays the waitress and he takes my hand as we step outside into the fresh air.

We spend the entire day leisurely making the tourist rounds on the cobblestone steps surrounding Red Square, taking in the architecture of St. Basil’s Cathedral, a church in the square with onion shaped domes on the top of the building, all in a variety of colors that are topped by high reaching

crosses and stopping for a bite to eat and drink midday and to rest.

Matt is animated and engaged while we tour the rest of the city in the afternoon, continuing our walk to Lenin's Mausoleum which covers an expansive area of one side of the square as we continue to walk, before we reach the Kremlin in all its architectural glory before dusk falls and we enter one of my favorite restaurants.

We've finished a dinner of *shashlyk*, chunks of grilled beef marinated in pomegranate juice, and are enjoying our drinks. He reaches across the table and takes my hand in his own. Every time he's touched me, taken my hand, put his arm around my shoulder or waist, guided me in one direction or the other with a light touch to my lower back, it has sent thrills of warmth and electricity through my body. I feel like I have been on edge all day, thrumming with this newly found current.

He's watching me with those steely grey eyes and I can feel my face flush as he talks to me. "When you were there next to me in the basement, I could feel our energy, your desire. You feel the same thing I do, your nipples are getting hard just from the touch of my hand stroking your palm. I want to take you home and care for all your needs, Princess," Matt says.

My father has ruined me for all men. I may let them get close enough to talk to me, try to satisfy me here and there, with a kiss or a touch, but never close enough to get my clothes off, or let my guard down. Matt has seen me at my worst. He knows the real me better than anyone else I've encountered. He's seen and felt my fear, my weakness and the attraction is so palpable, so undeniable, but at my age, the fact that I am still technically a virgin is embarrassing.

I decide to go with honesty. If my condition is a turnoff and not what he was expecting, then better to know now, before we go to the trouble of getting undressed. "I guess taking me home depends on your sexual preferences. Experienced and great in the sack or a virgin with no experience and only unclaimed desires."

Matt watches me for a moment and I see the slight twitch of his jaw before his eyes go smoky and his hand reaches across the table and his finger lifts my chin. “Are you telling me you’re a virgin, Princess?”

“I’ve played a bit, never really got there by the hands of anyone else, but no one has ever entered me. I guess it’s just never been the right time for me,” I say, not telling him the thought of being that physical with a man, someone that could use me like all the men who used my sister, has made me more than cautious. This feeling, what he calls energy, it’s just too much though.

He throws a handful of Russian paper bills down on the table. “Let’s get out of here, Princess,” Matt says, guiding me out of the restaurant.

MATT

MY RUSSIAN PRINCESS IS A VIRGIN. I take a moment to think about that, and what it means to me and my cock hardens letting me know he's there. She may have played a bit, but not one other man has ever claimed her, taken her and made her their very own. The reasons why are a bewilderment to me, but I fully intend to find out.

My dick has been on fire to get inside of her since the first time we met, and still is, but I now have a much greater need. One to find out why my princess is still a virgin and ensure that her first experience is everything it should be.

"We're almost there," Marenah says as we zig-zag between people on the streets, making our way back to her skyrise.

I guide her into the building with my hand on the small of her back and the doorman smiles at us, muttering something under his breath about young love as we make our way to the private elevator that literally floats to the top floor. When we reach it, she swipes her phone across the keypad. "So glad to have my phone back for so many reasons," she says.

"You talked to your sister?"

"Just for a sec while you were in the restroom at the cell store. She knows I'm okay. I still don't understand why your man wouldn't let me connect with her sooner, or how you knew she was my sister, but it is of no consequence. She was thrilled that I'm safe but wants to give me the big sister lecture for even being in that bar," Marenah says, rolling her eyes.

When we enter her condo, I pull her to me, watching as her eyes turn murky with desire. So quick to respond to me. I press my lips to her forehead and smooth her hair back from her face and just breathe her in. The attraction between the two of us is like nothing I have ever experienced, and while I want to go slow with her, my body craves hers. I want to touch every smooth inch of her. I stroke her cheek and run my finger along the softness of her full lips and am rewarded with the warmth of her breath as her mouth parts in desire. I caress the side of her neck and let my fingers find her pulse as my tongue seeks more, exploring her seam until she parts for me again letting me kiss her lips and explore her sweetness. I could completely get lost in her, but I need to go slow with her.

“Princess, I don’t want to rush this,” I say, sealing our kiss and letting my lips wander.

My finger brushes gently against her delicate cheek bones, still marked from her encounter with the hand of a dead man when I find him. My lips continue to travel, suckling the delicate skin of her velvety soft neck and she makes the softest sound, a little purr of delight as I travel, breathing her name into her ear. Her whole body softens and I pull her against me, molding us together, reveling in how her body fits so perfectly to my own as I continue to nuzzle her while my cock hardens against her softness.

One more little purr from her as my lips travel up and down the creamy column of her neck, sucking her harder, tasting the sweetness of her skin, pleased with the way she writhes against me as I mark her. I want to go slow, but the need to feel her is almost primal. I kiss her lips again, and she clasps her arms around my neck, pulling me closer, letting me know her desire and willingness. My hands trail down her body, cupping her exquisitely shaped breasts, so firm with nipples that are hardened with need. I let my fingers graze over the tips that are straining against the soft thin material of her t-shirt and my cock hardens even further at the sound of her whimper.

I slide my hands down her long sleek waist, let them explore the curves of her hips, and then settle on her firm

round ass. I grasp it with my hands, cupping her cheeks, pulling her against me so she can feel my desire.

“I want this with you, I’m so ready,” Marenah says as quiet as a whisper, and with that I slide my hands lower, lifting her into the air.

“Hang onto me,” I instruct and she steadies herself as I carry her to the bedroom, her arms locking around my neck and her ankles clasping around my waist. I lay her on the bed and push her hair back from her face, taking in the faint hitch in her breath and the rapidness of her breathing. My little princess may be able to hold her own with a bunch of tough guys, but she’s nothing but softness and sweet smelling vanilla in the bedroom. I stroke the shell of her ear with my tongue, letting it explore as her nipples further harden into peaks that my fingers can’t resist stroking.

She moans softly and leans into my touch. I need her undressed, to see her spread before me, and I have an innate desire to be the first man to bring her to orgasm. I help her remove her t-shirt and murmur my appreciation for her choice in lingerie. “So hot, Princess.” A white lacy bra with a clasp in front reminds me just how virginal she is. I kiss the small valley between her breasts, but I am greedy and need to see what I’ve fantasized about since the very first time I saw her. I slide my finger over the clasp, glancing up at her.

Her eyes are riveted on mine and the blue of her eyes is smoky with desire, and my cock throbs painfully inside the constraints of my jeans. My fingers stroke over the clasp again, giving her a chance to change her mind, but she doesn’t. Instead, my princess gives me the sexiest smile I’ve ever seen and I take that as consent and push against the clip.

The weight of her breasts, small, high and firm, naturally part the material, allowing me to gaze at her pink nipples, hardened and needy. I kiss one with my tongue while squeezing the other, rolling the delicate flesh between my finger and thumb until she moans with pleasure and I make my way down her tight little belly.

When I unclasp her jeans she tenses, but I didn't need the reminder to go slow or to be gentle, because I want to take my time unwrapping and cherishing her. "It's okay, Princess, we'll go nice and slow," I say, unzipping the material to slide it over her curves, past her thighs and pulling her pants off to expose her long gazelle-like legs and the lacy white panties.

I kiss up her legs, one then the other, stroking the curve of her calves and slowly make my way up those deliciously long legs, licking along her inner thighs and nuzzling against her lacy covered pussy with my nose, until she is nearly panting with need. Only when she grasps the comforter, and moans softly, do I relent, slipping a finger into each side of her silk and lace trimmed panties, sliding them past her delicious curves and down the length of her legs to expose her neatly trimmed mound.

I look up at her as I make my way south and just the warmth of my breath against her pussy causes her to push her hips slightly, silently letting me know that she's ready for me to teach her and I want nothing more than to do that very thing. I nuzzle her mound with my nose, slide down, and push her legs apart indecently, watching her closely as I do. Her eyes close and then open with undisguised embarrassment, but she isn't able to hide the desire that lurks there, too. It's too palpable and such a mirror image of my own that I would recognize it anywhere. I hold her gaze as I dip lower, allowing my tongue to touch her clit, and she raises up, shocked at the sensation. "Just feel, Princess, let me teach you about pleasure," I say, letting my tongue wash over her as she softly moans, causing my dick to pulse with need.

I want to explore every inch of her, sliding my tongue over her soft velvety folds, wet with desire and longing and so very sweet. I do it over and over until she is writhing with need. Only then do I wash her clit with my tongue, soft firm strokes that leave her panting with each pass, frantic with need and begging me not to stop. I draw her little bud into my mouth and suck hard sending her into a spiraling orgasm that causes her to buck against me and scream my name over and over until the waves have finally subsided.

When she stops quivering the look of embarrassment she has on her face realizing that my face is still between her open legs is priceless. I know she wants to close them, but I want to taste the cream I've created and keep them spread with my hands. "Princess, I think you owe me dessert," I say, licking down her wetness and dipping into her creamy center. She moans, and my cock throbs hard with desire, but I know it's going to have to be satisfied with my hand because tonight is not the night.

When I take her, she will have a night worthy of the princess she is, but when her hips raise with need, as I let my tongue find her entrance, I have to will myself to keep it together. And, that's precisely what I do until she starts squirming against my tongue, giving me even more access to the sweetness I desire as I drive into her virginal spot over and over, bringing her over the edge again, panting my name as she comes all over my tongue for the second time tonight.

When I've thoroughly cleaned her, I slide up beside her, pulling her body into my own. "Rest Princess," I say, nuzzling her neck, feeling the smooth softness of her long blonde hair cascading around us.

"Hmm, I've never felt something like that. I want to make you feel good, too," Marenah says, her voice low and barely intelligible with the need for rest.

"Sleep. You're exhausted, we're not in a rush here," I say and in less than a minute I have her pressed against my chest and she is doing just that, and I find it impossible to do the same or to take my eyes from her sleeping frame. Vacation or not, I would normally be working, at least researching this evening, but that's not what I plan to do. Instead, I send a text to Jay letting him know that I plan to take the night off to recover and I pull my princess closer, just holding her and losing myself to the fantasies playing in my mind about claiming her for the very first time.

WHEN I WAKE in the morning she is still asleep, and I kiss her lips gently. She smiles in her sleep, and I have no idea why that makes me happy, but it does. I raise up slowly, grimacing at the pain in my side, and being careful so as not to wake her. I strip once I reach the bathroom, in need of a nice long shower. When the warmth of the water cascades around me I can't help thinking about what she would look like in here with me, on her knees, the rain of the shower pelting against our skin as she sucks my cock. It's that image that has me rubbing my pulsing member; long strokes, squeezing just so right. When I think of the princess in my bed, taking my length all the way to the back of her throat, moaning with pleasure as she sucks, it takes less than a few minutes before I am sending strand after strand of desire for the beautiful princess laying in her bed onto the shower floor, watching as the water gathers, and sends it swirling down the drain.

I'm left to catch my breath and try to recover from the intensity of my need for Marenah. I tilt my head back, letting the water rain over me as I come floating back to reality. No one has ever captured my attention like the long legged, blue-eyed blonde in the next room. I've never felt the sheer physical connection we have with anyone else. It's an energy, so different that it's hard to comprehend. I've heard about it before, but never once in my life experienced it, but now there is an intense need to make it a special night for my virginal princess.

I dry off stepping out of the shower, my head a little clearer, slide into my clothes and slip out of her bedroom, closing the door behind me managing not to wake her. In less than fifteen minutes, I've made the arrangements that I need, figured out how to make a pot of coffee with her stainless steel machine and am signed into the huddle that Jay has called.

“You know the offer I talked to you about last week? Apparently, Chase and Brian are more determined than ever to have our team take care of their entire family, including the Italian Family.”

The minute Chase Prestian married Katarina Meilers, the one and only daughter of the New York Italian Family head,

things were always going to go down this way. We all knew we were protecting the daughter of the renowned crime boss, but we didn't have a choice after Chase fell in love with Katarina. The irony is that we do now have a choice but the choice is to continue protecting Chase and his extended Italian Mafia family or not. I'm in. There's no way I'll leave Jenny unprotected. Katarina's best friend, Jenny has become as close to family as I will ever have, like a little sister that I've always wanted, growing up in an orphanage and moved from foster home to foster home. The thought that I wouldn't protect her and her family seems ludicrous to me, even though six months ago I might have told anyone asking me to protect the mafia, much less any family with connections to them to fuck the hell off. I've experienced first hand what some of the families are into, but while these men are far from angels they know where to draw the line and are good men.

"I'm in," I say, and laugh out loud when I hear Jay's sigh of relief on the phone.

"You wanna tell me what that was?" I ask.

"No, I just want to make sure everyone on the team is cool with this before we meet with Chase and Brian. We've got a great team, and I'm not looking to split it up," Jay says.

"Agree. Negotiate the deal, we'll be behind you," I say.

"It may mean you need to fly into Italy to sign a contract. We're on our way to Italy right now and should be there tomorrow evening. Can you make a meeting with Chase the day after tomorrow morning? He's got plenty of room for everyone in the guest house," Jay says.

"I'm just a few hours away. Send the document over, and I'll take a look. In the meantime, I'll have a flight plan drawn up that will put Marenah and me in Italy tomorrow night. I'll send over the necessary info. Get it approved," I say.

"Roger that," Jay says.

I walk into the bedroom where my princess sleeps and shake my head. There's no way I'm going to allow her to be in

harm's way, but the cruel reality is that I have to go to Italy.
She can either come with me the easy way or the hard way.

MARENAH

I WAKE, stretching my body, sated with memories of Matt providing me with those amazing orgasms last night. The room is empty, but the drapes have been drawn open, and the sun is streaming in. I stretch again, lingering in my luxurious post-sexual bliss.

He walks into the room dressed in jeans and a tight black t-shirt and my thighs clench with desire, but he could have had me. I thought after what he did to me he would take me, but instead, he let me sleep, holding me in his arms. Still a virgin.

“Hungry, Princess? Breakfast is ready,” Matt says.

I nod, too choked up to say anything as he stares into my eyes. He takes my hand, pulls me up in bed, and kisses my lips. “Get ready and come to breakfast. I had it delivered while you slept,” Matt says, heading into the kitchen and leaving me to get freshened up before donning a robe and following. I find him laying out rolls at the bar. “Oh my God, Matt, Prez, whoever the hell you are. How did you know these are my absolute favorite! Let me smell,” I say with delight, picking up the freshly baked buns filled with bacon and onions. Do you know what these are?” I ask, waving the little homemade rolls around.

“Should I?” Matt asks, grey eyes watching me with amusement.

“Pierogi!” I say, tearing a piece of the pastry and putting it to his mouth. “Taste it.” Matt laughs at my enthusiasm and takes a bite, savoring the soft warmth of the bread, and

delicious flavors. He murmurs his appreciation of the taste, and something unfamiliar in my chest tightens.

Matt walks behind me and pulls me close, guiding me to the dining room chair and pulls me down into his lap. He takes the roll from my hand and tears off a piece. “You like this Princess?” Matt asks, setting a portion of the freshly baked bread onto my lips. I have no clue why the fact that he didn’t take my virginity when he could have and instead is feeding me turns me on so much, but it does.

“So much,” I moan, my mouth full while my ass presses into the hard cock beneath me.

I finish chewing and love the way his eyes glaze over as he looks at me. “Can I ask you a question?” He nods, looking down at me. “Why didn’t you, you know finish with me last night? Is it because I’m too inexperienced?”

His eyebrows arc and his hand snakes under my hair before pulling me gently to just inches from his mouth. “You think I didn’t take you because you’re not experienced, Princess?” Matt asks.

I nod, because nothing else makes sense. Most men, at least the ones I’ve encountered would just take what they wanted and walk, just like my father, just like all the men in my sister’s life. I’ve never given them the chance to use me and dump me like that, but for some reason, I wanted the closeness, the intimacy with Matt and the fact that he didn’t want me in that way hurt more than I want to admit.

He pulls me closer rubbing his finger against my lip, as I feel his cock harden even more beneath me. “Don’t think that I didn’t want you, Princess. I want your first time to be special,” Matt says, his mouth descending, stroking the seam of my lips with his tongue, parting them to give him entrance.

He captures my tongue in an intimate dance, one that I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to recover from. Never have I wanted a man like this, never have I wanted to feel this way about a man, but yet the uncontrollable magnetism is there, and it’s not diminishing, only getting stronger.

“Marenah, go and get showered and dressed. I have an entire day and evening planned for you. Don’t ruin your surprise.”

I sigh, kissing his lips just one more time. “Go, Princess,” Matt says, swatting my ass playfully, gesturing me toward the bedroom and shower.

When I come out, I am refreshed and dressed, ready for the day and whatever it brings, and he pulls me to him, kissing my lips lightly. “Let’s go exploring,” he says.

“You’re still hurt,” I say, rubbing my hand along his side, feeling the bandages that are still keeping him compressed and tight. “Are you going to tell me what happened?”

“It’s not that bad and it’ll heal. There’s nothing for you to worry your pretty little head over, understand?” Matt asks, pulling me close and nuzzling his nose into my hair.

I nod as he takes my hand and pushes the elevator button for the lower level. When it arrives he guides me into it and then out into the lobby, past the glass doors of the skyscraper and onto the sidewalks of the city. “There’s a dress shop that I want to take you to, it’s not far from here,” Matt says, and I look up at him. He grins at me. “What?” he says.

“Oh, I don’t know. Do you wow all your women by taking them to buy a dress?” I say, and his eyes cloud over for the briefest of moments, before he hides it, but not before I’ve seen it.

“Is that what you think?” he says softly, watching me intently.

“It’s what I learned growing up. All men want something. You could have taken me last night, but you didn’t. Now you take me out shopping for a night out in the city. I guess I’m a little confused and trying to figure you out,” I say.

“I’m not going to hurt you, Marenah. I just want to buy you a pretty dress,” Matt says, grasping my waist, pulling me close and kissing my forehead as we reach the shop.

“I’m sorry, sincerely. I haven’t had much experience with stuff like this. I’ve seldom gone on dates. I guess it’s just not

my thing,” I say, attempting to move away from him, but his arm tightens around my waist.

“Take a look at the dresses. Pick out a few, try them on and see which ones you like,” Matt says, holding the door for me as we enter the shop.

The sales clerk is eager to show me all of the merchandise. She keeps looking at Matt, her eyes surveying his lean muscled body dressed in jeans and the sweater he’s donned to come outside in, and she doesn’t even have the decency to be discreet about it.

I rifle through the dresses on the rack and in less than a few minutes have selected a few that until walking into this shop and seeing her ogle my guy would have been my last choice.

I hold them up and gesture to the fitting rooms at the back of the shop, and he sends me a wink. I slide out of my clothes, and bra since my favorite of the three leaves no room for that. A deep dark little black dress that has delicate straps, with a v-neck that plunges deep, right to my midriff, and then hugs the curves of my waist and hips before falling down around my legs, with a sexy little slit up the side.

I twirl in the mirror. This dress could not have fit better if it were custom made for me and while it’s so feminine and risqué, so different from my usual attire, I find myself wanting to wear it for Matt. I walk out of the dressing room eager to see if he likes it and stop short.

He’s talking on his cell facing outside, watching patrons pass by the windows and miss sales clerk is still ogling him up like he’s eye candy. He turns as if sensing my presence, his eyes homing in on me and no one else, taking me in inch by inch, his gaze heating my skin and I can feel my nipples pebble with desire as his eyes finally find my own. He says something quiet into his phone and disconnects, walking across the shop until he’s standing in front of me.

“That dress is as perfect as you are. It’s the one I’m going to unwrap you from before I take your virginity. You should go take it off before I decide to take you for the first time in

the dressing room,” Matt says low enough so that only I can hear, as he spins me away.

When I return he takes the dress from me and heads to the counter where miss ogly eyes continues gawking, glancing my way every now and then. My blood courses as she looks him up and down, then licks her lips before ringing the dress up. This emotion is so foreign, I don't think I've ever felt it before, this jealousy that rages inside of me. It takes all of my training to try and disguise my emotion as she goes about her business as she scans the tag.

He hands her a credit card and I gasp at the price displayed on the digital register. That can't be right. I knew this was an expensive boutique, but this is outrageous. I touch Matt's arm and shake my head. I don't need anything so expensive, but he just smiles while she's ringing him out. He pulls me toward him and whispers in my ear. “I want to do this. Let me,” he says as though he could hear my thoughts.

The lady clears her throat, not too subtly trying to catch our attention. He doesn't rush though, instead, runs a finger along my lips before placing a gentle kiss on my lips, a tender gesture that makes my legs go weak and my heart actually flutter. All these emotions, so new, so exhilarating that I can barely think straight and have to keep telling myself to breathe.

We walk out the shop and he glances at his phone. We're not far from a place for shoes. He tells me the name and asks if I know it. “Yes, and it's probably just as expensive as the shop we just left. Seriously, we can go somewhere else.”

“I'm not worried about the money. I want to do this,” Matt says, carrying the purchased bag in one hand and grasping mine with his other. He runs his finger along my palm, making patterns as we walk, causing little tingles of excitement to course through my veins.

The shop is filled with all the latest designers' selections and it doesn't take long to find a bright red pair of heels that will match the sexiness of the dress perfectly. I put them on and admire them in the side mirrors. His eyes light up and he

nods his agreement with the choice, but when he turns to take a call and I take a few steps I grimace. How do women like my sister make walking in these things look so incredibly easy?

I've taken them off and put my own shoes back on by the time he's finished his call. He takes them from me and places his hand on the small of my back as we walk toward the counter. This time the man that stands behind the counter isn't looking at him, but glances my way every now and then. Not overtly obvious like the woman in the previous store, but it's clear that he's checking me out on the sly.

Matt pushes the hair back from my face, exposing my neck and runs his thumb along it as the man rings us up, before he turns to the shopkeeper. His eyes settle in on the man who seems to be getting more and more nervous by the minute, but keeps looking over at me every once in a while as the credit card is processing.

"She's taken, my friend, but she is magnificent to look at, yeah?" Matt says.

"She is indeed," the man says, nodding to Matt as though I'm not even in the room or the one they're talking about. My cheeks heat with embarrassment as they finish the transaction, and we leave the store.

"What just happened there?"

"He wants to get in your panties. He couldn't take his eyes off you, not that I can blame him."

"And you called him out on it, why?"

"Because you're taken and I didn't like the way he was looking at you," Matt says.

I try to conceal my happiness, but I'm sure he can see the delight dancing in my eyes. I don't know why the fact that he was jealous, too, makes me feel so much better after that dress shop lady was gawking at him like a piece of meat, but it does. He takes my hand and brings it to his lips, before guiding me down the street as we make our way to check out all the other little shops along the way.

We spend the rest of the morning leisurely making the tourist rounds that we didn't get to yesterday until we are both hungry and ready for a break.

I take him to one of my favorite cafés for lunch. “What do you recommend?” Matt asks, skimming the menu.

“Here? Definitely the *golubtsy*. It's a cabbage roll with meat inside. So good,” I say.

“Is that what you'd like?”

“Yes, please,” I say as the waiter stops by and Matt orders the dish for each of us along with a glass of bread wine, which is a locally fermented drink popular with the locals.

In moments the waiter has returned with our drinks. Matt picks his up and gestures for me to do the same. “When in Russia,” he says, smiling at me while clinking his glass with mine.

We continue our tour in the afternoon, wandering around the city and stopping for a small treat of chocolate latte and pastry in the early afternoon before we make our way back to my apartment in the late afternoon.

Matt closes the door behind us and pulls me into his arms. “You are so incredibly alive. So beautiful, friendly, funny and sexy,” he says, thumbing his finger across my lower lip. “I want to get to know every single complex part of you,” he says, kissing me as he undresses me. When he's done and I am left bare in front of him, he suckles each nipple in turn, creating hard peaks of desire. He reaches down, grasping behind my knees, lifting me and my legs lock onto his waist and my arms tighten around his neck as he carries me to bed laying me down, and settling me before beginning to undress as I watch every sinewy muscle in his body displayed for me.

When he is completely nude, my eyes slide to the hardness pulsing between his legs. That is never going to fit inside of my body. It is long, hard, and so delicious looking that my pussy weeps with longing as I look at it. He smirks and slides into beside me, pulling me close. “You're going to have a long

night, sleep for a bit Princess,” Matt says, kissing my lips gently.

A COUPLE HOURS LATER, well rested, we walk outside of the skyscraper, me wearing the blue dress he purchased for me and him in a black suit, with a white starched shirt and tie. The doorman tells us to have a nice evening, and Matt tells him to do the same in perfect Russian. Matt opens the back seat of an awaiting limo, makes sure I'm inside, closes my door and walks around and gets in the other side. “Let me put this on you,” he says, taking the seatbelt from my hand, securing me into the soft leather seat, and watching my eyes as he does.

“Where are we going?” I ask as the driver pulls out into the city traffic, the city lights ablaze with life. “It's a surprise until we get there,” Matt says, taking my hand and stroking the inside of my palm with his forefinger.

Just the touch of his finger gliding over my skin causes me to heat, makes me want him like I've never wanted anyone before. I am thinking about what his fingers could do to me, stroking other places like he did before with his tongue when I am pulled from my day dreams.

The car has drawn up to the curb of the most exclusive skyscraper in the city and every nerve ending in my body goes on alert. “This is where you're taking me?” I ask, looking up at the building that my grandfather owns and one of the many places in the city that he will be able to watch me on camera.

MATT

WE PULL up to the most elegant restaurant in Moscow, the one I've reserved for us, having to pull more than a few strings to arrange it and she's looking at me with trepidation, not excitement.

"Marenah, what's going on? It's the nicest restaurant in the city. It even overlooks the Moskva River, I thought you would like it," I say as the valet approaches.

She looks at me and somethings not right, she's scared. I lift her chin up, and her eyes still don't connect with mine. "Marenah, tell me what you're afraid of?"

"We can't go up to the restaurant. They have cameras. My family will see you with me, and if it gets back to my grandfather, all hell will break loose," Marenah says.

I don't fully understand it yet, but I will in time. "Stay here, and out of sight," I say to her. "Anything goes south you leave me and get her the hell out of here," I say to the driver as the valet opens the door. I get out of the car, head into the skyrise and to the elevator. They've already seen the car pull up. If we leave now, it will alert them that something else is going on and they will have reason for suspicion.

The elevator dings before it opens into the sky level restaurant and the hostess behind the podium. "I just arrived back into the city. Do you have a table available?" I ask in my best Russian accent taking the opportunity to glance around as I wait for her response.

The hostess with short dark spiky hair and a long sleek body smiles and shrugs at me apologetically. “What will you pay?” she asks, batting her eyes, letting me know that if the price is right, she’ll shuffle the tables and accommodate what I want.

“Table or no? It’s early, the dinner crowd isn’t even out,” I say, glancing at my phone which registers only 6 p.m.

“Sorry. We have no tables available this evening or later tonight,” the young brunette says, and I turn, making my way back to the elevator. As it reaches the ground level and opens, there is a crowd of young people coming into the skyrise. “If you’re heading upstairs it’s all full unless you have a reservation,” I say with feigned disgust and I head back to the limo, slide into the passenger seat, and our driver peels away.

“Matt, what happened?” Marenah says.

“Nothing, but only because you told me about the cameras. Our car won’t be a target. They won’t even follow me. Just a man who didn’t make reservations,” I say as I pull her into my arms and the driver moves into the wave of evening city traffic.

I feel her body tremble and that tells me that there is so much more swirling around her mind. “We’ll go somewhere else, it’s no problem, but are you going to tell me what’s going on, Princess?” I say, lifting her chin so that I can look into the blue eyes that are wide, intense, and focused on my own as she contemplates how to respond.

“My family, they’re not what you would be accustomed to. They are, connected,” Marenah says and her eyes close with guilt, embarrassment, or something else.

“We all have skeletons, Princess,” I say, rubbing her shoulder.

“Whatever the history, or the story, we make the future,” I say as our driver pulls up to the penthouse that has been reserved in my name. The valet opens her side, and I walk around and guide her into the skyrise and toward the private elevator that takes us to the penthouse suite of the hotel.

I send a message to Nate who I just happen to know is still hanging out in Russia following my ass, no doubt at the ask of Jay. Dumbasses, they think I haven't seen him trailing us, but I've had to have eyes in the back of my head since I was little. Almost as soon as my message is received my phone pings with his response. One word. Asshole. I laugh, knowing he'll do as I asked.

"Would you like a drink, Marenah?" I ask, as the elevator opens to the luxurious condo. I push the remote that retracts the drapes and allows us an expansive view of the Russian capital and Moskva river. The view from my penthouse is even more impressive than the restaurant would have been, but I wanted her to be able to relax and show her a fun evening, not be thrown right into my home away from home right away.

"Please," she says in response to my question about a drink, but she's biting her lips. She's nervous, the sexual tension between us is entirely palpable. She wants to lose her virginity tonight, and I want nothing more than to take it, but it won't be rushed or hurried, so my Princess needs to relax.

I pour her a drink of the vodka that's been left for us and take her hand, guiding her to the sofa that looks out over the city. "I had a great time today. I've never had so much fun touring a new city," I say, and it's true.

She crosses her leg over the other and the slit of her dress parts, exposing her long creamy thigh and calf. Her sandals showcase the slender ankles and French tipped toes, colored a perfect little pink, and all I can think about is having them wrapped around my neck as I drive my cock into her little virginal pussy.

Her cheeks flush as she realizes I'm looking at her bared skin and she tugs on the silky material of her dress to cover herself. "I did, too. Things like this, they don't happen in my world, Matt. I don't date. I don't dress up for guys and go out on dates. This is all throwing me off my game a little," Marenah says.

She's apologizing for her innocence and doesn't have a clue in the world how hot that is. I shift in my seat and take a

sip of my drink. Fuck that's strong. "Why did you pick that dress, Marenah?" I ask, already knowing the answer but wanting to hear it from her lips.

Her cheeks flush pink, and she runs her index finger over her thumb, a little habit I've noticed she has when she's nervous. "Because Miss Thing was looking at you like you were her next meal and I wanted you to think I was sexy," Marenah says, the embarrassment at her admission clear, but there's something else brewing in those expressive eyes. She strokes her tongue over her bottom lip and my cock hardens to stone almost instantly.

"And you thought I wanted her?" I say.

She shrugs. "I'm not sure about that, but she's probably more your type. Seemed like a little tiger, would definitely be able to keep up to you in the bedroom."

"We should probably get something clear. I wouldn't have traveled clear across the globe if you weren't the one I wanted. The fact that you're inexperienced and that I can teach you about sexual pleasure is almost intoxicating, it's a gift, understand?" I ask, watching her pupils dilate as she takes in what I've said. I stroke her lower lip, the place her teeth have just left and graze over her velvety softness.

She nods. "Good, I had dinner ordered in, so let's enjoy the meal when it arrives, the exceptional view, have a couple drinks and get to know each other a little more," I say, just as the ding of the elevator alerts me that our dinner has arrived.

The caterers set up on the dining room table, and I watch as she observes the familiar Russian dishes being laid out before us. A plate of shashlyk, pork sliced thick and long and cooked over a gentle fire with a pomegranate marinade, and then a fruit pie stuffed with mulberries and topped with a delicious looking meringue.

The dinner is fabulous, and she explains the traditions behind some of the dishes as we eat and sip our drinks. When we are sated, I pull her to me. "I wanted to take you out to eat and then dancing in your beautiful dress before I unwrapped you," I say, licking the seam of her lips.

“That’s so incredibly hot. I’m sorry it wasn’t the evening you were planning, but I’ve had the best time, and I want you to be my first,” Marenah says shyly, kissing my lips.

MARENAH

THE ELEVATOR DOORS open to his penthouse, and I inhale deeply, trying to wrap my head around the turn of events. I have never been able to commit. The thought of getting close to someone has always been a hard limit for me, knowing my mother, my sister, and I were rejected by our father before my birth. I've watched my sister attach herself to any man that would give her affection, year after year since she learned the truth about our father. It was too much, and I vowed never to let a man get close to my heart, give him that power over me, the ability to devastate me like that.

I might indulge every once in a while in a little extracurricular activity, a kiss or a little feel, but then my head always gets in the way. Maybe because, until now, there's never been this energy, this burning inferno that sparks whenever Matt's anywhere near me. The physical attraction that I have for this man is too powerful, and I know he feels it too.

“Stand up for me. I want to see my package,” Matt says, and everything in my core clenches with desire for this man. I don't know why he's the one that I want to give my virginity to, but my body has selected him and I know it on a deep primal level. I stand, shy, and spin for him, and the desire in his eyes is intoxicating and probably mirrors that of my own.

“Absolutely gorgeous, Princess. Turn, I want to unwrap you,” he says, and I do what he asks, spinning on my heels until I am faced away from him. He unzips the small zipper from my lower back to right above my ass and then slides the

delicate straps over each shoulder, peeling them down my arms, holding the material in place while he kisses my neck and shoulders, trailing after the missing material as he does.

The moan of pleasure is mine, but his cock grows even harder against my ass at the sound of it. “You’re so responsive, Princess. We’re going to go slow, and you’re going to tell me exactly what you like or don’t like, understand?” Matt says, whispering in my ear while he licks the inside of the shell.

I shiver, and he pulls me tighter against him, pushing his cock against my ass.

“That’s right Princess. Tell me what you like, moan for me, just like that,” Matt says, letting the rest of the material of my dress glide down the length of my body until it hits the floor in a pile at my feet. I step out of it, standing in just a white lacy thong and pewter-colored Jimmy Choo sandals. The silver straps circle my ankles and show off my painted toes, and their height and angle causes my ass to tilt upward.

I have never felt so desired, so wanton, and as he spins me, the look in his eyes devours me, and makes me feel wanted. “You’re absolutely gorgeous, Princess,” he says, stroking my nape with one hand, letting his fingers of the other hand glide over my nipple, pulling me close, kissing my lips, softly at first, but with increasing passion as I open to him. His tongue captures mine, at the same time he pulls my body closer, rubbing against me before he lifts me.

“Wrap your legs around my waist and hang onto my neck, Princess,” Matt says, and I do as he’s asked, and he walks us into his bedroom. He lays me onto the soft down comforter and spreads my legs with his hands. “Stay open for me, Marenah,” Matt says, kissing down the length of my body, taking his time, sucking on one nipple, then the other, kissing my navel and exploring its center with his tongue before trailing lower, rolling his forefinger through the most sensitive part of my body, blowing on my sex with the warmth of his breath.

My entire core clenches with desire and I grab onto the bedding with both hands, not sure how to deal with the

incredible amount of pleasure.

“That’s it Princess,” Matt says, blowing on my sex again before he lowers his mouth, letting his tongue wash me from center straight up to my clit, taking it into his mouth, intermittently caressing and then sucking hard, taking his time, bringing me to the edge time and time again and then leaving me delirious with desire, trying my best not to strain against him, and panting with desire.

“I want you to be my first,” I say, kissing him with a passion that I have never felt before.

“Easy Princess,” he says, settling between my legs. His cock is hard, erect, jutting up and curving against his tight abs while he looks down at me and sticks one finger deep inside of me. “So wet and creamy and so very tight,” he says, wrapping himself before sliding a second digit in, the fullness stretching me as he scissors his fingers. He stills then, allowing me to accommodate to their width, before sliding them deeper and curling them. As soon as he does, that throbbing starts, it’s so sensitive there, right in that very spot, and as he rubs his fingers against it, the waves start building deep inside of me.

It feels so good, I’m unable to take it anymore, right on the edge of something, so incredibly delicious—nothing I’ve experienced at my own hand before has ever been like this. I moan softly, consumed by this throbbing neediness.

“You’re trembling, Princess. Ready to come for me?” Matt asks, rubbing his cock against my opening and stroking my clit with his hardness to push me over the edge. The waves of pleasure ripple through me, again and again, and with that he pushes my knees up and drives his cock right into the very depths of me, thrusting past my virginity, settling deep inside of me.

I cry out softly from the pleasure mixed with pain and he stills, kissing my lips, stroking my cheek and calming me as my body acclimates to the burn and his incredible size. “Oh my God, Matt, you’re inside of me,” I say, panting, feeling him pulse, hard and rigid within my body. The feel of him and the desire I see in his eyes cause my center to ache. He holds

himself in check for me, allowing me the time to stretch and to accept him, and that only adds to my desire. My thighs clench deliciously around his waist, pulling him closer, and he allows himself to sink deeper and I gasp.

He looks down at me, those wide eyes storming with passion as he restrains himself. He nuzzles my nose and strokes my cheek, and I can feel him pulsing inside of me, stretching me, causing my center to clench around him with desire. "Ready Princess?" he asks, parting my lips with his own, capturing my tongue as he begins to move, creating a rhythm, slow at first, rocking, stretching me, and then harder, and soon I can feel him hitting the end of me, that spot that spasms and wants more when he does, and that's the very spot he keeps hitting, over and over, rebuilding a tidal wave of desire inside of me. I hear myself moaning, calling his name, needing everything that he gives me.

He thrusts against that spot harder and faster and my ankles tighten against his waist. Current after pleasurable current as he drives us both to release, sending shock waves through our bodies, not stopping until the last of the waves have dissipated, and we are sated and spent, wrung out with the pleasure, holding each other through it until we begin to recover.

I pull his face, which is now right above mine, down for a kiss. I don't care that his lips have just been in my most intimate area. In fact, for some reason it makes me want to kiss him even more. "That was more than I ever imagined it would be. I never knew it could be this good," I say, licking his bottom lip and then suckling it, relishing in his moan of pleasure.

MATT

I WAKE up and watch the beautiful princess sleeping in my arms. Her face is nuzzled against my chest and her lovely blonde hair cascades down her back and over my stomach. The fact that she has put her trust in me, giving me her virginity, is a gift that I will always treasure. I stroke her hair, pushing it back so I can see her face and watch her breathe.

It's almost noon and I'm starving. We stayed up way too late enjoying each other some more, walked around the city, and then ended up back at her place. I've had an intense desire to protect Marenah from the very first moment I saw her, and now it is only getting stronger. While I could easily call down to the concierge who takes care of the penthouse guests, instead I send a message to Nate, who was out late watching us as we walked around the city.

Pick up pierogi/chocolate lattes at the bakery down the street? In an hr?

Fuck you!

Not in the stars.

Paybacks are a bitch!

I almost laugh right the fuck out loud. A ladies' man through and through, he's not looking to get attached to anyone long enough to stay for breakfast.

Marenah shifts, and her long legs stretch against mine, and she nuzzles in closer, and all thoughts of Nate and his problems evaporate. When her leg slides along mine and

encircles it in her sleep, my dick twitches, but so does my brain.—the part of it that warns me that getting too close to someone brings heartache and a lot of pain, the kind you can't just heal from like a broken bone or a busted rib. The kind that leaves the remnants of it seared into your being like a brand. It reminds me of Alyse, and why I stay the hell away from connections, but as I look down at my princess, I know that it may already be too late because every fiber of my being wants her curled up next to me exactly as she is, us craving each other, even in sleep, and most definitely when we are awake.

She slithers her leg along my calf and curls her toes around my foot, and something inside me just lets the feeling be. It's caring, almost possessive in nature, and most definitely sexy as hell, and all while she's sleeping. The fact that her body is drawn to mine in the same way that I crave hers gives me reason for pause. Things are happening fast, too fast, probably, and while my mind knows this, there's nothing I want to do but selfishly hold her closer. I stroke her hair and caress the soft silkiness of her sleek back, rubbing before the curves dip into her ass. So sexy, and she softly moans, rubbing herself against me as I caress her.

I don't stop, and she finally opens her eyes, and it takes a minute before she recalls where she is, what we've done, and who she's with. "Matt," she says, running her hand along my chest, coming dangerously close to my nipples, which are already painfully erect, a small tell of what she'll find when she heads south.

"What, Princess," I say, pushing her hair from her face so I can look at those now-wide eyes gazing at me with a swirling look of lust.

"I want you again, to feel you inside of me," she says softly, like she's trying to overcome her embarrassment.

In one movement I've flipped her, and she's straddled on top of me, but I keep her pulled close. I stroke her lips with mine, kissing along her seam, pushing in, parting her lips with my tongue so I can explore the depths within. So fucking sweet, and my cock has already hardened painfully and is dripping with arousal for this woman. It's pushing against her

belly as we kiss, and her breathing tells me she can not only feel how hard I am, but just how badly she wants this.

She is brave, telling me that she wants me. I decide to reward her by letting her be on top and grab one of the condom packets on the nightstand, pull it open with my teeth, and hand it to her. “Roll it on, Princess,” I say, watching her eyes widen. She licks her lips, nervous, and I don’t know why the hell the fact she’s never done this before is such a turn on, but it causes my dick to harden like a stone.

The consternation of her gaze as her delicate fingers push it over the head of my cock is adorable. She bites her lip as she continues to slide it down, and my cock throbs with this level of intimacy. I’ve never let any woman shield me. I usually do that myself, and it’s certainly not ever been an intimate moment, more of a necessity. Mitigating risks and all that. I pull her to me and kiss her lips, then allow her to rise back up, watching her eyes all smoky and glazed over with heat. “Are you ready, Marenah?” I ask as she finishes wrapping me, looking pleased at her accomplishment.

She nods, and that gives me the confirmation I need before I lift her and pull her down slowly onto my cock, letting it finally reach that spot that I’ve already learned drives her crazy. She moans and tries to squirm, but I hold onto her hips, keeping her in place, exactly where I want to be, buried in her wetness and velvety folds, moving a little but never giving her what she really needs. She finally cries out with the need to move, and then I thrust hard, upward, deep inside of her as I use her hips to pull her down over my cock. Her eyes glaze over, and her mouth forms the perfect little O for me as the orgasm rips through her. I ride her through the waves, and the way her tight little pussy squeezes my dick and the way she looks on the end of it with her little tits bouncing pushes me over the edge, and with three more deep thrusts, strand after strand of my white-hot desire is released deep inside of her.

I remove the condom, tying it off and letting it drop to the floor so I can pull her into my arms, holding her close as she nuzzles into my chest. I’m going to need to head out in a few hours if I’m going to be in Italy tonight, but I don’t want to

leave her, and I'm not letting her stay here by herself until I know what the hell is going on with her grandfather, why she's so scared that he may capture her on camera with me, or why the hell she was in the bar and why she lied.

So many things running through my head, but the one that is the loudest is how I plan to leave her when the time comes, if she won't come with me. I press my lips into her soft silky hair, and she lets out a little moan of pleasure. I grab my phone off the nightstand and look at the time and messages. Nate should be arriving in a few minutes with our rolls and coffee, and I haven't got one word yet back from my request to find out who the fuck her grandfather is.

There's something that keeps trying to come to the surface, but it evades me.

"Princess, I need to go to Italy, and I want you to go with me." She just looks up at me with sleepy eyes, smiles, and nods her head, nuzzling deeper into my chest. Her immediate agreement to come to Italy with me is a surprise. I thought I was going to have to convince her, but she feels this insane attraction that we seem to have, too, and I don't think she wants to see it end anymore than I do. In a matter of moments she's dozing again, on and off, lying in the curve of my arm. I push her hair to one side so I can watch her and stroke a finger across the sleekness of her shoulder blades and down her spine. Her body responds, curling into me, and I caress her some more, enjoying the change in her breathing. Even in her sleep, she responds to my touch and that is an intoxicating feeling.

Jay's message to me comes across. "I'm bringing Sasha with me to Italy. She's not safe in Chicago with us in Italy. How's her sister doing?"

Everything finally clicks into fucking place. The intel I retrieved on Bernatelli, Sasha's father: Marenah's her sister. Their father is one and the same. I remember uploading the transcript I came across, lifting off the audio line that I sent to the intel site when I was undercover trying to get anything on Bernatelli that could give us some leverage to get Jenny Torzial off their wanted list. I remember exactly what that

conversation was. *“The documents need to disappear, or they do. If anyone ever finds out what happened years ago, it will be the collision between two of the largest crime families on earth. We don’t need the Russian Mafia crawling up our ass. Deal with it!”* Fuck, that means that whatever Sasha is dealing with, my Princess is, too, and given her reaction last night, it must have something to do with her grandfather.

I send another message to the intel team to hurry the fuck up with the report that I asked for. They send me back a message to cool my fucking jets. They’re close and will get it to me as soon as they can, and some of the tension I feel dissipates, knowing they’re working as hard as they can to pull any and all information I need together.

I spend the next few minutes stroking my princess as she continues to drift, caught up in my thoughts about what’s happening. A sharp three-knocked rap on the door let’s me know that Nate is here with our rolls and coffee. I probably should’ve ordered lunch fare, but my princess seemed to love these so much that it’s what we’re having for lunch. I kiss her on the forehead, and she stretches, sliding her legs down the length of my own, curling tighter around me, wrapping me with her body. Fuck, now I just want Nate to go the fuck away, but when I don’t answer the door he sends me a text.

I’m outside the door. It’s been over an hour. Couldn’t you get it up?

I laugh out loud reading his message, and Marenah stirs on my chest and finally opens her eyes, trying to focus. I stroke her cheek and run my fingers carefully over her lips, still plump from the abuse she took at the hands of her captors. I would say good morning, but it’s already tipped into afternoon. We must have needed our sleep. “Nate’s at the door. He brought pierogi. Jump in the shower while I talk with him,” I say.

She squints and smiles up at me. “Pierogi? Yum, I’m starving,” she says. She stretches, and the lines of her sleek back arch, rubbing against me as she does, and that movement alone is enough to harden my dick. Damn this woman turns me on.

I kiss her lips. “Go shower. Otherwise, I’m going to send Nate away and fuck you until dinner time.”

Her cheeks flush and she looks up at me.

“Go shower, Marenah,” I say, reaching down to give her ass a playful swat.

She feigns indignation, but I see the desire flash across her bright blue eyes.

“We’ll experiment like that another time. If I don’t answer the door soon, Nate’s going to have a team of men invade this place, and I promise you those asses will eat every single one of the pierogi that I’ve ordered,” I say, gesturing for her to go to the bathroom with a nod of my head.

She opens her mouth as in shock. “No, they wouldn’t. I would seriously defend my beloved rolls. Heathens,” Marenah says, mocking me.

“Oh, they would, now get going,” I say, swatting her ass again, this time a little harder.

She yelps. “I’m going,” she says, but I don’t miss the glazy look in her eyes as she grabs the sheet and pulls it from the bed, wrapping it around her as she walks to the bathroom.

She’ll learn soon enough not to cover herself from me, but today I find it incredibly interesting. She’s not trying to use her body to seduce me, although she clearly could. Instead, she’s covering herself from me, and while it has the reverse effect on me, she wouldn’t know that. She could have just let us walk into the shit with her grandfather last night, but she didn’t. I told her to get the hell out of that bar, but she stayed back, ensuring I wasn’t outnumbered and could handle the oncoming men before she did as I told her and left the bar. Whatever she’s got herself into, she’s not trying to pull me into it, but instead, trying to keep me distanced from it, as evidenced by her reaction last night to me pulling up at her grandfather’s restaurant.

I hear the shower start up, slip out of bed, and slide into my pants and pull my t-shirt over my head. When I reach the door, Nate is smiling at me. “What, bring that shit in here and

help us eat it,” I say, knowing that if he’s gone to the bakery, he’s also bought something sweet for himself, because he can’t pass a damn candy machine without throwing his money down.

He perches himself on the stool by the breakfast table and opens the white paper wrapped bag. “What do we have here?” Nate says, pulling out one after another of the pierogis that my princess loves so much, and then pulls out a couple of different rolls and places them in front of him and takes a big bite of the open-faced pastry with berries on top.

“What is that?” I ask Nate as he hands me a pastry with what looks like cream cheese and red berries on top.

“It’s *vatrushka*. Goat cheese and berries,” Marenah says, walking into the kitchen, looking refreshed and ready for the day, as Nate nods his head and murmurs his appreciation for the sweet dessert. She settles herself onto the barstool and reaches for a pierogi—when my cell phone and Nate’s light up with incoming warnings, and the overhead security alarm lights start flashing.

MARENAH

THE SILENT ALARMS are set to only go off when someone has reached the stairwell two floors below me. The elevator is impenetrable, watched by an on-duty guard, but also by the feature on my phone that is changed often to ensure no one can possibly retrieve it. At least, that's what I've been led to believe.

"Come, they're heading up the stairs. Let's move," I say, swiping the bag of pierogi and danish, along with my purse from the counter which holds everything I need to get from country to country as I march toward the elevator.

I don't think they're going to follow me until Matt and Nate glance down at their phones, almost at the same time. They nod to each other, and I shake my head at their big brother shit. Right now we need to get the hell out of here, because someone, and I have a pretty good idea of who, is heading up that stairwell.

"They're in the stairwell, we have to go," I say, but if I thought I was in charge of this operation, I have another think coming.

Nate takes up the front, pulling his weapon, and Matt pushes me into the elevator. "We're going down. They expect with this set up that you'll take the stairs. We have about four minutes on these fuckers," Matt says, swiping his phone against the electronic eye of my private pad. I reach into my pants pocket to pull my cell phone out but stop when the

elevator engages and begins the long descent down to the lobby, the one that I thought only I had the access code to.

As the elevator dings, it opens into the private cove of the exclusive skyscraper's lobby. We walk out with Matt urging me to go faster toward the black Lincoln. Matt almost pushes me in, and Nate jumps into the front seat and tells the driver to go.

"The Chicago Mafia are ruthless, Princess. We need to get you out of here," Matt says, pulling me close and whispering in my ear so as not to be overheard by the rest of his team.

I shake my head because there are more people and factions than I can imagine who would come after me if they knew who I really was, but I don't believe that's who is trying to break into my penthouse tonight. The only people that know I'm home in my motherland, Russia, are the people that work for my grandfather. The thought that he may have discovered my work, and has seen me with Matt, both, send a chill down my spine, but I also know he would not hurt me. I don't have time to dwell on this, because whoever is heading up those stairs will be here soon.

I don't say a word, and Matt doesn't need me to. "Your grandfather. Let's get out of this mess, and then you can tell me what the hell all of this is about," Matt says, and I don't correct him as he pulls me closer and kisses the top of my head as his driver weaves through the city.

The only explanation that makes any sense is that the people I work for have put two and two together. As much as me being together with Matt would anger him, he would not send his soldiers in to harm me. Unless the Chicago Mafia has tracked me, but my grandfather's men surely would know if a rival was in their country, right under their noses, intending to do his granddaughter harm. The thought rattles around a little bit, and I don't see how that's possible. I was so careful, but then again, Bernatelli's crew was able to sniff me out, or maybe it was just that they saw me when they were hauling Matt downstairs and didn't really know who I was. It's not like they had the chance to torture it out of me. The driver navigates us out of the city and toward the airport, but it's soon clear that's not where he's headed. "Where are we going?"

Matt pulls me close. “We’ll drive for a while. The Gulfstream is refueling and going through some maintenance checks. They’ll get clearance to land at an airport about an hour away. We’ve got folks working to get you a new passport. Otherwise, as soon as your name pops, the people after you will know. They could even have the flight grounded,” Matt says.

I nod, letting it sink in. He’s right, and if I were on my own I’d be fine, but I’m not and I need much more information than I have before I can put the entire picture together. “That won’t really be necessary,” I say, opening my purse, which is as big as it is for a reason, rummage around and pull out my passport and hand it to Matt.

If I thought it would shock him, it doesn’t. “What’s the plan for the hair?” Matt says, gesturing to the picture of the short, dark-haired lady on the passport staring back at us with my blue eyes. I reach into my bag and grab a pony, wrapping my hair into a bun, and then pull my short black spiky wig out and place it on my head, shifting it into place. “Anika Smirnov, nice to meet you,” I say.

“Well, Anika Smirnov, glad to meet you. Looks like you’ll be traveling to Italy with me and my crew,” Matt says, smiling.

I am about to try to explain some of this, but he shakes his head and places his index finger on my lips. “We have a lot to discuss, but not right now. I need to focus on getting us out of this country and into Italy.”

We pass through checkpoints and the passports are cleared without so much as a raised eyebrow.

We turn into a remote airstrip where a plane is waiting for us. “Make yourself comfortable, Marenah,” Matt says, gesturing to the main cabin. “I need to work with the crew. I’ll join you when I can,” he says, leaving me to settle into the space on my own.

I don’t blame him. He has no idea who I am really, and he has a job to do.

H

It's been hours, and I wake slightly as Matt slides in next to me in the two-seater leather recliners, buckling up just before we touchdown on a private strip in Italy. "It's a short drive from the private strip to the airport we're headed to," Matt says, taking my hand, guiding me to the awaiting car, but offering me no more information than that. He probably doesn't know what to think after what's happened today.

I don't know what's going on between Sasha and Jay, but she's clearly pissed and doesn't plan to stay with him and instead intends to head to a hotel from the airport. I mention this to Matt, and he gets on his phone almost immediately.

"Did you just text Jay what I told you in confidence?" I ask, narrowing my eyes at him.

"First, you didn't tell me it was in confidence. Second, her security is at risk if she's on her own. He needs to know. He needs to keep her safe, Marenah," Matt says, grasping my hand and pulling me closer.

I should be mad, but instead I feel a deep sense of relief that for once I don't have to solve everyone's problems and that he and Jay have it all under control.

It is with that thought that I nuzzle into the crook of his side, with his arm wrapped around me, keeping me pressed warmly against him until we arrive. My phone buzzes with a message. Sasha again, and now she wants me to pick up some bag she's left in the women's bathroom at the airport.

THE DRIVER PULLS UP at the front entrance of the airport and lets us out into the night. Matt walks around and opens my door, helping me out of the car and taking me by the hand as we head into the airport. The security team has us surrounded, some in front and some in back.

"Why don't you see if you can find Jay? I need to run to the restroom," I say. I find my way to the bathroom and open

door after door. The fourth stall holds my sister's weekend bag on the hook behind it.

I am rummaging through it and am just about to call her cell and let her know that I found it when a tall man in fitted jeans and a white t-shirt underneath his jacket pushes the door open.

My survival instincts kick in. "Excuse me! You wanna tell me why the fuck you're in the women's bathroom acting like a goddamn stalker?" I yell, hoping someone will hear me as my foot hits his junk, just as I've been trained to do.

I've connected with my target perfectly, and his eyes widen with pain as he strives to catch his breath, staggering back and hanging onto the sink behind him. I use that time to hightail it out of the bathroom, but a huge man who looks like a human super hero captures me in his arms and they tighten around me. I struggle to get loose, but he's not letting me go and I know at any moment the man I've just lashed out at will catch his breath and want revenge. I try to calm my breathing, thinking of my training and how to get loose, but damn if this man's hold doesn't allow me to use any of those tricks on him.

I scream, yelling at the top of my lungs for help, and that's when I see Matt racing toward me. I wrestle as much as I can to get out of this beast's tight hold, screaming Matt's name. It is a public place and someone has to be able to help me, but I don't need a bunch of people, because Matt's eyes go dark and in a few heated strides he's delivering a punch to my attacker that sends the big guy reeling backward, making him let me loose while Matt pulls me into his arms, and kisses my forehead.

"I'm sorry, Princess. I don't know what happened, but I'll get it sorted," Matt says, running his hand down my face as the guy from the bathroom stalks toward us.

He looks pissed, and I cringe but get prepared for an all and out fight. "You wanna explain what the fuck is going on here? Why do you have your goddamn hands all over Sasha and why the fuck did you just call her Princess?" the man

glaring at us says, but Matt doesn't back down and holds me even tighter.

"I have no fucking idea what is going on, but this is the woman I told you about, my Marenah. Why do you keep calling her Sasha? That's her sister," Matt says, and his eyes grow wide as he finishes that sentence and looks down at me.

As soon as he does, I realize what's going on. I almost laugh, but the intense looking man from the bathroom becomes aggravated. "If you're not Sasha, she's been taken. She went into the bathroom and never came out. Dereck, get a crew to get the air shafts checked. Cole, have intel focus in the on-camera footage. I want to see anyone that came in and out of this room in the last three hours. Home in on the last half an hour first. Nick, I need you to get a track on her phone. Here's her number, put her credit cards in the system, see if anything comes up."

"Wait, wait. Sasha is okay. She sent me to the bathroom to get the bag she left," I say, pulling open the bag's zipper and retrieving the heels that were left behind.

The intense man nods, but before he says anything else, one of the other men tells him that the Larussio plane is about to land. Shit, Italian Mafia. "Giovanni Larussio is on it and that's their mark," he says. "There is a mounting mob on the ground. I have two teams called in, and our snipers are in place."

"Safeguard him at all costs. Take them out if necessary!" he says, and I realize that I have just heard an order to safeguard the next boss of the Italian Mafia, and somehow both my sister and I are right in the middle of this shit.

They walk me to the sidewalk, and a driver pulls up in a long black stretch. "Let's go," the intense one says.

"I'll take Marenah to Chase's and then rejoin you," Matt says.

"No, she's my sister, and I want to find her. I'm tougher than I look," I say.

I think he's going to disagree with me, but the intense one glances over at me and then at Matt. "Save your breath. We don't have time, and if she's anything like her sister, you won't win the argument anyway," he says.

I smile widely, nodding my agreement. "I think we're going to get along just fine," I say, smiling mischievously at Matt, who is scowling down at me, but I ignore it. "I'm Marenah, Sasha's baby sister by about five minutes," I say to everyone.

"I'm Jay, and this is Nick and Dereck. Cole is the one who just got punched out by your boyfriend," the intense one says, grinning as Cole glares first at me and then at Matt.

"Sorry, man," Matt says, grinning widely and extending his hand to Cole.

Cole takes it reluctantly and shakes his head. "No fucking drama for years and now you two hook up with the drama twins," he says, winning him a half scowl and a half smile.

Nick looks down at his phone. "We've got Sasha, she just checked in at a hotel not far from here. The bad news is that the Chicago Family is watching her card, too. It just popped up on their surveillance, and they've just given the order to move in"

"Floor this fucking thing," Jay growls.

MATT

AS SOON AS the driver pulls up to the hotel, Jay and team leave me with Marenah and the driver. I know the drill: I'm manning the car because I can contain the female. I smile down at the mysterious woman beside me, the one that has so much explaining to do, but right now there is fear in her eyes and her breathing is ragged. "They'll get her, Princess," I say, pulling her against me, stroking the pulse in her creamy neck as we wait. She nods as though she has a thought, or someone has asked her a question and she agrees. "You okay, Princess?"

"I just need for her to be okay. She means the world to me," Marenah says, tearing up, and although she was taken captive, physically roughed up, and touched in places I don't want to think about, never once did I see a tear.

"Princess, Jay and our team are the best. He's not going to let something happen to her," I say, knowing this for a fact because I've never seen him react to a woman like he has to Sasha.

"Who are you guys, Matt. Mafia?" she asks.

I bring my finger to her lips. "Shh . . . Princess. We'll talk when this is all over and we can both lay our cards on the table." Her crystalline blue eyes search mine and she seems to make her peace with trusting for now and talking later.

My headset beeps and I get the order. "Ready the car, we're on the way down. Jay's got Sasha; call in the order for a cleanup crew."

"Roger that," Nick says, and I know he's got it covered.

In less time than I would have thought, Jay is carrying Sasha toward the car. I open the door, and everyone makes room to let them in. Something's not right. Sasha is listless, just lying in Jay's arms and Marenah notices about two seconds after I do. "Sasha, what happened?" she says, unable to stem the flood of tears at the sight of her sister's lifeless body.

"She passed out, but she's breathing on her own," Jay tells her.

Dereck raps on the trunk of the limo a few minutes later, and the driver pops it open. He throws Sasha's suitcase in and then slides in next to us. "Let's move," he says to the driver.

Dereck scowls when he looks at Sasha crashed out cold in Jay's lap. "She okay or do we need the doc?" he asks.

"I honestly think she's just passed out," Jay says.

"She doesn't like flying. She usually takes a couple sleeping pills when she travels overseas," Marenah says, scouting around in her purse and showing them a packet of sleeping pills.

"After the night she's had, that would probably do it," Jay says, brushing her hair out of her face and holding her close.

"The angel sleeps," Dereck says before leaning his head back against the rest and closing his eyes.

"Did you call the cleanup team?" Jay asks.

"You know that I did."

"I have no doubt, but you know I have to ask," Jay says.

"Uh-huh, sent their pics to intel, too," Dereck says.

"Status on the ground?" Jay asks.

"Mission accomplished, and Giovanni Larussio is on his way home. The cleanup crew is working overtime tonight," the one that goes by Nick says, smirking.

Marenah just takes it all in. No drama, no surprised looks, just takes it for face value, but her eyes don't leave her sister,

and I have no doubt that if Jay's finger were to come off her sister's pulse, it would be replaced by her own.

It's another thirty-minute car ride until we get to the Prestian Estate, and we pass through the stone and wrought iron gates. Nick keys in the passcode to the guest house, and Jay carries Sasha up the stairs.

"I'll tuck Marenah in and be back down in a bit," I say to the men, and Marenah blushes and tells Jay how much she appreciates what he's done and why it's so hard for her sister to trust men.

I'VE BEEN THINKING about the quandary we're in all night long while my princess sleeps beside me. Jay and I haven't had a chance to talk, but the intel that's been found on Sasha relates to Marenah as well. I read and reread the report that she and her sister are without a doubt the daughters of Bernatelli, but he has never claimed them, and in fact has repudiated them. Regardless, if she's in any way tied to mafia, I need to make sure that Jay, Chase, and Brian know it. This team has come to mean the world to me, my family, and the thought of leaving them weighs heavily on my mind as I finally doze off.

THE MEETING IS SET for an hour from now. I send Marenah a text to let her know that I'll be back shortly and to meet me for breakfast, because I have no idea what's going to transpire between now and the time I spill what's on my mind. If this is the last time that I get to hold Marenah while on the Prestian Corp payroll, so be it. I have saved and invested well.

I'm almost at Chase's office when a text from Jay comes through, letting me know that Chase is aware of all the family involvement of both girls and things are fine. Jay's in Chase's office when I walk in. Chase is wearing a three-piece suit and gestures for me to take a seat next to Jay. Chase tells us that

the plan to solidify the expansion of the security company is sound, and the family has approved it.

When we finish reviewing the contract, Jay and I walk out of the room ecstatic. The guys are never going to believe not only the salary that has been offered, which far exceeds their overly generous one now, but the perks and benefits that have been provided. Chase and Brian blow any other competition out of the water with their hundred percent contribution to the 401(k), one hundred percent medical and dental in addition to the jets, helicopters, luxury homes, and resorts available to the crew as an added benefit to taking care of their family.

We walk back across the lawns to the guest house where we are both staying, and Jay tells me he'll catch up to me later and heads upstairs. I walk into the dining room, and the look on Marenah's face tells me that something has gone south. "What's wrong, Princess?" I ask, stalking toward her, pulling her toward me and then noticing her sister, sitting in one of the chairs in the dining room.

"She needs to go home before Jay finds out she's not upstairs. Can you get her on a flight right away? If not, I can see what I can do," Marenah says, pushing the breakfast plate on the table in front of her away.

I take in the situation, assessing it like I'm trained to do. Sasha wants to leave, and regardless of anything else, even Jay's desires, we don't keep people against their will unless they are in danger. I text instruction to have a plane readied and on the private tarmac of the airport ASAP and a car pulled around to the front. "Go with her, Nick, take her out the front now. I'll deal with Jay," I say as Marenah hugs her sister and Nick leads Sasha, who looks solemn and thoughtful, through the kitchen and out the door, and I pull Marenah into my lap. Marenah is quiet and pensive, too, and I slide into the seat beside her and take her in my arms. "She'll be okay, Princess. Nick will take good care of her," I whisper.

I knew it wouldn't be long, and it isn't, before Jay's boots are stomping down the steps and into the dining room. "You know where Sasha is?"

Marenah is still curled up in my lap and gives him a little nod and I applaud her honesty.

Jay doesn't say a word for a bit, but then the silence gets the best of him. "Um, you gonna tell me where that might be?"

"She went back to Chicago, Jay. I'm really sorry," Marenah says.

"What the hell do you mean, she went back to Chicago? How the fuck did she get out of here and how she is getting home?" Jay says and I brace for the wrath that is sure to follow.

"I arranged it for her. She was going to try to find a commercial flight. I sent Nick with her, and we have a team safeguarding her once she gets on the ground. She's safe, Jay," I say, knowing at the end of the day, whatever is happening, her safety is his ultimate concern.

"Why did she leave?" Jay asks Marenah, avoiding me all together. I get it, because if he had done the same thing, I'd want to throttle him, but I also know he's a man of integrity. He would do the same thing if positions were reversed. He'll figure it out, of that I have no doubt.

"She doesn't think you care about her. I told her that you do. Hell, anyone can see that you're crazy about her, but that's not what she feels, and she's been through a lot over the years. She has an overwhelming need to feel loved, and unfortunately although our mother loved us dearly, we didn't ever get that from the men in our lives. It's affected each of us in different ways. Sasha, unfortunately, has a habit of being clingy with breakups, and she's trying to be different this time," Marenah says, and while I know that's true, having read all the manuscripts, and see the pain on my dear friend's face hearing it, I also know that my princess has scars as well. She's just a little better at keeping them buried.

Jay takes it all in with a nod, and the only tell he gives that he's completely agitated is the tightening of his jaw as he turns and heads upstairs. I was prepared for a demand from my close friend to stop the plane, to do something, but not this. I already have word that Nick got her on the plane and is getting

her comfortable before takeoff, but I don't dare tell Jay that. If they want to sort this out, they will. If they don't, she'll be safe, because she means something to my friend and is my girlfriend's sister.

"He didn't even go after her," Marenah huffs, nuzzling in against my chest. I hold her tight, pulling the warmth of her body against mine.

"Jay will never go into a situation without a comprehensive plan, and I have a feeling that carries over into his personal life as well, Princess. They'll sort it out if it's meant to be. We're in one of the most beautiful spots in the world, let's go exploring," I say, knowing we need to talk, but right now I just want one day with her, just one normal day showing her around the beautiful country of Italy.

I send a text to the driver on standby that we'll be ready in half an hour. It's still early, just after eight, and while the ladies already ate I have not and I snag two of the biscotti that I know from experience will be infused with chocolate, a perfect complement to a morning coffee or latte. The driver sends me a message that he'll be here soon. "Go get ready; I'll make us a cappuccino," I say, swatting Marenah's ass playfully as she stands up and walks by me.

She lets out a little yelp and flashes me a fake scowl, but her bright blue eyes sparkle with interest. I tuck that bit of information away for later while I watch her heart-shaped ass walk away from me, climbing the stairs all the way to the top, until she turns, no longer in my sight, heading toward our guest room.

My cock has a mind of its own whenever she's around and my palm presses against it, shifting, so it's no longer pushing against the constraints of my zipper. Fuck, she makes me hot. I trudge around the breakfast bar and busy myself making two cappuccinos in the fancy silver-and-black machine that Gaby taught us how to use a couple years ago. I've just placed the lids on our travel mugs and turn around when Marenah walks into the kitchen.

She's wearing a pair of skinny jeans and a tight white t-shirt that hugs against the curves of her breasts. She slides into the university hoodie and zips it up. Damn, I was so not finished with the show. She slides a hair tie from her wrist, gathers her long blonde tresses up, and pulls them into a messy bun that spills down the length of her neck. All I can think about for a moment is slicing that little piece of coated rubber from her gorgeous locks and letting it spill over her bared breasts as she rides my cock. A text from our driver pulls me from my daydream and I glance up, taking her hand.

"Come on, we're in Italy and we have an entire day to explore," I say, guiding her down the stone pathway to where the driver waits inside the plush limo. While I didn't ask for this car, it will certainly fucking do. I hold the door open for Marenah myself, close the door, and walk around to the other side and get in, knowing that he will give us a guided tour through the Amalfi Coast cities as I've instructed, stopping here and there, until it's time for lunch.

We spend the next couple hours navigating small towns and witness the little communities along the coast waking. The driver lets us out at my request so we can walk through one of the villages that I've come to appreciate with past visits to the country. The fishermen donned in thigh-high waders and rain slickers are already heading back onto the coast after hours of fishing, pulling in their boats and talking loudly amongst each other, sharing their successes or missed attempts of the day. The bars, as they are called in Italy, are alive with friends meeting for a cappuccino or latte and a sweet pastry. The one we walk into is still open for breakfast and alive with animated conversation.

"Chocolate latte?" I ask, glancing at the menu.

She smiles brightly. "You're spoiling me, in more ways than one." I take in the coloring of her cheeks and something in my chest tightens. She's thinking about last night, too.

The waitress arrives and I order each of us a latte and a cornetto, a favorite pastry of the locals in this area of Italy, which should tide us over until lunch since they eat much later than people in the States.

I take her wrist across the table, the one I intend to restrain to my bed later, and lean across the table so only she can hear me. “Last night was just an introduction, Princess. You have no idea what pleasures I have in store for you,” I say, knowing that I fully intend to spoil her in every sense of the word.

She doesn’t respond verbally, doesn’t need to. Her eyes are bright and alive, her cheeks are flushed, and the pulse in her wrist has quickened under my finger. My princess is responsive in her own way, and my cock hardens as I watch her process my words.

When we finish, I pay the waitress and grasp Marenah’s hand as we walk out of the bar, prepared to take her on a tour of the cliff villages and lemon groves, but I see a shadow darting into a storefront just behind us in my periphery, seconds before my cell beeps and everything goes south.

MARENAH

MATT SWITCHES SIDES WITH ME, taking my hand. The gesture is exactly how I feel, an attempt to get closer to each other, and I lean into his warmth. I'm still trying to deal with the attraction that I feel for him. It's like this current running between us every single time we're close, even across the room, and it's intensely magnified when we touch. Even his hand, capturing my own, sends an electrically charged pulse directly through me.

I'm lost in my thoughts, just walking along the street with him, when his hand tightens, gripping me firmly, his arms wrap around me, and then rapid fire plays out over what seems like the entire village, shattering the store window that is within three feet of us. Matt's reactions are seconds quicker than my own, and he has me splayed on the ground, his body on top of mine, pushing me into the sidewalk as he shouts instructions to the driver, and I don't know who else.

"When I tell you to move, you move. We're going to the back right passenger seat of the limo that's going to pull up in front. Understand, Princess?" Matt asks, stroking my hair.

I can barely breathe from the weight of his body on top of mine, but I've seen him in action when danger ensued, and I know his instincts are good and that he has every intention of getting us out alive. "I know too much, they're coming for me. You need to protect Sasha," I say.

"Shh, Princess let me deal with this," Matt says, stroking my cheek as we wait for our ride, hidden from whoever was

firing. We won't have long because I know for a fact these people have no patience.

"No, you don't understand. If they've come for me, you need to be a long way away from me," I say just as a sleek black limo pulls in front of us, and Matt pulls the door open, hauls me from the ground, and literally heaves me into the back seat.

He pulls the door closed, and the guy next to the driver yells for him to floor it.

"Did you not hear what I am telling you? There are things I can't explain, but I am trying to give you a clue, make sure you and your teams aren't in danger, and you're just ignoring it," I say, pushing my hand against his chest when he reaches to console me. "You need to get me to the nearest transit and let me off. I'll make my way out of the country and call you when it's safe," I say.

His steely eyes penetrate mine, grasping my hand at his chest, holding it in his own as he assesses me and my outburst. "Not going to happen, Princess," he says, and then turns to the driver and gives him instructions before hitting the switch that engages the privacy glass to come down, sheltering us from the eyes and ears of the driver and security guard in the front seat.

"Matt, you have to listen to me. I know you're trying to help me, but there's so much I haven't told you that will impact you if you are with me. It's better if you just let me off somewhere, please, you do not want the trouble that will follow me. You and Jay, please, promise me, just keep my sister safe."

His grey eyes focus in on mine, holding them captive with his concentration. It feels like ages instead of mere minutes. "Sasha is fine. I have it on good authority that this isn't about her or you or your no-good father. This is something else, isn't it, Princess?" Matt says, stroking my cheek with his finger.

I don't know how to respond, contemplating what telling him the truth would mean and am embarrassed when I realize that I've just leaned into his touch, wanting it, desperately

needing it to provide me with comfort. I am not some needy woman. I am trained in not only physical combat, but emotional conflict, but I can't quite get past the commotion in my mind. He pulls me closer and trails the finger that was just on my cheek, letting it glide lower, creating a path southward, until it's circling around my collarbone, exploring the prominent bones he finds, and then slipping farther, underneath the hoodie, exploring the delicate flesh of my breast and rubbing the tips of my nipples as he bites into the tender skin of my neck.

I hear myself moaning, as he continues to suckle my skin. My thighs come together, and I try to think of something that will pull me out of the moment, away from the exquisite feel of his hands and mouth on me, but it is impossible. When the driver slows in front of his building, Matt adjusts my clothes and kisses my lips gently. "I'm not letting you go Princess, and I don't think you want me to. We'll finish this inside," Matt says before nipping my lower lip.

"The team's swept the entire area, we've engaged the perimeter security, and the top floor is open. You will be secure here," the driver says over the audio. Matt grasps my fingers, entwining them with his own. I know Matt thinks we're safe here, but we only have him, me, and his crew. The people coming for us will have body-armor-piercing bullets and we won't have a chance.

He guides me into the building, seemingly confident, but I still can't believe the people we're dealing with won't be able to find us. He assures me it's safe and that we have an entire team watching the monitors.

Matt leads me inside, through the great room, and into the kitchen. "Take a seat," he says, gesturing to the Tuscan-style high-rise table for two in the corner as he walks to the wine refrigerator and opens a bottle of red. "It's an exclusive red blend from Bolgheri, Tuscany, Italy, mature, so we can enjoy right away and skip the breathing process," Matt says, pouring it into two deep crystal wine glasses and handing me one as he swirls his own.

“I don’t know too much about wines,” I say shyly. “If you want to do vodka shots, I’m your girl,” I say.

He smiles at me. “Swirl, like this,” Matt says, twisting his wrist so the red liquid twirls in the large beveled wine glass. “Now smell the bouquet,” he says, bringing it to his nose and inhaling.

I do likewise and breathe in the aroma of the mature red wine.

“The scent, it’s intoxicating, right?” Matt says.

“It is,” I say, taking another sip of the complex but sweet drink and swirling my glass as he’s demonstrated. Matt lifts my chin so that my eyes are raised, looking into them with his.

“It’s not nearly as intoxicating as the scent of your pussy, Princess. We’ll talk later, but right now I think you should be rewarded for all you’ve gone through today,” Matt says, lifting me, carrying me into the bedroom before allowing me to slide down his body, feeling every rigid muscle and the hard cock pressing against me as I do. He slides his hand between us, pulling his leather belt through its loops, and my heart races harder and my pussy gets wet as I feel his dick harden even more and pulse against me.

“Hands over your head, let me undress you,” Matt says, peeling layer after layer from my body, exposing my collarbone, suckling and traveling lower, raining kisses and suction as he settles me onto the bed.

I moan and my hands slide downward, toward him, wanting to feel his hardness in my hands, but his grasp on them tightens, slides them above my head, exactly where he wants them before wrapping my wrists in his belt, and then fastening them to the hook in the ornate headboard, leaving me naked with the exception of a pair of white lacy panties and completely restrained.

He kisses all the way down the length of me, starting with the shell of my ear, circling it with his tongue before dipping into it. The moment he does, I say his name, just softly, it feels so good. He teases me with his mouth and the warmth of his

tongue, trailing down my collarbone, the swell of my breasts, and pays extra attention to my nipples. He sucks each of them, looking up at me with this steely eyes until the sensation becomes so intense that I hear myself moan softly.

He does it over and over before licking lower, across my navel and to the top of my panties. “So pretty Princess, but you won’t be needing these when you’re with me,” Matt says as he fingers the lace, letting me feel the warmth of his breath through the thin material.

I turn the side of my head into the pillow. Just his breath, right there, is enough to make my heart race.

“Look at me, Princess. I want you to watch while I reward you. Let your knees fall to the side,” Matt says, and I can feel my cheeks flush, but I do as he’s asked.

MATT

IN THIS POSITION she is spread wide, her thighs open for me to view and explore, and I can see the slickness and the telltale signs of wetness start to pool at her center. I push my dick against my hand to settle him while I sink myself between her legs, push her thighs wider, and inhale her scent deeply. Fuck, she is intoxicating. I stroke her little nub with my thumb, rubbing against the soft, sensitive skin with the rough surface of my thumb.

Her hips raise, and I smack her pussy lightly with my palm. Her eyes widen, and she moans when I do it again. This is not a punishment for my princess, she likes it way too much. I caress harder, delivering the rough stroke over her tender flesh at the same time I dip my tongue into her now wet and slick center.

She squirms and attempts to close her thighs, but I don't allow it. Instead, I push her thighs apart, spreading her wider and begin to lick, holding her as she thrashes and just when I feel her start to unwind, I sink two fingers deep inside of her and suck her clit hard. "Oh my God, Matt," she yells, and I love the way her little body bucks against her restraints, at the same time she comes all over my tongue. I continue sucking and pumping her through her pleasure, watching as her tight little belly contracts as she comes down from her high, relishing in the feel of her pussy clenching around my fingers as she rides her release.

I shed my clothes and watch as her eyes take me in, fully dilated and still hazy with desire. "Ready for me?" I ask,

sliding next to her and kissing up her body as she shivers against the pleasure and her restraints.

I can hear her panting, but she hasn't answered. "I asked you a question, Princess," I say, wrapping my dick while licking against the creamy skin of her neck, working my way to the sensitive skin of her ear.

"Yes," she pants. One little word, and that's all I need to hear before I take her legs and place them on either side of my shoulders. She's watching, eyes wide and those baby blues are filled with lust, just the way I like them. She licks her lips, lifts her hips, and my dick pushes into her sweetness, one long thrust and I am rooted, buried to the hilt in her warmth. I pull out slow, letting her acclimate to the size.

I work myself in and out of her, excruciatingly slow. My dick wants to plow into her, but I want to feel her come all over me first. I slide in and out, exploring, rubbing against the end of her until she is squirming with need, and only when she clenches around me, and I know that she's close do I begin to drive home deep, thrusting against that sensitive spot I've found that makes her crazy. I hit it again and again until she's crying my name and coming all over my dick, milking me with her spasms, at first just little cries, and then screaming her pleasure and it's that sound and my name that brings me crashing over the edge.

I release her wrists, pull her against my chest and rub them gently. She nuzzles against me, and I want nothing more than to feel her silky soft skin against my own. "Princess," I say, pushing her long blonde hair out of her face so I can see those baby blues.

"Hmm," she says, looking up from smoke-filled eyes.

"You are fucking amazing," I say, kissing her forehead, her nose, and then parting her lips with my own.

Marenah's bright blue eyes dance with delight. "That was amazing," she says groggily.

I kiss her and slide her down into my body, cradling her as we drift into sleep. I wake about twenty minutes later with her

still tucked into my arm. I look down at her, and even as thoughts of earlier come to mind and what we are facing, I dismiss them because I want this, the intimacy that we have, even if it's only for a short time. We can have this moment, at least that's what I thought until my phone buzzes.

I push the button, connecting with the security team. "Matt, I wish I didn't have to give you this, but the lady you call Marenah is an international spy. We're still trying to figure out who's paying her, but we know she's working for someone, just not who."

Fuck! I glance down at her peacefully sleeping frame and step out of the room, closing the door behind me. "Roger that. Turn on the mics, and all conversations between us and when she is on her own will be open for review. I'll send a message when you're to turn them off if I want to spend time with her privately until we know for sure what's going on."

"Roger that," I hear as I disconnect and head back into the bedroom, glancing down at the woman that looks so much like a princess and not a spy as I dress quietly. I've seen the other side, though, the resilience in the face of danger, the way she fights that could have only been taught by very few elite troops.

I decide to let her sleep and make my way toward the kitchen, start the coffee pot, make myself a sandwich for lunch, and hit the button that will connect me with Jay, and turn it on speaker knowing she's fast asleep.

"Jay here."

"Hey, I'm assuming you got the information. Jay, I didn't know Marenah was working for someone else, but in hindsight, the way she fights should have made me dig a little deeper."

"No, I get it. I'll send you the original file you sent me on Sasha. It may contain something that we overlooked the first time. I don't know if it'll help, but the intel team picked up some spy activity a couple weeks ago, and for whatever reason thought it was Sasha. At the time, I thought it might be true. Sasha works for the ballet troupe and is in multiple countries

each year and rubs elbows with the elite of the elite, politicians and all that shit.

“Turned out they were wrong, but I didn’t know until shortly before you did that the team made the connection back to Marenah. They just got the wrong sister. I’ll send you what I have, and let me know what you need. It sounds like you’ve made a good call keeping her away from Chase’s estate and the family. He knows everything about Sasha and Marenah’s family, but this is different. Do you need anything until we find out who she’s working for?” Jay says.

“No, I’ll take a look at what you send, talk with her, and then I’ll let you know first, but we may need to let Chase and Brian know.”

“Agreed, I’ll defer to you on this, Matt. I know you’ll do the right thing. Let me know if there’s anything that I can do until then,” Jay says before disconnecting.

In less than a few minutes, a pinging sound on my phone alerts me to an incoming message. I skim through the information that Jay sent over. It provides Marenah’s sister’s name, place of residence, current occupation, and description. She was born in a hospital in Moscow as Sasha Koslov, which means my princess was with her. Their mother was nineteen and father twenty. Their mother is the daughter of Ivan Vlasenko, head of the Russkaya Mafiya, a man rumored to lead the Bratva with an iron will. My heart is pounding as I read on. The remains of Koslov, Sasha and Marenah’s father, son of the caretaker for the Vlasenko estates, were found wrapped around a tree after Koslov visited the hospital the day before Sasha’s mother and her twin daughters were released in the care of Vlasenko.

I am in a relationship with a daughter of the Russian and Chicago Mafia while working for the Italian Family, and while I knew that, I did not think she was a spy, or I would have been straight up with Jay and Chase when we met to talk about the expansion of the security team and the goal of taking care of all of the families.

I pour myself another cup of coffee and am just settling in at the breakfast bar, determined to get that intel faster, when Marenah walks into the room, covered from collarbone to past her knees in a white fluffy robe.

I glance up, wondering if perhaps we could be wrong, but she takes a seat beside me and blows every hope that she isn't a spy right out of the water. "So, I think we're at an impasse. You shouldn't keep the volume on your cell so loud. I heard some of the conversation between you and your team. They're right. I'm not into playing games. I'll be as straight with you as you've been with me," Marenah says, leveling me with those sky-blue eyes.

I nod. "I've read you and your sister's background. You're both Chicago and Russian Mafia. Bernatelli doesn't claim you and probably put the hit out on the man rumored to be your father to keep his dirty little secret hidden," I say.

Marenah inhales deeply, contemplating my comment before she nods. "It's true. Nobody knows. Daddy dearest didn't want us to get in the way of the trust that his wife inherited. It's more than considerable."

"I thought you were undercover, and that you were in danger, not a spy. That's why I had you held in Chicago, had a security tracer put in your skyrise, and your key code uploaded and programmed to my phone. A pretty little airline attendant maybe, but you fight too fucking good to not have been taught by an elite unit, and there's only a handful of them around the world. The only question I have is, Who are you working for? Intel hasn't returned that yet, so you have a chance to tell me yourself," I say, leveling her with my own steely gaze.

MARENAH

DAMMIT. I should have known he would figure it out, but now that he has, I either need to come clean or lie. If it were just me, I might be tempted to tell a small little untruth, figure out a way to get myself out, and just disappear. Unfortunately, it's not only me and Matt, but Jay and Sasha that will be impacted by however this turns out as well.

The Italian Family will not take kindly to having both Jay and Matt, who are supposed to take over their security teams, intertwined with the Russian and Chicago families, but will like it even less if they find out what I do for a living. I'm still contemplating when his voice cuts through my thoughts and he slides his plate over toward me with a half of a sandwich.

"Marenah, I need the truth, Princess," Matt says, lifting my chin so that my eyes have nowhere to go except his deep grey steely ones.

I take a few bites, contemplating my next move while he watches me, before I place my finger on his lips and gesture for him to follow me. "I can't tell you what you want to know. This relationship may be short lived, but we have a little bit of time," I say, grasping his shirt and dragging him slowly toward the bathroom. I run my fingers over his lip, to keep him silenced before we close the door to the bathroom. I pull a switch that starts the overhead fan, turn the water on full blast, and then press a finger to my lips, letting him know without a word that I'm still not comfortable in our surroundings. He sends a text to his team, and I can only surmise it's to turn off

the mics wherever they are, and when he's finished just looks down at me. "Tell me."

"I can't divulge who I work for, Matt, but what I can tell you is that if the shoes were reversed, you would be doing the same thing. I'm trying to help people, innocent people that are being snatched from their lives and sold. You need to understand. These people are sisters, daughters, nieces, brothers, sons, and nephews. They take the young and snatch them right out of their very lives. They used to take young women, now they take young girls and boys, too. I don't have long Matt, or an entire truckload of people will be gone, vanished, right into the hands of the people I'm trying to find. I may not be who you think I am, but I'm not one of the bad guys," I say.

His eyes have darkened. "Trafficking," Matt grinds out.

"Yes, and it's getting worse and worse. Every major city, and if we don't do something, it's just going to keep going." I know I've been sworn to secrecy, but I haven't told him who I work for, and if Matt and his men can help, especially in this one case, knowing what awaits these people on the other side, then I have to take the chance, the job be damned.

"I can't stand the thought of innocent girls being picked up in a multitude of ways and then sold out for the highest dollar," Matt growls. "It's the very reason I got into the life I did to begin with. Tell me what's happening. Take me and my men there. They won't stand a fucking chance. If they're holding innocent women, we'll rescue them, but you need to trust us," Matt says, swiping his finger over my upper lip.

"There's no way I can do that without blowing my cover. My job will be history. If I let you in on this, and I want to, you need to know that it has to be done by the book, my way, Matt. If we don't, it will cost me my job and maybe our lives and those of others."

MATT

SHE REACHES up on her tiptoes, pulls my face down and kisses my lips. “Please, I want to feel you, one more time,” she whispers, and my cock hardens with the desire to be inside of her tight little pussy again, but it’s more than that. I’ve known it since the first time I saw her, there’s just something about this woman that calls to me on a level I’ve never known.

I have a hard time separating my need to protect her with my need to claim her, really claim her, but those smoldering baby blues and hard little nipples are more than a man can take. I rub her rosy little tips, gently at first, and then with a firmer hand as her eyes grow lusty. I walk her back to the wall, sliding her hands above her head, knowing what she needs. “Keep them there,” I say, unwrapping her robe slowly, exposing her creamy flesh, inch by delicious inch. I kiss her lips, and then suckle the length of her neck, moving south until I get to her creamy breasts.

I slide her robe down farther, just enough to control exactly when her needy nipples will be exposed to the cool of the air. As I let the material slowly expose them to me, she gasps, and I take one in my mouth. “Is that what you like, Marenah?” I ask.

She is speechless, just watching me, but nods her head in agreement as I twist her nipple with my hand, gently and then stronger, watching her eyes, knowing it’s building her pleasure, and when she moans, I know it is time.

“Keep your hands above your head,” I say, kissing slowly down her body, letting her robe fall to the floor and tsk when I see she’s covered her pussy with a pair of lacy panties. “You won’t be needing these, Marenah,” I say, sliding them over her hips and letting them fall to the floor. My dick releases some precum, just taking in the beauty of her body.

I run my engorged length along her slit, holding her hips in my hand, keeping her pulsing and needy against the wall, teasing her with my length.

Marenah moans her want, and I wrap myself before pushing deep into her warmth, connecting with the bottom of her, and she doesn’t back away from the intensity or the pleasure; instead her hips tilt, letting me know it’s not too rough and exactly how needy she is.

I thrust in and out, slowly but deep, making sure I hit the bullseye that sends her hips into a frenzy to meet me. Fuck she’s so hot, pushing against me, trying to connect with my cock, and all I want to do is drive into her, time and time again, but I want her climax to build, so I restrain myself, leaving her on the edge, making her pant as I slow, lifting her hips until she has no choice but to wrap her legs around my waist as I slide my dick in even deeper, but barely an inch at a time. I want her right here, on the edge, until I tell her to come and I bring her to a frenzied orgasm. Her little pants are almost more than I can stand, and she moans so softly, over and over, and it reverberates in my ear and makes my cock throb. Fuck!

My dick is deep inside of her and I know exactly how close she is when her pussy clenches me like a vice, milking me with her pleasure. She nuzzles me with her mouth, those soft, wet, sweet little lips and tongue caressing my neck and ears. She thinks she’s in charge, and as much as I love her playfulness, and the fact that she wants to provide me pleasure, she’s not in charge in the bedroom.

I keep her on the edge, pushing into her velvety warmth, and her panting nearly brings me over the edge, but I hold it together. “Tell me how you want me to be inside of you. Soft and slow, hard and fast, tell me Princess,” I say, grasping her hips as I thrust deep inside of her.

“I want you to fuck me like my family history doesn’t matter,” Marenah says.

And fuck if that’s not exactly what I want to do.

“I want you so deep inside of me, whatever you want, if you need to protect me, do it, if you need to distance yourself, I trust you,” Marenah says, pulling my face toward her and kissing my mouth gently.

Fuck, I need to claim this woman. She doesn’t have a safeword, she will in the future, but for now. “Tell me to stop if it’s too much, Princess,” I say, licking her neck and suckling as I nuzzle into the sensitive area between her neck and shoulder, sucking her creaminess, knowing I’ll leave my mark before driving my throbbing engorged cock deep inside of her.

She cries out, pushing her neck into my mouth, her body into my own, bucking against me as I provide her with every pleasure that I can possibly give, driving against that special spot until she’s trembling and I tell her to come, and she lets go, her tight little pussy clenching my cock, her walls suctioning my cock as I thrust deep inside of her, making her ride the waves, thrusting through them, over and over as we cling to one another.

I hold her tight, feeling her body’s pulse against my own as we start to come down, and I carry her to bed. My boss knows that she has family ties to both the Chicago and Russian Mafia, but what I didn’t tell them is that she could be a fucking spy because I didn’t fucking know, and either way leaves me in a god damn sling, but damn if I give a fuck as I pull her softness against my body, stroking her soft velvety skin, before her breathing slowly starts to slow and her trembling begins to subside.

Fuck if I’ve ever even noticed another woman’s breathing as she came down from what I gave her. Until now, while I’ve always wanted to ensure my partner’s pleasure as much as my own, when it was done, it was over. A kiss, a hug, thanks for a wonderful night, perhaps a ride home. But this is different, and I’ve known it from the very first time I saw her. I pull her body tighter against my own and she nuzzles into my chest.

I stroke her creamy skin, keeping her close as she falls asleep in my arms. I look down at her sleeping frame. There's no goddamn way I'm letting her take this on alone, but my little princess is a fiery little package of kick-ass when she needs to be. I certainly won't stand in her way if she's trying to save innocent children, but fuck if she'll do it on her own, trained spy or not.

I'VE BEEN WATCHING her for at least an hour or so. I find myself wide awake due to the time difference between Italy and Chicago, with nothing to do but stare at my princess and try to figure out how to protect the woman who gives herself over completely to my control in the bedroom, but can handle herself like the elite trained soldier that she is in a square-off with anyone.

This won't be easy, because she's already told me her target is trafficking. I know her mind is on the women and children, but I also know this means the badass boys that I used to work for, and that still work for her father, are involved. I won't let her go in alone, or any of the people my princess is trying to protect be sold, but this is much more complex than she thinks.

Marenah wakens and kisses my chest before looking up at me. "What's the matter?" she asks.

I hold her close and tell her exactly what I've been contemplating. She's been up-front with me and I'll do the same. When I tell her what I know about trafficking and how my team will help, she closes her eyes for a second. "I hate that I need help, but I love that you're willing to give it. Tell me why you're willing to do this for me. We've barely met," she says just barely above a whisper.

"You're pushing buttons that I haven't dealt with in a while, Princess," I say, sliding her hair aside, leaving the length of her neck exposed so I can stroke the creaminess of it with my fingers. "I had a friend once, her name was Alyce,

and she was taken. They didn't have a fancy name like trafficking for it back then," I say.

Marenah's body tenses, but then her hand squeezes mine, settling it in front of her, and I take pleasure in the fact that even though she doesn't like that I've brought up another female, she's reached out to provide me comfort when she believes I need it.

I turn her to face me and push the lock of hair from her face so I can watch her reaction. "She meant a lot to me, Princess, but not in the way you think. I never had a family, grew up moving from foster home to foster home. Then I met Alyce. She was a year older and never had a family either. We became close, used to watch movies together and just hang out. She got invited to a school play. She was so excited, got dressed up and curled her hair. I was waiting up for her so I could see how it went, but she never returned. I went searching for her. Scoured the entire fucking town, but it was too late.

"It took a while, but I learned she was snatched by a local gang. Long story, but she ended up dead instead of sold off. A few years later, I joined the Chicago Mafia as a runner. I got their protection, and their informants helped me find those men, and I systematically took them out, one at a time. I know I should have felt some sort of remorse for killing in cold blood, but I didn't then, and I don't know. There was just the need to avenge her death, to make someone pay for taking someone so young, vibrant, and full of life. The mafia became the family I never had, and eventually made me their enforcer.

"One night, and a few leader changes later, I learned the family was getting into the business of snatching girls like Alyce and had figured out a way to make even more money by selling them to the highest bidder overseas. The sick fucks were getting into buying children. Alyce had so many dreams of getting out of the life she found herself in. She used to say that I was the only good person in her life. She wouldn't have been proud of the man I turned into, and I sure as hell couldn't work for people that were doing that to women. I ended up working undercover for a few years and learned through another undercover friend that Chase had an opening for

security. The rest is history, but leave it to suffice I know which side of the law I want to be on, and it's his."

Marenah nuzzles her thigh in between mine, gazing at me with those sky-blue eyes. "I'm sorry you lost someone so close to you. I can't even imagine," she says, pulling my neck down so she can reach my lips and kiss them with her velvety softness.

I gather her in my arms, drawing her close, inhaling her scent and that of my own desire, which still lingers on her skin. I trace over the skin I've lightly marked with my passion and capture her tongue's warmth with my own. She moans with pleasure, pressing her naked body against my own. I slide my hands over her curves. This physical attraction is something that surpasses anything I've felt for any other woman, and it's so much more, but I have difficulty deciphering it while her hot little pussy is rubbing against my aroused body.

I've never been into vanilla, but with her I want to start there, to go slow, to savor every one of her gentle touches, listening to every soft moan of pleasure as I slide my covered cock deep inside of her, thrusting against the very spot that drives her hips up against mine, something I don't normally allow, but feeling her express her sexual pleasure, reciprocating, is beyond arousing, and I find myself permitting it as we both reach the edge, stay there, pivoting and rocking into each other, so close but still holding back until we no longer do, and I thrust us over the edge again.

MARENAH

I STRETCH, feeling the evidence of where he's been, and everything he's revealed to me, turning over and curling up to his pillow, inhaling his scent and listening to the sound of the shower in the background. I've almost dozed off again when alarms begin blaring. Matt appears from the bathroom, slides into a pair of pants, and throws me the clothes I was wearing earlier. "Get dressed quickly," Matt instructs, pulling on a t-shirt and bending down to lace his boots. While I slide into my clothes, he checks his phone, nodding, and begins texting.

"We need to move," Matt says, and takes my hand as I slip into my shoes.

"Wait," I say, throwing my hair up in a clip before pulling the Glock from my purse. His eyes narrow as he watches me slide it in to the back pocket of my pants, then slip my knife into my sock underneath my jeans before he has the door open and mouths "Let's go" and half-drags me down the hallway.

Just as we reach the stairs, he holds me back.

"Roger that," Matt says and I glance up, noticing for the first time the earpiece and the mic hanging from his shirt. That equipment is not standard bodyguard issue, and damn if I don't know where that shit came from. The ding of the elevator alerts us to the arrival of others, and Matt steps in front of me with a hand on his piece.

I would have rested easier a few minutes ago, with his hand on me, guiding me to safety, but now that I've seen his equipment, I don't know what to think or who he's really

working for. He places his hand on the small of my back and I tense, knowing I'll never be able to get the Glock from him if he chooses to use it at this point. I still have my knife, but he knows exactly how and where I'm armed, and if this man is working for who I think, he's been trained to fight as good, if not better than me.

He continues to lead me down the stairs, silencing me with the tip of his finger on my lip as an elevator dings in the distance. We wait until we hear voices in the distance laughing, heading the opposite direction. He guides me down the few remaining steps, out the back door and into an awaiting limo.

Nate has the door held open and the team that have surrounded us get us to the car. "Get out of here. We'll find out who they are and won't be far behind you."

"Thanks, Nate," Matt says before the man closes my door and Matt slides into the backseat beside me, and Nate jumps into the front seat. "Floor it," Matt says, as the driver peels away from the hotel, heading toward the coast, and after a short while begins expertly navigating the sharp curves and terrain of the Amalfi Coast.

"Where are we going, Matt? I knew someone would be coming for me, but I didn't think it would be the people you work for, although it's pretty clear now," I say.

He scowls slightly and turns his steely eyes at me. "You think the people I work for are coming for you? I'm not tracking, Princess."

"Who do you work for Matt, really? Are you still with the mafia, are you working for the Interpol sleazes?"

He considers my question, and his eyes don't waver. "No to both, Marenah. The mafia life is well in the past, but I think I'm going to need some clarification around Interpol. You've kept the fact you're working as a spy from me, and that you're the granddaughter of the Russian Mafiosi. You think I'm working for people that want to hurt you, and think Interpol are the bad guys?" Matt asks.

I take in a deep breath. I know better than a slip like that. I shrug, playing it off. “I was just throwing names out there, hoping something stuck,” I say, but he levels those steely eyes at me. He knows more than I thought, and for his own good, and that of his team, more than he should. I can’t change who I’m related to or what I do for a living. If he decides it’s too much of a mess, then so be it. Just another reason I’ve always avoided relationships.

“My grandfather, he has eyes all over the place. I know you thought you avoided them at the restaurant, but you can’t, not in this city, not in this country, and not anywhere in the world. The men that came after us tonight weren’t part of my grandfather’s team though. He wouldn’t have sent his goons in that way for his beloved granddaughter. He’d be more apt to make me come to him,” I say.

He doesn’t have a chance to answer though as headlights blare into the back of the car and our driver accelerates around the cliffs heading further south into the Amalfi Coast.

“We’ve got enemies crawling up our ass. Tell me someone’s got a line of sight on these fuckers,” Matt says into his mic. He nods, but I can’t hear the response on the other end of the line. “Roger that, as long as you have a plan,” Matt says, and I glance out the window, taking in all the beautiful city lights resting so many feet below us as we careen dangerously around the curves above them, knowing that we have no possibility of help or a relationship if he is working for Interpol.

He surveys me for a moment, then pulls me so close I can feel his heart beat. “The Chicago Mafia isn’t about to let us go without a fight. I knew they would come for me, but you need to tell me why they’re coming after you if I’m going to protect you, Princess,” Matt says.

He knows who my father is, how tangled of a mess the entire relationship is, and yet he wants to protect me. I don’t succumb to emotion, I don’t cry about what life throws my way, but the fact that this man saved me and then came across the globe to be with me and is willing to risk his life to protect me does bring a tear to my eye.

Matt lifts my chin so that I have no choice but to look into the intense steely grey eyes holding me with their gaze. “Tell me.”

I nod, knowing that I can’t do that, and that if I’m going to keep him safe, I will somehow need to find a way to distance myself from the one man that I’ve ever let past my walls. I decide to use the truth. He already knows about the Russian side of my family, and surely it won’t be long before Sasha or Jay divulges the history of the Chicago side of our family, if they haven’t already. “A long time ago my mother had an affair with Frederik Bernatelli. My sister Sasha and I are the dirty little secret. If my grandfather ever found out, there would be out and out war,” I say, but while he’s listening to me, he’s getting intel from that headset of his.

“Get down,” Matt says, pushing my face into his lap and covering me with his jacket. “They’ve got drones overhead. Stay down unless you want your picture splattered all over the underground channels,” Matt growls.

If my picture gets released, my death warrant is signed and I know it. There will be nowhere that I can hide that they won’t find me. I am a threat to their livelihood. Matt is caressing my neck, calming me, and I’m almost lulled into a false sense of security when all hell breaks loose. I hear a distinctive crack and the squeal of tires before we are bashed from behind.

“Step on the gas, they got past car two and they’ve got fire power overhead,” Matt says, cool and calm, caressing the back of my neck like we’re not in the middle of a shit storm while I shift in his lap, trying to reach the button on my belt that will alert my team that I’m in trouble.

“Tell me you’re out there, Cole,” Matt says.

A man’s voice comes over the speaker of the car. “We just took out the drone and I’m about to have your driver ram that car right up this fucker’s ass,” Cole says as Matt continues to caress my neck, and I make the decision not to push the button, feeling Matt’s body begin to relax beneath me.

“Roger that,” Matt says just as the sounds of steel against steel and the squeal of braking rubber fill the air.

MATT

I PULL Marenah's head inward, making sure she's braced against my body in the event we get hit, and a split second later we do. The car slams into us from the rear with a ton of force, causing our car to spin sideways, and I know how fucking close we are to these goddamn cliffs. Our driver navigates us out of a spin and puts his foot down, gaining us a little separation from the dead man that just put my princess in jeopardy.

While we may have gained a little distance, they are still too close, and the driver floors it on a straight stretch and I relax, knowing exactly what the fuck is going to happen in about two minutes. I turn and watch as the other car begins accelerating on the straightaway just as we begin slowing for the hair-pin turn. I brace myself, pulling Marenah against me even tighter, hugging her close even though I have every faith in Cole's abilities to hire a driver with skill.

He doesn't let me down, just brakes hard, spinning our car three-sixty on a dime. The sound of squealing rubber howls into the night as the tires of our assailants try desperately to grip the road and slow to a stop, but it's no use. At their speed, all it takes from our driver is a tap on the side front panel to send them spinning across the narrow highway and careening over the side of the treacherous cliffs and into the sea below.

"Great job! Fuck that was close!" Nate yells.

"You're all clear, Matt, but if the drones had a track on you, it won't be hard for them to come at you again. The

Gulfstream's ready and waiting, and you already have clearance. Have the driver put his foot down. You're about ten minutes south from a private strip," Cole says from the overhead.

"I'm already on it," our driver growls, accelerating behind the security car still in front of us.

"We made it for now, Princess, but you and I both know they're not going to stop until they get what they want. We need to get onto the plane and out of the country, where I can protect you, and we can talk, okay?" I say, pushing a long length of her blonde hair out of her face so that I can see her eyes, what she's thinking, and alleviate her fears.

The light from the moon and the illuminations of the city at the bottom of the hills gives me a little view of her eyes, and I watch as she processes. The solemn nod of her head tells me there's more I don't know. Our driver navigates us to the strip, and the security team guides us out of the car and onto the plane.

Marenah settles onto the sofa and buckles in, and the crew prepare for takeoff while waiting for the rest of our team, and Nate heads into the security area.

I text Cole and get no response. I scowl, trying him on the two-way and still nothing. I connect with Jay, who answers almost immediately. "Cole saved my ass, we're at the strip and he's gone silent. The pilot's ready to take off," I say.

"Cole's got a drone over his head, hang on," Jays says, placing me on mute while I wait with growing impatience, not sure what the hell is happening to the man that just saved our lives.

"Jay, you gonna let me in on this?" I say, but he doesn't respond, and I know that Jay's gonna do what he needs to do, and I'll have to wait it out.

The pilot's voice comes on overhead alerting us to the near departure. "Everyone in the cabin get situated. When we get the word that we've got our man, it's going to be a quick takeoff."

“What’s happening to him?” Marenah asks. I can tell that she’s concerned about Cole, too.

“I don’t know yet, but Jay will get him out of harm’s way. It may just take a bit,” I say, pushing a dangling strand of hair behind her ear so I can see her emotion-laden eyes.

I’m trying to keep her calm as we wait, but my insides are bunched, thinking that he could be in serious danger because he helped us. “Jay, you have an update?” I ask, my impatience getting the best of me.

“Yep, hold tight,” Jay says as the night around us lights up with siren wails and blue and red flashing lights all over the tarmac, and what looks like Cole’s car screams past us with cops on his tail, flying down the runway to the other end of the strip. A couple minutes later, another vehicle makes its way to the plane, squeals to a stop, and Cole jumps out of the front seat, running up the ramp and into the main cabin out of breath.

As the door closes behind him the pilot’s voice comes over the speaker again. “Buckle up boys!” the pilot says as the plane begins to drift across the tarmac, gaining speed at an unusually rapid pace and then begins to careen down the runway, gaining even more speed before lifting into the air just as the car that Cole left idling on the tarmac blows up, igniting into flames right below our very eyes.

Cole slumps onto the leather couch, catching his breath, and looks at both of us, one and then the other. “Alright, someone’s going to tell me right the fuck now what the hell we’re into? These fuckers have goddamn drones, heat-seeking fucking drones, and they just about roasted our asses,” he says.

“Fuck!” The mafia boys are high tech, but they’re not equipped like that. I have a pretty good idea who is, but I want to talk with Marenah in private about this. “I’m not sure if I fully understand what’s going on myself,” I say as Marenah’s eyes drop to the floor.

I think she’s going to stay silent, and that’s fine, because the conversation that I plan to have with her isn’t one that should be done in public, but she surprises me. “I’m sorry that

I brought you both into my world. If I had it to do over again, I would have pushed you far, far away,” Marenah says.

I lean over and lift her chin, because I want to see her eyes when she either tells me the truth or tries to lie to me about who she’s working for. These people, whoever they are, want us dead. Fucking drones that had no issue with taking what they thought was Cole’s car out right at the airport. Whoever these people are, they have balls, big ones, and while I thought at first my little princess may have be working for the Russian government, I now wonder if she is running from them, because it’s become extremely obvious that whoever these fuckers are, they not only want her dead, but will take out anyone helping her.

“Marenah, we can talk privately, but either way, we need you to tell us what the hell is going on if we’re going to protect you and stay alive,” I say.

Her wide sky-blue eyes are swirling with emotion, but she looks me straight in the eye. “I told you, I’m trying to do the right thing. I have to help the women and children. The people that are after me want to prevent me from doing that,” she says.

Cole’s looking at her and then at me. “Trafficking,” I say.

“Fuck!” Cole says. “No wonder they were trying to take our asses out.”

“So, you’re working for the United States and pretending to be working for the Russian government, they found you out and brought a shit ton of heat down on us?” Cole asks.

She pales at his reference to who she’s working for, not realizing that my security men have eyes and ears on all our conversations if it means potential security breaches to us or the families we protect. The way she’s breathing leads me to believe he’s not far off with his assessment. “Enough. Marenah and I will talk,” I say, taking her hand and leading her to the door of the bedroom suite to the Gulfstream and closing it behind us. “Are you going to tell me which country you’re working for Marenah? I can’t keep you protected or help with the trafficking issue unless I know what you’re up

against and what we need to mitigate as a security team,” I say, running my hands along the moist seam of her mouth, and across her bottom lip.

MARENAH

THE FEEL of his finger on my lip, so sensual and intimate leaves my heart racing, but I know that he's looking for answers, things that I can't tell him if I am to keep him and his security team alive.

“I told you what I could, Matt. I wasn't lying when I told you that I was trying to help the women and children that are snatched into a life of trafficking. I just didn't tell you who I work for, and unfortunately I can't, because if I did, it would put you and your men, my sister, and basically anyone that is close to any of us in jeopardy.”

“Princess, I know you're doing right by those people but if we're going to get those women and children out alive, you're going to need to trust me, and right now I'm not feeling it. Where are they being held? What can you tell me that will help my security team get a lock on them? Once we know who and where they are, we can put a plan together and deal with it, Marenah, you have my word,” Matt says.

I haven't gotten any messages from my team, and for all I know they could be dead, but I do know someone is after us, and right now the only hope for these women is staring me in the face with narrowed steely grey eyes. “I can't go on record telling you who they are, it's in my contract, but I can take you to where the trades are made. You can't take a picture of me or record my voice. If so, they will be able to recognize me, and a world of heat will rain down on all of us,” I say.

“No pics and no voice recordings. You have my word, Marenah,” Matt says, running his fingers through my hair.

Once I lead his team to them, there will be no turning back. “Then let’s go back to America,” I say, watching as his eyes widen with surprise, and then comprehension.

“Marenah, is that why you were in the bar?” Matt says, and I can already see him putting two and two together.

I nod. “The Chicago boys have a hand in this, but they aren’t the ones responsible for the entire system and structure that enables trafficking. Those are the people I want! I only went back to Russia afterwards because I didn’t have backup, and it still hasn’t arrived. I don’t know if it’s still the priority right now, but it is to me,” I say.

He looks solemn for a few moments and places a hand on each side of my face, caressing my cheeks, waiting, knowing there’s more that I’m not saying.

“It means that I’m all alone if we go in,” I say.

He nods. “If you can’t tell me who you’re working for, then I don’t technically know you’re working for anyone for the next twenty-four hours. I’ll get a small group together and we’ll go in and get them out. I’ll clear it with Jay, but you have to know that I’m only going to ask for a day’s window before I’m going to need to let Chase and Brian know what’s going on,” he says.

I nod, fully understanding what he’s not saying. Once he does that, we’re over. It would have to be, unless I could tell him who I am working for, and we both know that just isn’t possible.

The intensity of my emotion for this man is something I’ve never felt before. He’s putting his life and those of his team members on the line to help these people. I know this could get him in trouble with Chase and Brian. I look at the equipment he’s still wearing, and his headset is standard issue. While I’m not sure how he’s connected to the mystery that my life has become, I believe in my heart that I can trust him to

help get the women that have become my mission, and keep them alive before we part ways.

“Let me give them instructions so they can get the flights routed and the plans approved,” Matt says, connecting with one of his team. He goes through the directions, letting his teams know we’ll follow their original flight plan while they’re working to get a flight to America approved, refuel, have clothes put on board for us, and then we’ll be on our way. As he does, my throat constricts with the knowledge that tonight may be the very last time we are together.

I look up, and he’s watching me with those steely grey eyes, and the energy is almost palpable.

If this is our last night, I want it to be one that we both remember, regardless of what happens in the future. I slide off the bed and stand to my full height and begin undoing the pearl buttons of my light pink blouse. The desire in his eyes as he watches me while listening to someone on the phone is hot, and I feel my nipples pebble and strain against the lace material of my bra. His eyes don’t leave me, watching every move I make until I have reached the last button, letting it slide from my shoulders and onto the floor. He disconnects with whomever he was talking with and tosses his cell on the dresser, watching me. The heat of his gaze is intoxicating, and I want to see that look grow with intensity. I unclasp the clip to my bra and watch his chest as he gently inhales and exhales as my breasts are freed to his view, and my eyes gravitate to his pants and the bulge that has formed.

There is one thing that I want to do right now, and if I don’t, I will regret it forever, so I don’t hesitate. I unbutton my slacks and slide them over my hips, letting them meet my other clothes in the heap on the floor, and walk slowly toward him, left only in my white lacy panties.

I slowly sink to the floor in front of him, onto my knees, needing to taste him and to feel the power of bringing him to his pleasure. “Let me do this,” I say, looking up at him and relishing in the hazy steely grey eyes that are watching me intently.

I start to unzip him, releasing the bulging cock from his underwear and trousers. I lick it's tip, just like an ice cream cone. He moans, and the sound alone makes my pussy wet.

“I want to please you. Tell me how you like me to suck you,” I say, licking softly up and down his shaft, teasing until I reach his balls. I am not about to regret or hold back during the last twenty-four hours that we have together, and suck his balls into my mouth, first one and then the other, alternating and intermittently tasting and fondling the crevice that goes right up to his shaft.

He holds my face, and moves me onto his cock, slow, letting me acclimate before inching forward. “Relax your mind and your throat muscles. You can take me, Marenah,” Matt says, inching forward, little by little, until my head is pressed tightly against his belly, ensuring that I have all of his cock in my mouth and down my throat.

He strokes my hair, and then starts to move, grasping my nape and pulling me onto his cock. I've never given a blow job like this, a man taking what he wants, pulling me and my mouth onto his cock. At first, I struggle with the rhythm and the feel of him at the back of my throat. Once I relax, the impulse to gag disappears. I just feel him, hard and silky, stroking my mouth, and hear the sound of his groans above me as he drives his cock deeper, seeking his pleasure.

Intermittently he lets me rest, but only short times to catch a breath. “I want to come in your mouth, tell me if you don't want me to, Princess,” Matt says.

Instead, I suck him hard, trying to take him in deeper, as he sends strand after strand of come deep into the back of my throat, and the way he shudders against me, holding me close, is an exhilarating rush. I suck and nuzzle him, cleaning all the way down his length and then back up again. I could do this forever, but he extracts himself from me and lifts me by the waist, placing me on the bed so I can see our reflections in the full-length mirror before spreading my legs obscenely wide. “Watch Princess,” Matt says as he begins to tease me with his tongue, barely touching at first, but then gently parting me with its warmth.

I moan and raise my hips, but he lifts his head, narrowing his steely grey eyes at me and depriving me of the warmth of his tongue. “We’ll go slow, but I want to control your pleasure. If you move, I’ll be forced to restrain you,” Matt says.

I moan at the thought, unable to control the movement of my hips as he licks me from center to clit. All too soon his tongue has left me, and his belt is wrapping around my wrists, pulling them above my head as he kisses my lips and then sucks back down my body, slow and leisurely, avoiding my mound, instead teasing around it and leaving me in a state of heated desire. He strokes down my thighs and calves with the warmth of his tongue, and I hear myself softly moan as he spreads my legs. The soft material wrapping around my ankle gives me pause and he senses my hesitation. I’ve never been fully restrained, at least voluntarily, and I tense with the knowledge that I will be completely vulnerable to him in this state.

“Don’t be afraid, Princess. I want to teach you how to let me pleasure you. If you don’t like it, tell me to stop,” Matt says, affixing my ankles to the footboard and kissing his way back up my body and calming me. He sucks each of my breasts, taking the tips into his mouth and then nipping them before moving down my body and settling between my legs as he keeps his hand splayed against my belly.

“Let’s start again, and this time you don’t move, otherwise I’ll spank your pussy instead of licking it,” Matt says, before his silky tongue runs over the most sensitive part of my body.

I am able to remain still by sheer will power and nothing more, wanting more than anything to arch into the warmth of his caress.

“Very good, now let’s see if you can stay still and let me take you over the edge,” Matt says, licking me from center to clit again. This time I do, but I can only grasp air with my hands as they are restrained, unable to move, away from the pleasure, and I’m forced to take it as he wants to give it. I moan, determined not to move, to do what he’s asked and let him pleasure me, but I am right on the edge and so needy.

“Matt, I’m so close,” I say, my head tossing from side to side, desperately trying not to raise my hips, but the need is too great and just when I think I’ll break, he sits up, leaving me bereft of his tongue, unties my ankles, lifts my legs above his shoulders, and sends his wrapped cock deep inside of me. He pulls my hips down urgently, rooting deep inside of me, hitting that spot over and over and over again until I am panting with desire. He rubs my clit and it makes me shudder with need. When he feels my body tighten, he drives deeper, making me clench and cry out as we grip each other tighter and tighter and our climax overtakes us.

I SLOWLY AWAKEN, glancing around the opulent bedroom of the Gulfstream, and pat the side next to me, empty. I turn to look out the windows of the plane on either side of the bed. The sky is dark and ablaze with stars. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything quite so magnificent. The door opens and disrupts my thoughts, and I turn to look.

“You’re awake! I thought you may be hungry and in the mood for breakfast food. We should be landing in a while,” Matt says, placing a tray of food and coffee onto the nightstand beside me. Something catches in my throat at the gesture. He’s looking at me like he wants to say something, but he doesn’t. Instead he picks up a piece of toast, butters it, and then smothers it in jam. I can’t help but smile when he lifts it to my lips. “Take a bite.”

I do, and it’s absolutely delicious. “The jam is amazing, all the little strawberry seeds are intact and all,” I say.

“Gaby, Chase’s housekeeper, more like everyone’s mom, makes it. Chase has a huge place by Lake Michigan, and they grow apples and have a huge farm. She and her staff put enough up for us to eat this stuff all year,” he says.

“Sasha said Brian and Chase give a lot to charity, and both are huge supporters of trying to get children adopted from the orphanages,” I say.

He nods. “Speaking of them . . . I talked with Jay, and we’re going to need to give Chase and Brian a report exactly at the 24-hour point after we reach Chicago,” he says, leaning over to wipe a crumb from the side of my lip.

MATT

THE PLANE TOUCHES down in Chicago, right in the city where I live and the city where I first found her. If she was in the bar looking for these people, I already know who the sons of bitches are that are holding these people, but I don't know how many, or what their process is, and that's what we need to figure out, because I'm not looking just to get a few women out of trouble. I'm looking to destroy their whole fucking business.

I guide her out of the plane, and we are processed through customs efficiently with our security clearance.

Fucking Jay has sent one of the armored limos. Cole walks in front of us down the ramp and holds the door open, raising his eyebrows at me. I shrug, no clue what the fuck is going on, but if Jay sent it to keep us safe, I'll take it.

"Where to?" the driver says.

"Great, we're going to my place," I say, giving him my address. "Cole, you wanna let him know where you're heading?" I say, pulling Marenah next to me in the back seat.

"Well, what I wish is that I was heading downtown to the club, but unfortunately someone has to protect your sorry ass," he says.

"That's not necessary, Cole. Seriously, we'll be fine until I lay out a plan for tonight. I can call you later. Go blow off some steam," I say, knowing he has the keys to the club and can call any girl he wants, and they'd be more than willing to meet him at the club at any time of the night.

“No can do. We stick together. Nate will join us later. You’d do the same for me, so quit being such a badass and tell me you have some of Gaby’s desserts in your freezer,” Cole says.

I nod, because Cole is anything but relentless, and a great friend. “Roger that. She’s put away enough of that stuff to last me a lifetime,” I say, knowing that with his sweet tooth, it may not last us that long.

“Excellent. We’ve got time to work on a plan and let it thaw,” Cole says as the driver makes his way across town, finally pulling up to the skyscraper that I call home, on Michigan Avenue.

I roll my eyes, because Cole has no family but our team, and there’s no way I’m shaking him if he thinks we’re in trouble or that we need him. “Sounds good,” I say, guiding Marenah out of the car and toward the entrance, knowing that Cole isn’t far behind.

“Welcome back, Matt . . .” the doorman says, walking us toward the private elevator.

“Thanks! Good to be home,” I say to the man that holds vigilance at the door of the high-rise.

“Have a great day, sir. There’s been a stir of activity with the deliveries you’ve requested. Let us know if there’s anything else you need,” he says.

“Thanks Leo. I’m sure everything will be fine.” We get into the elevator and I press in the password to my floor.

Marenah has been quiet the entire drive from the airport. If I were her, with an assignment to free the women and children, and then the assigned help just disappeared, I would be too. We’ve got a little more than twenty-four hours though, so we don’t have time to mess around.

As soon as we’re in the condo, I set my timer. “Alright, both of you set your phone timers so we’re in sync,” I say. “Marenah, I’m going to leave it up to you whether we bring Cole up to speed or not. All he or anyone on my team knows is that I need twenty-four hours to help you get women out of

trouble. My team is willing to help, knowing women are in trouble, but we all work for Chase and Brian, and we don't keep secrets from them. Especially when the people that we're after could very well be the same group in direct conflict with our employer's family."

Cole looks around the place and whistles, never having been at my home in Chicago before. I hold back a smile because it wasn't too long ago that I was in a completely different life and would have never imagined myself working for a legitimate company, doing right by people, and having the money to invest. I have done just that, and as Cole and Marenah take in my condo, I see that reflected in their eyes, and I can't help but feel a sense of pride and accomplishment.

We're here to get a job done though, evidenced by the maps of the city that have been delivered in tubes and sit on my table. "Take a seat. I'll put on some coffee, pull out some of Gaby's desserts from the freezer for later, and then we'll get to work," I say, setting a pot of coffee to brew.

I'm waiting to see if Marenah is going to spill the story to Cole, but he isn't waiting around for it. "You guys want to let me know who and what we're going after? I know if we're doing this off the grid, that it's something you need to do, but it would sure be helpful in putting a plan together to bring out everyone safely," Cole says.

Nothing he said isn't how I would feel if I was sitting in his position, but it's not my story to tell. He demanded to come with us, and I look to Marenah, hoping she'll share the story about the women with him, knowing she's torn by allegiance to some group, but not who, although I have a sneaking suspicion, and if I'm right, I have no fucking clue how Chase and Brian will react.

"Marenah, Cole can be trusted. He wouldn't ever condone what's happened, Princess. If you're going to trust someone, trust him," I say.

She contemplates for the smallest of moments, and I can see the very second she agrees, because her bright blue eyes spark with a fiery energy. Marenah glances at both of us and

then pulls her knife out of her ankle sock, her gun out of her holster, and another out of her back pocket, laying them on the table. “Okay, I’ve shown you mine, now you need to show me yours,” Marenah says.

She would almost be adorable, except there’s something in her eyes, a glimpse of uncertainty in her otherwise confident stance. She wants to know where everyone’s weapons are, yet she hasn’t come clean, and it gives me a moment of very real pause.

I glance around the table, at both her and Cole. If she’s holding back there’s a reason, either she doesn’t trust or she’s going to make a play, but I and my team live by protocol.

“Alright Princess, we’ll play your way,” I say, hitting Cole’s contact on my phone. He’s on silent, which is also a protocol. It’s clear to me exactly when he’s read the SOS message by the “what the fuck” look he gives me over the table.

She knew I watched her gear up, so if she’s still packing, it must have already been in place. Her eyes capture mine and she doesn’t give an inch, still watching us. She’s looking at me like she’s just put her life in my hands, and shit, maybe she has.

If this has to play out in front of Cole, so fucking be it. I slip my Glock out of its holster and lay it on the table, and reach down and pull the smaller issue from my calf holster and put that beside it. I slide my hands in my pockets and place the pocket knife with a multitude of deadly gadgets onto the table last. “That’s it Princess.”

“Okay, I’ve given over almost all my weapons, except for one. Anyone want to guess where it is?” Marenah says, giving me a toss of her bright blonde hair and a wink of her blue eyes.

Cole’s eyes flash his surprise and he glances over at me, and then to her.

Fuck, she’s hot, but goddamn dangerous. I don’t know where this is going, but I’ve seen the way she handles herself, and those dainty little hands and feet of hers are fucking lethal.

“Nope, not until you give over your last weapon. You would be a formidable opponent without weapons, but with them, I’m scared you would take Cole out,” I say, trying hard not to laugh at his look of amusement as we battle to get this resolved or her look of surprise that I’ve called her out.

She looks back and forth, surveying us, pensive and contemplating. I will help those women and children, but it’s clear she’s holding back, from fear or trust or something, but it ends right now. We’re in this together or not at all, because with or without her, I am going after the network that has managed to get a foothold in my city, of that there is no doubt. The only thing left to determine is if she will be going with me or not.

I take the lid from the long tubular waterproof sleeves the delivery service had brought over and start pulling out the maps and rolling them onto the table. The entire city and the docks along the lake are all blown up and numbered, just like I’ve asked. The intel I’ve received has identified four potential areas, and I pull out a compass and circle those all with a red colored pencil.

I look up at her after a few moments, giving her what I feel should be enough time to answer, and just when I’ve reached my limit, she stands. “I just need a few moments,” she says before walking right past me and opening and closing the door that leads out to the balcony.

“What the fuck? Cole says.

“Give me a minute,” I say, knowing this is going to get resolved right the fuck now, because whatever is wrong has made her hands tremble. I saw it when she walked by and my princess is fearless, but she is running scared right now.

MARENAH

I INHALE DEEPLY, trying to calm myself, but that equipment, all of it, it's all the same as standard issue. His earpieces, his two-way and most definitely his weapons. The survivor in me is doing the math, and something doesn't add up, but Matt has been completely trustworthy, and Cole has even put his life on the line to save us. They're both telling me what I want to hear, that someone will help me free those people, but Matt is wearing the enemy's electronic equipment and has just circled two of the drop sites, and I've seen what these men are capable of. I can't help wondering if I am having an affair with an extremely deadly enemy.

"I just need a few moments," I say, walking toward a door that leads me out onto the balcony, seemingly miles high above the city of Chicago.

I'm looking down over Lake Michigan Drive, watching the water taxis that make their way down the river, through the city far, far below when I hear the sliding of the patio door and feel him move in behind me.

"What are you watching, and what does my team need to be prepared for?" Matt asks, whispering in my ear, pulling my body against his own and stroking my nape.

"The women we're after were transported in trucks, but just looking at the taxis down below, any vehicle that moves could be used as a means of transportation. How do we stop this?" Marenah says.

“You stop this by telling me and my team exactly what we need to know,” Matt says, pulling me tighter against his hardened member, kissing along my nape. “I hate to break this to you, but it’s going to take every bit of manpower we have to get those people out of this situation, and if we can’t trust each other and be ready to go when we get the word, they could slip right out of the country.”

My entire body goes rigid with the thought that those innocents could already be long gone and we’ll never get them back. He knows this, because he’s lost someone special, too. I don’t know who he works for, but at this very point, I do know that my life is worth giving up if it can save the lives of all of those people and bring down those that are in charge. I turn in Matt’s arms. “If that’s the case, we need to move fast, because the faces of the women and children I saw will haunt me for the rest of my life if we don’t save them, regardless of what happens to me.”

He lifts my chin, so I have no other choice than to look at him. “Marenah, we’ll do everything that we can to help these people, but you need to give us something here. I want your trust, Princess,” Matt says, stroking my lower lip.

I think about all that we’ve been through together and all that he has done for a few moments. “Matt, you said you liked my hair once. If you run your hands through it, you’re going to find the last of my weapons. Take it, and then let’s go and develop a plan to free those people,” I say.

He grasps my face, running his hands down my cheeks, kissing my lips gently, and then lets one hand trail to stroke my nape, encircling it with the span of his hand. I know I should be scared, but I’m not. If he meant me harm, he’s had plenty of chances and could’ve overpowered me at the drop of a hat.

Matt’s steely grey eyes go smoky, and he slides his other hand along my shoulder, inching up so that both hands are caressing my nape, before he sucks and then whispers into the sensitive flesh of my ear as he slides his hands over my head and pulls the clasp from my hair. He looks down at it, and his lips twist with confusion as he turns the barrette in his hands,

but smiles when he pulls both ends apart and the razor sharp two-inch-long knives gleam.

“Holy shit, you don’t mess around, do you, Princess?”

My hands crawl up his muscular arms and make their way to his neck. “Not when people’s lives are at jeopardy,” I say, lifting on my toes and placing my lips onto his, watching as his eyes dilate, which must be a mirror image of my own. He captures my lips before sliding my clip back into place in my hair.

“Come on, Princess, we’ve got a ton of work to do between now and tonight,” Matt says, kissing me lightly on the lips before taking my hand and guiding me back into the dining room.

“You two plan to fuck around all day while I do all the work,” Cole says, rifling through papers on the table as the microwave dings. He gets up and pulls a plate of the defrosted dessert tray that Gaby has made from the microwave and brings it to the table.

I shake my head. “I can see you’ve been working hard getting the dessert ready,” I say, pouring us each a coffee as he hands us each a small plate.

“It’s for fuel,” Cole says, his eyes dancing with amusement.

“Works for me,” I say, reaching for the spatula to scoop a piece of the strudel off the dish and onto my own plate. I then give each of the men a piece, and when I place Cole’s on his plate, use the edge of the metal spatula to scrape some of the frosting along his piece and smear it onto my own.

“For fuel,” I say, smiling widely and laughing as Cole’s eyes widen with surprise.

“You see that, Matt. We need to set some rules for this woman of yours.”

I laugh, because setting rules for me is exactly what Matt has been telling me about, wanting to teach me. Like when he won’t let me move when he’s having his way with me. All the things, but for now we have our work cut out for us, and the

rules I'm thinking about are starting to leave me with a moist center.

It takes methodical planning, and we have to call in the help of our intel team to get a tracker set. We work hard as the sun comes up and throughout the day, only taking a break to order sandwiches and wolf them down in between calls to our team and getting details in place. When we finish hours and hours later, we are all feeling the need to stand up, stretch, and move around. "I'll put in an order for pizza," Cole says as I contemplate what's to come and walk out to the balcony.

"Can you catch the order when it arrives," I hear Matt say as I glance back through the screen door I've left open and see him throwing some bills on the table. "I'm going to spend some time with Marenah," he says.

"No problem. You need me to give you some space for a while?" he asks.

"Unfortunately, not," I say, catching the smile he gives his friend before he joins me on the balcony and closes the door.

It's turning dusk and the temp has dropped a bit, not cold this time of year but just a little cooler than earlier. I wrap my arms around myself. "You okay, Princess?" Matt asks.

"I will be once we get through tonight. Thank you both for all of your help. I really don't know how I can repay you."

Matt grasps me around the waist and pulls me to him. "You don't have to thank us. We want to help," he says, and I nod.

Cole opens the balcony door. "Hey, don't mean to break up the moment, but we've got movement at one of the docks. If it's what we think, things are going to go down fast. Brian and Jenny are in town, so we've got Keith for the night," he says, looking at the two of us.

Matt scowls. "Who's on point for Jenny?"

"It's been taken care of. She and Brian are locked up tight. No one's coming in or out of their penthouse. Relax dude," Cole says.

“Let’s move, then,” Matt says.

When we walk out of the skyrise and onto the street, a sleek black Cadillac is waiting for us. Matt holds open the door and I hop in and slide over to make room as he gets in beside me, and Cole jumps into the front passenger seat.

“Let’s move this thing, Keith,” Cole says to the driver.

“Roger that,” he says, and I know he’s already been apprised to where we are going. The city traffic is not as congested as it could be, but in a state of hurry, we are crawling at a less than ideal pace until Keith veers off a ramp, puts his foot to the floor, and we finally start making some time.

We’re nearing the south side dock when the driver pulls off the road and shuts the lights down. Cole turns in his seat. “I just got word that our team has visual confirmation that we’ve got women, young boys, and girls in route. They have them in a truck, and they’re heading to the dock right now. This is the one, and we’ve only got one chance. Jay and Sheldon are out of the picture, they won’t be landing for a while. Dereck and Nick have their crews in place and they’re sending in backup,” Cole says.

“Roger that,” Matt says, putting his arms around me. “How much time do we have?” he asks Cole.

“Not long. The boat’s scheduled to leave in forty minutes, and intel has the truck clocked arriving in about thirty. It’s a ten-minute move, if that. Intel says they have a lift and move scheduled, so they must have the people in a pod that’s been placed in the truck. They’ll pull it forward, hoist it with the crane, load it on the boat just like they do with any other product, and that ship will sail right the fuck into a different country if we don’t stop it,” Cole says.

“When do we move in?” I ask.

“We’re positioned where we’ll see the truck go by. We’ll follow it to the dock and be in place in case something goes south, but we’ve got air support coming in, and our ground crews are in place.”

“Excellent,” I say at the very moment Keith lets us know the truck will be passing us in the next few minutes and to hold tight. We all wait, watching the traffic, and the minute a large semi lumbers by us, Keith pulls out behind it, and my chest tightens at the thought that if we don’t stop this vehicle, innocent people will be sold off into the world of modern-day sex slavery.

We are tailing close enough to keep the truck in sight, doing about sixty miles per hour, but Keith has allowed a discreet couple of cars’ distance to alleviate any suspicion, at least until we get closer to the dock. “What’s the plan when the truck exits to the ramp?” I ask.

“Don’t worry, Princess. We have inside help. Interpol is extremely interested in situations like this, and they’re sending their people in to provide support and backup,” Matt says.

Fuck! I knew his equipment was Interpol issue, but it’s clear that he has no clue that the division has been corrupted and that the same people he thinks are going to swoop in and save us could in fact be the same people that are in charge of trafficking millions of people to different countries every day.

MATT

MARENAH'S LOOKING at me like she wants to say something, but Cole's voice disrupts my thoughts. "Interpol's swooping down. ETA less than five minutes."

"We'll go in from the rear and cover the exit. We don't give these fuckers an escape route," I say.

"Roger that," Keith says, swinging off the highway.

"Where are you going, man?" Cole says as we watch the truck continue down the road.

"We know where they're headed. Trust me. I know these docks like the back of my hands. I grew up running shit around this area. We're going to slide in from the back, and they'll never see us coming," Keith says, navigating us down the frontage road that runs parallel with Lake Michigan.

"Roger that," I say because Keith was born and raised in Chi-town and there's nothing about the underground that he doesn't know. I message Scottie to see how far away they are, and he's got his team in place with air support, on the alert, if needed.

Keith pulls up behind a warehouse, and we wait as the truck begins to plod down the road, and then turns and starts to back up toward the dock adjacent to a large ship vessel.

"Hold up everyone. Intel just got wind of explosives on the truck. One false move and these fuckers will blow that truck, those people, and any evidence they were ever here away," Cole says.

“We need to get to the captain. I’m going,” Marenah says, opening the door and rolling out of the car, but I’ve been watching her, sensing a change. I don’t understand it, but something isn’t right. As soon as she pops that lock, I reach for her, but she’s just a little too quick. Fuck. I roll out the same side she did, but she’s got a few seconds on me now, and my princess can move. I don’t catch up to her until she slides into the shadows beside the boat’s ramp. There are a couple ways to get on this thing, but the guards have the easy way blocked, and Marenah knows it. This doesn’t deter her one bit as she slides into the lake and disappears underneath the water.

I see exactly where she’s heading and take off after her. She hadn’t planned on being pursued by a man who had no parents to pay for extracurricular activities at school, and who instead swam the currents of the lake for exercise and stress relief in his high school years and continues to use that as a conventional source of exercise.

I reach her just as she comes up for air. She thinks she’s going to climb those fucking stairs and go onto this ship filled with enemies all by herself. “What the hell do you think you’re doing, Princess?” I growl softly, pulling her soaked body back into my own.

She turns in my arms, hanging onto the stairs that she intended to climb, treading water, looking up at the massive boat above us. Her eyes are intense, watching me, and her heart is racing against my body. “Marenah, tell me what’s going on Princess? Whatever it is, I’ll help you if it’s for the right cause,” I say, pushing her drenched locks away from her face.

“I think we have a traitor in our midst,” she says.

“Who? Tell me that, Marenah,” I say.

She’s intermittently glancing at me, contemplating, and it’s longer than I would usually allow for an answer, but I give her time, just watching her as she processes. “Interpol, I’m not sure who, but some of them are trafficking. We may be walking into a trap. We have to get to the captain and take over

where this vessel goes. If anything goes wrong, that's the only thing that's going to save these people," Marenah says.

Fuck! I reach for my phone to send our team a text and realize that I've lost signal thrashing through the turbulent waters of Lake Michigan. I can no longer connect with my team silently and I'm dependent on my mic and headset. Interpol is only a few moments out and timed to reach the boat exactly when the passengers are supposed to board. "You're right, Princess. We're taking over the goddamn ship. I've lost all connectivity, so it's you and me. I'm going up first, cover me," I say, spinning her and heading up the ladder, pressed flush against the hull as I make my way upward.

I'm only halfway up when I hear voices above and pause. They seem to move on, and I continue the climb, but slowly. I've almost reached the top when the team alerts me to the incoming helicopter. I double-time it up the remaining stairs and pull her over and up, pushing her head down just before the lights of the craft come into view and light up the entire surroundings.

"Let's go," I say, grasping her, crawling across the deck, slowly inching toward the door that will take us to the captain. I reach and open it, standing and taking a moment to get my legs back while pulling her inside the door and upright, too. She stretches to one side and then the other.

I look her over to see if she's okay, and she raises her eyes at me. "I'm good," Marenah whispers.

I take her hand, keeping us both pressed against the wall of the hull as we make our way to the north side of the ship, where I believe the captain will be. We shimmy along the walls and are fortunate that most of the men have been sent out to the shore to oversee the incoming. We settle in behind the mammoth man who oversees the ship and is talking into his speakers. "The packages are being loaded. We'll be on our way shortly," the captain says to whoever is at the helm.

"Roger that, Lad. Let's get this ship sailing as quickly as we can," a voice says over the speaker in the main quarters.

Marenah's pure look of fear after hearing that voice and my knowing precisely who it is tells me everything that I need to know. I put a finger to her lips, pressing against them to keep her silent, but also to calm her.

Instead of looking scared, she sucks my thumb and then my forefinger into her mouth, and when she looks up at me with those wide blue eyes, my cock hardens with desire at the most inopportune time.

I keep her pressed against me, quiet, just waiting, watching her eyes dilate and grow hazy as she continues to suck my fingers. Fuck she is hot!

I know that my team will do everything in their power to keep these innocent people safe, but Marenah is right. If something goes south, we are in precisely the place that we need to be.

The water is cold this time of year, and her body is drenched. She shivers, and I wrap my arms tighter around her, pulling her back against me, sliding my hand down her nape. Her pulse is racing, and I wish I could talk to her, but one sound could bring the entire mission down.

Instead, I keep Marenah pressed tight against me, running my hand along her arms to keep her warm as I listen to my team deal with the situation on the dock.

"The truck gate is opening. No one moves until we get a lock on the fuckers that are moving these people," Cole says.

"Roger that," the team says, almost in unison.

It's quiet for a few moments, and then all hell breaks loose. "Steady guys, let's make sure we've got the person responsible for moving these people."

There's shuffling in my headset and then nothing but utter chaos.

MARENAH

WHEN I HEAR THAT VOICE, I cringe, knowing for sure. I always suspected Scottie. His name was on every single file and always assigned in the same area the trafficking occurred, but somehow every question that arose he always seemed to have an answer for.

Matt keeps me pressed against him, trying to keep us warm, but suddenly the sound of boots stomping down the hall begin, and the sound of Scottie's voice gets closer and closer. Matt puts his finger back on my lip, gesturing me to keep quiet as he pulls my body even tighter against his own and into the recessed little alcove we're hiding in behind the cabin as a group of men barrel past us.

As soon as the men get into the main quarters, we hear the captain's loud and aggravated voice. "We've got heat this trip. Get rid of them in the next ten minutes or the trailer's going up in flames and we're heading out," he says.

My heart sinks at the thought of all those people being wiped out in one explosion, and I know even if it weren't my job, I can't allow it. I've evaluated the sounds of boots, and by my best guess, Scottie's got two men with him, plus the captain. I don't know how close Matt's surveillance team is, but it doesn't even matter, because they've been made and if they get any closer to these people, they will be dust in moments. The men in the cabin are not about to get caught. They would rather blow a truckload of innocent people up and turn them and the truck into ashes.

I evaluate my weapons and our options. It's clear the captain is the one calling the shots to the man at the helm, and the only way we're going to stop this is to take him out, and it's not going to be easy with Scottie and whoever else he has with him running sidekick.

I gesture to Matt with my finger, letting him know that we need to go in. He shakes his head no and my heart sinks. His team has been made and he knows it, the captain is getting ready to blow the fucking truck and send these innocent people to an early grave and he tells me no. I don't fucking think so. I do a mental play-by-play of my weapons one more time, checking through all my escape routes, and then grasp Matt's hand, which is still on my nape, and bring it to my lips.

I draw his finger back into my mouth, sucking on it and watch in the dim light as his eyes grow hazy and his hand moves from my nape, hitting his headset with one hand so he can listen to an incoming call. "Roger that," he says as his other hand makes its way down my body, caressing my waist. It is at the perfect height and I grasp his wrist, turn it and bend it, intending to get free and get to the men in the cabin before they can hit the button that will send tons of people to an early death, but he's somehow faster than me and won't allow it.

He grasps my wrists and pins them behind my back, but suddenly another team of boots start clomping down the stairs, and it's now or never if we are going to save them. I swivel, turning and pivoting, so I'm no longer captive, pulling my Glock from my waistband as I march forward and take the entire captain's cabin by surprise.

Scottie's look of surprise is priceless along with the other two fuckers from Interpol. Those sons of bitches are not about to take these innocent people to an early grave. I will not allow it, and I hope to hell he knows that as I plow into him using his surprise to push my gun into the side of his temple. "Call off the execution order. If you don't, you die."

Matt walks into the room, his own Glock pulled, walking toward us and then aims it directly at me. "Drop it Marenah, or you will die," he says, and if I thought he was talking to Scottie he clarifies for me exactly whose side he's on. "You're

testing my patience tonight. Drop that fucking weapon or the whole trailer goes up in smoke.” My breath catches and heart pounds. I knew his equipment was standard issue, the same that all the Interpol ops have. I knew they were involved, and that this was a very real possibility, yet I let my heart and emotions take over and I let him in. How fucking stupid, and now every one of those people will suffer at the hands of these men.

The chambering of a round in Matt’s Glock brings me back to the present, and I know that he has at least seventeen after that, and even if he didn’t, the men in the room would overtake me, so when he tells me to drop my weapon again, I do exactly that. I swallow back my tears as Scottie pins my hands in front of me and locks the handcuffs around them. “Get her out of here and get those people moving. We’ve got the tails covered and taken out. We’re down to minutes to get this boat loaded, Lad,” Scottie says to Matt.

“Roger that,” Matt says, grasping the cuffs and pulling me none too gently out of the cabin and down the hallway, but we don’t go down the stairs we came up. When we reach the bottom of the ramp, he continues half-dragging me to the cover of the trees.

The truck has been backed up to the dock, and a group of men jump out of an SUV, open the trailer, and a ramp is thrown down over the existing ramp.

“Move, move, we have minutes,” someone yells as a huge crate is pulled forward on a sort of skid, and then the crane picks it up, hoisting it in the air and loading it onto the boat.

The teams won’t stop now, and the bleakness of the situation sets in as I lift my hands in a show of covering my heart, settling over the little button and pushing, an action intended to bring a reign of hell and fury down onto those that are a danger to our society.

There is nothing else that I can do but watch helplessly as they are loaded onto a boat that will take them to a fate, that for some, will be worse than death. I can’t control the stream of tears that flood down my face as the helplessness of their

situation settles in, but my training will not allow me to let it rest.

If I don't do something, I'll be no help at all to those people. They will ship out and be lost to anyone that loves them and everyone that is looking for them. Matt lifts a hand to touch his Bluetooth and gives me the only opportunity that I may get, and I'll be damned if I don't take it. One of his hands leaves my cuffs and accepts the call and I use all my strength to knee him in the groin. When his hands go to his privates my cuffed arms go around his neck, spinning to pull him back tight against me.

The thought that this is the last time I will ever feel his body against mine crosses my mind, but I have a job to do, and saving these people is it. I walk backward, pulling him with me toward the cover of the woods, but he gets a finger and then a hand under the cuffs, even though my training and hold technique shouldn't have allowed it. His agile body swivels, easily overtaking me, and his steely grey eyes flash as he frog-walks me backward into the privacy of the overgrowth, his eyes never wavering, holding mine captured with the intensity of his own.

As soon as we reach the safety of the treed canopies, the distinct point of a gun is placed to the small of my back and someone whispers in my ear. "Don't move or draw attention to yourself. Watch and you will learn, Marenah," Scottie says.

"Dereck and Nate have the ground crew covered," Matt says, and my heart sinks with the reality that all along, not only Matt, but his entire crew has been involved. "The men are getting anxious, how much longer?" Matt says to Scottie, but he doesn't reply and just gestures ahead to the shoreline where the ramp has been closed, and the boat begins to move slowly and then quickly, leaving the port.

"We've got 'em boys, take the bloody arseholes out," Scottie says from behind me and I watch from our secluded spot as a fleet of Interpol helicopters swarm down, encircling the boat, shining their spotlights on the massive boat. The captain doesn't slow the boat's speed at first, and a fleet of men lower onto the ship to ensure that he will, and ten long,

excruciating minutes later the boat comes to a complete halt and begins the progression of turning course and heading in our direction.

This time, when the ramp is in place, Nate and Derick lead at least a hundred people down it as sirens fill the night and police cars begin swarming the dock area.

“We’ve got the bloody arseholes,” Scottie says into his headset. “She’s safe, she’s with us, just getting some loose ends tidied up,” Scottie says as he begins to uncuff me and gives me a wide grin.

I grab Scottie by the shirt. “You need to tell me what the fuck is going on. I thought you were the leak, the one on our team helping these sons of bitches get past the checkpoints. All this time, you kept showing up, time after time in the same ports these people kept disappearing from,” I say, looking up into his intense eyes.

“Then we did our job and you did yours, Lass. You were supposed to think it was me. They were being too careful, and we needed them to let their guard down. Once Interpol assigned you to the mission and leaked the information, they got more confident and thought I had a trafficking deal on the side, which helped open the lines of communication.”

I was the one assigned undercover to take these bastards down. He grins widely at me, but when I look at Matt, the look on his face makes my chest tighten.

MATT

I DO THIS FOR A LIVING, in and out of situations like this every day. It's part of our training, the job, but my heart is still beating like a fucking freight train. When Marenah put her life in jeopardy, jumping into the water to gain entry to the boat, when she left the safety of my arms to yet again make a play to save those people, it brought back too many feelings. If only someone like her or Scottie had been there years ago when Alyse was taken, she may have survived too, but my heart is warmed when the ambulances, police, and social workers arrive. I know the people that have just been taken from the boat are going to make it. While they may have scars from whatever trauma they've dealt with leading up to this, we were able to keep them from being transported into another living hell, and for that I am grateful and feel good about the work accomplished tonight.

When I got the message that Scottie had been called in by Interpol to run ops from the outside, I was relieved and thought we could wait it out until he did what he needed to do to make sure the men had begun to leave port with the people.

But no, Marenah. What the hell to do with Marenah, my little undercover princess. My heart is still pumping at the near escape we had. If I hadn't known Scottie was running ops, she could have taken him out, and any chance in hell of convicting the people responsible for this could have gone out the window. They could have murdered my princess. She could have been killed right before my very eyes if I hadn't taken her

hostage in front of them, but damn the look in her eyes when I held that gun to her, the look of betrayal and hurt.

This is what getting involved with someone means in my business. You no longer have the upper hand. The people you love can always be taken from you or used against you at a moment's notice.

I am only half-listening to Scottie and Marenah as my cell signal is restored and I send a message to Jay, but the next words out of Scottie's mouth stop me dead in my tracks. She is not a double agent, like many of my team thought, she's fucking Interpol. Jesus, just the fact that she's been inside Chase's Italian villa and has seen the setup sends chills down my spine. I know the Italian Mafia were appreciative of our help stepping in to save the next don of the Larussio family, but that credit's only going to go so fucking far. Even Chase and Brian aren't going to be able to explain how one of the owners of their security team, privileged to all the comings and goings of the Italian Family, is literally in bed with an agent of Interpol. Fuck!

“What possessed you to get on that boat without backup or to storm that cabin? You could have been killed,” Scottie says. Marenah hangs her head slightly at the chastisement of a man clearly her senior and who with one call could end her career. “I know your heart was in the right place and that things were not as they appeared. I tried to send you a message by putting your cuffs on you in front, but you were so emotionally involved, you didn't even catch it, Marenah.”

He looks like he's going to say something else, but I look at her face, and I don't think so. I hit the send button on the message I was texting and drop the cell into my pocket, slowly walking toward her. “I'll take it from here, Scottie. If you don't mind, I'll borrow these for a while,” I say, taking the cuffs from his hands as the grin on his face spreads, and he heads out to meet with Nate and Dereck.

“What don't you understand about staying put, out of danger? You could have been killed or taken right along with those people.” As soon as I say those very words, I know that's the exact feeling I can't seem to shake: the absolute

horror of losing her. I am pissed that she put herself in that situation intentionally, but she is also the most passionate person I've ever met. She cares deeply about others and is someone that acts on her emotions, and that type of person is clearly a danger to herself and to my heart.

She looks up at me, and if I think my little spitfire is going to break down and apologize, I have another think coming. Her blue eyes flash with anger. "You could have found another way besides pointing that gun in my face," Marenah says, so low only I can hear her even if anyone was hanging out in the trees with us.

I reach out and grasp her nape and pull her to me, tilting her chin so she needs to look up at me. "If I hadn't been there, Scottie would have had to do it. I didn't realize he was finishing up a couple assignments with Interpol until we were on the boat. I knew you weren't in danger from him, which is the only reason I let him put handcuffs on you. I just wanted you out, and so did he. We were trying to protect you, Marenah," I say.

"I don't understand why they didn't send backup in," she says, pulling her necklace out and showing me the button I'm pretty sure is a confidential asset of Interpol. "One click of this and they're supposed to come and get me, and I pushed it twice." Marenah's emotions are beginning to show in the shine of her eyes. Tears she's trying to hold back. My little spitfire is all fire and toughness on the exterior.

"Remember the rules, Marenah. Only if it doesn't endanger the mission or cause more casualties," I say, and the dam breaks.

"They didn't come for me because I'm expendable," she says, and her tears begin to flow.

"No Princess, they didn't come for you because they knew Scottie was on board, and as the most senior, he would have been waiting for his alert to come in. If he felt there was a chance to keep the mission intact and get us out of there, he wouldn't push that button. He also had the advantage of

knowing that, if I was on the boat, my team was on the ground and we wouldn't be there without a plan."

She takes it all in and nods, wiping her tears with the back of her hand.

"So now that we've got that out of the way, you owe me a few explanations. I get that you couldn't tell me that you were with Interpol, but surely you could have given me some other reason for a relationship between the two of us not working out? I mean, something, before I took your virginity, Princess," I say, rubbing my finger over her lip, wondering if what she tells me will be enough to get her out of the punishment I already have planned for her.

She doesn't say anything at first, and then the conversation turns deeper than I thought it would. "I wanted it to be you, and I don't regret anything. I know this is impossible for us, but I still wanted my first time to be with you, and I still would have done whatever I could to get those people out. All I could think about was that they were being ripped from their lives, that loved ones would always be devastated, like you for your friend Alyse. I had to do everything I could with the knowledge I had. I have no regrets," she says, looking down before I lift her chin to see her eyes sparkling with unshed tears in the moonlight.

She turns from me, looking out onto the beach at all the helicopters and police cars that are lining the otherwise normally quiet dock, before looking back at me and stepping on tiptoes to press her lips against mine. "I think my ride's here," Marenah says, and I look down at the handcuffs I have swirling on my fingers, intending to treat her to a night of punishment for making me worry and putting herself in jeopardy, but she is right. That would only prolong the inevitable.

MARENAH

THE WALK to the beach and toward Scottie is probably the longest I've ever taken. The heat of his gaze penetrating me as I leave sears into my senses and causes me to slow. If I turn to look, I will never be able to leave, so I continue walking toward the helicopters. Dereck and Nate are talking to Scottie as I approach, and they both look out over the distance behind me. "Matt's fine, lads," Scottie says. "Marenah needs to come with me and clear up some paperwork," he says.

Nate nods, but Dereck doesn't. A man of few words, he looks beyond the cover of the clearing, and my eyes follow his to the lone man standing in the shadows of the protection. "Take care of him for me," I say, as Scottie leads the way to the helicopter, and I hoist myself into the machine and buckle into the seat. "Headquarters, Lad," Scottie says as he climbs in, gesturing overhead to get this bird in the air as quickly as the pilot can.

"Roger that!" the pilot says as the whirring starts overhead, drowning out everything around us. We are soon in the air, and I don't miss Dereck and Nate walking toward the man in the shadows. He hasn't moved at all, watching as the chopper hovers and then turns, moving out toward the lake.

I swallow hard, trying my hardest to keep my tears at bay at one of the hardest decisions that I've ever had to make. His team, the only family that has ever really cared for him, will pull him through. They are more than a security team, they are like brothers, and Matt doesn't deserve to have to leave the only family he's ever known outside of orphanages and gang

runners, just to be with me. He should have so much better, and I and my family, along with my job, will only cause him suffering and pain in the long run.

It seems like forever when the helicopter finally lands on the deck of a ship and the whirring sound begins to fade to the point where we can hear each other speak. “Interpol satellite headquarters,” Scottie says to me as the pilot jumps out, leaving us in the machine by ourselves. “Two things. You will give a statement and let them know that you got on that ship and charged that room because you thought I was in trouble. Nothing else is acceptable, understand, Lass?” he says, taking me completely by surprise.

I slowly digest what he intends and nod my agreement. “Lastly, nothing, absolutely nothing about Matt and his team. If asked, and I highly doubt you will be, you don’t have any idea who it was that dragged you out of that room,” Scottie says, and again I nod before he jumps down. I follow suit as he leads the way to the stairwell that takes us into the main deck of the ship, down a large hall, and through a door that opens into a spacious main cabin that has windows all around it and allows a view of the ocean for miles around.

Scottie heads to the desk, and the man behind it stands and extends a hand first to Scottie and then to me. “I’m Captain Lyons. Congratulations, I wasn’t sure for a while if you were going to be able to bring them in. We were following things from below when things went south,” the large burly guy says, and I barely see the flick in Scottie’s eyes, but it was there. I didn’t imagine it, and when he turns and introduces me and swipes his finger, just briefly across his lips I understand exactly what he’s telling me.

“Sit down, you two,” Captain Lyons says, gesturing to the large high-back leather chairs across from his desk. I take a seat as Scottie slides into the adjacent one, stretching his leg toward me, lifting his pant leg ever so slightly, letting me know exactly where a piece is secured, and I in turn touch my chest, pretending to pick a piece of fuzz from my sweater, gesturing up and down to let him know that it’s right in

between the crevice of my breasts, where most women keep a small extra piece, just in case we need it fast.

“So, let’s get the preliminaries over. I know you folks are tired, so we’ll get this done as quickly as possible. I’ll let you guys fill out the paperwork sitting here together. Just no talking. Once you’re done, we’ll take you into separate rooms, ask you some clarifying questions, make sure there’s nothing our teams don’t need to provide closure on, if you know what I mean,” Captain Lyons says, handing us both an official document that is in triplicate. “These pens will work,” he says, sliding one to each of us. “I’m going to get some coffee. I trust you not to talk. Either of you want anything?” he says.

I nod. “It was cold out there. I would love a hot cup of coffee to warm up with,” I say.

“Coming right up,” he says.

“Remember what the man said, no talking,” Scottie says, pretending to begin filling out his form, letting me know to keep quiet in case they have mics on us, which I have no doubt they do.

Moments later Captain Lyons saunters back into the room with two steaming cups of coffee and slides into his desk chair, pushing an aromatic brew toward me. I continue writing and hope we are just being paranoid after the events of the evening, until we hear the distant chopper coming in. Interpol is a global operation, and I’ve almost convinced myself that these satellite ships are used for multiple purposes and we are just being overly cautious, but when four men covered head to toe in black gear walk into the room, my body’s response is all I need to know that we are in trouble. “Alrighty, Scottie, Marenah, let’s collect your summaries, get you split up with the interrogation teams, and then we’ll get you on your way home,” he says with a smile.

They say you should trust your body’s natural instincts, and that, I do.

MATT

I WATCH her walk away under the moonlight, the gentle sway of her hips moving toward the beach. She has a commitment, a highly confidential and stringent one. She has pledged herself to Interpol, and my lifestyle prevents me from being a suitable partner, not even close. If they dig deep enough, they will find my connections to the mob years ago. Hell, they may even be able to pin me to the murders of the people responsible for the rape and trafficking of Alyse, and after the last month, they will sure as hell be able to pin me to both the Chicago and Italian Mafia.

If I were her, I would walk away too, but that doesn't stop the ache in my chest as I watch the only woman that I have ever wanted to claim as my own walk away from me and board a chopper that will lead her to the other side of the globe. Even though our security team is well intentioned and we consider ourselves on the right side of the law, we slip into the opposite side of the law and take things into our own hands when we need to.

Dereck and Nate are walking toward me, and I take a deep breath. Things will be fine eventually, but it won't be today, that's for damn sure. My phone buzzes and I read the text from Jay twice. Fuck!

Intel intercepted a message. Interpol is infected and pulling Scottie in rt now.

I text a message back as quickly as my fingers can type.

Marenah went with Scottie. They just lifted off in a helicopter, 5 mins out.

I'll interface with intel. Get your asses on the Augusta. Pilot's ready.

I race toward Dereck and Nate. "Let's go. They're pulling Scottie and Marenah in," I say, and they don't ask any questions, just turn about face and hightail it with me to the beach. "The silver Augusta," I say, knowing Jay wants us on that one because it's one of the fastest helicopters in the world, and it's armed and dangerous. We haven't even reached it before the pilot's got the blade's whirling in anticipation of our ascent, and it takes less than a minute for all of us to haul our asses in and Dereck to heave the door closed.

"Go, go, go!" Nate yells to the pilot, and in seconds we are ascending and on our way, flying by all the helicopters and drama on the beach below, and looking for anything suspicious as our intel teams try to determine where to send us.

It feels like hours until Jay texts.

Give me a call.

Fuck! This can't be good. I push Jay's button. "Matt, our intel team has a lock on an Interpol-registered copter. It's just recently landed on a satellite ship. You're close! We believe Scottie and Marenah went aboard. The helicopter they were on was Interpol's, so you have to know, whatever is going on is at the hands of Interpol," Jay says.

I nod, knowing exactly what he's telling me. "Jay, I won't bring trouble to Chase and Brian's door, but I won't leave her to deal with this. She did everything she could to save those people, not knowing Scottie was on our side. I'll send a text to Chase and Brian, letting them know I'm resigning. Nothing will blow back on them. Just have the Augusta drop me within distance from the boat. I'll take it from there," I say, texting both Brian and Chase that I am resigning, before heading to the back to snatch a set of wet gear from the racks. I don it and turn, my eyes going wide as both Dereck and Nate don suits of their own.

“We heard, and we go in as a family,” Dereck says, and Nate nods.

My chest tightens, and all I can do is nod as the words of appreciation and love for these men catch in my throat, because I know what they are gambling with. If the Italian Mafia, or Chase or Brian, for that matter, don't approve of their alliance with someone who has resigned, they will be out of the family with a snap of a finger, and we all know it.

The pilot lets us know when we're at our drop, and one by one we hit the water and silently move toward our mark, finally reaching it and making the climb up the ladder in silence. We slink along the walls of the boat until we reach the lower level undetected. No sign of anyone else on the ship.

We know the drill, scanning the area, taking in the four suits and the captain that we've all been warned about, but my eyes home in on my beautiful princess sitting in a chair next to Scottie. The men split into two groups, one walking toward Scottie and one toward Marenah on the pretext of taking them and corroborating their stories.

If they get them split up, we all know what will happen. These bastards play for keeps, and as if sensing my presence watching her through the wall venting, she turns and her lips shift into a little scowl. If they're going to keep from being separated, it has to happen now, and I nod to the men to get ready, we're going in, but my princess picks that moment to take a sip of her coffee and it falls from her hand, splashing everywhere. The man behind the desk jumps up to avoid getting a lap full of the hot liquid.

She leans down, and all hell breaks loose as she comes back up with a gun pointed at the captain's face, and Scottie turns, holding off the others. Nate and Dereck are first into the room, taking them by surprise and easily overpowering two of the men, with Scottie holding them at point until they're done securing them. The two that were going after Marenah turn, and I kick the weapon out of one man's hand and lunge for the other, but he spins out of the way, maintaining possession of his firearm.

He points it at me and gestures for me to drop my weapon. I don't know how many men are on this ship, but the chances of them being friendly if they hear gunfire is not likely, and I'll take my chances with these odds. I drop my weapon, and the minute I do, his eyes lower to it sliding across the floor, not anticipating the full-length kick of my foot to his chin. He reels with the force and I deliver another punch, this time to the nose, as Scottie reaches him and pushes the point of his Glock into the back of his neck. "On the floor, Lad," Scottie says calmly, but I turn toward Marenah and my chest tightens hard.

The captain has managed to get the best of Marenah. Her gun lies on the ground, and he's standing behind her with a knife to her throat. His walkie-talkie crackles, and he uses one hand to lift it to his mouth. "Land now," he says into it and slides it back to his pocket.

Damn it, she missed her chance to catch him with one hand busy, but when he tells her to put her hands up, she gives me a little smile as I watch from my crouched position on the floor, just waiting for one chance to overtake him without getting her cut. Once that knife comes away from her throat, that bastard won't have a chance in hell of making it off this boat alive, because no one puts hands on Marenah.

As soon as her hands go up, the captain places them on the top of her head and gestures for Scottie, Nate, and Dereck to stay on the far side of the room and kicks the gun across the floor. Once he does, he relaxes, spinning Marenah. Glaring at her. "You were given one assignment, keep tabs, not anything else, nothing! If you had kept your damn nose where it belonged, we would have been on our way and no one would have had any proof. Now you leave me no choice. You've seen too much. Say goodbye to your friends, and I'll let Interpol know that you died putting up a good fight for their cause," he says at the precise moment both of her hands come down hard, driving the razor comb set deep into both sides of his neck, opening his carotid, while her knee connects with his groin. His hands go first to his neck, grasping and gargling as he stumbles backward to the desk, and then begins to slump onto the floor.

“You just make sure you tell them who won,” she says, walking around the desk and opening it, taking out a plastic bag before grabbing the knife that has dropped to the floor and placing it into the bag. She walks over and hands that to Scottie.

“Nice work, Lass,” he says, taking it from her.

“Damn girl, you could rival Dereck here with those kung fu knife moves,” Nate says, and Dereck nods.

“Impressive work,” he concurs and nods toward me.

She was the one to walk away, and I’m not letting her do it again. I’ve made my decision: she means more to me than anything else. I stride toward her, and she is about to say something, but I take her in my arms and caress her neck, the creamy beautiful neck that could have been forever marred or worse, been sliced to still her beating heart. The thought alone sends a shiver down my spine. The very notion of her not being with me does the very same thing. I press one finger to her lips and bring her to me, capturing her lips with my own, holding the length of her body with my own.

I keep her pressed against me this way until the sound of the helicopter landing brings us back to the fact that Scottie’s not through with the mission at hand. “Let’s get the jackets and hats,” Scottie says, gesturing to the men on the floor.

Marenah and I gather our weapons and the walkie-talkies, handing them to Dereck and Nate as they finish dressing in the black gear the men were wearing.

“Hands behind your back everyone,” Nate says as the two lead us out of the cabin and up to the top deck. The wind is whirling around, and when Dereck and Nate urge us into the chopper and we are in our seats, the pilot radios that they’re bringing back prisoners, but the Russian voice that replies causes the blood to drain from Marenah’s face.

MARENAH

WHEN I HEAR the voice of my grandfather's right-hand man, the son of his best friend and second-in-command of the largest Bratva family in Russia, I cringe, because he's giving the instructions himself, and they are clear: take us to the nearest drop point. This man will take over when my grandfather is ready to pass the baton, and while it's never been a contract as in some families, my grandfather's desire for either myself or Sasha to marry this man has always been known. I glance at Matt, Dereck, Scottie, and then Nate, but no one moves a muscle, keeping their eyes on the pilot and the destination.

"How much longer?" Dereck says.

"Why so anxious?" the pilot says.

"Get us there faster," is all Dereck says.

"I'll drop us in on the front side and have the guys take the packages inside," the pilot says overhead, letting us know that we've got company when we land.

I open my palm and begin to draw out the letters to spell Bratva, and as soon as I get to V, Matt nods, turning his attention to the pilot and Scottie sitting in the front.

I do a mental check of the weapons we took back after the last encounter. A small gun tucked in my cleavage, a Glock in my back holster, and my knives of choice firmly placed back in my hair. Matt and Scottie are packing Glocks, and each has a gun on both calves.

The pilot begins the descent as we fly over the North Atlantic Coast, and a mansion comes into view. As we get closer my stomach dips. While I have never been here, I know exactly where we are. I've seen the pictures, one of the many homes of the Bratva, prestigious and always right out in the open as to throw a middle finger up at the rest of the world. Fuck you, catch us if you can!

When we land, the pilot turns from his seat and gives us all a once over and opens the door before gesturing for us to do the same. Dereck and Nate do a good job of keeping the charade of us in capture as they pull us down and onto the deck below.

The pilot jumps down last and walks past us and toward the man that I've known for a lifetime. "I've been instructed to hand the prisoners over to you. We couldn't make the shipment work. This *cyka* got in the way, everything for naught," he says, backhanding me across the face after calling me a bitch in my own tongue. I reel with the force, and as I look up, Matt has him in a headlock and is no doubt about to squeeze the life out of him—when Kroskov aims his gun and pulls the trigger.

I scream as Matt and the pilot go down, and rush to Matt's side as Dereck, Nate, and Scottie draw on Kroskov. Matt pushes back against the pavement, shoving the shot pilot from atop his body, and stands up, scrutinizing the scene playing out before us as he comes to stand beside me. "I'm not hit, Marenah," he says, holding me close as my body trembles with the fear of almost losing him and what's yet to come.

Kroskov walks toward us, his gun to his side as the guys relax theirs as well. "Marenah, your grandfather sent me. He's had word from Giovanni Larussio that you were in harm's way and asked me to assist. I came myself when I learned of the situation and how brave you were. There were two more men in the house awaiting your arrival, and they've been dealt with," he says.

Matt walks up to Kroskov and extends his hand. "Thank you for what you did for Marenah."

Kroskov looks him up and down, a towering bald-headed, tattooed, and formidable Russian. “Yah, it is done. Now, I need a private word with Marenah,” he says, and I lay a hand on Matt’s shoulder as I sense him tense beside me.

“It’s okay, he is a friend of the family. If he were going to kill me, it would be done,” I say, walking alongside the giant until we reach the front of the mansion.

“Let’s go inside while they clean up the mess,” Kroskov says, opening the door for me and guiding me into the great room where he picks up a decanter, pouring us each a shot of vodka.

“Drink in celebration. You have done much good tonight, Marenah, but there is much you don’t know and, this thing, we must clear the air between us.”

“I knew Grandfather was having me followed, but thought I got rid of the trails.”

“Marenah, do not ever underestimate the reach of your family. It would not be advisable. Your grandfather has known about your interactions with Interpol since you signed with them last year. Do not take what I’m going to say out of context, but there was a reason, other than your amazing marksmanship, that they wanted you on their team. A faction within Interpol wanted guilt to point in the direction of your family, and what better way to do that than to have you part of the inside. We know your heart was in the right place, but when you applied, it was like a bonus for them. All they had to do was walk away and let you take the fall if something went wrong,” he says, pouring another vodka.

“How are the Larussios involved in all of this?” I ask, holding out my glass, silently asking him to pour me another, too.

“The Italians and our family may not agree on everything, but we both agree that we will not allow the trafficking of human lives in our countries or waters. Giovanni is next in line to take over the Italian Family. It seems your boyfriend’s security team saved him and his great-uncle’s life. They are honorable men and tend to pay their debts,” Kroskov says.

I nod, not fully understanding the connection, but know enough not to ask too many questions in these matters either.

“It was foolish of you to join Interpol. You are talented, but the conflict of interest remains. It is insurmountable, and you will leave your grandfather with little to no choices.”

My temper rises. “What, the choice to kill me or those that I work with?” I say.

“Marenah, do not test me. I have it on good advisement that you only joined looking to get more information on Bernatelli from Chicago. We will do, what they say in America, a compromise. I will tell you what it is you want to know, you will never speak of it to anyone, especially your grandfather, and then you and I will go our separate ways,” he says.

“Wait, what about my grandfather’s wishes? You and I both know he believes we will be together as soon as you are ready to take a wife,” I say.

“*Da*, it is true, but you are spoken for, and I do not ever intend to take a wife. The work we do is too dangerous, Marenah,” Kroskov says, pouring himself another vodka.

“You are serious,” I say, walking toward him. This man, the one that I have known since a child, the one that will take over the entire Bratva at some point in the future, ruling and governing what does and does not go on in our country.

“I am serious. You are free to explore a relationship with the gentleman outside. If he’s not the one, you will have any future prospect cleared by the family. Understood, Marenah? This is not an option. There is too much at stake, as you’ve learned this evening. Our family and families, like the Larussios try to govern as we can, but with that, brings threats.”

“I understand and thank you, Kroskov,” I say, the emotions of the day and the reality that I have my life back with choices suddenly overwhelming me. I throw my arms around my old childhood friend and hug him tightly. He kisses me on the top of the head, and I sink into his strength, relieved that my entire

family and everyone I care about will have this fair and honorable man at the helm of our family one day, when Matt walks into the room.

MATT

MARENAH WALKS AWAY with the Russian, and I take a moment to glance down at my cell phone as incoming beep after beep distract me. Text after text, first from Chase, then from Brian, and another multitude of strings from Jay.

Resignation denied. Family first.

Resignation denied. Family first.

Resignation denied, Chase called in a favor with the Larussios. By the time you get this message, things should have been sorted. All things, including the conflict you thought may have existed with Marenah. No issues. I'll leave you to take care of Marenah.

I glance up at the three men standing around waiting for me to say something, but there is a lump in my throat that keeps me from saying anything for a few minutes. Nate seems to notice and breaks the moment. "Just reading the texts from Jay. Thought we were going to get our asses handed to us, and instead he's giving us all three days off with pay. He wants us to stay in the city for dinner tomorrow night," he says.

I nod, still too choked up to speak in sentences. "Roger that," I say, walking by them and through the door to find Marenah. I know she said she'll be fine, but I have a grave need to see that for myself after all that has transpired. I make my way through the foyer and down the lit hall and into the great room, to find her wrapped in the hulky arms of the tattooed bastard with crystalline blue eyes.

He lifts his eyes to glance at me and then turns her head to face him. “Be well, do as I’ve asked, and make sure you stay in touch this time.”

He turns and addresses me. “Giovanni Larussio wants a blessing by the family for your relationship. After what you did tonight, I concur. If she chooses to be with you, then you have the family’s blessing. Know that it comes with a death sentence if you ever hurt her in any way,” Kroskov says, stepping away from Marenah without as much as a handshake to me.

He’s an intense fucker, but if he thinks he’s calling the shots where Marenah is concerned, he can think again, but I do know there is a fine line of trust and hate between all the families, and I’m not foolish enough to disrespect that right now. If there comes a time, I will, but not now.

“Thank you,” is all I say as the formidable Russian turns and walks out of the house.

I take her hand, and the magnetism between us is palpable. All I want to do is take her in my arms and hold her, but I can sense the hesitation and uncertainty swirling in her eyes. “What is it, Princess?” I say, reaching out to stroke her cheek and push a strand of long blonde hair that is covering her face behind her ear.

She hesitates for a moment, but then seems to gather her resolve. “I’m afraid he’s been like that since we were kids, and I doubt it’s likely to change.”

Marenah thinks I’m concerned, and I think that’s sweet. My little princess looking out for the mafia bad boy is humorous, but I nod and stroke her cheek.

“There are things that I need to take care of. I know you would help, but I need to do this myself, Matt. If I am ever going to be free from all the drama that is my life, I need to take care of something. Something just isn’t adding up with all of this, and I need to find out exactly what it is that’s still bothering me. If not, I fear it will haunt me and whoever I am with for the rest of our lives.”

I catch that she didn't say that it would haunt us, and I swallow, knowing that walking away from her and giving her this time is going to be one of the hardest things I've done, but if this is what she needs, then I will honor her wishes. "Goodbye Marenah. Stay safe, Princess," I say, kissing her lightly on the lips, turning, and walking out the door.

Kroskov is talking with the guys when I walk out to the helipad, and his eyes narrow to slits as he sees me alone. "I'm not sure what she needs to take care of, but I trust that you will keep her safe while she's doing it," I say.

He nods. "It shall be done," he says, extending his hand to mine before I head to the helicopter. As soon as we're boarded, the engines engage and we are on our way.

"Brian and Chase both offered for us to stay in their condos this evening. The entire gang will be back tomorrow. In the meantime, Jay needs our help getting a few things lined up for tomorrow night," Nate says.

"What's going on?" I say.

"Sasha's got a ballet performance tomorrow night, and everyone's coming to Chicago to see it and then out for dinner," Nate says, and Dereck rolls his eyes and leans back in his seat.

"I'm going to head to my place," I say. The need to be by myself with my thoughts of Marenah overshadowing everything right now, and we split up into different cars, each going our own ways when we reach the ground.

I'M JUST DRYING off from a long shower when my cell rings with Jenny's ringtone. I wrap the towel around my waist and answer as I head into the living room to pour a stiff drink. "Matt, I was worried sick about you! What were you thinking, sending Brian a text like that? You can't just send him a message that you're resigning with no explanation. He went absolutely ballistic," she says, and I can completely see the hothead doing just that if he thought it had anything to do with

Jenny. I settle into the couch and take a sip of my drink, knowing that Jenny, the sister I've never had but have now, is not bound to end her tirade quickly, and that I probably deserve it for not providing anyone with a reason. I smile as she keeps on and on.

"How is Marenah, if it's not prying too much?" Jenny says, and again I smile, because the thought of Jenny ever not prying when she cares about someone just doesn't happen.

"She did a great job tonight. She took more chances than I wanted, but at the end of the day, we caught the people responsible, and a lot of innocent people are now safe," I say, feeling a surge of pride for my princess, but at the same time an overwhelming sadness that she's not in my arms letting me punish her for her brashness and reward her for her bravery.

"Matt, can you still hear me?" Jenny says.

"Oh, sorry, yeah, I can now," I say, wondering if I've missed a part of the conversation, too caught up in my own thoughts.

"I'm not exactly sure what's happening, although my guess is Brian and Chase do, but Jay asked everyone to attend Sasha's ballet performance tomorrow night in Chicago, so we're in the city," Jenny says.

"You good with that?" I say, knowing that Sasha went out with Brian a few times before he knew Jenny and she didn't really want to take no for an answer when he was ready to move on.

"Sasha called me and apologized. Told me she was working on herself, and I believe her. Jay's a good man, and if he sees the good in Sasha, then I am going to do my very best to bury my jealousy. She's just so beautiful, and a ballerina, too. You know?" Jenny says, and she doesn't need to tell me just how gorgeous she is because I am in love with her identical twin and adore every single inch of her body.

"Jenny, if Brian had wanted her, he would have stayed with her. Simple as that. He wanted to move on, even before he met you. Brian doesn't have eyes for anyone but you,

Jenny,” I say, and I can almost see her little nod of acceptance through the telephone.

“Yeah, and I trust him, Matt, so no, I don’t have a problem with this. You guys all mean the world to Chase and Brian and the rest of us. We want to be there for whatever Jay has planned. I’ll deal with the green-eyed monster,” Jenny says.

“Good girl. Now, tell me the name of the place we’re meeting. I’ve got a few things I want to do tomorrow, so I’ll meet you there,” I say, knowing that I may not make it but keying the address into the phone as she gives it to me, just in case.

“Matt, I hope you know how much I appreciate everything that you did to get me off the Bernatelli family’s target. Brian isn’t telling me much. Is it over, I mean is it over for you?” Jenny says.

“It’s over as far as you’re concerned, Jenny, and they know if they come after any one of us, that all hell will break loose with the Russians, but the family interests are so intertwined now, we’ll see what happens,” I say.

“Okay, as long as you’re okay, Matt,” Jenny says.

“I’m fine. Take care of yourself and tell Brian thanks. Gotta go. Damian’s trying to get ahold of me,” I say.

“What, wait, Matt, I have no clue what’s going on, but Brian asked him to check on my niece. I let her and her boyfriend move into my old house, but my mom and aunt haven’t heard from her in quite a bit. It’s been too long, Matt.”

I scowl, not having heard anything about this. “I’ll give him a call and let you know what’s up. Try not to worry. I’ll see you tomorrow at the performance,” I say, disconnecting and hitting Damian’s number.

He answers on the first ring. “Me and the guys are in town. Just got off the phone with Jenny, and she said you were checking up on her niece,” I say.

“I am, but things aren’t looking good. I’ve got intel digging right now, but it appears as though she’s gone off the

grid or someone's taken her. I've followed her trail as far as it goes at this point," Damian says.

"What the fuck?"

"I'm handling it but may need some help. She was last seen with her boyfriend, but after what I've learned about him, I'm not feeling any better. I need a few more hours to get the last of the intel together. I'll be back in Chicago tomorrow in time to catch the show if something actionable doesn't pop up," Damian says.

"Roger that. I'm in town tonight, staying at my place. The guys are over at Chase and Katarina's. Let me know if you need any help," I say, wishing there was better news for Jenny and her mom, but knowing that they've got the best intel in the world and one of the best agents we have on the trail of her niece.

"Will do," Damian says before disconnecting, and I text Scottie for an update on Marenah.

I don't know how this will end. Marenah signed up with Interpol to ensure atrocities such as trafficking do not occur and to find the leak in the organization, but what I don't know is if her heart is so vested that she can never give it up, because she and I both know we can't be together while in our current states of employment.

MARENAH

I WALK TO THE HELICOPTER, still shivering from the trauma of the night, but filled with a sense of power, a rightness of making sure those people were released, but as much as that felt good, I know that this can't be my life. I thought signing up would give me free rein to find out my father's dirty secrets. Instead I found out that he was paying people, important people, to cover his trail, to obliterate any evidence of his wrongdoing from this earth before anyone like myself could find it.

I am wiser now and know exactly what I need to do as I pull myself up into the helicopter and take a seat right next to Scottie.

"We need to go back and finalize things, you know that," Scottie says.

I wonder if he can see me swallow my emotions and fear, trying to bury them way deep inside, but I nod. "I know."

"Head to the satellite boat," Scottie says to the pilot, and the whirring of the blades overhead becomes louder and louder and the chopper becomes airborne, seemingly in place for a space of a matter of minutes before it veers into the sky, leaving people, boats, trees, and the shoreline behind us, leaving me to contemplate what I want and need to do.

OVER AN HOUR LATER, we land on another large boat in the middle of nowhere. I look around, realizing I have nowhere to go if things head south. The only escape is the deep dark ocean swirling around us and the thought of jumping into the deep blue waters this far off land with no backup or safeguard is unthinkable. Scottie has brought me to a virtually impenetrable area, and I resign myself to my fate as I jump down after him and follow him across the deck and down the stairs. I have the worst sense of déjà vu. What if Scottie isn't who he's pretending to be and is bringing me back to these men? Why would he take me to their headquarters? To kill me or to turn me in? I take a deep breath. Scottie could have killed me multiple times, and he didn't. It's been a long day, and I am just being paranoid. He could have turned his loaded gun on either Matt or me, but he didn't. It takes me the entire walk into the cabin to calm myself to the point that I am breathing regularly.

When the dark-haired captain in uniform, the one that hired me and is sitting at the large mahogany desk, gestures for me to come closer, Scottie encourages me with a slight nod of his head.

I didn't follow protocol, not once, but disregarded them several times in my need to see those people freed. I steady myself, walking toward him, not fully knowing what reprimand and penance comes with such disregard of the game plan in the world that is Interpol.

The man assesses me from across the desk and then turns his head down, reviewing the documents he has in front of him for what seems like hours but could only be a moment in time. "You want to tell me why you signed up, why you really signed up?" he says as his eyes pan across my face, settling on mine and holding them captured, ensuring I feel the entire magnitude of his displeasure.

"I wanted to make a difference, and thought I could," I say.

"Enough! You thought you could gain inside information about your family, did you not?" he says as his dark eyes hold mine.

I shiver, because there's something in that look, in those eyes, in that voice, that takes me back to a different place, to a different time, and I can't quite figure it out, until I finally do.

I breathe deeply, inhaling, knowing that if I give him one reason to know that I recognize him from the men that were in my grandfather's study, making deals around the world, not only will I be dead, but anyone we are trying to save will be likewise.

I watch him, his deep grey eyes penetrating mine, and then I see it, the recognition, then his shock quickly covered, but I think he knows I know.

This man that deals with my grandfather, the head of the Bratva, is in a senior position in Interpol, and I know exactly why Scottie is just watching, taking it all in.

The man behind the desk snarls. "I recognize you! You're the girl he introduced us to as his granddaughter. He sent you to keep tabs on us because he didn't think we were capable of doing his dirty work right?" he shouts.

I smile and watch him squirm. He thinks I am a plant for my grandfather, and he has unknowingly told me exactly who is responsible for the human trafficking that I've been following for Interpol, but he is afraid, and should be, because everyone knows that my grandfather will put anyone that he believes could talk or that crosses him into the ground.

I just let recognition settle in, and then give him a little smile, letting him know he's right in terms of who I am, because I want him scared. There's a sick side of me that wants this maggot to feel just a small amount of the fear, only a sliver of what these young people he has been trafficking have endured. I realize in this moment that I may have inherited this trait from both my father and grandfather, and it doesn't bother me in the least.

He starts babbling about the boat being overtaken. I smile, because I know it's for my grandfather's benefit. He hopes that he will be granted mercy by my grandfather when he is behind bars in a prison that my family owns, but he will not be, because this is the cockroach that not only has been

responsible for orchestrating the movement of human lives, but has been taking kickbacks and bribes that takes money out of the Bratva hands, and no one does that and sees the light of day.

I let that thought settle with me, and I don't feel remorse for this asshole, only happiness that he will see justice, but if I didn't know it before today, I do know that I will never be part of either of my families, because I can't stomach that they are both part of this life, making part of their living by plucking unsuspecting women and children out of their lives and selling them to the highest bidder. I will, instead, fight against this. It is finally right here and now that I understand who I am and what I stand for, family name be damned.

I see the nod of the captain's head, just a tilt, but it pulls me out of my head and into the moment as his henchmen stalk into the room with guns aimed at Scottie and me.

One puts his Glock right behind Scottie's neck and the other one marches to me, his gun leveled at me the entire time he walks toward me. I let him get closer, because he needs to be, and when he is in my face and tells me to put my hands up, I do, at both sides of my head, just as would be expected, but in a practiced sweep, I grip both sides of the razor-sharp hair clip and bury them hard into both sides of his neck. The sound of his scream does not phase me. It allows me time to grab my Glock and crash it into the side of the captain's head, rendering him unconscious and allowing Scottie the moment of surprise he needs to spin and overtake the man that has him hostage, taking him in a choke hold that he's not going to get out of until he has breathed his last breath, and only then does Scottie let the man's limp and lifeless body slump to the ground, and I wipe the blades of my combs off on the dead man's shirt.

I hear the footsteps overhead before they ever reach the steps. I nod to Scottie, pointing up, and he knows without me saying a word exactly what I've heard. We march to opposite sides of the stairs that will bring our enemies into the lower level, and when all six men march down the stairs, we are prepared to take them out, but I shake my head to Scottie.

These are supposed to be the good guys of Interpol, and I know this because they are the ones that have been chasing these fuckers, trying desperately to catch them in the act.

I come out of my position behind the stairs, and all eyes turn to me. “The men on the floor were trafficking women and children,” I say, looking at the most senior of the Interpol men. “I’ve finished the job asked of me. You’ll find these are the men responsible. The captain should still be alive. Consider this my resignation,” I say, walking past them to get to the stairs. It’s not until I reach the upper deck that I take a deep breath and feel the heavy weight of my family’s history fall from me, finally free, at least to the extent anyone can be with a legacy such as ours.

I am leaning over the railing, looking out at the darkness, when Scottie approaches from behind. “You did well, Lass,” he says, leaning on the rail beside me.

“You always knew, didn’t you?” I say.

He tilts his head and his lips curve upward ever so slightly, and just for a brief second, but I didn’t miss it. “You’re too smart for your own good. Yes, I always knew who your family was. What I couldn’t be one hundred percent sure of tonight was where your allegiance would fall when you found out your grandfather was working with the Interpol faction that was responsible,” he says.

“So I passed your test,” I say.

“Marenah, you did well, that is all. I can’t apologize for my job. I had to be sure, especially with your relationship to Matt. The Italian Family will never condone the mistreatment of women and trafficking, and Matt works for them. One last thing: Kroskov isn’t aware of your grandfather’s involvement with trafficking. He wouldn’t condone it. We believe with the latest developments, he’ll be taking the reins sooner than even he anticipates,” he says.

“Can you take me to Matt?”

“Indeed I can, Lass. In fact, I have strict orders to get you on the helicopter even if I have to kidnap you,” he says.

MATT

I READ the text and exhale the breath I didn't realize I was holding. She walked away, resigned her position, and is on her way to see me, and my chest tightens with the unknown. My little princess has slayed her dragons and is coming my way to tell me, but what she doesn't know yet is that going forward, her dragons will be mine to slay.

She also doesn't know that the minute Scottie felt things going south, he had a finger on a button that would bring in our backup, and Kroskov, true to his word, had the boat surrounded and men infiltrated on the lower level in the event things got out of hand. She is brave and trained well, and while it killed me to let her do it alone, I could not allow her to do it without a safety net behind her. I thank Scottie for everything he did and let him know where to take Marenah when they arrive in the city and get to work planning.

It's a couple hours before he texts me that she's settled in at the penthouse suite of the most luxurious hotel in the city overlooking Lake Michigan. I know exactly when she's read the letter, the one left for her on the king-size bed, when she texts me as I've asked her to do. While my princess is extremely capable of handling the most difficult situations physically, I've seen her submissive side, and it makes my dick hard and my heart constrict with the need to care for her. It has since the very first time I saw her, heard her breathing while she was chained next to me, felt her desire grow as I spoke to her. It was never a question, her and me, it was only a matter of time, and that time is now.

If she is mine, then she will need to know that I will ensure her every need and desire is taken care of. I know for a fact that her heart is consumed with making sure that trafficking is minimized and that aligns perfectly with the Italian Family vision and that of Kroskov, who I know will be a person in the periphery of her life and will be an ally to the Italian Family. I pick up the phone and hit the contact for Chase, who I know is already in the air on the way to the States from Italy with Katarina. I hear the reconnect of the phone to the Wi-Fi on the jet and it takes a few extra rings, but then his voice comes on over the secure line.

“Chase here, Matt. We were all worried about you when we got your texts. Jay’s been keeping me posted on the situation, but I’m glad you called.”

“Thanks, Chase. I don’t know how to thank you and Brian for your faith in me. I mean, this is as close to a disaster in terms of conflicts of interest that we could find ourselves in, and the fact that you both want to keep me on the team means the world to me. I talked to Jenny earlier, and she told me Brian didn’t take the news very well at first.”

“You’ve been taking care of Jenny since her trauma. He knows you hold a special place in her heart. You’re like the brother she always hoped to have. I think you know the situation with her own brother isn’t the best. He wants to protect her and make her happy and didn’t want you off the team, and neither do I.”

My chest tightens again, because I’ve never had a family before, and I now know the true sense of family, and these are the people I care most about, and they are just that, my family. I inhale deeply, finding it difficult to ask for anything more, but in my heart, I know it can be a win-win for everyone.

“You know my background. I’ve never had a family and now I do. I wanted to come to you first with this idea because I know Brian will do whatever it takes to keep me close to Jenny, but I didn’t want you to feel pushed on the matter.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, and Brian and I don’t agree on everything, but we respect each other’s positions when not.

What's on your mind?" Chase says.

"Marenah's passion is in prevention of trafficking. She puts her life on the line every day to do just that. She resigned from Interpol because of the conflict it would cause to the families, completed the assignment they hired her to do, and did it in a way that the people running the operations were taken out, but will still leave the Russians in a strong position and as allies to the Larussio family. Kroskov will be taking the reins shortly and is adamantly opposed to trafficking. I happen to know the Larussios are staunchly opposed to any activity of this kind, too. We could easily create a trafficking research division, and after what we've learned the last few days, should. If the security team is going to keep everyone secure, you're going to need to know exactly what's happening on all fronts to counter anything that occurs, and Marenah is passionate about this. I still need to discuss it with Jay, but I know he'll be supportive. You asked us to bring anything that came up related to conflicts of interest to you and Brian, and I want to respect that request."

"I like the idea for more than a few reasons. Let's conference Brian in," Chase says, and before I even have a chance to reply he's connecting.

"Brian here, what's up?" he says to Chase.

"I have Matt on the line. We're looking at the possibility of opening a new division in our intel team to research trafficking and placing Marenah in the division. It would give the security team an edge and more intel when dealing with the different families globally and any potential enemies."

"I'm more than good with that. She's more than proven herself capable and trustworthy in the way she dealt with things, and I won't have you leave the team, Matt. You're family. Do what you need to do, and bring her on board," Brian says.

"Roger that. I'll talk with Jay and the guys and get it set up. Last thing, I need to make sure you are both really okay with Marenah as part of the family. I know we've talked about

work, but I mean more. I want to solidify a personal commitment with her,” I say.

“We’re more than okay with it, Matt. Brian and I discussed it and have already cleared the way with Giovanni Larussio. We’ve told him what he needs to know, and he’s completely supportive, based on the way things were handled. You know the Italian Family is staunchly opposed to the abuse of women. We’re all supportive. Scottie let us know you’re in Chicago, and we’re on our way right now. Are you planning to attend Sasha’s event tomorrow and dinner tomorrow evening?” Chase says.

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world. I’m the one that’s supposed to bring Marenah,” I say.

“Excellent. We’ll plan to see you then,” Chase says.

“Thanks for everything,” I say, and that’s all I can manage to get out, because again they floor me with their dedication and loyalty, taking me in just like I am one of their real family.

I send Marenah a text to see if she has followed my instructions and her text makes me smile. Teaching her tonight will be fun.

I RIDE UP THE ELEVATOR, and when it stops on her floor, at the penthouse, it dings my arrival, because I pushed in the security code that she, Scottie, and myself are privy to. The doors part, and I walk past the living room and into the bedroom of the penthouse suite and my dick hardens at the fact that she’s followed my instruction to the letter.

My princess is splayed out in front of me, just as I asked, perfect in her pale pink lacy nightgown that shows the pointy tips of her nipples through the sheer lace and causes my dick to release the precum I’m saving for her. She’s watching me. Our attraction has always been intense, and her bright blue eyes are holding my own in anticipation as I near the edge of the bed. I can feel the magnetic power, the attraction for each other our bodies emit.

“Princess,” I say, rubbing her pale pink and white-tipped manicured toes and running my finger against the smoothness of her arch, up to her ankle, lifting it so that I can suckle her toe in my mouth. She moans softly and shifts, and with that I know restraints will be needed for what I have in store tonight.

The scent of the bath gel she’s used and her arousal as I make my way from her delicate feet to the curve of her calves, past her knees, and then to her inner thighs is intoxicating. I smile as I lick her inner thighs, pushing her nighty up and her thighs apart, getting closer to her pussy as she shifts her hips up. She may be willing to do as I’ve asked, but she’s not experienced yet and unable to control her body’s responses, and my dick hardens and thickens at the thought of teaching her.

“Still, Princess. You don’t take your pleasure. I give it to you,” I tell her, and my dick throbs when she moans softly. “I’ve taken your virginity once, tonight I take it a new way. If you want me to stop, you tell me, otherwise, I am going to restrain you and take you my way,” I say, licking closer to her pussy one more time. Her brilliant blue eyes glaze over, dilating, and I need no further invitation.

I’m still fully dressed and push her arms over her head, slipping the soft cuffs over her dainty wrists and securing them to the headboard, kissing her, smothering the soft little pants as I make my way down her body, pushing her long blonde hair aside as I nuzzle and kiss her creamy neck, sucking it, marking her as my own as she moans and struggles in her restraints.

When I reach her pointy tips, taking them in my mouth, sucking hard. She squirms, and her body responds to the intensity just like I knew it would, pushing up on its own accord. “Still Princess, I’ll give you what you need,” I say, making my way south, covering her exposed mound with the palm of my hand, grasping it and squeezing, letting her know I’m there. I watch as she struggles, wanting to push her mound up, get her little pussy stroked, but my princess is made for me, and if I didn’t know it before, I know it now. She manages to restrain herself on a different level than my cuffs do, waiting for me to give her pleasure. I sit up, giving her even

more time, letting her desire build along with my own as I stand up and push my suit coat off, undo the tie around my neck, laying the tie on her thighs because there is so much more I want to do with that. I start unbuttoning my shirt, and as I pull it back and let it fall to the floor, she moans softly.

“I don’t know all the rules. I love what you’re doing,” she pants.

“I’ll teach you all the rules, little by little. Tonight, you do what I say, let me give you your pleasure,” I say, and my dick hardens as her eyes go hazy and she licks her lips as I finish undressing and let the rest of my clothes fall to the floor.

She’s panting as I part her legs and slide between them. I’ve taken her virginity and she’s felt the pleasure of pain and then pleasure, but she hasn’t experienced it like this. I grasp behind her knees, slowly pushing her forward so that she is almost bent in half, suckling her sweetness, slipping my tongue into her. “Ready, Princess?” I ask, sitting up, but she need not answer because her eyes tell me everything I need to know as I thrust my cock deep inside of her.

I hit the back of her, and she cries out, “More,” and although she’ll learn that I call the shots in the bedroom, that’s exactly what I give her, finding that exact spot that drives her crazy, hitting it time and time again until she is writhing on the bed, trying her hardest to constrain her movements, pulling at her restraints and panting my name, and only then do I allow her to come, once and then twice.

She’s still trembling, but we’re not done. I want to feel her again, and coax her satiny lips apart, allowing me to explore the warmth, the taste of her, and capture her tongue in a dance with my own. She moans, and her hips shift slightly, and my dick twitches knowing that she’s becoming aroused again.

I slide my thumb over her swollen clit while my finger explores her wetness and pushes into it. Her head rolls back with one finger, she arches her back with the insertion of the second. I keep rubbing her clit, and after stretching her and feeling her soak my fingers, insert another into her pussy. This

time she moans, raising her hips to accept more, sending my dick into overdrive.

She's ready for me, wet and needy, exactly the way I want when I claim everything for my very own. I release her restraints and flip her onto her belly and lift her hips, sliding my fingers out of her velvety smoothness, as her ass rises with desire. "Princess, you're so hot. I want your virginity another way tonight," I say, pressing my lubricated finger deep inside her tight little ring until I feel her relax and begin to enjoy it, pushing back, even though we'll need to overcome that with time, but it tells me exactly what I need to know. She's wants me this way. I add more lubricant and slide another finger in, scissoring, spreading her before letting them both sink in to the depths they are able. Her moan tells me it's good, and I sink my cock into her dripping pussy from behind, thrusting slow, and deep. She needs to be right on the edge for the first time, and that's exactly where she is when I add another digit, allowing her to adjust, and when the little pants turn to moans, it's time, she's ready.

"Ready Princess?" I ask, pushing her silky hair to the side.

"Yes," she moans, and I pull out of her pussy and push the head of my cock a few inches into her back entrance. It's a tight fit this way, even having stretched her, but she moans and pushes back, letting me know she wants it, and fuck, that makes my dick hot.

I push farther, and then hold position, allowing her to acclimate to the size in this position, but if anything, she's pushing back harder, just begging me to take her this way. I slide in, going slow, inch by inch, giving her time, knowing it's pushing her boundaries as she tenses trying to take me. I still myself, letting her stretch before seating myself all the way, letting my dick's pulse rest against the end of her.

I drive slow, intentional, listening to her pants, and I can tell exactly when the discomfort turns to pleasure, and then pull her hips back and up so that I can drive slowly and deep, ensuring she feels every stroke, and every fucking time she moans with need, my cock grows and wants to explode. Listening to her little pants almost pushes me over, but I hold

it back, wanting to feel her coming with me, finding her little nub with my finger and stroking it in time to my thrusts.

Deep, over and over, deeper and deeper, and when she starts grasping the bedsheets, and I know that she's close I thrust harder, hitting the spot that makes her cry out until she is screaming my name over and over and over again.

My balls contract at the sound of my name from her lips and the tightening of her entire body around my dick. White-hot molten need spurts through me and I release strand after strand of my come deep into her tight velvety wetness, pulling her hips back over and over, needing the feel of her settled deep on the tip of my dick as I come inside of her, holding her until the waves finally begin to subside.

I roll her with me, gathering her against me, folding her small frame in my arms, kissing the back of her neck as our breathing finally returns to normal. "So very good," my princess says barely above a whisper before falling into a sated sleep in my arms.

I hold her tight next to me for the longest time, just listening to her breathe as she rests.

AN HOUR LATER, I've washed her with a warm washcloth and she's just beginning to fully waken. I pull her into my arms and push a strand of long blonde hair away from her face so there is nothing distracting me from her expressive eyes.

"You recall the first night we met?" I ask.

She nods, her eyes fixated on my own, her eyes dilating, her breath shallowing, and I can feel the magnitude of the beating of her heartbeat from here. The attraction we have is palpable, it seems to have a life of its own and connects us completely.

I grasp both sides of her cheeks with my fingers, bringing her toward me, licking her lips with my tongue, capturing her

bottom lip with my own. “Princess, you’ve been mine since the very night I saw you. I’m not letting you go.”

“What about my family?”

“It’s been dealt with. My family has dealt with it. There’s nothing for you to worry about. If you want to keep working to eliminate trafficking you can. There’ll be a position for you,” I say.

Her eyes narrow as she gazes up at me. “So that means you’ll be in charge of me, of what I do, and my job?” she says.

“Marenah, I’m always going to be in charge of ensuring your security, and that your pleasure is taken care of, is that a problem for you?” I ask.

It takes a moment before she shakes her head. “I think I love that,” she says, her eyes still hazy and dark, and my cock gets hard watching her submission.

“Princess, you don’t have to take on the world alone. I want you for my very own, and that means ensuring your every need is taken care of. I’ve never been into vanilla relationships, but with you I want both lifestyles. I want you to wear my collar, but also my ring. A connection like ours doesn’t happen every day. I want everyone to know that you are mine in every sense of the word, vanilla or other. You are mine,” I say, sliding the silver and diamond collar that has a circular ring for play attached, but then has two initials, both M’s, one for Matt and one for Marenah, overlapping and dangling from the sphere, and anyone looking at it, unfamiliar with the lifestyle, would think it is nothing more than a beautiful necklace.

She rubs it gently, looking up at me. “Yours,” she says gently, her eyes fixated on mine, and my dick hardens and throbs with her submission and the way her eyes dilate when she gives it.

“Marenah, I want you in every sense of the word: my best friend, my partner in life, my submissive, my wife, and the mother of my children. Marry me, Princess, and let’s make a family that we can call our own and be proud of,” I say, and

her eyes begin to brim with unfallen tears, and she nods her head.

“I love you so much, Matt. Yes, I’ll marry you, make a family with you,” she says, and my chest tightens hard as I slide the ring I’ve selected onto her finger.

“Matt, it’s absolutely gorgeous,” she exclaims, her voice barely above a whisper as she continues to admire the princess cut diamond ring that now sits proudly on her finger.

“A ring fit for a princess,” I say, capturing her lips with mine and sealing my claim of her for my very own.

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Via’s House of Vixens, is a “private” Facebook group for readers and fans to connect. If you would like to be part of this group, [request to join](#) for loads of fun! I hope you continue reading [Auctioned Surrender](#) to find out what happens next!

ABOUT VIA MARI

Contemporary romantic suspense author Via Mari likes to keep her readers on the edge, fanning themselves as the action unfolds and the heat rises. Her books, featuring the most handsome, intense males, exemplify extreme romance, with powerful men who will stop at nothing to protect the women they love.

Via was raised in both the United States and United Kingdom. Since childhood, she has enjoyed reading books that carry you away. In fact, you can still find her in the early hours of the morning, curled up in an overstuffed chair by a crackling wood fire, reading a page-turning novel, especially during the harsh winters of the Midwestern United States.

When not writing, Via spends her days with her husband. She enjoys gardening, shopping at the local farmers market, and walking in town or around a big city. And she loves traveling to research her next novel.

She also loves interacting with her readers, so feel free to connect with her on the following social media sites! If you want to stay updated on the latest releases and claim a copy of an exclusive story, [sign up for her newsletter](#).