

*It's our differences that
bind us together.*

CHASING
A MERCY RAVENS MC NOVEL
SIMONE
BOOK FIVE

M. J. MARINO

CHASING SIMONE

A MERCY RAVENS MC NOVEL

BOOK 5

M.J. MARINO

CONTENTS

[Art and Editing](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Thank You](#)

[Please Leave A Review](#)

[Background Information and Content Warnings](#)

[About This Book](#)

[Previously In Book 4: Engaging Opal](#)

[Prologue](#)

1. [Chase](#)
2. [Chase](#)
3. [Simone](#)
4. [Chase](#)
5. [Simone](#)
6. [Chase](#)
7. [Simone](#)
8. [Simone](#)
9. [Chase](#)
10. [Chase](#)
11. [Chase](#)
12. [Simone](#)
13. [Simone](#)
14. [Chase](#)
15. [Simone](#)
16. [Simone](#)
17. [Chase](#)
18. [Simone](#)
19. [Simone](#)
20. [Simone](#)
21. [Simone](#)
22. [Simone](#)

23. [Chase](#)
24. [Simone](#)
25. [Cynthia](#)
26. [Chase](#)
27. [Chase](#)
28. [Simone](#)
29. [Simone](#)
30. [Chase](#)
31. [Chase](#)
32. [Simone](#)
33. [Chase](#)
34. [Simone](#)
35. [Chase](#)
36. [Cynthia](#)
37. [Simone](#)
38. [Simone](#)
39. [Chase](#)
40. [Simone](#)
41. [Simone](#)
42. [Simone](#)
43. [Cynthia](#)
44. [Chase](#)
45. [Simone](#)
46. [Chase](#)
47. [Simone](#)
48. [Cynthia](#)
49. [Chase](#)
50. [Simone](#)
51. [Simone](#)
52. [Chase](#)
53. [Simone](#)
54. [Simone](#)
55. [Simone](#)
56. [Chase](#)

57. [Chase](#)

58. [Simone](#)

59. [Trent](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Bonus Chapter](#)

[Playlist](#)

[Kind Reminder To Leave A Review](#)

[Coming Soon](#)

[Also by M.J. Marino](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

Chasing Simone—A Mercy Ravens MC Novel 5

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ART AND EDITING

A SPECIAL THANKS TO THOSE WHO HELPED
MAKE THIS BOOK SHINE

Cover Design: Amy Queau of qcoverdesign.com

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Slayers wordslayers.net

DEDICATION

For my sister.

The one and only Sam-mone.

You inspired this book, bringing my character
to life in the most delightful ways.

And it was so nice of your hubby—J-ase—to be the
inspiration for Chase. LOL. He's going to hate me.

Love ya, Sis.

THANK YOU

Hello Lovely Reader,

Thank you for purchasing my fifth self-published novel. Whether you've supported my writing since the beginning of the Mercy Ravens series, or have started at book five, it means the world to me you're reading a steamy romance novel of mine.

Just when I thought my previous book was the most challenging, this book proved me wrong. A concussion in January set me back six weeks. A spontaneous romance cover photo shoot for a future project had me halting work in May. And then I was slammed with COVID in July, delaying my editing schedule and forcing me to find new editors last minute. This book project was one battle after another. But I've prevailed and *Chasing Simone* is available for you to enjoy.

This book is the longest to date. I couldn't condense it anymore if I tried—my characters had too much to share and their story deserved to be told at length. You can thank my alpha reader and my husband for telling me I had to add more Mercy Ravens brotherhood action early on in the book. Thus, a comical bar fight scene was added. Also, there's a bonus scene at the end between Simone, Punk, and Jo which will give you the familial bonding you've all come to love in this series. It's a little something extra for waiting for this release.

To my loyal readers, thank you for coming with me on this writing journey. I know you've waited a long time for this romance novel, and I appreciate how supportive and patient

you've been with me. Thank you for sticking with me this long and for all my future books in the Mercy Ravens Series.

If you haven't read *Lips on my Heart*, *Lips on my Soul*, *Lips on my World*, and *Engaging Opal* in that order, I would implore you to start at the beginning before proceeding. Is it necessary? No, but to get the full scale of Chase and Simone's complex relationship in *Chasing Simone*, start at the beginning of the series—I promise you'll get hooked right from the first chapter of book one.

Chase and Simone's love story is an intoxicating trope mashup of steam, instalust, opposites attract, Dom/brat, protective biker romance, with more progressive views than your traditional biker romances. It's time we normalize the other 99% of biker culture into our steamy romance novels, because there's nothing sexier than a man who values, appreciates, and supports his old lady while seeing her as his equal in all things.

Those who follow my social media closely are aware Simone is based on my sister, Samantha. When you read this story, you'll get an inside look at the woman I'm lucky enough to have as a sibling. Heads up, the chapter involving a hair scalp mask is a true story about sister. I have the screenshot text messages to prove it. LOL.

Saying goodbye to Chase and Simone as my main characters is difficult since I love them deeply (don't worry, they'll still be involved in the other books), but I'm excited to move on to Butch and Candy's love story. Hope you're in the mood for an alpha biker not afraid of being submissive in the bedroom for his dominant bunny.

My wish for you, dear reader, is that you get lost in the fantasy, place yourself in the characters' shoes, and live a different life, if only for a moment.

Enjoy!

M.J. Marino

PLEASE LEAVE A
REVIEW

Indie authors need your love to continue publishing the novels you enjoy reading. You can show your support by leaving kind reviews on Amazon for your favorite authors. If by the end of this novel you have fallen in love, please spread the love by getting the word out to others and input those reviews. On behalf of all indie authors, we thank you for your support.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION AND CONTENT WARNINGS

Dear Reader,

This is the fifth book in the Mercy Ravens MC Series and the first book where Chase and Simone are the main characters. Their book is a standalone within the series. However, there are comments and scenarios within the book that correlate with events that occurred in the previous four books. This romance starts where the second book ended with Maceo and Jo's wedding and goes beyond the fourth book.

To get the full scale of what's happening with supporting characters, I would suggest reading the previous four books in order. If you're only concerned with the main characters in your romance reading, then you can proceed with this book with no problem.

This book is not a dark romance, but it does contain strong language, sexually graphic situations, and darker elements, as it did in the previous books. If you're sensitive to stalker-drama, sexual assault (mentioned, not detailed), mild Dom/brat relationship, spanking, bondage, poisoning, hostage situation, cheating (not between main characters; previous relationship), domestic abuse (not between main characters), and vigilante justice, it's best to stop reading. If not, press on.

This is a contemporary, steamy, instalove, opposites attract, Dom/brat, protective biker romance where the hero will go to great lengths to have his happily ever after with his woman. Hope you're in the mood for equal parts steam, suspense, angst, and humor.

Are you still intrigued? Then hop on and enjoy the ride.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Shawn “Chase” Brighton, head of intelligence for Mercy Ravens MC Security, is an ethical hacker who forages the dark web for predators and corruption. No one is safe from his cyberstalking skills as he tracks those who do evil things to innocence or have wronged his club.

The hipster biker loves his MC brotherhood as much as he loved being a Navy SEAL, content to live the rough and notorious playboy lifestyle. However, even bad boy heartthrobs can fall in love, and Chase has fallen hard for a woman he’s only seen on his computer monitors.

Simone Holland was out of his reach until the day the sassy yet sophisticated accountant arrived at Mercy Ravens’ headquarters, looking for a fresh start after a painful breakup. That day, Chase laid a silent claim on her—she would be his old lady, come hell or high water.

It doesn’t matter if Simone is high-maintenance or as opposite to Chase as positive is to negative. When they come together, they mix better than cool ice and smooth bourbon. Their chemistry burns as much as it soothes.

The problem is Simone’s unable to commit to a new relationship until she has moved on from the last. Chase has given her space and time, but the wait has ended. Simone is as good as his.

With a relationship forming on the horizon, Chase sees no harm in asking Simone to join the club’s latest security case, where her accounting skills will help investigate a pilfering

operation. But all goes belly-up when the accounting firm's liaison is none other than Simone's cheating ex-boyfriend.

Will old feelings resurface for Simone? Can Chase keep himself in check while Simone works closely with her ex? Does an edgy biker stand a chance of winning the heart of a white-collar queen?

PREVIOUSLY IN
BOOK 4: ENGAGING
OPAL

The technology room is bustling. My team and I work through the files of a questionable investment bank we've been hired to investigate. I'm neck-deep in accounting records, ready to go cross-eyed.

We've been going at it for hours with no results, which is unacceptable—we need to determine the algorithm of where the money is being bilked to proceed with our investigation.

Simone may be distancing herself from me, but I could use her help with this case. The woman is a whizz with numbers. Hence, my nickname for her is Numbers.

Don't think about it, Chase. She's asked for time and space to get over her ex-boy brat, and I need to respect that. The first anniversary of when Simone arrived at headquarters has passed. Meaning, I've given her ample time to get over the douche nozzle. Yet, this particular case might trigger some emotions she'd rather forget.

But she's on Atlas's payroll as our accountant. I mean, I can ask her to assist me, claiming it's work-related since it technically is. Besides, her expertise rivals mine by far in this area.

Fuck it. I heft myself out of my chair, grab the case file, and amble across the hall toward Simone's office. I could call her on her cell, but I want an excuse to look at her. Simone could refuse me—at least this way, I get to blatantly stare at her before she turns me down.

I find Simone hard at work behind her desk, scrolling through an accounting spreadsheet. The woman's

organizational skills are top-notch with how she operates the company's finances. She truly is an asset to our crew.

Trying to go for sexy-casual—*hey, anything to make her wet for me*—I lean my broad shoulder against the doorframe, showing off my muscled biceps, rapping my knuckles on the open door. “Knock, knock, Numbers. You got a minute?”

She doesn't even bother looking up from her computer screen. “I swear to God, if you are here to ask for another booty call, so help me...”

Damn, her sassy-ass is hot. I shamelessly adjust my hardening cock in my jeans—it's not like she's looking at me, anyway.

“As much as I would love to entertain your booty, I'm here on a business-related matter.”

After a brief rundown of the case, Simone still isn't convinced my intentions are honest. To be fair, she's not entirely wrong—I'd do about anything to always have this woman beside me.

“Here,” I say, handing her the file. “Maybe this will change your mind.”

Simone opens the thick folder, asking, “What's this?”

“The investment corporation we're investigating.”

Simone's eyes scan through the top page of the file, bulging once she gets to the name at the bottom. “Holy shit! This is my old company.”

Knowing I have her snagged, I ask, “Will you help me?”

A minute later, Simone sits beside me in the tech room, combing through the accounting records that have been giving my team so much grief.

She points at the monitor. “Here. Do you see these expenses? One of my specialties was keeping a lookout for fraudulent operations—these accounts have all the telltale signs of embezzlement.”

Unable to resist her, I plant a fat one on her cheek with a wet smack. “Thanks, Numbers. You’re a genius.”

Shockingly, she doesn’t take a swing at me for pulling a fast one on her. She laughs, blushing at my praise...or maybe because that kiss meant as much to her as it does for me.

Simone quickly looks away when she notices me staring a little too hard at her beautiful face.

“So...um,” she stumbles over her words. “How deep do you think this thieving goes?”

Could have sworn she wanted to ask me something else—possibly something about us. Wishful thinking, I guess.

“Not a clue, but enough to have several investors claim fraud over the past year,” I answer before asking, “Weren’t you involved with the investment banking division?”

“Yes. I had transitioned from accounting into investment banking when I joined the corporation.” She shakes her pretty head. “I can’t believe they let this shit slip under the radar. I knew my boss, Cynthia, was a flake who didn’t know her ass from a hole in the ground. But Trent...he should have caught this.”

Hearing her ex’s name slip past her sweet lips chaps my ass. On the flip side, the way she said his name with disgust is a vast improvement from how it would have brought her near tears a year ago. Maybe Simone is ready to move on—with me, specifically.

I see an opportunity and spring on it. “Maybe you could work this case with me, seeing as you’re an expert.”

Simone scrutinizes me. “For real? You want me to audit my old place of employment?”

“Couldn’t think of a better person for the job.” It’s true—Simone should work on this investigation with me. “What do you say? Wanna join me?”

Hesitant, Simone takes a deep breath before saying, “Sounds like a date.”

Fuck me. I think I unloaded in my jeans.

Our conversation ends when Gauge enters the tech room. A giant smile consumes his face.

“Hey, bro. How was the ultrasound?”

Gauge’s crooked smile widens. “Fucking awesome. Got to see my baby girl for the first time.”

The room erupts in cheers. We all know how much he was hoping he and Opal would have a tiny replica of his wife.

I give my brother a back-slapping hug. “Congratulations, man. Happy for you.”

“Well, save that happy thought.” He hands me a slip of paper. “I’ve got some information regarding our current case. You won’t be happy.”

Confused, I skim the email. My eyes land on the name which has cockblocked me for a year.

Trent Grills—as in Simone’s ex-boyfriend.

“He’s appointed by the bank to assist us while we investigate the claims,” Gauge says in apology.

The man who broke my love’s heart, and continually harasses her to give him another chance, will work alongside my team and me. A team where I just appointed Simone to be our lead auditor.

Sonofabitch.

PROLOGUE

*P*resent Day

There's nothing more appealing than seeing dollar signs increase by the day, with little effort in obtaining the loot. The way the money multiplies with each passing second, collecting interest in a bank far away, is like greed fueling greed. When the money was never yours, it makes the gluttony even sweeter.

Some might call it stealing. I call it retaining.

Is it thieving when you're planning on relinquishing dirty money from a dead mobster? Money that would fund the surviving family members' corrupt empire?

Nah. I'm doing a community service by extracting these finances from oversea accounts. At least it won't be going toward smuggling weapons to terrorist organizations or trafficking innocence to lecherous monsters.

The way I see it, I'm saving lives while lining my pockets. No harm, no foul.

It's a shame Lorenzo Bianchi—former Don of Denver—didn't put all his cash eggs in one basket. The number of zeros I could've obtained in my offshore account would've been staggering.

I could always gamble by transferring to another accounting firm, preferably in Colorado, where the mafia overlord once sat on his crooked throne. If Bianchi preferred extremely private financial firms of moderate size in

California, one could assume the same for his place of residency.

The problem is, I'm stuck for the time being while the firm's hired an outside security company to investigate the ongoing embezzlement scheme from multiple accounts throughout the company. Leaving now would set off alarm bells, which isn't a risk I'm willing to take when I've already sacrificed so much to get this wealth.

I'm covered if I stay put, having gone to great lengths to conceal my involvement. There are plans in place to slow the process of the audit, redirect attention away from where the funds are actually going. And paperwork has a funny way of going missing when necessary.

Yet this Mercy Ravens MC Security company is well-known for uncovering deeply hidden information. Their renowned skills pretty much guarantee results swiftly...getting it illegally through whatever means necessary, no doubt.

But they're the best. Hence why the firm hired them.

Their involvement is truly problematic.

Is it unwise to hang on to the money?

There's always a risk of getting caught. Yes, I could dump the offshore account, make it look like it got lost in the shuffle. But it's too late for me. I've seen the number of zeros at the end of that number, and I want all of it.

No, I can't gamble on walking away when the heat is focused on everyone in this firm. If I leave before the start of the investigation, the trail could lead to me. A lot of money's on the line, money I'm not willing to give up unless I have no choice. After everything I've endured, I deserve every dollar.

Good thing I'm one step ahead of the investigative auditors.

As is, no one suspects me. Nobody would ever consider I could pull off this kind of heist. Cooperating and playing dumb are in my best interest. I only need to pretend for the short duration of the audit, till someone else takes the fall, then

I'm in the clear. Free to live my life the way I want, where I want, with the person who holds my heart.

CHAPTER ONE

Past—One Year Ago at the MC President's Wedding

A man's identity is an intimate detail he keeps to himself, revealing it only to those he trusts. His individuality is defined by his character, secrets, aspirations, and heart, no matter how twisted or neglected it may be.

Club names are used to protect our identities, buffering us from outsiders who have no right to interfere in our business. A mercenary biker never can take too many precautions.

"Shawn Brighton" is the name on my birth certificate, the only thing my mother gave me before placing me in an orphanage, where I lived until I aged out and joined the navy. However, "Chase" is the name I wear proudly on my leather cut. It was a name given to me by my platoon when I was a SEAL, and it followed me when I retired from the navy to join my MC brothers who left before me.

Atlas, my old captain, is president of the Mercy Ravens Motorcycle Club in Fort Collins, Colorado. I'm his third-in-command and the club's intelligence specialist, living the dream, and living up to my name.

My brothers call me "Chase" for two reasons.

The first is, I hunt criminals through the dark web, chasing leads to track down the douchebags who do evil things to innocent people or have wronged our club in some way. I love the chase, and I'm fucking phenomenal at my job. Some might even call me the best in the cyber industry. It's not my ego talking when it's a damn fact.

One of my recent hacking accomplishments was identifying another hacker creating chaos in our MC's surveillance system at the direct orders of the lecherous mafia don Lorenzo Bianchi. She was a good cyberpunk, just not good enough to escape my attention. Our crew apprehended the hacker, leading to the downfall of Lorenzo Bianchi's sinister criminal empire, something not even the FBI could accomplish.

Punk, my best friend and our MC's security specialist, says I'm good at hunting criminals because we share like minds. He's not wrong. Had I not joined the navy and became a SEAL, I most likely would've joined the dark underworld of cyberspace. After all, an aged-out orphan with a knack for computers needs to make a living, and what better way than using your talent for profit?

Growing up in an orphanage wasn't ideal for a defiant bastard like me. The caretakers were strict, bordering on abusive. One child care worker was exceptionally cruel, beating anyone who stepped out of line. I crossed the line one too many times for her taste.

After one particularly nasty beating when I was a young teen, I had enough. I waited until after lights-out to sneak down to the main level, where the staff offices were located. A screwdriver to the crone's office door sprung the lock, giving me access to her world.

I may not have known a thing about computers, but it wasn't hard to guess her password when it was the bible verse she'd chant as she beat you with a broomstick. *"For rulers are not terror to good conduct, but to bad."* (Romans 13:3)

Well, rule this, bitch.

A few porn downloads from the Internet emailed to all the staff members were enough to get her canned. She may not have succeeded in beating terror into me, but she did give birth to the hacker I am today.

There's not a system I can't crack, and I always leave behind zero traces. I would've been a damn good cyber criminal, but instead I chose to use my skills to hack into the

minds of the people we hunt, making sure they pay for their crimes.

The second reason for my club name is more crude, but fitting.

I like to chase tail.

I'm your textbook ladies' man. A Casanova in a biker's cut. A fuckboy extraordinaire.

I'm your rugged bad boy version of a hipster—tatted, pierced, trendy glasses, man bun, and all.

Women love me, and I love to fuck those women into tomorrow.

I've warmed the beds of every woman who's willing, from the east coast to the west, and all the states in-between, too. One-on-ones, threesomes, and orgies are all on my bedroom resume, with gold star reviews. You'll never hear me apologize for my conquests or quell my hankering for a sexual release.

If you're looking for boyfriend material, I'm not the man for you. But if you want to have your toes curling, blood humming, and body sated, then I'm the man you hook up with for the night.

Life is simple, easy. I have my brothers, the club, and a high-paying job as a cyber hacker for a mercenary security company owned by Atlas. The work is demanding but rewarding. Biker life can be hard, but I play harder.

My life is fucking perfect for a content bachelor. There's nothing I'd trade it for.

Except her—*Simone Holland*.

Four months ago, when Atlas stupidly asked me to run a background check on Jo, the woman who's now his wife, the day came when I knew I was irrevocably screwed.

While I was investigating Jo's social media, I got distracted by the silver eyes, ash brown hair, and hourglass figure of her sister, Simone. All her images held me captive, but one video from two years prior had me feverish with need.

The video showed the sisters helping their mom, Stella, decorate holiday sugar cookies. All was sweet until Jo made a joke about Simone's love life, or lack of one. In retaliation, Simone flung a spoonful of frosting at Jo's face, landing square between the eyes. A massive food fight ensued between the sisters, with Stella hollering, "Stop!" at the top of her lungs. To anyone else watching, the situation was humorous. For me, it was the moment I discovered the sexy vixen I was transfixed with was a brat.

I *love* brats. Love the way they clap back when being told what to do. Love how they test my patience. And I love punishing their asses when they go too far.

My heart tugged at my chest, squeezing uncomfortably as my fingers reached out to touch her image on my monitor.

Tug, tug, tug.

Without a doubt in my mind, I knew she was the woman who'd put me in my place.

For months, I tortured myself by stalking her image all over the web. She was in more places than I was comfortable with, but I thanked God she was at the same time. It meant I could see more of her, learn more about her, feel closer to her. The more I learned, the deeper I fell.

Simone was committed to her job, working tirelessly to complete accounting projects. She was shrewd, with a no-bullshit attitude. It took a lot to gain her trust, but once you earned it, she was loyal to a fault. In many ways, I could relate.

It agitated me how this unknown woman was getting under my skin, making me crave the fucking romance that came with it. She was messing with my life, and she didn't even know me.

This beauty wasn't another pretty face. I've had my fair share of beautiful women to recognize a superior woman when she's right in front of me. Simone was a checklist of every desirable and wicked quality I wanted in a partner: beauty, brains, class, commitment, and plenty of sass.

I tried to ignore my feelings. Tried to get lost in my fuck 'em and leave 'em lifestyle. But the urge to be with anyone else just disappeared.

Celibacy isn't a lifestyle choice when you're a horny bastard like me, but my body was betraying me. Ever since I found Simone's pictures on Jo's social media accounts, I haven't fucked another woman—which has made me one sexually angry prick.

I thought if I approached Simone, won her over with my charm—and got her in my bed—maybe I could screw her out of my system, then return to the life I loved.

But that misguided dream turned to pot four weeks ago, when she showed up at headquarters with all her belongings in her posh Mercedes-Benz SUV.

As soon as I laid eyes on her in real time, standing on our headquarters' front stoop in her expensive-ass high heels and body hugging business clothes, I threw in the towel. There was no way one good lay was going to be enough to rid my system of her. Trying to deny myself what I *really* want would just be futile.

And what I *really* want is to make Simone Holland my old lady.

Subtlety is not my forte. From the moment she arrived at our club's compound, I made my intentions clear, warning all my single MC brothers Simone was off-limits, claimed, and spoken for. They didn't need to be told twice.

Possessive? Yeah, but I don't give a shit. I know what I want, and I'm not afraid to go after it.

Doesn't matter where she is. My eyes follow her like a puppy dog trotting along, chasing its favorite scent in the air.

Speaking of scents...

The wind shifts, wafting the alluring floral musk of my obsession in my direction. It's enough of a stimulant to pull me out of my thoughts and into the present moment at Prez and Jo's wedding. I drag Simone's unique floral fragrance deep into my nostrils, closing my eyes a moment to cherish

her scent before opening them to find her standing a few feet away from me on the dance floor.

Simone looks sexy as hell every goddamn day, but tonight she's exceptionally radiant. Like Venus in human form.

She's wearing an emerald green Grecian bridal gown that hugs the voluptuous curves of her heavy breasts, tucking in at her tapered waist before flaring at her round hips. Her hair is up in an elegant twist, showcasing the flawless, creamy skin on her long ballerina neck. Her gray eyes shine like silver dollars under the twinkling outdoor wedding lights.

Fucking magnificent.

While she watches Jo and Prez dance their first dance as husband and wife, I watch her over the rim of my bourbon tumbler.

Simone smiles, happy her younger sister found the man of her dreams. But I notice the sadness in her liquid mercury eyes. She hides it well, yet I see her emotions as clear as day. I would do anything, *everything*, to wipe the sorrow from her life.

Trent Grills, her fucking ex, thought he could have his cake and eat it, too, when he cheated on Simone with her boss. The loser may have gotten away with it had Simone not walked in on the two of them doing the deed, shattering her heart in the process. Her ex's infidelity drove Simone out of Sacramento, right to our doorstep at the MC, confessing everything to her sister—and one step closer into my arms.

His fuck-up is my gain. I intend to mend her broken heart, strengthening it to make it all mine.

Thinking about that dickhead raises my blood pressure, angry at what Simone went through because her ex couldn't keep his pecker in his pants.

After I inadvertently heard a private conversation between the sisters, where Simone admitted Trent cheated on her and shared her fear of being exposed to STIs, I escorted her to get tested. Okay, yeah, I more or less insisted on going with her. She wasn't thrilled at having a stranger tag along with her and

her sister, but I was worried. She didn't understand I'd known her for months already and was completely invested in her.

No, I couldn't tell her. Then she'd know how obsessed I am with her.

Yes, I'm well-aware I'm a creep. Don't care, and I wouldn't deny it if she asked.

My issue with crossing boundaries didn't stop there. I vowed to protect Simone from her ex, monitoring his whereabouts and keeping tabs on how often he reached out to her. As long as he stayed in his bubble in Sacramento and didn't make his way to Colorado, he'd be safe from my wrath.

My determination to keep Simone safe only grew after Lucky Luca, a sadistic hitman in Lorenzo Bianchi's mafia, tried to force himself on her a few weeks ago. I shadowed her every move, hardly letting her out of my sight, never once complaining about sleeping on the couch in her suite. I'd sleep on a bed of rusty nails if it meant I could stay close to her.

I even stole a kiss from her plump peach-colored lips when our crew rescued her and her family from the Bianchi mob a week ago, an act I have every intention of repeating. Maybe next time she'll kiss me back.

The kiss definitely landed me in asshole territory. But I can't lie, I don't regret kissing her when it was positively the best experience I've ever had. The way she melted into me told me she hadn't minded. It was only a handful of seconds, but that moment plays on a loop in my head the whole fucking week, torturing me with the ghost of her lips tingling against mine. I haven't transgressed since then, scared I'll freak her out with how territorial I'm becoming. But the urge to piss in a circle around her is strong.

I fucking need to win her heart—*now*—before I overstep to the point of no return, kissing goodbye any chance of being with her. My attention snaps back to the present, setting my plan into action.

For an early autumn evening, the weather is unseasonably pleasant, but not too unbearable for dancing to cause any

discomfort. The sun has already set over the mountain region, casting a quixotic ambiance, lit only by the bonfire and lanterns on the slate-covered patio.

The mood couldn't be more perfect to charm the dress right over her head.

Shadows are ideal for giving the impression of more privacy when you're in a public setting filled with MC family and close friends. Perhaps Simone will be more open to my affections if she feels more secluded in the dim atmosphere.

The lengths I'll go to earn this woman's attention are beyond what most of my biker brethren would venture. As a biker, I'm rougher around the edges than your average dude; doesn't mean I can't be a romantic to the right lady. And if there's a lady for me, Simone is it.

My attention returns to my temptress. Her body sways to the music, her hips moving like a pendulum in a slow, sultry swing. She's not even embellishing her movements—it's her natural sway. It has my dick saluting in my fitted slacks. She's got me hypnotized, walking right toward her.

My hands itch to grab her hips from behind, pull her back flush to my chest. Those round, soft curves would feel so good under my fingers. Kneading her supple flesh in all the ways I've fantasized about. Bruising her porcelain skin like overripe fruit in a way that would give her maximum pleasure.

When I'm a hair's breadth away from her, close enough to feel the heat of her body bounce off my chest, I whisper low in her ear, "Feeling down?"

I get the joy of watching a shudder run up her spine. She sighs and says, "A little, I guess."

"I could reverse that. Feel you up instead," I offer, with a smile in my voice.

Simone's shoulders bounce with silent laughter. "Corniest pick-up line to date, Chase."

"Anything to bring a smile to your lovely face, Numbers," I admit, calling her by the pet name I gave her. It's a cute club name for my little accountant.

She peeks over her shoulder, her silver eyes hooded with a desire I've never seen before. A desire for me.

'Bout fucking time.

“Dance with me.” I'm not asking, but I keep my tone light to censor my command. Being demanding will do me no favors, even if it's in my nature.

Simone leans into me, not heavily, but enough to show me her consent. I gently turn her to face me, pulling her tight against my torso. With one hand cinching her hip, the other flares over her back, keeping her flush to me. I may not do all the spicy Latin moves Atlas can, but I can move my hips. I dance with her the way I'd make love to her. Slow. Seductively. Intentionally keeping one thigh between hers, close to the warmth between her sexy legs, to help aid my cause.

When she brushes her sex against my leg, it's by accident. She sucks in a little breath, flushing a pretty shade of pink on her ivory skin. My lips curl in one corner of my mouth as I bend my knees, taking her with me, making her straddle my thigh as I twist my hips slowly.

Simone whimpers, sucking her full bottom lip into her mouth to stifle the arousing noise.

I bend my gigantic six-three frame to meet her much shorter stature, bringing my lips close to her delicate ear. “Don't hold back those little kitten noises from me. I want to hear them.”

She sucks in a lung full of air as I spin her around, holding her back to my front. My nose runs along her floral-scented skin, breathing in her natural bouquet. Simone doesn't wear perfume like the other women in the club, and she doesn't need to. The natural aroma of her flesh is fragrant enough, irresistible. Most intoxicating scent I've ever inhaled.

Simone swallows loudly. “What are you doing?”

“Enjoying you,” I answer honestly against the pulse point in her neck. It drums quickly under my touch.

For once, I'm glad to be wearing a fancy, tailored suit. I gave Atlas shit when he announced the wedding party was dressing up all GQ for the occasion. Most MCs would still wear their cuts for club celebrations. But dancing with this queen in my arms makes me feel like we finally match, like my sorry ass is good enough for this high-maintenance beauty. As good as she looks wearing pricey name brand merchandise, I know she'd look fucking stunning dressed down in leather with my property patch on her back.

She turns in my arms to face me but doesn't back away. Her fingers lace behind my neck, pulling my head down toward hers in an act so intimate, it sets fire to my insides.

"Chase, I'm not looking for a relationship."

Ouch.

Her words sting. How many times have I used her exact words on the countless women before her? And now she's using it on me?

Karma can be a bitch, but I'm good at taming hurt hearts.

"I get you need time to get over the twat who did you dirty," I murmur quietly to her as we dance. "But let me be perfectly clear. I'm the guy you want to have a relationship with when you're ready for a real man to worship you."

Her gray eyes dilate to black pupils. My words are affecting her. She leans her body into mine, but I doubt she realizes it. It's like her body is doing what it wants and her head hasn't caught up to its actions.

"Chase," Simone rasps in a breathy whisper, "you can't say things like that. We hardly know each other. We don't know if we're compatible. In fact, I'd say we're opposites."

She has a point. Simone is Miss High Class and white-collar. I'm a hipster-biker covered in piercings, lurking in the corners of the dark web for a living.

On paper, we don't add up. But when you put us together, the numbers don't matter. Only the chemistry matters, and the chemistry is reactive. Positive and negative charges can't resist

attraction. Eventually, they collide, connecting in one powerful bond.

Why can't she see we'd be ideal together? We'd balance each other perfectly. She sees us as separate ends of a spectrum, clashing. But under all her expensive business clothes and perfectly applied makeup, I see the wild woman she's got shelved away. I've seen hints of her breaking through, like when she and her sister had a wrestling match the day she moved in. But she quickly conceals her brat nature before it can shine.

I want that wild woman she has hidden away to come out and play with me in all the wickedest ways imaginable.

"We go together like smooth bourbon and fresh ice," I whisper, grazing my lips feather-light against her temple. "We soothe while we burn in the best way. There's no better combination."

Simone gnaws her bottom lip, like she's mulling my words.

I got her on the line, slowly reeling her in.

"Let me show you what it's like with me. Give you a taste of the heaven we can have every night," I suggest, trying hard to keep my desperation from leaking into my voice. "You deserve to be cherished, and I'm offering it to you."

Simone scoffs. "Chase, I will not use you for sex."

Please do. Use me till you can barely walk. You'd see I'm the man you've been searching for.

"Pity," I say on a sigh. "I'm more than willing to let you use me as you want. Soft the way you deserve. Rough the way I like. And all the ways in-between."

Another shudder rolls through her body, vibrating against my chest. She grips the lapels of my suit, pulling me closer as she wars with her good girl persona.

I'm not going to give her the opportunity to overthink what I'm offering. She's close to giving in to me. I can taste her

desire in the shared air between us—it's heady, thick with want.

Leaning in, I whisper against her ear, "I would kneel at your feet to worship the pretty pink lips you have between your legs."

Simone gives a little squeak, jumping back. I close the distance between us, not letting her escape, and press on. She needs to know exactly what I'll give her before deciding to turn me down again.

"I wouldn't stop till I had you coming around my greedy tongue fucking your swollen pussy. When I've licked you clean, I'd climb over your body, worshiping each of your breasts as I sink my fat cock into the tight, dripping slit between your thighs. I'd fuck you slow, hitting all the right spots."

"Oh, my God," Simone murmurs, blushing all the way to the roots of her hair.

"Not God. You call me 'Chase,' and you scream my name when you're coming on my cock. Only then will I allow myself to get lost in you. When the rush is over, I'll hold you, whispering sweet nothings till you fall asleep in my arms. I'll watch over you till the morning light comes up. And then we'll do it all again."

Simone peeks at me through long lashes. "Chase..."

No more needs to be said—actions speak louder than words.

I take her by the hand as the fireworks go off around us. Atlas likes to put on one hell of a show when impressing Jo. Everyone is too busy admiring the view to see us sneaking off to my suite. I don't dare look over my shoulder as I guide her up the steps of headquarters. I'd like to say I'm being mysterious or some shit, but the truth is, I fear opening my mouth, saying something stupid that would spook her.

You'd think I was a damn teenager about to get his dick wet for the first time, the way my insides are rattling. Nervous, excited, and completely out of my comfort zone.

At my door, I swing it open. Walking backwards inside, I gently tug on her hand for her to follow. I need her to know she can always back out, but as soon as she steps over the threshold, I'm not holding back.

“What’s it going to be, Numbers? Are you going to let me have you, or are you going to keep me waiting?”

CHAPTER TWO

Simone hesitates. My stomach is in my throat as I wait for her to make her choice. It feels like a lifetime before she squares her shoulders, crossing the threshold.

Hallelujah!

Inside the room, I swing the door shut, pushing her firmly up against it. My mouth is on hers, greedy, demanding. I eat from her mouth, swallowing her moans as I caress her tongue with mine.

Fuck me.

Her mouth is sinfully good, laced with the rich bourbon she'd been drinking earlier. The way her tongue wraps around mine...*damn*. I'm giving her everything I've got, and she's returning it in kind.

Pulling back from her feels like a crime, but I need to make sure we're on the same page. Talking will ruin the mood. I'm an action kinda guy. But I need to hear her give me permission before I feast on her.

"Tell me you want this, Simone."

Her mouth opens, but nothing comes out.

The things I want to do with that pretty, sassy mouth. I trace my tongue along her full bottom lip, loving the little moan that escapes her.

"Say it," I plead in an edgy voice, my cock straining to break through my pants.

"I want you," she admits demurely, her eyes downcast.

Shyness will never do. A man can speculate only so much about a woman's needs. It helps when she doesn't hold back her desires. My fingers tilt her oval face toward mine, letting me stare deep into the storm clouds of her eyes.

"Tell me specifically what you want from me."

I think she's blushing again, but it's hard to see with only the moonlight filtering in through my windows.

She licks her lips, teasing me. "I want you to fuck me."

It's like the heavens parted, with a choir of angels singing hymns.

"With pleasure," I say in a guttural voice before attacking her lips. My hard body crushes her flat against my door, pressing tight against all her soft, luscious curves.

Christ. I could come from the delectable friction her body gives the steel pipe between my legs.

I'm all for screwing anywhere, but I don't want to fuck Simone for the first time against a door. No, a woman like her deserves to be worshiped properly, in a bed, where I can strip away all her inhibitions with tender care. Taking things nice and slow to relish every passionate second is how this will play out tonight. Tomorrow, we'll experiment.

Eager to bump this to the next level, I grab her thick ass, hoisting her up in my arms. I chuckle when she squeaks with surprise. Bet she's never been handled like this, a caveman carrying her away to his lair. Those pumice-polished boys she dated before sure as fuck don't have the strength I have to throw a woman around like she weighs nothing.

At my bed, I set her on her dainty heels, looking deep into her eyes. I've always given expert attention to my past hook-ups, but I avoided the tricks that make a woman feel like it's more than what it truly is. Not now, though. With Simone, I want her to know this is more than a casual hook-up. Eye contact, caressing, pillow talk, and cuddles are going to be the new norm for me, and it's all for her.

After tossing my glasses on the nightstand, I take Simone's oval face in my hands, claiming her mouth in a slow, seductive

kiss. She whimpers as I deepen the action. That single whimper holds so many expectations of what's coming. I won't let her down.

Her body bows into mine, sinking heavily against me. It feels surreal to have her pliant in my hands after weeks of her resisting my affections.

With deft fingers, I undo the zipper of her dress, slowly unwrapping her like a long awaited gift. The satin slips from her shoulders, catching on her heaving breasts. They're big, acting like a shelf, upholding the material. My jaw clenches as I take the dress in both hands, shimmying it from side to side over her full tits. As soon as I catch sight of her large, tightly furled nipples, I'm done for.

I drop to my knees, sucking one rosy diamond into my mouth, worshiping her body the way I promised I would. Simone gasps, her head falling back. Her fingers lace into the roots of my hair, gently tugging and loosening my man bun.

After sucking, nipping, and licking her first breast, I move to the second, giving it equal attention. My hands fondle both her tits, so large my hands are overflowing. For a man who loves boobs, I've never seen a pair as perky as her perfect fucking globes.

"Chase," Simone pleads in a sultry whisper. "I want more."

Holy hell! I have to fist myself through my pants to stop myself from shooting my load.

If she wants more, I'll give her more. I tug her dress down her narrow waist and over her wide hips. My eyes narrow in on the thin strip of white lace between her thick thighs.

On instinct, I press my nose against her sex, inhaling her naturally sweet musk deep into my sensory system.

"Fuck me, you smell divine."

I sigh, sliding the delicate lace down her legs to reveal a spattering of soft brown curls on her mound. I've seen every kind of pussy, but seeing her natural has my dick punching the

back of my zipper so hard, I'm going to have teeth indents in the head of my cock.

Never been the sentimental type, but I pocket those lacy panties. Something to remember our first time together.

I run my hands up her silky thighs, causing goosebumps to break out across her flesh. Even on my knees, I don't need to look high to lock my eyes on her.

Simone blushes. "I—I'm sorry. I haven't gotten waxed since leaving, um, California."

She was going to say, "Since leaving Trent." I could see it on the tip of her tongue, but she thought better of saying his unrighteous name as I kneel at her feet.

Good. By the time I'm done with her, the only name to fall from her sweet lips will be mine.

"Love seeing you natural. If you wanna wax your pussy because you like it that way, then you do it. But you don't do it to appease anyone but yourself. You hear me? I'll eat this pretty pussy no matter how it's dressed."

To prove my point, I gently push her down on the bed. Her breasts bounce from the soft impact, making my dick weep greedily in my boxer briefs. With my eyes locked on hers, I run my hands up her toned calves, throwing her knees over my wide shoulders to splay her open before burying my face in the apex of her thighs.

Simone arches off the bed. "Oh, God!"

I raise my face from her dripping mound, licking my lips to capture all her creamy goodness. "No, baby. Remember what I said? You scream *my* name when you come on my tongue."

Simone whimpers when I return to feasting on her, my tongue dragging painfully slow from her succulent snatch to the tip of her ripe clit. Forking my tongue, I dive into her pussy to drag against the backside of her clit. She squeals, her fingers fisting my hair in her slender hands to the point where my eyes water. Don't care if she makes me bald. I'm finishing my favorite meal.

When her legs shake, she tries to escape the pleasure by scooting up the bed.

A growl rumbles in my throat. I grab her ankles, yanking her back. “Never take away a man’s plate while he’s still eating.”

“I can’t. It’s too intense,” she cries weakly, her head tossing from side to side.

“That’s the way it should be, baby. It should feel like your insides are about to explode into a million stars, like you’re free floating in space.”

“I’ve never...” She pauses, clamping down on her lips.

“What? You’ve never what?”

I can feel the heat of her blush on her feverish skin under my hands. She’s embarrassed.

My heart pounds with enthusiasm. “Baby? Are you telling me no one’s pleased you like this before?”

Agitated, she shakes her head. “Don’t be so full of yourself. No, it’s not my first time. I just haven’t...”

Holy shit! “You’ve never climaxed.”

She sighs like she’s grateful I said the words for her. “Ever. With anyone. My toys do a fine enough job, but it’s never felt like this.”

My alter ego is beating on his chest, screaming triumphantly. Nothing I enjoy more than a challenge. If I’m the first to bring her to climax, then I’ll be a fucking miracle worker in her eyes.

“You’ve had some shit partners who either didn’t care or were too lazy to do the job right. Lucky for you, I’m not letting you leave this bed till I’ve made you come more times than you can count.”

She gives a petite snort, disbelief coating her voice. “I’m an accountant. I can count pretty high.”

My shoulders shake as I hold in my laughter. This is going to be fun. “Challenge accepted.”

Doubling down, I lick, nip, and suck on her deprived, sensitive sex. My hands roam up her wondrous body to fondle her beautiful tits, while I ravish her with my mouth the way she deserves.

Simone's whimpers become full, unadulterated moans of pleasure. I damn near nut in my pants at how fucking hot she sounds.

With her body a quivering mess under my touch, I hollow my cheeks, sucking her swollen, pink pearl into my mouth for the grand finale.

"CHASE!" she screams as she gushes down my chin.

Music to my ears.

Greedily, I lap at her juices till I send her over the edge a second time.

Sated, Simone lays in a boneless, panting mess on my sheets. Her breasts jiggle with every breath she takes, her stomach sunk in to reveal a sliver of her ribs, and her legs wide open to welcome me.

She's the sexiest pinup model I've ever laid eyes on. Any artist would want her as his muse.

My balls are screaming for release, tightening to the point of agony. I need to sink inside of her before my nuts burst.

Tie goes flying. Buttons popping. Zipper hissing. I strip till I'm as bare as her, letting her drink me in.

Her silver eyes roam hungrily over my muscled body, then settle on my rock-hard shaft. Not trying to be conceited, but my dick is fucking imposing—thick, long, and ribbed for pleasure. Tonight, it's the stiffest it's been in my twenty-seven years on Earth. It's so hard, it's practically kissing my sternum, and it's all for her.

My heart trips in my chest when she reaches out for me, beckoning me to join her, to interlock our bodies. I reach into my nightstand, ripping open a box of condoms. My motto is "No glove, no love." But fuck if I don't want to go bareback

for the first time. Sinking into her tight heat, suctioned around my greedy dick...*fuuuuck*.

“Chase?”

My eyes jump to hers as I fumble with the condom.
“Hmm?”

“You know I’m clean.”

I arch my pierced brow at her. Is she suggesting what I think she’s suggesting?

Nah. I already won the Powerball by getting Simone in bed. There’s no way in hell I’d win the Mega Millions the same night I get to do her bare.

“I have the Depo shot.”

Fuck almighty!

My body is on her faster than my brain can register my actions, attacking her mouth, face, and neck with my lips. “Simone,” I pant between kisses, “I swear I’m negative. Haven’t had sex since my last test four months ago.”

Dammit. I can’t believe I admitted I’m a born again virgin.

“Haven’t been able to be with anyone since I saw a picture of you on your sister’s social media. Can’t get you out of my head.”

Put up your fucking filter, Chase, before you scare her.

Simone balks. “Seriously?”

Ah, hell. This is where she’s going to leave my sorry ass. Who wouldn’t? She knows I’m a White Hat, an ethical computer hacker. But if the job calls for going dirty, I have no problem breaking the rules.

Jo already told Simone I searched her background without her consent when Atlas requested to know everything about Jo. I could downplay how deep I went into investigating Simone after Atlas had his information on Jo, but I can’t lie to her. I don’t want to.

“Yes. Saw your face, and I needed to know everything about you. Looked through your public accounts but stopped short of hacking into anything private. Wanted to but didn’t.”

Her jaw drops. “You wanted me before meeting me?”

If I’m going to confess the dark secrets of my heart, then I’m going to do it with my eyes trained on hers.

“Wanted you. Need you. In every way.”

Her mercury eyes dilate to black orbs. I half-expect her to push me off. Instead, she wraps her arms around my neck, pulling me closer to her warm core.

My knuckles brush over her cheekbone. “Yeah? You sure?”

Simone rolls her eyes in that feisty way of hers. “Chase, I don’t know how much more obvious I need to be. I’m lying naked under you, asking you to rearrange my guts—”

Before she can finish her sentence, I surge forward, planting myself to the hilt in her tight cunt. We both groan, stilling to adjust to the intense sensation of finally being joined.

After several seconds, she rotates her hips, pleading, “Chase, please. I—I need friction.”

Good. Because I do, too.

Slowly, I pull nearly all the way out before pumping back in, tilting my hips to rub against her inside walls. Every time I cock my hips back, I feel her pussy gripping around me, resisting my exit.

A groan escapes my lips. “You feel so good. So tight.” Best I’ve ever had.

Simone responds with a throaty moan, tilting her hips to meet mine.

Sensing she’s ready, I steadily increase the pace until I’m rutting her like a feral animal. My balls slap against her ass hard enough to bruise my sac. Her nails dig into the flesh on my shoulders, imprinting herself on my skin like the ink that

covers my body. I'm tapping her good, and she's meeting me thrust for thrust, begging for more.

"Harder," she pants.

Any harder, and I'll fuck her through the mattress. Yet if my woman wants more, I'll deliver. I slide my hands between us, finding her precious nub. Gently, I apply pressure with my fingertips.

There's no warning to her release. Her mouth parts in a symmetrical circle as her pussy sucks me in deep, clamping around my cock. She comes on a silent cry, her juices gushing down my balls, dampening my bedding.

Damn, that's hot.

I hiss through my teeth as I fight against her grip, chasing after my release. When I climax, I come on a roar. My hips buck against hers as every spurt of my release shoots straight into her womb. It's like her body summons the pleasure straight out of me to mix with hers.

Depleted, my arms shake to hold myself upright. I lower myself, enfolding my body around hers, leaning more to one side to avoid crushing her. We're panting, sweaty, sex-sated lovers wrapped around each other in my tangled sheets.

Can't think of anyplace else I'd rather be.

My vision comes back into focus, zoning in on her flushed face and liquid mercury eyes.

"Wow," she whispers breathlessly, her eyes wide with amazement. It's like she's seeing me clearly for the first time. Seeing me as the man who'd give her anything to be her everything.

Wow indeed. I've never come that hard in my life, and I know it has nothing to do with going bare or abstaining for months. It has everything to do with the sensual woman lying naked in my arms.

Staring down at Simone in the bright autumn moonlight, I feel a stirring in my chest similar to what I had the first time

her image popped up on my computer. My heart is conjuring a spell in the cauldron of my chest cavity.

What is this feeling?

I take a second to pin it down. It's an emotion I've never felt until now, and it's on the tip of my tongue, trying to waggle the words out of my mouth.

Don't say it, Chase. You say it, and she'll run for the hills. Slow and steady wins the race.

But I want to tell her. Fuck, I want to scream it from the rooftop until there's not a soul within a mile radius who doesn't hear my proclamation.

I've been falling for Simone for months, while she's still grieving a fucknut ex-asshole. She's not ready for my confession.

Though I can't tell her, I can definitely show her.

My dick thickens inside of her wet heat. Simone's eyes widen in surprise.

"Already?"

I answer with a claiming kiss, showing her my feelings by making sweet love to her again.

CHAPTER THREE

Soft snores wake me from a deep sleep. It's a comforting sound, a peaceful melody, but enough to bring me out of REM. I stir, burrowing into the warm body wrapped around me, settling against hard, bulky muscles.

I frown.

What the...?

Tentatively, I peel my eyes open, revealing the most gorgeous male torso with chiseled pecs and boxed abs.

At first I don't know where I am, then it all comes flooding back like one big tidal wave of hard reality.

I let Chase fuck me.

No, it wasn't fucking. It was...something deeper, something more than what I've experienced with anyone before.

I brave a peek at the face belonging to the sculpted body. Sure enough, Chase is sound asleep, with his heavy arms braided around my body.

Sweet mercy!

How the hell did I let this happen?

Yes, I've been crushing hard on Chase since I moved into headquarters, but I recently got out of a year-long relationship with a man I thought was my world.

Fucking Trent, my ex-boyfriend and finance co-worker, cheated on me with my boss. *My fucking boss!*

Agh! Every time that bilk pops into my head, I want to punch something. We were together a year, but we'd known each other since I started at the same community-based financial services company in Sacramento five years ago. We were friends, good friends, or so I thought.

When Trent showed an interest in me, it flattered me. He had all the ingredients of what I thought I wanted: intelligence, good looks, success. Charm dripped from his mouth, and I stupidly drank his Kool-Aid.

Our relationship moved quickly—a massive mistake in hindsight. There was talk of marriage, future children, and possibly starting our own financial firm. When he asked me to move in with him in his condo, I accepted excitedly, without hesitation. From our first date to domestic dwellers was less than four months. I moved too quickly into the relationship.

Everything was picture perfect. I had a successful accounting career, with an equally successful partner, living a charmed life at twenty-nine years old. But looks were deceiving.

Shortly after we moved in together, my boss, Cynthia Higgins, started bogging down my schedule with projects that had me in the air, flying all over the damn map more than I was at home with Trent. My absence made it easier for the two of them to hook up behind my back.

I got a flight home earlier than expected, intending to surprise Trent for his thirty-fifth birthday. Blowing away my bonus, I had a Giant Propel Advanced Disc racing bicycle scheduled to be delivered to our condo the same day I did. It was a ridiculous amount of money to drop on a birthday gift, but I loved the guy, and he loves biking.

Unfortunately, the surprise was on me when I walked into our home, finding his clothes mixed with those of a woman's (not mine) askew all over the floor leading to our bedroom. I didn't want to go into our bedroom, but I had to.

When I opened the door, my stomach dropped.

Trent was thrusting between Cynthia's legs, both of them lost in each other.

I don't know how long I stood in the doorway before they noticed, but once they spotted me, all hell broke loose. I screamed at both of them to get the fuck out, cried until my head felt like it might burst, and got physically sick.

I ran to the bathroom to escape them both, but Trent followed, his eyes welling with tears as he rubbed the back of his neck. He kept insisting it wasn't what it looked like and begging me to forgive him. When he tried to comfort me, I dodged him. There was no way I'd let him touch me, not after finding him with her.

His pleas for clemency died the moment Cynthia demanded to be let in the bathroom to join the conversation. She seemed more annoyed than contrite, concerned with how this would affect our work relationship. Trent's demeanor did a one-eighty in Cynthia's presence. He began accusing me of being an unfit partner, saying it was my fault he was driven to find sexual gratification with another woman, since I was always working.

Heated, I screamed, "The bitch you're fucking in our bed assigned me my workload, you dickhead!"

In the end, Trent left with Cynthia at her insistence, leaving me to deal with my turbulent emotions alone in a shattered mess. I never felt so worthless, tossed aside for another woman.

To hell with both of them.

Angrily, I wiped away my tears and did the only thing I could—I started packing. Called in sick the next morning and went to the U-Haul store to get boxes. Typed up my letter of resignation without having a clue where I'd live or work once I left.

Home seemed like the most reasonable option. I called my parents, only to find out they were staying in Colorado with Jo. The crap icing on the cake was them telling me they planned on selling their home in Los Angeles to stay in

Colorado permanently. Jo, my little sister, was getting married and planning on starting a family with a biker she just met.

What. The. Fuck?

Talk about the worst timing. Here I did the same thing she did, falling for a man too fast, but her situation worked out, whereas mine went to pot.

Distraught, I fought with Jo, which didn't help our already rocky relationship. When I got off the phone, I was torn about what to do. I could stay at my parents' house but be alone, or I could go to Colorado and pray Jo took me in. All I knew was, I wanted to go home—I wanted my family, whether or not they pissed me off.

Trent gaped when I put in my two weeks, unable to grasp why I'd leave the firm when my career was important to me. Cynthia was less surprised, possibly hoping I'd leave but still stunned I was following through. I honestly don't know why they assumed I'd stay where I'd see them daily, working one-on-one with them. I may love my job, but I love myself more. There was no way I was going to subject myself to them any longer than I needed to.

Whereas Cynthia was pleased to see me tucking tail, Trent tried to talk me into staying. I doubt he was doing it out of guilt or because he cared for me. Those who cheat and feel guilt don't continue the relationship with the other person if they truly cared for their partner. No, Trent was trying to convince me to stay because he knew the company was going to be fucked carrying the workload, something I did seamlessly.

Jaded, I was tempted to burn all my bridges. Walk out with my middle fingers raised proudly over my head, shouting how my boss was boning the staff. But I saw what happened with Jo in her career as an architectural engineer. Her ex screwed her over by stealing her promotion, and she retaliated by quitting without notice, resulting in her being blacklisted by nearly all other architectural design firms. I didn't want to fight for a job like she had. Jo came out of it unscathed after

starting her own construction firm, but she struggled unnecessarily, and her outcome was not the norm.

For two weeks, I avoided the cheaters at work, keeping to myself. It wasn't easy when I could feel their eyes on me, waiting to see if I'd report them to human resources. What would be the point? The damage was done, and I was done with dealing with their bullshit. I wanted to move on.

Late at night, Trent would blow up my phone, begging me to give him another chance.

“Are you staying with Cynthia?” I knew the answer, since his laptop was still at our condo—technically his condo, since my name wasn't on the title, per his wishes. His location was linked to all his devices, and I knew the address was hers.

He lied, of course. I finally grew tired of it. Took a page out of Jo's book and ignored his sorry ass. I wanted to block him, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. I don't know why, other than I wanted to remain professional since we're in the same field. If he messaged me with anything other than business, I disregarded him.

In my last two days of work, I decided it would be best to use my remaining sick bank. Packed up everything I could into my Mercedes-Benz SUV and started driving. I was still undecided on where to go, but when I headed east on I-80, the answer seemed predetermined—I was heading to Colorado to be with my family.

After an embarrassing catfight in the front yard with Jo—a long story—she graciously forgave me for how I'd treated her during her messy breakup. She took me in with open arms, giving me a suite at the MC headquarters and job doing the books for her construction design firm and Atlas's security company.

Jo and I rebuilt our relationship, and I finally had my sister and best friend back. I made friends with the other biker women in the MC, as well as made up for lost time with my parents after months of not seeing them because of traveling for work. I got a clean bill of health after getting my STI test results, grateful Trent didn't infect me with whatever cootie

bugs he may have picked up from Cynthia or any other women.

My life's good from outward appearances, but I'm a mess on the inside. I hid it well from everyone, even my family. No one saw how depressed I was, other than maybe Jo. No one else saw my pain, or so I assumed.

Chase—handsome Thor-lookalike with the brains of Stephen Hawking—saw me like I was an open book. His eyes followed me everywhere, tracking my movements and emotions. When his eyes weren't on me, I felt them through the lens of his cameras, located all over the property.

Stalkerish? Kind of. But recent events made me understand how important the Mercy Ravens Security monitoring system is to the survival of the club members and people affiliated with it.

After being abducted by Lorenzo Bianchi—the Denver mob don, now deceased—to be used as bait to lure Jo out of headquarters, Chase tracked down our location through his techy skills. Lorenzo had already promised his second in command, Lucky Luca, he could have me as a reward for his loyalty. The pig had his cursive tattooed hands on me, with promises to do far more than grope my chest. Had Chase not found us, sending the backup we needed, Luca may have gotten his way.

Though Lorenzo got his just desserts, Luca was able to evade the police, slipping out the back of the steel warehouse where we were being held hostage and disappearing into the maze of metal buildings in the rail yard. Authorities speculate he hunkered down in the industrial park until the coast was clear for him to hop a train in the rail yard. The sadistic pervert is still out there, somewhere, which causes me anxiety. Even though I go to therapy to deal with what happened, knowing he can come back has me panicking.

From day one, Chase had been coming to my suite at night, offering to keep me company. He saw my internal turmoil, and he admitted it gutted him. You'd think he felt my emotions as if they were his own, empathic to my duress.

I'm not an idiot—I knew Chase wanted more than to crash on my couch while watching over me while I slept, but I couldn't give it to him, not while I was still mourning Trent.

Stupid Trent. Still fucking with my heart, inhibiting me from moving on with a man who seems willing to move mountains for me.

I've tried to convince myself Chase and I wouldn't work, that we come from different worlds. But those are lies. Lies I can't even believe.

I never realized how sexy a man in leather could be. How tattoos and piercings made a man look like a piece of art. How long hair and trendy glasses would make me swoon. I was used to men who got manicures and dressed in suits. Now I'm drooling over rough, calloused hands that aren't afraid to get dirty.

There's something to admire about a man who takes loyalty seriously, and Chase is a fiercely committed brother of the MC. Growing up in the system made his devotion to the Mercy Ravens a familial commitment. His adoration for all members in the MC, men and women, is endearing.

Equally appealing to his inked-up, nerdy Viking appearance and big heart is his intelligence. Chase isn't the only one who did his research. I gathered all the information I could on the man who was taking up more head space in my mind than anyone deserves.

Chase speaks multiple languages—English, Spanish, Russian, and Farsi. Graduated top of his class. He knows more about the Internet than the entire IT Enterprise Services Division in the FBI. He runs the Mercy Ravens Security Company's intel department, diving deep into the dark web to search for predators and corruption. The man shoots bourbon back like it's water and cusses more than any man should. But the next minute, he's sipping wine and talking for hours about music, art, literature—and he's a rugged biker in leather and chains.

Talk about a woman's wish list for a dream man in flesh and bone form.

I'm still getting used to Chase's forwardness and crass vocabulary, but I never craved Trent's etiquette-proper conversations the way I desire Chase's dirty mouth telling me exactly what he wants to do to me.

Yesterday, during Jo and Atlas's wedding, I couldn't stop staring at how handsome Chase was in his dovetail-colored fitted suit. How his Buddy Holly glasses highlighting rich brown eyes made him look sophisticated. And how he could pull off a man bun with his long tawny hair, like some hipster runway model.

My heart was in my throat when Chase led me around the dance floor, holding me close to him like I was worth admiring. Maybe it was the two bourbons I downed, or maybe it was how he said all the right, naughty things, but I followed him to his room with every intention of sleeping with him. Sex has never been a pleasant experience, mostly because no one had ever given me a Big O, but I threw my inhibitions aside for him, praying Chase would be different.

I slept with him. Well, technically, we didn't sleep much.

Chase worked my body like a seasoned musician playing his favorite instrument. I never knew sex could be so satisfying. That my heart would fill before exploding again and again. True to his words, Chase pleased me more times than I could count. When we finally grew too tired and sore, he cleaned me with a warm washcloth, tucked me into his side, playing with my hair until I fell asleep in his arms.

And in his arms I still find myself—his warm, strong, protective inked arms.

Tentatively, I run my fingertips lightly over the contours of his regal face. The sharp angle of his Roman nose and his inverted triangle face hidden under a short but maintained beard give him an appearance coveted by *GQ Magazine*. His hard brow line is crease-free in his sleep but normally has deep lines when working at his computer. And his lips, a pale shade of pink set in thin lines, and so damn tempting.

My feather-light touch makes him frown. He opens his eyes to narrow slits. He sees me, smiles, then closes his eyes

again. “Mmm...love your touch almost as much as I love you.”

I lightly snigger. He must be dreaming. There’s no way he actually meant what he said.

“Love you, Simone,” he mumbles before falling back into a heavy sleep.

Oh. My. God.

I could have brushed one off as sleep-talking, but there’s no mistaking him saying it twice.

Oh, no.

This is too much, too fast. Shades of Trent all over again.

Chase is a dream, but I’m not making the same mistake twice by rushing into another relationship. I’m strong, but I know my heart wouldn’t survive if I fell for Chase and he woke up one day, realizing he could have done better.

Nope. I can’t.

Slowly, I peel myself out from under the cage of Chase’s brawny arms. He reaches for me, feeling my absence from his bed. I quickly shove a pillow into his embrace. He grasps the pillow, pulling it tight to his chest, sighing with contentment.

Oddly, my heart aches at seeing how he treats the pillow as if it were me. Jealous of the bedding, I shake my head at myself.

Stay strong. I’m not ready for another relationship, no matter how amazing last night was, no matter how special he makes me feel, and no matter how much my heart wants him as badly as he wants me.

Hastily, I yank my dress over my body, gathering my heels in my hands. My panties are nowhere in sight. I consider them a lost cause. On tiptoes, I creep across his suite, exiting the room.

As soon as I shut the door, I turn to flee to my suite, only to run smack into a brick wall.

“Whoa!” Atlas catches me by the shoulders before I bounce off his broad body. “Sorry, Simone. I didn’t see you there. Was grabbing Jo’s purse. She forgot it in our suite as we were heading out.”

“Oh, yeah.” I laugh nervously. “You should probably get going. Don’t want to be late for your flight, delaying your honeymoon.”

Atlas flashes me a charming smile, the same one I’m sure won over my sister. “Don’t you worry. I plan on making her happy for the rest of my life.”

It’s then he looks down at my outfit, the bridesmaid dress from yesterday. His black eyes turn lethal, narrowing to slits as he turns his head to the room I exited, clenching his jaw.

“I’ll fucking kill him if he pushed you before you were ready.”

I stop him before he reaches Chase’s door. “No, Atlas. Don’t bother Chase. I was more than willing to hook up with him.”

Atlas scrutinizes me. “Hook up? Nu-uh, sis. You weren’t a hookup. He wants you as his old lady.”

My heart flips in my chest with dread and, peculiarly, excitement. “I’m not ready for a relationship. Not sure if I’ll ever be ready for another one.”

He opens his mouth to say something, but I stop him. “Atlas, I’m begging you. Please, leave this alone. I need to get back to my room before others notice. Don’t tell Jo anything—I don’t want her worrying while she’s away. Just focus on your honeymoon. I’ll talk to Jo after you guys return.”

I’m nearly running across the hall, flinging myself into my suite to escape the awkwardness. My hands slide down my face. Running into Atlas is the least of my concerns.

Chase will awake soon. I can only imagine how he’ll react, finding me gone from his bed. He’s going to be pissed, maybe hurt, and I don’t want to hurt him. I’ll take full responsibility for my actions last night, but I think it’s best if I avoid Chase for the moment.

A low buzz has me nearly jumping out of my skin. I look to where my cell sits on my nightstand and see it's lit with a text notification.

Has Chase woken up and discovered I was gone already?

Hesitantly, I pick up my phone, groaning when I see who the sender is.

Simone, love. Call me. This silent treatment has been going on for nearly a month. Give me the chance to explain myself.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. Piss off already, Trent.”

I toss my phone back on my nightstand, ignoring Trent’s text like I’ve done every day since I left California. There’s enough on my plate as is without adding Trent’s pathetic groveling to the mix.

A shower sounds like a perfect distraction from my current situation. I stalk off to my en suite bathroom to do just that. I take my time, letting the steam from the scalding water fill me with a sense of peace—the calm before the storm.

What am I going to say to Chase? How can I gently tell him I’m not ready for another committed relationship?

I’ve finished drying my body, wrapping myself in my robe, when I hear a rapid knocking on my door.

“Shit,” I whisper.

“Simone, baby. Let me in,” Chase pleads on the other side of my suite’s door.

My eyes sting with salty tears, anticipating the hurt that lies ahead. I muffle my cry with my hands, but not fast enough.

“Numbers? Are you crying? Did I do something wrong?”

“No,” I choke out. “You did nothing wrong. It’s me. I did something wrong.”

I swear I can hear him panting on the other side of the door. “Don’t you dare say last night was a mistake.”

“It was,” I croak. “I shouldn’t have slept with you when I’m not ready to move on. It’s not fair to you.”

The handle rattles, but it’s locked. He can’t get in unless he has a key, which I hope he doesn’t. You never know with these bikers—they’re pretty territorial with the women they love.

Love. Chase said he loved me. I can’t deal with that, not while I’m still grieving for a life I once loved.

“Fuck Trent. He doesn’t deserve your tears, your thoughts, or your time. You deserve happiness. I want to give it to you. Let me in, Numbers.”

Let him in. I know he doesn’t just mean in my suite. He wants in my heart, mind, and soul. If I give in, Chase will work himself into every crevice of my body until we’re fused together as one.

It’s too much. Too soon.

“Chase, I need time. It’s not for him, but for me. I need to grieve before I can fully commit to anyone else.”

“You don’t need to fully commit to me yet,” Chase chokes in a louder voice, emotions getting the best of him. “I’ll take whatever you’ll give me till you’re ready. Don’t shut us down.”

“Chase, don’t say that. You’re worthy of so much more than a half-commitment.”

I don’t blame him for being hurt. I’d be hurt, too, if the situation was reversed. Hell, I am hurting. I can’t undo what I’ve done. The best I can do is stop whatever this is before I do more damage.

Tears are tumbling like torrents down my face. “I won’t use you, Chase. You deserve better than what I can give. You deserve a woman who’ll invest one hundred percent of herself.”

There’s a slap against the wall, probably from him. “I don’t want any other woman. I’ve had them. I’m done with them. You’re the one I want, have since the moment I laid eyes on you fucking months ago!” he shouts.

The rooms may be soundproof, but the doors are not. He's bound to attract attention. I don't want others knowing our business, but I can't exactly reason with Chase after having ditched him.

"Chase, I'm begging you. I need space."

There's a *thunk*. Maybe he's resting his head against the door. "I won't leave you, not when you need my comfort."

My heart pounds wildly in my chest, angry I'm denying a man I desperately want.

"Bro," I hear the muffled voice of Punk, Chase's best friend and MC brother. "Come on, man. Don't force this. Let your woman have her space. She'll come to you when she's ready."

Never thought I'd say this, but thank you, Punk. The moron is good for something, it seems. If he acted like this more often, we'd probably be as tight as him and Jo.

"I'm not leaving her," Chase swears vehemently.

"Dude, I know. You're giving her a break to calm down," Punk reassures. "Let's grab some breakfast before hitting the gym. You need to let this shit out away from her."

Punk coaxes him a little more before the hallway falls silent.

Alone, I plant my ass on the couch, the same couch Chase has been sleeping on for weeks while watching over me. I swear I can smell his scent embedded in the fabric, a mixture of well-worn leather and peppermint engulfing me in the memory of him.

It's overwhelming being this close to him, while not at all. I bring my knees up to my chest, letting out my bottled emotions, praying I didn't screw up my chances of a happily ever after with my dreamy biker.

CHAPTER FOUR

She's avoiding me—like the fucking plague. If I catch a glance of her, it's only when she runs to the kitchen to grab food, or down in the offices to collect whatever she needs to work on in her room. Punk told me to give her breathing room, but it's killing me to have to resort to watching her through the monitors of my computer again.

Stupidly, I thought we'd turned a corner on the night of the wedding. I knew she might regret her decisions in the morning, but when she crashed against me after hours of us pleasuring each other, I hopelessly believed she was consenting to be with me. Had it been just about the sex, she was well within her rights to leave my room and go to hers. But she stayed in my bed, in my arms. In my book, that qualifies as agreeing to a relationship.

Waking up to a pillow instead of her soft curves pushed me over the edge. It wasn't right of me to cause a scene outside her suite, but for the first time in my life, I was stung with rejection. All the women before her knew they were signing up for a one-time hookup. I've never led a woman on—ever. But I sure felt deceived by Simone, and it hurt worse than anything.

To add insult to injury, I vaguely recall saying I may have loved her while not totally awake. Pretty sure that's what caused her to tuck tail and run. Had I been coherent, I would've withheld that shit until she was ready to hear it.

Now I'm the asshat who pushed too hard, too soon, blowing my shot with the woman of my dreams.

Fuck my life.

Even though I'm bogged down with a shit-ton of work dealing with Esteban Moreno, the Colombian drug lord and Atlas's nemesis, popping back into our lives, I'm consumed by thoughts of Simone.

Is she hurting like me? Does she miss me the way I'm missing her? What can I do to make her feel better?

After days of being a walking dick to everyone in the club, my mood hasn't improved. Bitterness leaks into my voice when my cell rings, and I answer the unknown caller with a clipped, "Yes?"

"Seen your mob man running," a gravelly voice rasps on the other end.

I sit back in my chair, trying to pinpoint the name to the voice. The 719 area code tells me it's coming from the southern hemisphere of the state.

"Hawk?"

The Hell's Horsemen MC enforcer out in Pueblo doesn't answer my question. "That mob bitch is heading south in a Buick beater. Followed him from a distance all the way to Trinidad. He checked into some roach-infested inn on the outskirts, about thirty minutes east of the old, abandoned marble quarry in the center of the nature preserve. Pretty remote in that area."

I smirk, understanding. "Thanks for the tip."

"Thanks for looking into who's pushing drugs in our territory. Brothers looking out for brothers," he drawls, then disconnects.

Looks like Luca's luck has finally run out. The dirt bag assaulted my woman, traumatizing her to the point where I slept on her suite's couch to be there in case she needed someone. Several nights, I awoke to her whimpering in her sleep. I'd stroke her back, shushing her till she'd fall back into slumber. More than once, I sat beside her after she'd gone back to sleep, vowing to annihilate the bastard who'd caused her this turmoil. Burned my insides not being able to track him

after he hightailed it out of the city when his boss went boots up. But thanks to another MC having our back, I finally know where my mark is hiding.

A quick call to Atlas and him waving the checkered flag are all I need to go after the old Bianchi mobster, getting justice for my woman.

Crossing our intel cave, I slap my hand on Butch's desk to get his attention. "Suit up. We're going hunting."

Butch grins before wordlessly leaving to get changed. My MC brother has been waiting as long as I have to end Lucky Luca. His fondness for Candy, one of the club's women affected by Luca's cruelty, has earned him a spot on this assignment.

I'm downstairs in our armory, gearing up, when Punk approaches. He looks bent, with his tatted arms folded defiantly across his chest and a pissy look on his face. "Why am I not going with you?"

I look at my best friend with regret. Punk and I are a duo, always paired together, fighting side by side. But this situation calls for another brother.

"Butch needs to give Candy justice, and Atlas wants it to stay a two-man job."

No more needs to be said. Candy is part of our MC, meaning she's family. Besides, it's a safe bet Butch has laid a silent claim on her, meaning Candy's been raised to the status of old lady. Hard to tell when the guy barely talks, but Butch is clearly taken with her.

Lucky Luca may have groped my woman, but he raped Candy for years before she found refuge in our club. I would say let her have the honor, but we don't let the women in the club get involved with the dirty work. Call it chivalry or misogynistic all you want, but MC women stay clean. They're too valuable to be put to work in the dangerous roles our brothers face. Butch will do the honors for her.

"Sucks I can't tag along for the fun," Punk grumbles, slumping against the lockers. He pouts, quietly watching me

get ready. Silence is odd for my jokester brother—the dude never shuts up.

“What is it?”

Punk shrugs. “Surprised you don’t want to do the honors yourself, considering you’re now boning Priss.”

My best friend and the woman I love aren’t fond of each other, all because of a bad first encounter. Punk mistook Simone as some uppity-looking door-to-door sales woman decked out in her business-chic attire when she first appeared at headquarters. The encounter earned Punk the title of “Moron,” and likewise Simone the title of “Priss.” The two of them tolerate each other on the best of days and squabble like young siblings the rest. It’ll be a cold day in hell before those two come to a truce, and it’ll probably involve me making it happen in some way.

“Don’t talk about my woman like that,” I warn him. Love my brother, but I’ll straight up beat his ass if he disrespects Simone.

“Alright. Alright. I won’t disrespect your old lady.”

“And don’t remind me I miss out on the hit. It blows, but Butch deserves it more.”

“Agreed. Does Simone know?”

My jaw tics. “No. It’s best it stays that way until the job is done. Even if I wanted her to know my plans, I can’t. She’s still avoiding me.”

Punk scratches his shaved head. “Not that I understand your attraction to Miss Priss, but give her time. She’ll come around. Simone ended shit with the loafer-dick not even two months ago. When you’ve been in a committed relationship with someone, it takes time to get over them.”

“Like you and Nat?” As soon as the words leave my mouth, I wish I could recant them.

“Don’t fucking compare what I had with Nat to what Simone had with dickwad,” Punk seethes in a low tone, warning me I went too far.

Apologetically, I raise my hands. “I’m sorry, bro. That was uncalled for.” I sigh, settling on the bench in the middle of the locker room. “You know you can move on, too, right? It’s been three years.”

Nat, or Natalie, was Punk’s girl. He loved her more than life itself. And she ended up marrying his half-brother. Punk didn’t only lose her, he lost his whole family. He may go around acting like a playboy, but he’s been hurting ever since.

“I’m good, Chase,” Punk lies smoothly, smooth enough to fool everyone but me, and maybe Jo. “I score more pussy than the entire crew. Trust me, I’m over her.”

There’s no getting through to him, so I drop it. “Whatever. You only get more pussy because I’ve pulled out of the competition.”

We banter heartedly as he helps me and Butch load up the unmarked van. He salutes us as we climb in. “Godspeed, brothers.”

I call out through my open window, “Hey, Punk?”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. I’ll watch over Priss while you’re gone,” he groans as he heads back into headquarters.

CHAPTER FIVE

There's a knock at my door.

Not bothering to lift my head from my computer where I work on the couch, I ignore it. It's probably Chase again, and I'm just not ready to face him yet.

Another knock follows.

Again, I ignore it.

The person on the other side of the door breaks out into a drum solo.

Sighing, I rub my temples. Whoever it is, they're not going to go away until they get what they want.

"Who is it?"

"Housekeeping," a male says in a pitchy tone. It's a poor interpretation of a woman's voice.

Chase may be a prankster, but his deep timbre never could reach that octave. I get up from the couch, skulking to the door, annoyed with whoever it is on the other side. I'm not in the mood for socializing, haven't been since Chase inadvertently spilled the beans to everyone in headquarters about our hook-up.

Jo is still honeymooning in Spain with Atlas, but I could use some sisterly advice. There's no way I'll put a damper on her happy time by describing my pathetic love life. But if she were to call, I'd definitely spill my guts.

I peek through the peephole, seeing only blackness. A hand is over the lens. Whoever it is, they're immature as hell.

Which means it can only be one person.

Grinding my teeth, I open my door. “What do you want, Moron?”

“Oh, look! She lives.” Punk pushes his way into my suite, acting like he has all the right to do so.

“Get out!” I try to stop him from making himself at home, but Punk does what Punk wants. He plants his ass on my couch right where I’d been working.

He scans the room, shaking his head. “Jesus, Priss. Could this room be any more depressing?”

Aggravated, I fold my arms over my chest. “What are you rambling about?”

He waves his hands at the entire space. “This. You’d think a squatter was living here.”

Punk gets up, crossing into the bedroom. He throws open the curtains. Sunlight pours into the room. My hand flies up to cover my face as I hiss in the bright afternoon light.

Punk’s hand flies to his chest dramatically. “Christ, woman! How long have you been hibernating?”

My eyes swivel around the room, assessing the mess I’ve accumulated in the past few days. Records, receipts, and finance reports litter the sitting area, along with old dishes, tossed aside clothes, and empty candy wrappers.

Admittedly, it looks bad. “I’ve been busy.”

Punk gives me a pointed look. “You’ve been hiding.”

Chafes my ass he’s calling me out on my bullshit. It’s not like me to lose sleep and give up on personal hygiene over a guy. I wasn’t even this bad when I caught Trent cheating. But Chase...avoiding him has made me spiral into a deeper depression.

“I’m not talking about this with you.” Embarrassed he’s witnessing my life crumbling around me, I bend to pick up my trash, like I’m trying to hide the evidence.

“Fine by me. I prefer when you don’t talk. Makes it easier to get a word in.”

I roll my eyes. “You never shut up, do you?”

“Hey, I’m only up in your business because I’m doing a favor for my boy, as well as our sis, too. Jo would be upset if she saw you like this.”

Alarmed, I spin around with my arms full of garbage, wrappers spilling from my grasp from the sudden movement. “Not a word of this to Jo. She doesn’t need to worry while she’s away.” I would tell him not to mention this to Chase either. However, I’m sure Chase has a pretty good idea of my depressive state, no doubt watching me through the monitors in his tech room when I leave the safety of my room.

Jo and I have only recently gotten on good terms again. We went a solid year with no contact because of my closed-minded comments about her being irresponsible for leaving her last job without notice, unable to understand how she could be so reckless. But I know now, since I went through the same shit with Trent she did with her ex, Jacob. Live and learn. I refuse to rock the boat while she’s on her honeymoon.

Punk raises his hands. “I won’t say shit to Jo, but only if you pull yourself together. I get you wanting to avoid Chase—you’re not ready for commitment, yadda-yadda. I understand better than most. Believe it or not, I’ve been cheated on. I know how much that shit hurts. You’re in mourning.”

Baffled he’d reveal something so personal, I do a double-take.

“Look, it’s not my place to say how you should live your life, but grieving that fucker,” Punk shakes his Bic’d head, “is not worth it. I’m not telling you to jump into a relationship with my best friend. Honestly, it would be easier for me if you didn’t, since you and I get along oh, so well. But if you have a shot at loving someone else, then go for it. Doesn’t need to be right now. Maybe in another month or six. You owe it to yourself to find happiness. And Chase is a great guy—the best guy.”

My chin wobbles, and I clench my jaw to stop it. I swear to God, if I break down in front of Punk, I'll kick my own ass for not holding my shit together.

Punk looks alarmed, his eyes widening to comic proportions. "Oh, no. Don't do that shit. I don't do well with crying."

I swipe at my tears as the dam opens down my face, dropping half my trash in the process. "That's seriously the sweetest thing I've heard in a long time. And I can't believe it came from you, of all people."

He sighs, pulling me into a hug. "You're going to be okay, Simone. I promise."

Simone? He must really feel sorry for me if he's not calling me "Priss."

"I've been such a bitch to you," I snivel.

He barks a laugh. "You said it. If it makes you feel better, I'll still refer to you as 'Priss.'"

"Yeah, well, you're still a moron."

Punk pulls away with a cocky grin. "Glad we've got that established. Let's clean up your pigpen. Then you can accompany me and Hades on a walk around the property. But first, you need to shower—you reek."

"Hey, I don't stink!" I turn my back on him to take a quick sniff of my shirt. Hell, if he ain't telling the truth. I'm foul.

Ignoring my complaint, Punk picks up my room. He's not half-bad for an unfiltered moron.

Walking in Colorado would be enjoyable if I liked being in nature. I'm a city girl. Nature and I don't mix, like oil and vinegar. It may be early October, but it's a stifling fall afternoon. So far, I've swallowed a bug, stubbed my toe on a rock, and I'm roasting in the sun. Punk doesn't seem to fare any better. He struggles to get my sister's Cane Corso moving.

Hades is being exceptionally stubborn, throwing a barking tantrum at Punk. It's almost like he's telling him to "kick rocks." Since his mama has been gone, he's been depressed and refuses to move. He prefers to stay by Chase in the tech room. Can't say I blame the dog—I'd prefer to be in an air-conditioned room next to that handsome biker, too. But the longer we fight with the dog, the more I melt in the heat.

"Are we there yet?"

"Stop whining," Punk chides. "We haven't even gone a full lap around the property."

His words have me worried. "Exactly how many laps are we doing?"

"Three," Red huffs next to me, sweat beading on her freckled brow. Red is one of the MC women in the Mercy Ravens crew. Tall and lithe, she has the body most supermodels would kill for. She's super sweet—quiet, but friendly. Her sleek, long copper-colored locks earned her the club name "Red."

Ebony hustles beside Red, pumping her arms like she's power walking for the gold medal. Even at this slow of a pace, she's struggling to keep up with Red's long strides—we all are. Eb is another biker chick in the MC. She's a hoot, always up for a party or girl time, but she's less thrilled to be on this adventure. Her gorgeous, wavy black hair is why the MC calls her Ebony.

"When Punk said we were going to do something fun, I assumed he meant actual fun, not walkin' hand-in-hand with Mother Nature. This field trip sucks, Punk. I want a refund."

He looks over his shoulder at Ebony as he play-fights Hades in a game of tug of war with his leash. "For what?"

"For my chipped toenails. I just did them for the wedding, and look at them. Ruined! Now that would have been a fun outing, going to get our nails done."

"You wore sandals, Eb," Punk counters. "You knew the plan included walking."

“We didn’t think it would require this much effort,” Candy retorts, coming to Ebony’s defense.

Candy—named for her dyed cotton-candy pink hair—was the first woman to join the Mercy Ravens MC. She has a reputation for being a hardass, but she’s not a bad person—she’s just misunderstood

“I hate exercise,” Ebony gripes, pulling her tank top away from her chest. “My boobs are sweating.”

“My butt’s sweating,” I add, stopping in my tracks to catch my breath. I don’t mind exercise, but I prefer laps in a cool pool as opposed to walking on a hot blacktop surface.

Sighing, Candy plants her ass on the paved trail. “Then what the hell is wrong with me? Boobs or butt? I’m sweating everywhere.”

Punk’s lips thin. “Candy, get up.”

Irritated with Punk’s pushy attitude, I plant my ass on the ground next to Candy. Red and Ebony sit next to us in a show of solidarity. We snort with amusement, giving each other knuckles. Us women stick together. None of us has any intention of moving anytime soon.

“Ladies,” Punk tries to placate. “I’ll drop you off at headquarters, but we have to get there first.”

Hades seems to like our idea, choosing to sprawl out next to us.

“Traitor,” Punk grumbles at the dog. With a gigantic sigh, he gives up, sitting down on a boulder next to the trail.

We sit listening to the sounds of buzzing insects and chirping birds surrounding us. It’s peaceful...for a moment.

Red breaks the silence. “So you and Chase, huh?”

I groan, while Punk chuckles.

“Don’t laugh, skinny boy,” Ebony warns, wagging a finger at him. “The entire club is talking about it. It’s no joke. Chase is serious about her. Hence, why he and Butch hightailed it out of here, strapped like they were ready for bloodshed. I can

only imagine it has business to do with Lucky Luca if the two of them are partnering up.”

Punk signals for Ebony to stop talking, slicing his hand back and forth across his throat hastily.

My heart drops. “What?”

“How do you know?” Punk demands rigidly.

I turn to Punk, my stomach in knots. “It’s true?”

Punk ignores me, waiting for Ebony to answer.

Ebony waves her hand dismissively. “Don’t get your briefs in a bundle. Nobody told me anything, but your reaction sure as shit did. You men can be so obtuse. Like us MC women don’t know what goes on around here? Please. When shit is about to go down, you guys ooze testosterone like you’re coating yourself in war paint.”

“Eb...” Punk warns through a clenched jaw.

“Red was passing the tech room and overheard Chase tell Butch ‘we’re going hunting.’ Red told Candy, who then told me.”

Punk groans, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“It wasn’t rocket science; I put two and two together. Butch and Chase pairing up for an assignment when you’re Chase’s usual partner? The only thing the two guys share aside from computers is a connection between Candy and Simone. Wasn’t difficult to surmise it involved Luca.”

Holy fuck buckets.

My eyes sweep to Candy. She twists the bracelets around her wrists, anxiety written all over her pretty round face. She’s worried about Butch the way I’m worried about Chase.

I wrap my arms around my midsection, desperate to hold my shit together.

Uneasiness settles over our group in deadly silence. Chase went to find Luca. This can only end badly for one of them.

Red rubs Candy's back as she says, "Butch and Chase will be okay. They know what they're doing. All the guys do. We just need to focus our attention on something else while we wait for them to return."

It's easier said than done. Yes, the MC men are trained to handle these types of hostile situations. That doesn't mean the threat is diminished.

"Distractions are a good idea," Candy mutters to herself. She tilts her head, studying me. "What do you have against being with Chase? The man adores you. He's hot as hell. Not to mention he's a fucking Einstein. And those muscles..."

Red nods, fanning herself as if she's gotten warmer.

"It's complicated," I defend myself, still uncomfortable with Chase away on a mission. "My life's in shambles. I just left my ex, who I thought was ideal. I'm trying to find my footing again."

"You mean the man-child who was screwing behind your back?" Ebony scoffs. "Girl, please. There's no redeeming qualities in the dude. Think of it like this. If you had a juicy T-bone steak and discovered it had a piece of shit on it, you wouldn't eat around it. The whole thing would be ruined. It's the same for your ex—he's trash."

Point well made, but Ebony misunderstands.

"You didn't let me finish. I rushed into my last relationship, overlooking red flags along the way with my rose-colored glasses. All things are wonderful in the honeymoon phase. I don't want to make the same mistake twice. I need to get myself sorted before moving into another relationship."

"Makes sense," Punk muses aloud.

Candy swats him in the shin, making him yelp. "Way to do your bro dirty. Whose side you on?"

"I'm on the side that makes everyone happy in the long run," Punk hisses, rubbing his bruised leg. "Some things can't be rushed."

“Speaking from experience?” Ebony jabs.

“Don’t you have an Italian giant problem to deal with?” Punk counters quickly. “Word amongst the brothers is, Tank put a silent claim on you.”

Ebony’s mouth falls open. “Is that why the guys are avoiding me like I’m gas station sushi? Because Tank wants a snack?”

“He doesn’t want a snack, Eb. He wants the whole goddamn meal, every night from here on out.”

“That *sonofabitch!*”

Ebony stands with a huff. She grumbles something about neutering Tank, then storms off with Hades running after her. Candy and Red follow, trying to calm down their friend. We watch as they disappear around the bend in the trail.

I lightly punch Punk in the shoulder. “Thanks for the diversion.”

He shrugs. “I hate it when the guys get on my ass about moving on. Won’t stand by watching someone else go through it.”

We try to catch up to the girls, but they’re hauling ass. Ebony is on a mission to make Tank pay for interfering with her social life. She loves her freedom, with no intention of giving it up soon. If Tank is threatening the other brothers to back off from her, that shit won’t fly.

Their potential relationship has me thinking of my and Chase’s situation. I’m worried about the man who’s snuck into my heart.

“Punk?”

“Yeah?”

“Is Chase really on a mission to find Luca?”

He sighs, running a hand over his shaved head. “I can’t talk club business, Priss. It’s safer if you don’t know. Nothing to implicate you.”

Hold the fuck up. “Implicate me? They’re just going to find Luca to turn him in to the police, right?”

“Listen.” Punk places a hand on my shoulder. His steady, cool blue eyes tell me he’s being serious. “This is all I’ll say on the matter—you’ll never have to worry about Luca again.”

I wring my hands together. “Is Chase going to kill him?”

Punk doesn’t answer, his silence speaking volumes.

This news should unsettle me. Most people would freak discovering someone they cared about was about to commit murder. Strangely, it doesn’t have the same effect on me. If Luca is dead, I won’t feel the need to look over my shoulder every time I leave headquarters. Going to prison doesn’t ensure he’ll not get out one day. My only concern is for Chase. He’s going against a dangerous man—a raping, murdering sadist.

Punk must see my duress. He squeezes my shoulder. “He’ll be fine, Priss. Come on. Let’s get back to headquarters. I can smell Mama Bear’s cooking from here.”

CHAPTER SIX

The trip to Trinidad dragged. Being undercover means you can't do anything to bring attention to yourself, including speeding to your destination. Unmarked van, nondescript clothing, no leather biker cuts are all part of the disguise to blend in. I even took out my facial piercings and tucked my shoulder-length hair into a black baseball cap. Anything to hide who I really was.

As we approached the border of Trinidad, Butch and I pulled off to a rest stop to change into our tactical gear—the final step in our preparations.

Snagging Lucky Luca was almost too easy as we busted in the door of the rundown motel under cover of darkness. The butt end of Butch's rifle connecting to Luca's head was enough to keep him quiet until we reached our destination in the nature preserve next to the abandoned quarry Hawk suggested. It was a perfect place to dispose of a body.

I took my pound of flesh, throwing my weight into every punch I landed against Luca's pudgy face. When I grew tired, Butch took over, making good use of his steel toe boots, kicking into Luca's torso. I may have got a little trigger-happy and fired a round into his shin—I'm human; not a robot.

The beating proved fruitful, with Luca rambling off vital intel that could help find Esteban Moreno. In the end, I handed my pistol to Butch, giving him the honors. One bullet to Luca's frontal lobe was his ticket to hell.

For shit, kicks, and giggles, I set his feet into cement shoes—a tribute to Luca's gangster days—before we threw his

lifeless body into the bottomless quarry. He sunk into oblivion and out of the lives of our women forever.

After finishing a call to Atlas on a burner to give him the news, we climbed into the van to make the four-hour trek back to Fort Collins. We've driven an hour in silence—not surprising with how Butch prefers not to talk—when the dude clears his throat to get my attention.

“What? You need to take a leak or something?”

Butch shakes his head. “No, I'm good. I just wanted to say thank you.”

“No need to thank me, brother.”

“Yes, I do. I know you wanted Luca's head as much as I did. He hurt your woman, too.”

I sigh. “Not as much as he hurt your Candy.”

Butch falls silent, and I surmise that's the end of our conversation. However, Butch speaks up again. “Candy... she's mine, always has been, even though I've never told her. I've wanted her since the moment I came into the club.”

Boggled, I do a double-take. “Then why haven't you claimed her?”

Butch looks out the passenger window. “She isn't ready to accept who she is.”

Confused, I ask, “Who she is? As in yours?”

My brother turns back to me, with a shrug. “Among other things.”

Obviously, there's more to the story. I'm fairly good at decryption, but Butch is being inscrutable for a reason. I don't press for more information. Butch will share when he's ready.

“You'll be good for her, Butch. She needs stability, and you can provide it, along with love and trust.”

Butch looks ahead, sighing. “I may be good for her, but first she needs to accept me, as well as owning herself.”

I get the sense Butch is referring to something of a sexual nature, but I'm clueless about what.

“Have you two...”

I don't know how to ask my question without coming across as intrusive. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't dying of curiosity. The guys in the crew were convinced Butch was asexual. No one had ever seen him hook up with anyone. When he started spending time with Candy, it threw our brotherhood for a loop.

“No. I want all of her or nothing. I won't settle for a false version of her—the woman she presents to others isn't who she really is. She hasn't come into herself yet, and I don't want the person she's given to everyone else. I want the woman she truly is, the dominant version of herself she doesn't know exists. Being her fuck buddy isn't an option. To have a taste of her and still not own her heart would end me.”

My stomach turns, recalling the woman who owns me wholly while evading me. “I know exactly what you mean.”

He turns his full attention to me. “You own Simone. She may not realize it yet, but it doesn't change the fact that you have her heart in your hand. Cherish it and be ready. Shit will move quickly once she surrenders to you. I promise you, bro. It may not be as soon as you want, but it's already in motion.”

My chest tightens. Fuck if my brother hasn't gotten me in my feels with his proclamation. I bite the inside of my bottom lip, missing my lip ring. I never realized how much I bite on it when I feel uneasy. A nervous tell.

I clear my throat. “I guess we both need to make our women see reason and hope they give us a shot.”

“Amen to that.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Mama Bear—or more appropriately, my mom, Stella—is the voluntary cafeteria lady of the club. Her cooking is always amazing, but I can't eat. My gut is tied in knots, twisting uncomfortably.

Needing a distraction, I help my mom clean the kitchen after dinner, but it goes too quickly. My mom can tell something's bothering me, but she chats about her latest quilting project, knowing I won't talk until I'm ready.

After we put away the dishes, I retreat to my room. Though the trash is gone, it still needs deep cleaning. I thoroughly polish and vacuum. Next I scrub the bathroom, followed by stripping the bed, laying new sheets.

Chase still hasn't returned from his mission. I grab my laundry basket, heading to the basement level, where the laundry room is located. Most of the club has settled in for the night, but I'm going strong. I use the elliptical machine in the gym for an hour, shower, and finish folding my clothes.

Time ticks on at a snail's pace, each second weighing heavily on my heart.

My head hasn't stopped racing with worry since discovering the guys went on a man hunt nearly twelve hours ago. Anxious, I bounce my leg from where I sit on the end of my bed. How long does it take to kill somebody?

A swell of nausea rises to my throat. I swallow back the bile, chastising myself for being dismissive with someone's life. Doesn't matter if Luca deserves all that's coming for him, I shouldn't be flippant over his end.

It's early morning, still pitch black outside, when I hear the faint sound of tires pulling into the compound through my open windows. I strain my ears, trying to pick up the sound of anyone talking, but I'm greeted with silence.

Like a teenager sneaking out of their parents' home, I creep out of my room, tiptoeing out to the open landing on the top floor to look down into the main living area of the giant complex. I missed whoever it was walking by, but I can see their retreating shadows as they make their way into the basement, where the locker room and armory are located.

Anxiously, I sit on the steps, waiting for them to come this way to head to bed.

What am I doing? I shouldn't be out here creeping on Chase. What kind of message would I be sending?

Mixed signals, that's what I'd be sending him. I'm not supposed to care this much. I'm not supposed to worry about his livelihood.

I'm such a hypocrite, lying to myself when I know I want nothing more than to run after him and jump into his arms. Kiss him all over his handsome face before diving my hand into his pants...

Oh, my. Even my thoughts aren't safe.

Restless, I clench and unclench my hands, unsure of what to do. Behind me, I hear a door snick shut. It could have been Butch, with how quiet he is, but it may have been Chase, coming up from the staircase on the opposite end of the hallway. I pad barefoot back down the hall toward Chase's door.

Foolishly, I press my ear against the wood. I hear nothing, but these rooms are fairly soundproof.

If anyone saw me, there would be no way of denying my feelings for Chase. I need to go to bed.

Hurriedly, I pull away from the door, only to stop dead in my tracks. Butch is standing six paces away. He sports a sly grin, fully aware of what I was up to.

Crap on a cracker. My luck sucks eggs, I swear.

Without saying a word, Butch saunters toward me. My mind is racing a mile a minute to fabricate a likely excuse for why I'm standing outside Chase's door in the middle of the night.

Before I can ramble out an explanation, Butch raps his knuckles hard on Chase's door. He then darts down the hall, ducking into his room.

"Why, you little—"

I don't get to finish my sentence before Chase opens his door. He's standing in front of me without his glasses, hair down, shirtless, the button of his jeans undone. Inviting as fuck.

My mouth gapes open and close like a fish, unable to give a valid reason for my presence. "Um, hi."

Chase's Adam apple bobs as he swallows. His warm brown eyes run along my body, setting my skin ablaze in their wake. The things this man ignites inside of me without touching me...

"I—I shouldn't be here," I apologize. "I heard you went after *him*, and..." I debate if I should be honest.

Chase stares intently at me, like my answer will be fundamental to where we go from here.

Does he have to be so damn gorgeous? The dude renders me stupid.

Careful, Simone. Honesty will open a door I may not close again.

In my head, I have my reasoning, but then my heart jumps out of my mouth. "I was worried about you."

Chase's hand snatches out faster than the leather of a whip, snagging the front of my night shorts.

"Eek," is all I get out before he's dragging me against his hard body. His mouth is on mine, hot and rough, forcing my lips to part for his demanding tongue.

I'm lost. So, so, lost. Swept away in his warmth and my need.

As suddenly as he grabbed me, he releases me, as if my touch burned him. "Shit. I shouldn't be touching you. Not until I've washed."

My mouth parts in a silent O. At first I'm relieved he isn't rejecting me, but then I realize why he wants to wash. I wrap my arms around my midsection to hold myself together.

"Fuck, Numbers," Chase breathes, pulling me deeper into his room. His leather and peppermint scent is strong in this section of the suite, clinging to his gray bedding. "Give me five minutes to shower. Then we can talk."

Because I want answers, I nod, taking a seat on his bed.

Chase ducks into the bathroom, showering quickly. To occupy my time, I examine his suite. Like several of the men in this MC, Chase keeps his space pristine. The navy way of life has been embedded into him.

The hipster biker has a taste for rustic, heavy furniture. It's a little homier than the mid-century modern décor Jo prefers in her designs—less sophisticated, but not any less stylish. I quite like it.

Admiring the craftsmanship, I run my fingers along the thick, weathered headboard. It appears to be made from old barn boards. Six black iron rings adorn the front of it, evenly spaced out. It's a charming touch, like a little masculine bling.

Chase is gone less than ten minutes before returning in a towel wrapped low on his hips. He fumbles to put his facial piercings back in. While he's distracted, I get to admire him without interruption. His bare chest glistens with water droplets, rolling down the sharp panels of his abdomen and trailing along the V-lines at his hips.

He's beautiful, with his skin covered in lots of ink and piercings—eyebrow, septum, bottom lip, ears, tongue, nipples and genitals. As much as I want to trace him with my eyes, I'm fixated on his latest mission.

"Do you need help with laundry? Cleaning the shower?"

Well, this is a first for me—destroying evidence. I didn't see any blood on him, but I wasn't looking for it. I've seen plenty of forensic crime shows to recall blood doesn't simply wash down a drain. You need chemicals to strip the DNA.

He shakes his head. "We did a sponge bath onsite and swapped clothes before coming home. The clothes are in the incinerator. I just wanted to wash off anything I may have missed. I already sprayed down the shower with bleach."

So there was blood, enough that required burning evidence and harsh solvents.

I swallow. "Chase?" I want to ask if he killed Luca, but the words are stuck in my throat.

He kneels in front of me, taking my face in his long hands. "Luca is dead."

A normal person would freak the fuck out being in the presence of a murderer. But all I do is burst into tears, throwing my arms around his neck to pull him closer.

His muscular arms wrap around me, holding me tight as my body rakes with sobs.

"Shush," he whispers against my ear, softly rubbing my back in soothing circles. "It's okay. No one will ever harm you again, not as long as I live."

"Was it you?" I know I shouldn't ask, but a part of me is compelled to know if Chase or Butch snuffed Luca out.

Chase groans. "Simone..."

"Don't coddle me. I'm a full-grown woman. I can handle it."

"Fair enough. The bullet came from Butch, but we both had our fair share of flesh beforehand."

I shudder, gripping him tighter. It makes sense Butch got to make the kill to avenge Candy. And if I'm honest, I'm grateful Chase wasn't the one to do it. I'm not sure how I would have handled Chase murdering a man for me, even a merciless, raping pig like Luca.

“I shouldn’t have told you. Don’t ask for more. You don’t need to know the ugly.”

“No, I don’t want the details. Thank you for answering my question. I’m relieved he’s gone.”

All that remain are bad memories for me and countless other women who were Luca’s unfortunate victims. There’s not one scrape of remorse inside me to give a rat’s ass about his death being criminal.

Chase eases us into his bed, throwing his comforter over us. The warmth of the blanket is comforting, and I snuggle against Chase’s chest, my fingers absently playing with the soft curls of his minimal chest hair. I’m sure I’m sending mixed signals being this close, but I can’t help myself. I need Chase’s console, need to feel him close to know he’s okay after what happened tonight.

“What you did...I can never thank you enough,” I choke through my slowing tears.

“There’s nothing to thank me for. I take care of what’s mine,” he says nonchalantly.

I shut my eyes. “I’m not ready for a relationship. Not yet.”

“But you will be someday, and I’ll be here waiting for you. I can’t promise I’ll be waiting patiently, but I’m not going anywhere. I want us. This right here, every night, with you in my arms.”

It sounds wonderful. Everything I want. But I can’t rush this. “Please, try to understand. I don’t want to make the same mistakes I did with Trent.”

Chase growls. “I’m. Not. Like. Him.”

“No, you’re so much better. And that’s why I won’t give you half of myself. You deserve all of me. I can’t give you all of me, not yet, and I don’t know when I can fully commit. It’s not fair for you to wait around when I have no end date in sight.”

Chase’s arms constrict around me. “I guess I just need to show you how good it is to be with me. Maybe it’ll speed the

process along.”

“Chase,” I warn him.

“Don’t you ‘Chase’ me. I’m going to woo the fuck out of you, win your heart. I’ll give you space, but I’m not going to hide away, and neither are you. That shit ends now, you hear me? There’s a trade for a trade, Numbers. If I give you time, then you allow me to show you what you’re missing.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I spoil you. If I want to buy you a coffee, you’re going to accept it. If I want to take you for a ride on my bike, you’re going to accept it. If I want to buy you things, you’re going to accept them. If I want to shower you with compliments, you’re going to listen and accept it. And if I want to steal a kiss, test the boundaries of your heart, you’re going to maybe get pissed, but you’re going to accept that’s how I operate.”

Unbelievable. If he thinks he can push me around, then he clearly has no idea who he signed his heart over to.

“Chase—”

The air gets sucked out of my lungs as Chase quickly takes up my wrists, pinning them over my head. His legs straddle my body, his chest brushing against mine.

“Chase!”

“This is who I am, Simone. I take what I want when I see it. I want you. *Sooooo* fucking badly. You need time? Fine. You need space? I’ll give as much as I can tolerate. But I have limits. I have needs, and the need to win you over is strong.” He transfers my wrist to one hand, touching the center of his chest. “It’s strong because of what I feel in here for you.”

He doesn’t say he loves me, but the sentiment is there all the same. His confession has my core burning with an ache that needs his soothing.

This isn’t what I asked for, but I see this is Chase offering a compromise, something that’ll suck for both of us, while giving us enough of what we need from the other.

This is overwhelming. “If I say back off—”

“Then I do as you wish. I don’t want to bully you into being with me, Simone. I expect you to push back when you’ve had enough of me. When I overstep, I expect you to ride my ass. I’m not asking you to change—I adore the woman you are, thunderclap and all. I just want to show you how badly I want you.”

I bite my bottom lip. This is too damn tempting. It’s like a kinky fantasy where the hipster, bad-ass biker pursues the woman of his affections while obeying her orders. I feel empowered, like a dominant.

“And you give me tonight the way I want,” he adds matter-of-factly.

“What?!” *Dominant role deactivated.*

“You heard me. I get you tonight. We do what I want, how I want it. This will give you a damn good clue of what you’ll be missing.”

Why am I slick between my legs? I’m a strong, independent woman who doesn’t bend to any man—*ever*. But here I am, panting like a dog in heat, rubbing my thighs together as I imagine all the sinful things Chase plans to do with my body.

Physically, I’m all on board, ready to ride this man into tomorrow. Mentally, I war with staying the course, distancing myself. It’s so unfair!

Why can’t I have my cake and eat it, too? Chase is offering, fully aware this doesn’t guarantee I’ll be ready for commitment immediately following. I don’t need to be on high alert with this man. He’s giving me permission to relax and let him pleasure me.

It’s one night.

He’s dicked me down good before, and this time will be no different. Chase is like a can of Pringles. Once you pop, you sure as fuck will not stop.

I’ve decided.

“Fine. I’ll give you tonight.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

The look of triumph flashing in Chase's eyes and the wickedest smile pulling at his sinful lips have me second-guessing tonight's agenda.

"Uh..."

"No take-backs, Numbers."

He jumps from the bed, his towel falling away. My eyes stay locked on his perfectly sculpted buttocks until he disappears into his walk-in closet.

Shit! What did I sign up for?

I've heard stories from some of the other MC women about how domineering these men can be in the bedroom. Atlas likes spanking Jo during rough sex. Opal told me Gauge is into collaring. I might be okay with some of that, but the simple truth is, I don't know what Chase is into. And based on the big dick energy he's giving off, I'm guessing Chase is into all kinds of hot kink.

For a vanilla woman, this is terrifying.

"I think we need to discuss boundaries, possibly some safe words, too," I croak.

Chase chuckles darkly, returning to the bedroom with several bandanas in his hand. His dick is fully erect. It's impressive how thick and ridged his appendage is. But it's the several body piercings holding my attention, especially the large barbell punctured straight through the head of his penis.

Dick piercings aren't something I'm familiar with pre-Chase. When we had sex the first time, I was shocked I could

feel the ball of metal rubbing against my insides, stimulating all my nerve endings. It added a whole new level of pleasure I'd never experienced before. Reminiscing about how good it felt when he was thrusting away inside of me causes a spurt of wet warmth to pool between my thighs.

His cock bobs with anticipation, drooling with pre-come and ready to be put to great use.

The question is, where's he going to put it?

“You need to get out of that pretty little head of yours.”

My eyes narrow in at the material in his hand. “What are those for?”

“To heighten your senses.”

That doesn't sound good. It sounds like relinquishing control. As in me, Simone Holland, control freak, giving over my power to be in a vulnerable state.

As Chase draws closer to the bed, my heart rate increases. Problem is, I don't know if it's increasing because I fear doing something kinky or thrilled with finally having a partner who's willing. Maybe it's both.

He cocks his head, his warm brown eyes shining with amusement. “You're not scared, are you, Numbers?”

Ugh! How dare he challenge me?!

Asshole has me pegged as a competitive woman. He's not wrong. I thrive on challenges.

I shrug to hide my shivers, trying to pull it off as elusiveness. “Nah. Do your worst.”

What the hell, Simone? Is your ego so big, you have to play macho?

Chase raises an eyebrow, smirking. “My worst? Or my best?”

A whimper escapes me before I can choke it back. Chase's eyes shine with mirth. He kneels on the bed, straddling me once more. “I'll make you feel so good.” He places a chaste kiss on my lips before he orders, “Arms up.”

Hesitantly, I raise my arms. Chase takes the end of my nightshirt, dragging it over my head. He's staring at me with a hunger in his wild eyes that makes my toes curl with anticipation. Slowly, he slides back, taking my night shorts with him.

“No panties?”

“Not when I sleep.”

Chase groans with deep, throaty approval. He picks up one bandana, motioning with his fingers for me to sit upright. Once I'm sitting, he goes to wrap the bandana around my head.

I jump back in alarm. “Don't you dare gag me!”

“You think I want to muffle your needy mewls of pleasure? Please. I aim to make you squeal—loudly. It's for your eyes, babe. Be a good girl and stay still.”

Be a good girl? Who the hell does he think he is?

“Nu-uh-uh. You promised I could have you tonight the way I want. I want you blind, unable to predict what I'm going to do next.”

Why, oh, why is this making me more soaked between my thighs?

Huffing, I hold still as he ties the bandana around my eyes. It's disorienting, making me feel defenseless.

He lays a soft kiss on my shoulder, his breath dancing across my heated flesh. “Lay down.”

My body tingles as I obey, laying against the pillows. Chase straddles my body higher. I can feel his fat cock rub against my sternum, leaving a snail trail along my skin.

Good God, that's hot, knowing a guy wants you so badly, he leaks with excitement before he's inside of you. I wish I could see it pulsing with need. Stupid blindfold.

My ears strain to hear what he might be doing. There's a distinctive wheezing sound of fabric being pulled against a metal surface, like a rope through a pulley.

What the...?

Fingers softly stroke my wrists. “Will you let me restrain you?”

My voice hitches as I ask, “Bondage? What are you tying me to?”

“Anchored hooks. I built them into the headboard for this purpose.”

“Wait. The decorative rings on the bed are anchor hooks?”
Seriously?! He’s done this enough to inspire him to build a bed with anchors?

How many women have been tied to his bed?

Jealousy burns like acid in my gut. It’s wrong to judge another’s sexual past. Yet I’m seriously annoyed he’d place me in the same group of women.

I harrumph out of irritation. “I don’t want to be tied up where you’ve had other women, Chase.”

“Shush,” he coos low in my ear. His breath tickles my neck, making me shiver. “Calm down, baby. This is a pilot run.”

My eyebrows rise behind my blindfold. “I’m the first?”

“You’re the only one I want to share my love nest with.”

I snort. *Love nest? How inane.* My body shakes before I break into full-blown giggles.

“Love dungeon seemed like a turn-off,” he says, unashamed.

My laughing stops, panic settling in its place. I release a trembling moan. “Chase—”

“Have I ever hurt you?”

“No, but—”

“Did I make you feel good the last time we were together?”

Heat rushes up my cheeks, recalling how amazing our first time was. “Y—yes.”

“Do you trust me to keep you safe from everything?”

Without a doubt. “Yes.”

“Then trust me with your body. I’ll never hurt you. I lo...” Chase stops short of dropping the “love” bomb again. My heart pangs painfully at hearing him hold it back. “You’re everything I care about. If you want out, I’ll release you. But if you want to feel more than you’ve ever felt before...”

Feel more than I did before? Is that possible?

I bite my bottom lip, torn with handing over control. On the one hand, I don’t want to appear weak. But on the other hand, I’ve never been more turned on in my life. I’m too afraid to admit I want to hand over the reins, not to have to decide.

In my everyday life, I call the shots. Even when I worked under management at the financial firm, I ran things the way I wanted.

Would it be the end of the world to try some bondage? Not at all. Knowing I’m the first to share this bed of surprises with Chase has me more inclined to take part. It’s my stupid pride impeding my enjoyment.

“Don’t overthink this. Let go. I’ll take care of everything.”

Say yes. Say yes. SAY YES!

Attempting to show some manner of superiority, I give a stiff nod. “Fine. But if I say ‘Red—’”

“Then it’s full stop.” He brushes fingers over one of my erect nipples. I arch into his touch, biting back a moan. “You won’t regret tonight. I swear on my leather cut.”

Chase takes my wrists in his large hands, tugging them above my head. Soft fabric—my guess, the bandana—wraps around my wrists. There’s enough slack, allowing my arms some movement. Secured by the anchors, I gulp, trying to control my nerves.

My biker wastes no time. He sucks one of my nipples into his hot mouth, lavishing it with his talented tongue. The barbell on his tongue hits against the tip of my nipple,

stimulating it into a tight peak. Panting, I determine I agree with Chase—I will have no regrets about tonight.

Chase slips down my body, kissing, nipping at my sensitized skin. When his mouth covers my hooded clit, I can't help myself. A guttural groan of pure ecstasy radiates from my lungs.

“Christ, you're mouth-watering. Fucking nectar. Never want to stop eating you out.” He returns to feeding on me, alternating between vigorously flicking my clit with the tip of his tongue and dipping it inside my greedy pussy.

My God, his tongue is going to be my undoing. The amount of slick growing on my thighs is scandalous. The wet noises he's making would make a porn star blush.

“Ch—Ch—Chase,” I stutter, my body on the verge of erupting with my release.

He quickly backs away, leaving my body heaving with dissatisfaction.

“No, you didn't!”

Chase chuckles darkly. “Trust me, baby. The build-up will make this more enjoyable.”

“Don't wanna gamble recklessly. Finish eating.”

I'm about to argue until I feel something smooth and hard slip between the valley of my breast. I know what it is, and it has me groaning with want. Chase sandwiches my breast together, helping me feel every ridge and protruding vein of his steel cock against my flesh. He gets himself off using my boobs, thrusting his hips at a deliciously slow pace. I'm not a small-chested woman. The fact that his cock can poke clear through my cleavage to bump against my lips is a tribute to his massive length.

“Suck,” he orders.

So bossy. Then again, so am I.

Not going to lie, I enjoy this demanding side of him. Him flexing his control would be a total turn-off outside the bedroom, but in it...*wow*.

I'm still a little salty he didn't bring me to orgasm first. The ache between my legs hasn't subsided since he stopped. Rubbing my thighs together is doing squat to elevate the pressure.

Two can play at this game. If he can be a tease, so can I.

Fighting the urge to laugh, I quickly swipe out my tongue, clipping the salty tip of his pre-come cock. The sensation has him jerking his dick clear of my boobs.

"You brat," he growls. "Open wide so I don't chip those pearly whites." He pushes the head of his cock into my laughing mouth to shut me up.

Once he enters, I suck hard. He hisses. "Fuuuck. You suck me so well."

Chase cocks his hips, testing to see how much of him I'm willing to take. I gag slightly once he hits the back of my throat. He backs up to avoid causing me discomfort. Slowly, he pumps in and out of my mouth. I moan around his salty taste, enjoying his shameless grunts each time I run my tongue along the bottom ridge of his dick.

I'm a needy mess. If my hands were free, I'd be playing with my engorged clit to get off at the same time as him.

"Enough," he orders as he attempts to pull free of my mouth. I moan loudly around his cock to torture him some more before I playfully nip at the tip.

He groans. "That hurt good. You can bite me anytime."

Jesus! This man is kinky.

The bed jostles with his movements. One moment I'm on my back, and the next he's flipping me on my stomach. With my arms tethered to the bed, my face plants on the mattress. Chase grips my waist, lifting me onto my knees.

"Head in the bed, ass in the air. Such a beautiful sight." He kisses each of my bottom cheeks before he slaps both cheeks in unison with his enormous hands.

I scream, pushing back into his crotch. I barely recognize this wanton woman I've become when I cry, "Fuck, yes!"

“Love how greedy your pussy is for my dick.”

Chase moves my body back into position before burying his face in my ass. I gasp when his mouth attacks me from behind, pointing his tongue to dive inside of me. It’s a bizarre sensation, dirtier than I’m used to, but oh, so pleasurable. Back and forth he works his tongue, sliding across my sensitive flesh, building my arousal. He’s got me on the cusp of an orgasm, my body aggressively shaking. The headboard groans in protest from where I pull taut on the restraints.

“Chase. Please, please, please!”

Finally showing mercy, Chase stops, only to grab me by the hips. He runs the length of himself through my folds, slicking himself in my juices. The delicious contact has me pushing my ass back into him. The fat tip of his dick kisses my entrances before thrusting into me from behind, spearing me.

The force of his impalement has our combined weight rocking the headboard into the wall. This is not a slow and gentle love session. This is raw, savage fucking. Chase is stamping a claim on me from the inside out.

I try to push back, to match him thrust for thrust, but it’s clear I’m not in charge. All I can do is absorb the delicious friction as pleasure builds deep in my core.

“That’s it, baby. Take what I’m giving you. Take it all.”

Chase picks up his pace, pumping me full to the brim with each drive of his hips. The ball of his cock piercing slides exquisitely over my G and A-spots. My clit is amazingly assaulted as his ballsack taps me from behind with each dive.

The air grows heavy with the smell of our sweat mixing, potent with our combined musk. It’s enough to make me drunk with ecstasy.

“This pussy is mine. Mine to pound. Mine to conquer. Mine to keep.”

He releases one hand from my hips, only to rope my hair with it. He leans over me, sucking on my neck before clamping his teeth down on my pulse point.

The sudden pain mixed with my mounting arousal has me rocketing into oblivion. I come with a jolt, silently screaming as my sex wrings the life out of Chase's manhood.

He bellows, sinking himself to the hilt inside of me.

Warm, sticky fluid coats my insides and down my shaking thighs. Chase holds me there, keeping himself seated deep inside of me. Heavy panting fills the room, me breathing into the mattress, and him into the crook of my neck.

Slowly, Chase pulls out of me, sending more of our releases to drip down my legs. He frees one wrist, then the other. Unable to move from exhaustion, Chase turns me over on my back, gently removing my blindfold.

I blink, trying to focus my eyes on his handsome face. He takes my face in his hands and kisses me tenderly.

Thoroughly fucked, I watch in a dazed state as Chase climbs out of bed and disappears into the bathroom. He returns with a warm, damp washcloth to clean the mess we made between my legs. This aftercare is incredibly intimate and nothing I've experienced with previous partners. It's another example of how Chase cares about me, not just what I can give him.

He pulls the covers over us, with me resting in the crook of his arms. He leans over, tugging the cord on his bedside lamp. Several minutes pass in silence, with him rubbing my arms, hips, back—anywhere he can reach.

He breaks the silence. "Don't keep me hanging forever, Simone. I'll do it, but I can't promise I'll behave around you while I impatiently wait."

Nor would I expect anything less from my greedy biker.

CHAPTER NINE

Present Day

A whole damn year has passed since the last night I shared my bed with Simone. Too many long, fucking dry months of not sinking myself into her wet heaven have been a trial.

To say I'm growing impatient is an understatement. I'm as frustrated as an armless man watching porn. This dry spell needs to end, but it'll only end if Simone lets me in.

Have I respected her need for space and time? More or less.

Okay. Fine. I've pushed the boundaries more than once, pissing her off royally. Any chance I could get her alone, I took advantage of it. Anytime I could steal a kiss or smack her glorious ass, I did.

I did it all, and then some.

Embroidering her nickname, *Numbers*, on the bitch seat of my bike was an epic tantrum, but nowhere near the ass whooping she gave me when I presented her with an MC *Property of Chase* leather cut.

It's been a hellish torture to hold what little of myself I can tolerate away from her. She's one bratty remark away from being thrown over my shoulder, barricaded in my suite, where I'll lick the attitude right out of her.

The possessiveness I have for this woman has me right up there with how Atlas is with Jo, or Gauge with Opal—over the top Neanderthal in all ways. *Shit*, soon I'll be throwing rocks

outside my tech cave to keep the vultures away from what's mine.

Speaking of vultures...

I stare murderously at the name of the man on a sheet of paper who's cock-blocked me since Simone's arrival at the club. The name of the prick I want to curb stomp the absolute piss water out of for hurting the most amazing woman in existence—my woman.

Trent Grills, douchebag extraordinaire and public enemy number one, will be liaison in our investigation of P.L. Moore Financial.

The update from the financial firm our security company is hired to investigate sits in my hand, burning a hole in my skin. When I asked Simone to be the head auditor for this assignment, I saw it as a way for her to give a final *fuck you* to her ex-boyfriend and boss, who still works at the firm. Never did I imagine it would blow up in my face, putting Simone back in her ex's path.

As spokesperson for the firm, Trent will be in direct contact with Simone daily. It was bad enough seeing his name roll across my security monitors every time he tried to reach out to her over the past year, which was more often than I care for. Simone handled his pleas for a second chance well enough by ignoring him, but that's easy to do when you're states away. Face-to-face is an entirely different challenge.

How am I going to keep him away from her while we conduct this investigation?

To hell if I allow that pissant anywhere near Simone. I hand the assignment sheet back to our MC's vice president, Gauge, with a hard, "No."

Gauge lifts an eyebrow. "It's not an option, brother."

I grit my teeth. "The fuck it isn't. We're backing out." I give him a challenging look, one that hollers I'll throw hands if he pushes this.

Simone's brows pull together as her head swivels back and forth between me and Gauge. "What's the problem?"

For once, I wish Simone wasn't beside me. This would be easier to handle without revealing to her why I want our team off the assignment. "It's nothing, Numbers," I say matter-of-factly.

"They paid the deposit, bro. Atlas already stamped it with his seal of approval before we received this email," Gauge says apologetically. "We gave our word, Chase. We always follow through."

"Extraordinary circumstances bringing additional evidence to light are within our rights of refusing service," I dispute in a haughty tone. "We don't owe them shit."

"What in the world has got your briefs in a twist?" Simone snatches the email from my hand. Before I can snag it away from her, she's already read the fine print. "Trent is acting liaison for P.L. Moore Financial? Is this why you want Mercy Ravens Security off the case?"

The cat is already out of the bag. No point in denying the truth. "Precisely."

My sassy woman rolls her silver eyes, cocking her hip with attitude. "Chase, there's no way the company is backing out of a high-paying gig because of ex-peckerhead."

"I concur," Gauge seconds.

"Piss off, VP." I turn my attention back to Simone, gritting heatedly, "I don't want Trent near you."

"Neither do I," she admits. "But we're not backing out of this mission because of him. This is our job, Chase. We can't be promising customers results, then reneging. It takes one shit review to spoil future clients' interest."

Irritated, I push a hand up under my glasses, rubbing at my tired eyes before looking back at her. "Simone, the creep hasn't left you alone since you moved here. Do you honestly think he's going to leave you be once you suddenly pop back into his line of sight? Fuck that noise. Our company doesn't tolerate sexual harassment, and he's more than good at delivering plenty of it."

Simone folds her arms over her chest, huffing with annoyance. “And how would you know if he’s been sexually harassing me?”

“You know damn well I watch everything coming into this club.” If she wants me to feel ashamed for monitoring her call history, she’s sadly mistaken. That is part of my job as head of intel, and everyone in the club is well-aware I monitor their shit at all times.

“My phone records aren’t club related, Chase. You have no right to monitor my phone.”

“Oh, but you’re wrong. You work for Mercy Ravens Security, which is owned by this MC, making you and everyone in it club business.” I bend to get in her face to make my next point extremely clear. She shows her teeth like a cat ready to take my head off, but I don’t care. I like her teeth, especially when they’re on me. “And if you didn’t work for Atlas, you still would be monitored by the club.”

Simone scowls. “Why would that be?”

“Because you’re my woman,” I say with finality, just like I’ve said a million times to her throughout the past year.

“Dammit Chase, you need to manage this whole biker claiming bullshit. We’re not a couple.”

“Not yet.” I wink just to ruffle her feathers some more. She’s so damn sexy when she gets angry.

Simone throws her hands in the air. “You’re impossible.”

“And you’re beautiful. Bold. Sexy. Intelligent—”

“Bossy. Overly opinionated,” Punk adds as he waltzes into the tech room to plant his ass in the chair next to my computer station. He snaps his fingers as he suddenly recalls something. “Oh, and obstinate.”

A year later, and these two still give each other shit. There have been periods of peace between them, but they always revert back to bickering.

“Very stubborn,” I agree. “But fuck you for being a dick to my woman.”

“I’m not your woman!”

The entire tech room laughs at Simone like she just told the funniest joke. She can deny it until she’s blue in the face, but the whole MC knows she’s mine. She only needs to admit it to herself. Once she does, she’ll be sitting pretty as my queen at my side, where I’ll spoil her rotten like she deserves.

“Look, I get you trying to protect what’s yours,” Gauge intervenes.

“I’m right here!” Simone yells, her face turning red with rage. “Don’t talk about me like I’m a piece of property.”

Gauge ignores her outburst. “Believe me, brother, I understand your concern. But Trent isn’t coming to the club. He won’t be anywhere near Simone.”

My head falls back as I close my eyes. “I made Simone head auditor on the assignment.”

Gauge groans, pulling out his cell to fire off a text. “Atlas is going to flip when he hears this.”

Punk breaks out into a fit of giggles. “That fucking blows. Glad I’m not you.”

Undeterred, I shrug. “If we don’t back out, then Simone doesn’t work the case.”

Simone’s head whips to me faster than a bullet from a gun. “You’ve got to be joking if you think I’m backing out of the chance to smear Trent and Cynthia’s names through the mud for not catching this pilfering operation happening right under their noses. Don’t you dare threaten to remove me from this mission.”

“It could be therapeutic for her,” Gauge agrees.

“Help her move forward,” Ziggy, my tech assistant and MC brother, adds.

“Again with you buffoons talking about me like I’m not here!” Simone shouts to the room.

Punk cups his ear, straining. “Did you hear something? Sounded like a blow horn.”

Ziggy laughs. “Really? I thought it was Charlie Brown’s teacher talking.”

Simone glowers at my brothers. “I hate you all.”

“Enough, children,” Atlas orders in a deep voice as he enters the tech room. “The lot of you squawk as loud as my boys.”

Prez looks tired but still alert enough to beat all our asses if he’s so inclined. His baby twin boys have been a handful. With Jo pregnant with another set of twins, he’s been doing everything he can to make her pregnancy easier, even doing the nightly feedings. Hence, his foul mood.

“Nobody better be teasing my sister-in-law. Last thing I need is blowback from Jo because you guys were a bucket of assholes. Chase? Simone? My office—now.”

Great. It’s like being told to go to the school principal. This will not go in my favor.

I follow Simone into Atlas’s personal office, ready to plead my case.

Atlas shuts the door before speaking. “What the hell were you thinking assigning Simone to this case? And without consulting me or Gauge first?”

I grimace, realizing I overstepped. This is Atlas’s security company, and his club. He runs this ship as tight as he did when he was a captain in the navy. But even he consults with me, Gauge, and Punk before making heavy calls. I should’ve run this by him first. Atlas has pretty much let me operate my tech team the way I see fit. He wouldn’t object to having Simone assist on the case. However, he would have vetoed that suggestion, knowing her ex would be active in our investigation.

“I admit, I fucked up. With your permission, I’d like to recant my invitation for Simone to join the team on this assignment.”

“Over my dead body,” Simone snaps.

Atlas runs a hand down his face. “Simone—”

“Don’t,” she warns her brother-in-law. “Don’t you dare remove me from the team.”

“Jo would kill me if that sleazy fucker is around you again,” Atlas states adamantly.

Simone stomps up to Atlas—a David facing Goliath, completely unaffected by his intimidating size. “Atlas,” she pleads. “Don’t. I need this.”

Atlas is silent for a long moment, eyeing Simone, almost like he’s assessing if she can handle being on this assignment. Whatever he sees makes him release a sigh of resignation.

Ah, fuck me. She just had to play on his emotions. I need to swing this back around.

“It’s a conflict of interest,” I state firmly.

Simone turns her storm-colored eyes on me, glaring daggers. “And where was this conflict of interest ten minutes ago, when you asked me to join?”

“A poor oversight.”

“Chase, you want her on your team. Her history with the company and her vast knowledge of accounting are a massive asset. Had this assignment fallen into our laps a year ago when she left the company, that argument may have worked,” Atlas counters.

“It’s not about the company, but who’s still at the company,” I amend.

Atlas gives me an apologetic smile. “She needs closure.”

Frustrated, I toss my hands in the air. *Unbelievable.*

Prez looks at his sister-in-law. “You’re in.”

“Yes,” Simone hisses in victory.

“However...” Atlas pauses, making sure he has Simone’s undivided attention. “This case has nothing to do with your ex and his mistress. If you go into this like it’s a witch hunt, I will pull you out myself. Do I make myself clear?”

“Crystal,” Simone replies. “I’m a professional. My feelings won’t interfere with the assignment.”

“Make sure it stays that way,” he warns her. Atlas addresses me. “We got a problem?”

I shake my head at the wall before meeting his cold glare. “You’re such a fucking hypocrite.”

“Come again?” Atlas marches into my bubble. We’re chest-to-chest, both ready to hash it out.

“You heard me. When Jo tried to work with her ex-boyfriend on the new headquarters build, you threatened to take the project away from her unless she sent him packing.”

“That was different,” Atlas growls. “The fucker wanted in her pants.”

“And you think Simone’s ex hasn’t been hounding her over the past year to get back into hers? Doesn’t matter if he’s still screwing Simone’s ex-boss. He wants what’s mine.”

Simone huffs. “For the love of God! Knock it off, Chase. I’m not some meek person who’ll roll over and take Trent back. And this possessive shit is getting old. You’re not my boyfriend.”

I point a finger at her, giving her a measured look. “You’re right. I’m your man. Get used to my overprotective side. It’s here to stay, baby.”

“Simone’s out for blood, brother. You don’t need to worry about Trent getting anywhere near her pants. She’ll bite the bastard if he tries.”

“I’ll do worse than that,” Simone vows, crossing her arms over her ample chest.

This outcome isn’t acceptable. “Atlas, I don’t trust him. She can hand him his balls all day, but the creep doesn’t take no for an answer. If he did, he would have left her alone a long time ago. I’m going to be stuck in their security room or in their main computer servers—there’ll be no eyes on her.”

“I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself,” Simone interjects.

“No. Chase is right. Most of the team won’t be going through the paper archives, which will definitely be in a separate room away from the tech team. If Chase feels this guy is a threat, then he’s a threat. Jo would be one pissed off hellcat if I left you without security.”

Simone’s eye twitches, but she doesn’t argue. When it comes to protection, our MC doesn’t fuck around.

Atlas turns to me. “Who do you want covering her detail?”

Easy. “I want Punk.”

Simone scoffs. “Absolutely not!”

Atlas doubts my choice, too. “You really want to assign Punk? They don’t exactly get along.”

“He’s the only one I trust with her.”

“I’m not having that moron shadowing me, telling me what I can and cannot do. Besides, he’s Jo’s guard dog.”

“Tank watches Jo, too. He can handle her security while Punk is away,” I remind her.

“Get over it, sis. Punk’s your security for the assignment. Chase wants him,” Atlas says, with finality. “Get your team in order. You leave for Sacramento next week.”

CHAPTER TEN

Atlas approving Simone's position on the team has my composure slipping.

"Fuck!" I shout, grabbing fistfuls of my hair as I retreat from Atlas's office. I'm so goddamn irate—I need to cool off before I can return to my work.

"Chase," Atlas calls after me, "where are you going?"

"Out," I snap, not bothering to look over my shoulder, where his hulking presence follows me. "I need some air."

"Don't do anything stupid," he warns from behind me.

A bitter laugh leaves my lips. "Stupider than asking Simone to work with her ex? I think I've filled my stupid quota for a lifetime, don't you think?"

Atlas curses, then hollers for our brothers. "Ravens! Anyone available needs to go with Chase. Make sure he stays out of trouble, while I secure headquarters. Punk, send me a text whenever you reach wherever it is you go. Gauge and I'll be right behind you."

I want to argue I don't need babysitters, but my complaint will fall on deaf ears. What Prez says goes, and no one argues with Atlas. If he says I need supervision, then I need supervision. No questions asked.

Fine, my brothers can tag along for my pity party. I don't give a flying fuck. Most of the crew, like Eagle, Stage, Triple, Flay, Butch, Tank, and Ziggy, are working tech or security around headquarters. Meaning only about half the brotherhood will witness my meltdown. I can deal with that.

Punk hurries to catch up with me. “What’s the plan, bro? Do you want to head over to the gun range and shoot some shit up? A long ride on the hogs? What do you need?”

“I need a drink.”

“A drink?” I can hear the judgment in Punk’s cynical tone as he says, “It’s only noon, Chase.”

“*It’s five o’clock somewhere,*” Reaper sings with a nasal twang as he and Brass follow me and Punk out of headquarters to the garage, where our hogs are.

The ride over to Mickey’s Pub isn’t long enough to take the edge off my anger. Not even the cool mountain air with the scent of fall leaves in the breeze is enough to settle my temper over my shit situation. Hopefully, a bourbon and some lunch will calm me down, or at least hit the spot, before I need to return to my tech lair.

Mickey’s Pub is the Mercy Ravens MC local bar of choice. It’s a rustic, timbered building along the outskirts of the city, surrounded by tall aspen trees and close to the Rocky Mountains. It may be a little rough around the edges, much like the old man who runs the joint, but it’s clean, always stocked with booze, and has good food. Being close to the highway makes it a popular spot for bikers, truckers, and blue-collar workfolk.

Today’s lunch special is gyros—a favorite among the locals. The bar is crowded for the lunch hour, but the patrons step out of our way when they spot our biker cuts. We’re not a nefarious biker club, but we don’t exactly take shit either. While at Mickey’s, we’re more like the bouncers of the pub. You start shit, and we finish it.

Old Man Mickey waves us up to his bar. “What brings you boys in at this early hour?”

“Bourbon,” I say with a huff as I sit on a stool at the bar.

Mickey raises a bushy white brow at me. “A little early to be hitting the hard stuff, son, don’t you think?”

“That’s what I said,” Punk adds to the criticism, taking the stool next to me.

“Will you lay off me? My woman is going to be working with her ex, and it’s my goddamn fault.”

Mickey whistles low between his teeth, turning to the top shelf to pull down a bottle of Blanton’s. He pours me a tumbler over ice and passes me the amber liquor.

“That’s shit luck, son. Here, drink up. It’s on the house. But do this old man a favor. Order some food and don’t start a bar fight. Okay?”

“Sure thing, Mickey,” I say, raising my drink to him before taking a slow sip and enjoying the burn of the bourbon. If only it could burn away my frustration.

My brothers and I are digging into our gyros when the bar falls silent. There’s only one dude who earns that level of respect in these parts. I don’t bother greeting Prez when he takes the seat next to me at the bar and Gauge the seat next to him.

Mickey gives Atlas his usual Eagle Rare and a beer for our VP before heading into the kitchen to grab their food. The bar slowly returns to normal levels of easy conversation.

Atlas sips his bourbon, his eyes focused on the major league baseball postseason game playing on the flat screen TV as he addresses me. “You understand why I kept her on the assignment, right?”

The food in my mouth goes dry when he mentions Simone. I swallow down the jagged pieces before clearing my throat.

“The same reason I asked her to join the team. She’s an asset to the case. Doesn’t mean I have to be fucking happy about it.”

“No one said you had to be happy about it. You just need to keep your shit together while working the assignment, especially with the fuckwad ex involved.”

A few patrons behind us share heated words. We look over our shoulders to assess the situation. Two truckers at one table throw shade with two loggers at another regarding the baseball game. When it looks like the altercation isn’t escalating beyond verbal words, we turn our attention back to the bar.

“You say that like it’s easy. Trent will be near my woman. Can’t we request a different liaison?”

“On what grounds, Chase? Give us a different liaison because my head of tech has a problem with our auditor working with her ex?”

“Sure. Why not?”

Atlas gives me a pointed look. “You know damn well we’d look unprofessional as hell if I did that. The firm would be within its rights to break the contract. This is our livelihood, bro. We work the tough jobs that bring in the most money. This one will just be tougher for you. We wouldn’t be having this conversation if you didn’t go over my head—I would’ve put a full stop to it.”

“I agree. It’s my fault for inviting her to join. Still, circumstances have changed for this mission. When shit changes on the job, you make the appropriate adjustments for optimal success.”

Atlas nods. “Problem is, there’s no better substitute for Simone. She knows the financial firm, the building, the staff, how the system works, and she’s a damn good accountant.”

Desperate for a way out of this mess, I argue one last point. “He hurt my woman, Prez. She doesn’t deserve him creeping on her while working the case.”

Atlas lays a hand on my shoulder. “You know your woman is tough as nails, brother. If Simone couldn’t handle her ex, she would’ve backed out. But she didn’t. That says a lot about her character. She isn’t going to let what he did affect her, nor should you. She’ll have Punk watching over her, and you’ll be there to oversee it all.”

Feeling a migraine coming on, I push my fingers under my glasses, pinching the bridge of my nose. As much as it pains me to admit it, Atlas is right. Simone can handle this case. She belongs on the team, and I need to get over my insecurities. The question is, how?

“Talk to her,” Gauge urges me, reading my mind. “Tell her your concerns and talk them out.”

“Preferably when you’re more rational,” Atlas adds.

“Again, not easy when she avoids me and thinks all I want is to get in her pants.”

Gauge is quick to respond. “When the opportunity arises, be frank with her. Don’t think with your dick, speak with your heart, and be honest.”

All the tips my brothers are giving me are simple, but putting them into action will be my biggest obstacle, as well as getting her alone. I just need an opportunity, just one moment of her time, to have a heart-to-heart before we leave for Sacramento.

The men bickering behind us start shouting. Our crew turns on our stools to face them. Mickey doesn’t need this kind of shit happening in his pub. It’s only a matter of minutes before the verbal fighting will turn physical, and then we’ll step in like we always do.

Brass leans over to Reaper. “Twenty on the young, skinny trucker throwing the first punch.”

Reaper eagerly shakes on it. “Deal. You may as well pay up. The younger one will say something to piss off the older logger. Loggers always throw the first punch.”

“I’m with Reaper on this one,” Punk chimes in. “Young dudes always instigate.”

“You would know,” Gauge chides him. “You’re always starting shit.”

Punk looks at the VP with the biggest smirk on his face. “Did you just admit to being the old man in this situation?”

“Asshole, I’m not old. I’m only six years older than you.”

My best friend can’t help taking another dig at Gauge. “You may as well round up to a decade. Pretty soon, you’ll need to buy the little blue pills to keep up with Opal.”

Gauge stands from his barstool. “Fuck you and your blue pills, Punk. I don’t need shit to keep my old lady satisfied. My baby in her belly proves it.”

Atlas puts out his arm to stop Gauge from advancing on Punk. "Brothers," he growls, calling our crew to order.

No sooner does he speak, fists fly across the room. The logger swings out, missing the trucker by the skin of his teeth. The trucker, realizing he's pushed the older logger too far, backpedals, trying to dodge the next punch. The logger chases him around the table, yelling at the younger guy to fight.

Desperate, and possibly scared, the trucker throws things to deter the logger from pursuing him. First it's a beer bottle, followed by a plate of food. All the trucker achieves is infuriating the logger more.

Frothing like a junkyard dog, the older logger charges at the trucker just as the younger guy winds up to throw a single-serve container of cucumber sauce. The logger crashes into the trucker, sending the shot wide. The sauce sails through the air before hitting Atlas in the heart of his leather cut over his president's patch.

The whole pub gasps in horror. Mickey grumbles, knowing exactly what's about to transpire.

"Ooooh, this is bad," Brass whispers.

"Very bad," Reaper agrees, with a smile in his voice. He turns to Brass with his eyes alight. "Twenty bucks on Prez losing his shit."

"You already got twenty out of me. Do I look like I want to take another losing bet? Hard pass."

Atlas runs his hand over his cut, scooping up the cucumber sauce before flicking it on the floor. He closes his eyes a moment as he turns his neck to the side, popping the vertebrae in his spine.

"Easy, Atlas," Gauge cautions Prez, eager to calm him down.

The VP's wary words aren't enough to settle Atlas's internal beast. When Atlas opens his dark eyes again, they're coal black and full of rage. The veins in his neck stand at attention as his fury rises to the surface.

“Esto significa guerra.”

Faster than the strike of a cobra, Atlas grabs his bar stool and launches it across the room. It *whizzes* through the air before knocking the two men to the floor. The other patrons scramble to get out of the way, afraid of getting caught in the crossfire.

Unfortunately for these two guys, they disrespected the Mercy Ravens MC leather cut. The trucker could've nailed Atlas in the balls without provoking this violent reaction, but sadly, he aimed too high. It's worthy of a beatdown.

Atlas roars, running at the perpetrators. The logger and trucker's comrades try to stop Atlas by jumping on his back. Seeing Prez under attack activates Brass and Reaper into action. Each of them takes a man off Atlas, dishing out a few well-earned punches to the stupid men.

Free of restraint, Atlas grabs the instigators by the cuffs of their shirts, hauling them to their feet. He tosses the skinny trucker at Gauge, who knocks the guy out cold with one punch. Atlas gut punches the logger, bringing the gnarled man to his knees before breaking a plate full of gyros over his head.

Punk jumps up on the bar with several containers of single-serve cucumber sauce, yelling, “Food fight!” He then beans random patrons in the head with the little plastic containers, white sauce exploding everywhere.

The bar erupts into chaos, food and drinks soaring through the air.

Groaning, I turn on my stool to face the bar. Mickey glowers at me, with cucumber sauce smeared down the front of his plaid button-down. The old man isn't going to let this slide.

I pull out my wallet, handing him my credit card. “Technically, I didn't start the fight. But I'll pay for the damages.”

Mickey swipes the card out of my hand, trading me with a mop and bucket. “Start cleaning, son.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

After the mighty Battle of Cucumber Sauce and messy cleanup that followed, our crew rides back to headquarters, showers, and returns to work as usual.

Needing a distraction from my bitter mood, I retreat to my tech room to keep myself busy. Butch and Ziggy give me a wide berth, knowing I need time to digest this bitter pill. They keep to themselves, letting me fall into my work unbothered.

It's been several hours since I found out Trent will be the liaison, and I'm no less on board with Simone working on the assignment. Part of my discomfort comes from not knowing where I stand with Simone and the uncertainty of our future. The other part is me being a territorial asshole, not wanting her ex near her. Not only do I see Trent as a threat, I want to shelter my woman from getting hurt again.

I'm finishing up hotel reservations for the upcoming assignment when there's an alert on my monitor for the front gate of the compound. I check the video feed, finding a caravan of three blacked-out armored SUVs. There's only one man in the area who travels with security not supplied by our club.

The buzzer rings for the front gate. I hit the intercom button. "There's nothing on the schedule for Bianchi. What's this about?"

"Boss needs to speak with Atlas," Bianchi's driver states.

"Then he calls ahead and makes an appointment," I inform him. "Prez doesn't like unexpected guests on our turf."

“Chase,” I hear Piero Bianchi coo in the background. “Come on, man. I was in the area and need to speak to my brother. Besides, your MC owes me.”

I shake my head. Piero helped us financially one time, and suddenly the guy thinks our crew is indebted to him. “We gave you what we had on your crooked cousin. We’re square.”

Piero chuckles darkly. “That deal was a trade for trade—helping you track Esteban Moreno for what little you’d collected on Lorenzo Bianchi. Funding your mission to recover your MC’s First Lady...we both know there’s a debt to pay. So be a good foot soldier and inform your president I’m here.”

Cocky sonofabitch.

I call Atlas’s cell. He answers with a clipped, “Yes?”

“Your mobster side piece is here,” I quip. “He’s sitting at the gate, begging for your affection.”

“I heard that,” Piero seethes over the intercom.

“Wasn’t trying to hide it, and I don’t hear you denying my claim.”

Atlas groans. “Stop poking the don. Let him in and escort him to the larger conference room.”

I hit the button for the front gate and watch as Piero’s crew pulls onto the property. I fire off a quick text to Eagle and Stage to greet the royal bastard up front.

These are the sorts of meetings Atlas prefers his closest men present for. Being third-in-command puts me in his inner circle.

Lucky me. I grab my tablet and make my way to the conference room.

Atlas and Gauge are already present when I enter. “Behave,” Atlas warns me as I take my seat.

“Don’t I always?”

Punk grumbles upon entering the room. He takes a seat next to me, muttering curses. He’s no more a fan of Piero than

I am.

Gauge points an accusatory finger at Punk. “And you definitely need to behave.”

“Sure thing, old man,” Punk taunts him, with a salute.

Gauge opens his mouth, probably to throw an insult back at Punk, but he snaps it shut when Piero enters the room with his entourage. Eagle and Stage escort them with their assault rifles.

“Are the armed guards necessary when I visit, Atlas?”

“Come without your war party, and my crew won’t meet you with guns.”

The two men are silent for a moment, staring each other down. It’s like the meeting of the alphas, both trying to establish dominance as they wait for the other to break eye contact first. It doesn’t take long before they crack with smiles.

Piero goes to Atlas, extending his hand. Prez meets him halfway, pulling him into a bro-hug. “Brother,” Atlas greets warmly.

“Always good to see you, *mio fratello*.” He pulls away from Atlas, his dark eyes narrowing on me. “At least someone in this club is civilized.”

I press my palm to my chest, with a mock frown on my face. “I’m wounded.”

Atlas gives me a warning look. I raise my hands in surrender. Pushing Prez’s buttons won’t do me any favors. He’s not above assigning me cleanup duty in the communal bathrooms at headquarters.

“What brings you to Fort Collins?” Atlas asks the don, ushering for him to have a seat.

Piero sits across from me and Punk, making himself right at home. “Business.”

Punk folds his arms over his chest. He looks away, muttering under his breath. I kick him under the table with my

boot. The fucker has the nerve to kick me back.

I get why Punk is upset. He doesn't trust Piero. There's only so much faith you can have in a mafia kingpin. Our crew may not be squeaky clean, but we do more good than bad. Piero has made great strides to legitimize his businesses and scrub himself clean of his family's way of life. Yet he still has ties to dirty operations, and old habits die hard.

Too bad our MC owes him for his help in recovering Jo, and then Prez when he'd switched places with his wife.

The only question is, what will he ask from us as payment?

Atlas rubs at his jaw, looking completely relaxed. He's been ready to do whatever repayment is necessary for quite some time. "What can we help you with?"

"It requires the assistance of your hacker."

Fuck me.

Punk curses beside me. I lay a hand on his shoulder to settle him. No point in showing our dissatisfaction until we learn exactly what he wants.

Atlas says nothing for a moment as he stares down Piero. "If you're wanting my brother to hack into something you're unwilling to use your own tech team for, then my answer is no."

Piero shakes his head. "It's nothing like that, I assure you. My men have tried and are getting nowhere. I need Chase's skills."

He's piqued my interest. I sit a little straighter in my chair. Presenting a cyber challenge to a hacker where others have failed is like presenting cocaine to a crack addict. My palms are already itching to hit my keyboard.

"What's the assignment?" Gauge asks.

"Searching for my shitty cousin's hidden money."

"We gave you what we had on Lorenzo, and it led you to that sweet little accountant you had us interrogate." Punk taps

a finger to his lips, musing. “What was her name again? Rosanne? Ramona?”

Piero tenses. His look becomes murderous. “Her name is Rowan. And you will keep her name out of your filthy mouth.”

Attacking a weakness is Punk’s favorite game. He takes full advantage of pissing off the mafia don. “Right. Now I remember. Rowan Emerson. Fuck, she was one hot little thing. All that thick, chestnut-colored hair. *Mmm*. Man, I’d love to have her on the back of my bike. You think she has a thing for bikers? Mind putting in a good word for me?”

Having reached his limit for razzing, Piero stands in a flash, his chair skittering behind him on its wheels. He leans across the table, grabbing Punk by his cut. “Don’t you fucking go near her. If you do, I swear it will be the last thing you do.”

Punk is as giddy as a kid in a candy store, unaffected by Piero fisting his vest in a death grip. “HA! Looks like the big old don has a thing for Miss Emerson.”

Atlas rolls his eyes. “He baited you, bro.”

Punk makes kissy noises, further insulting Piero. The mafia boss releases Punk in disgust, settling back into his chair like a sulking child. “If you weren’t one of Atlas’s men, I would end you.”

“Piero and Rowan sitting in a tree. K-I-S-S-I-N-G,” Punk sings out of key.

My hand covers my smile as I shake with silent chuckles. Punk is exceptionally gifted at getting underneath one’s skin, and Piero made it too easy. It’s also comical seeing a badass biker singing a nursery rhyme.

“Let’s get back on topic,” Gauge insists, shutting down our fun. “We all have shit to do.”

“As I was saying,” Piero continues, anger still radiating from him. “I need Chase to locate the rest of my cousin’s dirty money. What the FBI seized is only the surface. Miss Emerson is assisting with tracking the funds Lorenzo invested with Donovan & Walt.”

“Willingly, I’m sure,” Punk heckles. Rowan is likely an unwilling participant in this investigation.

Atlas gives Piero a pointed look. “You better not be forcing her hand. I won’t tolerate you threatening or harming an innocent person.”

“Please,” Piero chides, smoothing his tie. “I don’t need to force any woman to do anything. And Miss Emerson is far from innocent in this mess. She’s trying to protect whoever was the culprit behind the account transactions between Lorenzo and Esteban Moreno. If she doesn’t want me going after the real offender, then she’ll do this favor for me.”

None of us disagrees. Rowan wanting to protect the perpetrator who assisted two deceased, nefarious crooks is unsettling. She must have her reasons. We’ll leave it to Piero to solve that enigma.

“There’s more of Lorenzo’s dirty money stashed out there—much more. I want those funds.”

I look at Atlas, trying to get a read on him. It’s difficult to decipher his thoughts when he normally has a hard look to his features. But Atlas appears thoughtful as he mulls over Piero’s words. “Is this money going toward a good cause?”

AKA: Is this going to help those victimized by the Bianchi mob?

“If taking down the heads of my family by whatever means necessary is a good cause, then yes.”

Bringing an end to a mafia family known for countless criminal activities, including dealing in human trafficking, is a score in our books. Our mercenary gigs are loaded with enough recovery missions. Knocking out the Bianchi’s flesh trade will ease some of our load stateside.

Atlas shows no outward emotion, but I can hear he’s pleased when he asks his next question. “Will you be needing our services when executing this agenda?”

Piero smirks. “I only hire the best. And I’ll be paying you with clean money—not my cousin’s.”

Clean cash is the only acceptable transaction our MC takes. Bonus for us.

Atlas looks at me, then Gauge and Punk. We nod in agreement. “Deal.” Atlas sticks out his hand.

They shake, signing my hacking skills over to Bianchi. “Excellent.” Piero turns his attention toward me. “I’ll have my tech team hand over everything we’ve collected to yours.”

“No rush,” I pipe up. “My tech team and I are going on assignment for a few weeks. I won’t have time to invest in your money recovery operation until we return.”

The mob don nods. “I’ll send it regardless. Better to have it available for when you’re ready.”

Atlas and Gauge walk Piero and his security detail out, while Punk and I remain seated in the conference room. I can’t help grinning at the delectable cyber challenge Piero laid in my lap.

Punk snorts at my expression. “God, you’re such a dork, getting hard over a hacking job.”

I punch him in the shoulder as I stand and head out of the room, laughing. “Love my work, but the boner in my pants is for your eldest sister.”

Behind me, Punk makes a gagging noise. “Sick bastard.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Today has sucked a bag of dicks. It started off fine. I was in my perfect working groove before Chase walked his sexy ass into my office. He practically made me drool like one of Pavlov's dogs, with his muscles straining through the fabric of his tight T-shirt and leather cut.

It's been hellish, denying my longing for Chase. When I told him I needed time a year ago, it was to get over my loss before entering a relationship with anyone else. Chase tested me every day, but as time went on, I wasn't sure why I was holding back anymore.

Not true. I knew why.

One, I didn't want to get hurt. Two, I didn't want to rush into another relationship. And three, if I was going to pursue Chase, I didn't want him thinking he was my rebound. He deserved more than that, and I was slowly coming around to the idea of dating.

But everything went boots up when Gauge dropped the bomb that peckerhead Trent was going to be the liaison for our client.

Of all the people in the firm, they had to pick the one whose dick I want to cut off.

Then Chase had to get all growly and territorial, like a Neanderthal chasing suitors off his woman. Was it hot? Heck yeah, it was. But it wasn't helping the current issue involving me working alongside my ex.

And then Atlas had to go full protective alpha, assigning Punk to babysit me.

Mom and Dad caught wind of the assignment, ya know, because no one knows how to keep their damn mouth shut in the club. I swear it's worse than middle school kid gossip. When I stepped into their gaudy-looking cottage for dinner, I knew I'd get an earful.

Mom squawks at me like a mother hen. Her small arms flutter animatedly at her sides as she scolds me, adding to the whole chicken vibe. "Simone Eira Holland, don't you dare consider following through with this case. The team can manage fine without you."

They could. But with my help, the case would go faster. Smoother. They need me.

"Stella," my dad warns, not looking up from his tablet at the dining room table. "Simone wants to be on the team. She can handle this assignment better than the lot of them."

His confidence warms my heart and makes my eyes water. "Thanks, Dad."

He looks at me with a tender smile, squeezing my folded hands resting on the table.

"Jim," my mother huffs. The large teak wooden kitchen spoon in her hand suddenly looks more like a baton, ready to be thrown at either of us. "It has taken a year—A YEAR—to move on from what that creep put her through. This face-to-face could set her back. All this time wasted over that jerk, when she could be happy with Chase."

I sigh. Why are people always talking about me like I'm not in the room? My parents haven't hid their preference for Chase, often suggesting how great a couple we'd be. What made it worse was, I knew how great we'd be together, have known for a year. And just like Chase, my parents are worried about Trent weaseling his way back into my life.

There's no chance I'd let it happen.

My dad's brows pull together, his aqua-colored eyes focused on my mom. "The last time we gave our unsolicited

advice, it nearly cost us our relationship with Jo. Do I want Simone to work on this assignment? Hell no, I don't. But we raised our daughters right, Stella. Jo walked away from the architectural firm because she knows her worth. Simone wants to help the team because she knows her worth, too. It's time we stop interjecting our beliefs and let them do what they feel is right."

Unhappy, Mom returns to the robin-egg blue kitchen, slamming cabinet doors as she goes back to preparing dinner.

I love my parents, I do. They only want what's best for me and my sister. But sometimes their opinions are biased, only thinking of what they feel, not what may be best for us.

"I'll pay for that later," my dad groans, returning his attention to his eBook. "You don't think she'd poison me, do you? She's still making my dinner."

I smirk. "No, Dad. She still needs you for your pension."

"I heard that," Mom hollers over her clanking pans.

My dad and I snigger, returning to safer topics of discussion.

Wanting to drown my sorrows after dinner, I escape to Jo's house for some quality sister time. Since Atlas doesn't hide anything from Jo, he informed her of the team going on assignment. Thankfully, she didn't jump down my throat, steering clear of any conversation regarding it. I'm sure Jo has an opinion, but she's trying to respect my decision to stay on the case.

I knock back my second glass of wine like it's a shot. It's a shame, because it's a superb wine and should be enjoyed sip by sip. I raise my glass above my head from where I sit on the oversized sectional in Jo's classy mid-century modern living room.

"Fill 'er up!"

Jo rolls her coastal blue eyes, filling my glass. “Slow down and savor it, dammit. I have to live vicariously through you while I’m pregnant. The least you could do is taste the wine.”

I wave a hand at her. “Fine. I’ll drink slower. You happy?”

Jo sits next to me, kicking her feet up on the coffee table. She runs her hand over her new baby bump, trying to relax after putting her infant twins to bed. “Describe it for me—in vivid detail.”

“It’s full-bodied with herbal notes,” Punk says, taking another long sip. “It has a slight earthy zest, pairing nicely with rich currant flavors.”

God, I want to throat-punch him. It’s bad enough having Punk being my bodyguard for the upcoming assignment. But having to share my younger sister with him pisses me off.

“Why are you here?”

“It’s Winey Wednesday,” he answers matter-of-factly, glaring at me with equal distaste. It’s a juxtaposition, an inked biker in leather sitting in a posh living room, drinking a glass of red wine like a sommelier. However, I’ve witnessed Punk in bizarrely similar situations enough not to be affected by its shock value. “I’m always here on Winey Wednesday.”

Unfortunately for me, he is.

Opal, Gauge’s wife, giggles beside him, her baby bump barely showing. She’s the sweetest one in the whole MC, always bubbly with her rainbow streaked hair radiating happiness and smelling like the delicious desserts she makes daily for the club. “Punk, you’re here every day. You may as well move in.”

“Maybe I will,” Punk muses aloud. “Hey, sis? Can we be roommates?”

Jo rips her nose out of my glass to answer, grimacing as if it pains her to stop inhaling its scent. “Punk, I love you, but even I have limitations.”

“Wow. That’s harsh, sis.”

“I’ll settle for lots of sleepovers,” Jo offers.

He lifts an eyebrow. “During Romcom Sundays?”

“Sure.”

“Excellent!”

Great. Yet another thing I’ll have to share with the moron. “I call the guest room in the back.”

“Not fair.” Punk pouts like the adolescent man-child he is. “I don’t want the front bedroom. It gets too much sunlight in the morning. I need my beauty rest.”

A snide remark about Punk not improving his looks with more sleep is on the tip of my tongue when Ebony comes tromping in the front door, loaded down with shopping bags. Jared, Jo’s best friend and general contractor, follows behind Eb, his arms filled with more bottles of wine. Red and Candy bring in the rear, making a beeline for the wine goblets in the kitchen.

Jo’s Cane Corsos, Hades and Runt, go ballistic with all the new arrivals, barking and running around in fast circles. Jo jumps to her feet to let them outside before one of them wakes the twins. I can’t help laughing as she corrals them to the front door like a cowgirl.

“What’s up, my bitches?! I brought the goods.” Ebony drops the bags on the coffee table in front of us. “We’re doing hair scalp masks.”

Punk groans, pointing at his shaved head. “Not fair, Eb.”

She pulls out some sunflower oil. “I got you covered. We’ll have you shining like a bowling lane.”

“Thanks, *chica*.”

I sort through the hair mask options in the bags, coming away with one that grabs my attention. “Oooh. Rosemary and sage. That sounds quite nice. Very holistic.”

Fifteen minutes later, the entire group is in Jo and Atlas’s spacious luxury master suite bathroom, applying the scalp treatments to our damp hair.

Red and Candy whisper, occasionally glancing at me in the mirror before averting their eyes.

I hate gossip. Either say it to my face, or keep your mouth shut. “What’s up?”

Red bites her bottom lip, looking to Candy. Candy shrugs, then asks, “Are you sure you want to confront your dick-for-brains ex?”

“We don’t want you getting hurt,” Red adds softly.

The topic proves too much for my sister. Jo growls beside me, turtle-waxing Punk’s head a little too roughly.

“Ow! Sis, take it easy on my noggin!”

“Sorry, Punk,” she apologizes to him before addressing me. “I’m not on board with you being anywhere near that asshole. It’s taken you a year to move past the trauma of his cheating ass.”

I heave a sigh. “It’s not like I’m doing this because I want to be by my ex-boyfriend and old boss. Trust me. I’d rather go the rest of my life without having to deal with either of them.”

Jared cocks his head at me. “Then why take on the case?”

“Aside from sticking it to Trent and Cynthia?” I hesitate, unsure if I’m ready to admit it out loud.

Everyone looks at me, motioning for me to spit it out.

“It’s...don’t laugh at me, okay? When Chase asked me to work the case with him, it made me, I don’t know. It made me feel special. That he thought so highly of my expertise, he wanted me working with him. He recognized my intelligence. It flattered me. When it came out Trent would assist us, I didn’t want to back out. Partly because I want to show Trent I’ve happily moved on. But more so because I didn’t want to let the team down, specifically Chase.”

All the girls gush in “Aws.” Jared and Punk exchange a knowing look.

“I know my brother. Chase wouldn’t have asked you to join his team unless you were the best candidate,” Punk states.

“Yeah, he’s hot for you, but he doesn’t let his feelings affect his work. No one on the crew does—that shit stays separate. Chase assigning you to the case has nothing to do with wanting you on his arm. However, him wanting you off the assignment has everything to do with his feelings for you. He wants to keep you safe, Priss.”

“Trent doesn’t have a chance in hell of getting back with me,” I vow.

Jo scowls. “Doesn’t matter. There was no way I was going to let Jacob back in my life, but look how that blew up in my face when I made contact again.”

“Trent might be a jerk, but he’s not a predator,” I say.

“And no one suspected Jacob was either.” Jo gives me a pleading look. “Just promise you’ll listen to Chase and Punk while on this assignment. They’ll make sure Trent remains professional. You don’t need any unwanted attention from him.”

Fully aware of everything Jo went through with her ex, I can hardly say no. “I promise.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

My hair smells like a goddamn Butterball Turkey. Rosemary and Sage are fine, but mix them together, apply to your head, and heat with a blow dryer, and you'll be smelling like a Thanksgiving dinner.

It's late when we call it a night. The MC women left earlier with Jared to walk back to headquarters. Punk helps me and Jo clean the mess left behind from our pamper and spa night. I contemplate crashing in Jo's guest bedroom, but I didn't bring any of my toiletries or pajamas. I could borrow Jo's stuff, but I prefer my own.

With a yawn, I make my way to the front door.

Jo stops me. "Simone, wait. Punk will walk you back."

"No can do, Sis. I'm on guard patrol for you and the twins. Prez won't be happy if I leave you unattended."

"It's no biggie," I say as I reach the door.

"Let me call Maceo to come walk you back."

"Don't bother him, Jo. He's busy working on another trafficking case with Gauge. I can walk the few acres back home by myself."

Jo frowns. "I don't like you out when it's this late."

"Okay, worrywart. Calm down. It's not like this compound isn't secure to the max." I open the front door, exiting before she can protest. "Love you," I say, before quickly closing the door behind me.

The walk to headquarters isn't long, but it sure is spooky this late at night. With no streetlights to light my path, all I have are the bright stars and moon in the country sky.

I'm about halfway to my destination when I hear twigs snap behind me off in the brush. I come to a screeching halt, instantly alert.

Please don't be a bear. Or a wolf. Or a mountain lion.

When another stick cracks behind me, I spin around with my heart in my throat. Scared, I strain my eyes into the dark underbrush to see what's following me. The tall grass shakes from side to side as something large moves through it, coming closer...

My head is screaming at me to run, but my knees are knocking too dang hard to move away.

The grass parts as a giant black mass moves onto the gravel road. A smaller streak of silver follows behind it.

"Hades! Runt! You nearly scared the piss out of me."

Jo's dogs cock their enormous heads in that adorable way all dogs do.

I let out a loud exhale. At least it isn't wild animals stalking me. Only some giant Cane Corsos.

Hades sticks his snout forward, sniffing the air. Runt mimics him.

Cautiously, I look around me. Do they smell danger? Is there something else coming for me?

My head swivels back to the dogs, worry bubbling inside of me once again. "What is it, pups?"

Hades's giant tongue snakes out to lick his muzzle over his massive canines. His gold eyes are fixated on me.

Ah, shit. They don't smell danger. They smell a home-cooked turkey.

Hades and Runt whine with excitement, trotting towards me with their docked tails wagging faster than flags in a storm.

The dogs are sweethearts. However, I'm about to be taken down, where they'll lick me bald.

Runt is a runt, but even a runt Cane Corso is a big dog. Hades is a different beast altogether, coming in at a hundred and fifty pounds of solid muscle. He could easily knock me off my feet, unintentionally hurting me. Death by dog trample is not how I want to go out.

“Hey, now. Let's settle down. No need to come closer.”

When the dogs charge me, I bolt for headquarters. Luckily, I'd changed out of my business attire before going to dinner at my parents' home. But the maxi dress and flip-flops I'm wearing aren't exactly an upgrade from my suit and heels.

My flip-flops smack loudly against the gravel as I sprint for all I'm worth. It doesn't matter how hard I push myself, I'm losing steam, and I'm losing it fast. My stomach feels like a rock weighing me down, slowing my escape.

My efforts are futile. I won't make it back to headquarters before either of the dogs reaches me. I curse myself for being a swimmer instead of a runner. All those times Jo begged me to join her on a run—I should have gone. I'm going to be picked clean of my hair, like feathers from a goose.

There's a massive sycamore less than fifty yards away from the road. If I can reach the tree, I can avoid the dogs. My arms pump faster and my feet follow as I aim for the tree. The dogs follow close behind, yipping excitedly.

Thank God the branches are low, giving me the ability to scale the large trunk like a squirrel fleeing for safety. Runt can jump on the lower branch, but her small stature makes it impossible to go up further.

However, that's not the case with Hades. He jumps the first branch, then the second, followed by the third...

It should be impossible for dogs to climb trees, but here we are. And of course, I had to pick the one tree on the property to scale with branches wide enough to resemble treads on a staircase.

With my stomach in my throat, I climb higher toward safety. At some point, Hades won't be able to go any further, right? At least I hope so.

The branches narrow, stopping Hades from advancing. He throws his big block head back, howling like he's pleading for me to come closer.

Not a chance in hell. I happen to like having hair on my head.

To make sure I'm out of reach of the dogs, I go one limb higher. My feet are sweaty from the rubber of my sandals, causing me to slip in my advance. A scream rips from my lungs as I fall. I land with an *oof* on a large branch below, wrapping my legs and arms around it in time before I flip on the underside of the branch.

I'm hanging precariously from a tree branch, like a dangling carrot for the dogs. My fingers desperately grasp for purchase, clawing into the bark. I'm scared I may lose my grip, falling the rest of the way.

I scream out for the only person I can think of saving me.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The tech team and I have been at it for hours, finalizing all the last-minute details for the upcoming mission. Limiting Simone's contact with the firm while I can, I called ahead to have the paper archives for the past year ready for when we arrive onsite. If they've already moved the files to off-site storage, the firm employees will have them brought back to the building, reducing the amount of wasted time sitting around for the files.

My team will be small for this operation: Butch, Punk, Simone, and myself. Ziggy will remain at headquarters to assist with other cyber intel cases. Atlas and Gauge are busy working strategy for an entirely different case, but they're still going strong like the rest of us at this late hour.

I'm still bent Atlas sided with Simone to stay on as lead auditor for the assignment. The idea of her anywhere near her slimy ex has me grinding my molars to pulp.

On the plus side, Simone will have this assignment wrapped up in no time, meaning Trent will have limited time with her. I'll just need to stay vigilant and hope Punk does the same.

With the bulk of the work done, I sit back in my chair, releasing a loud yawn. I'm drained, but not tired. I rarely sleep, and the only time I sleep well is when I'm near Simone.

Fat chance of me getting that lucky. A man can only wish she'd fall right into his lap, begging to be taken to bed.

I look over at Ziggy, who looks as haggard as me. "Let's call it a night."

He nods, rubbing at his tired eyes. “I’m sure Jared’s missing me in bed.”

Lucky bastard has his cuddle partner for the night, whereas I have to go solo. I’m happy Ziggy has Jared as a husband. I only wish I had the love of my life, too.

I wave lazily at Butch, who’s on tech security for the night. My foot is about to cross the threshold when I hear roaring laughter behind me.

All heads turn to Butch quizzically. He doesn’t talk much, let alone laugh. The guy is practically mute by choice. Hearing him break out into hysterics is unusual.

Butch tries to cover his laugh with his fist, shaking his head at whatever he’s watching on the computer monitor.

Atlas questions him. “Care to share, brother?”

Butch gives a few clicks on the keyboard before the main screen on the wall shows a live video feed of the property.

A voice I know all too well screams through the overhead speakers, “CHAAAAAASE!”

There, in crystal clear night-vision, is my woman dangling upside down from the massive sycamore on the property, with Hades and Runt jumping excitedly underneath her.

Struck dumb, I gape at the live footage. I feel my lips mouthing, “What the fuck?”

The guys bust their guts, slapping their denim-covered knees and holding their sides.

Gauge squeezes my shoulder. “I think this is your opportunity, brother.”

Indeed it is.

I sprint from the tech room, nearly sliding past the patio doors in my haste. Throwing open the doors, I charge into the night, worried about my woman.

“I’m coming, Numbers. Hang on!”

Simone spots me approaching, her eyes wide and hopeful. “CHASE!” she says on a sob.

Once I’m onsite, I see she’s maybe eight feet above the ground. If she fell, it would hurt, but she most likely wouldn’t get injured. She’s barefoot, clinging to the branch with her long dress hiked up to her waist, flashing me some seriously hot lace panties. The dogs jump underneath her, trying to reach Simone. Hades is only a few inches short of reaching her. She squeals each time he gets close.

Knowing she isn’t in any danger, I chuckle. “Why the fuck are you in a tree?”

“Why the fuck aren’t you getting a ladder?” she fires back heatedly.

I laugh harder. “Babe, just let go. I’ll catch you.”

“NO! Are you nuts?! I weigh too much. I’ll hurt you.”

I shake my head. “Baby, you don’t weigh too much. I’ll be fine. Let go.”

Hades makes a running leap for her, his canines brushing the ends of her long, ash-brown hair. She screams bloody murder. “HE’S GOING TO EAT ME!”

I nearly double over in amusement. “Hades wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

Simone shakes her head fervently. “You don’t understand. I’m a turkey. I’m an oversized, plump turkey.”

There’s no way the guys aren’t losing their bladders watching us back in my tech lair. This is comic gold.

“Baby, you’re plump in *all* the right places, but you’re no turkey. Let go.”

She whimpers. “Call off the hellhounds.”

Shaking my head, I clear the humor from my voice. “Hades! Runt! Sit.”

The dogs obey me. They always obey me. Most of the guys are afraid of Hades, but not me. I see him for the big lap puppy he is.

With the dogs under control, I hold out my arms to Simone. “Let go.”

Simone shakes, her grip losing purchase. “You won’t drop me?”

“I’ll never let you fall,” I pledge.

With one final exhale, Simone releases her grip, free falling right into my awaiting arms, where I catch her easily.

Weights too much, my ass. Simone is ideal, fitting perfectly in the cradle of my arms. Just because my woman has curves and thick thighs, doesn’t mean she’s heavy. I’m a little butt-hurt she thought I wasn’t strong enough, as if the hours I put in at the gym were only for show.

Clutching her to my chest, I press my face to the top of her head, breathing her in. “You’re safe, Numbers.” I sniff her hair. “Mmm. And you smell good enough to eat.”

Simone smacks my chest, scrambling to free herself of my grip. “Shut it, Chase. Not another word about how I smell.”

With Simone back on two feet, the dogs bound for her, their tongues flapping about, and drool dripping from their jowls.

Simone screeches, climbing back up my body. “Pick me up. Pick me up!”

Amused, I let her scale my tall frame, monkey-wrapping herself around my waist as I stride for headquarters. “So the dogs ran you up a tree because you smell like a feast?”

“Stupid hair scalp mask,” Simone mutters as she clings to me like a life preserver.

Smiling like a fool, I shoo the dogs back home to Jo as we enter headquarters. I don’t set Simone down, only adjust her to have my hands full of her luscious ass as I ascend the stairs.

“Put me down, you brute,” she hisses, not wanting to awaken others in the building.

“No can do. I got you right where I want you.”

When she fights to get free, I swing her body over my shoulder with ease, completing the caveman persona I've adapted since meeting Simone. Her rump is right there by my face. There's no one around to see me getting fresh with her. I take a healthy bite full of her bottom.

Simone gasps, a delicious sound of ecstasy. She gains her wits, slapping my backside. "You animal!"

"And you were afraid of the dogs?" I hum with glee as I open her suite door, walking into her private domain.

Bypassing the bed, where I really want to go with her, I stride for the bathroom. There's no way she's going to talk to me before she's settled. Washing the scent of homemade stuffing from her hair is what's going to calm down her ornery ass the fastest.

Moving quickly, I set her on the bathroom counter, reaching into the shower stall to blast the water. I toss my glasses on the counter beside her. Simone sasses me up and down with her viper tongue, while I rid myself of my cut and boots.

When I reach behind my neck to grab the collar of my shirt, her eyes go wide, realizing I have every intention of joining her. She leaps from the counter in a poor attempt to escape me. God, I love a good chase. I snag her around her waist before she makes her way across the threshold on the bathroom door, hauling her into the shower, dress and all.

Simone sputters angrily as the warm water hits her in the face. "What the hell, Chase?! I'm not undressed."

"Neither am I, but you didn't give me much choice. Don't worry. I'll help you strip."

I go to lift the hemline of her skirt. She slaps away my hands, cursing me out.

Fine. Guess we'll shower with our clothes on. If she wants to be a brat, then I'll be an asshole.

I grab her shampoo, spinning her around to position her back to my chest.

As soon as I get the shampoo in her hair, I work my fingers through her silky strands. Simone stops fighting, sinking against my chest with a content moan. I would've loved to bathe her naked, but my angry hellcat would've cut off my balls with her manicured nails. They're hers regardless, but I still need them attached for when I give her babies someday. Hopefully soon.

Focused on my task, I massage her scalp, chasing away the dinner scent with something more floral. I rinse her hair, only to repeat the process with the conditioner before rinsing it away. With Simone finally relaxed, I take the small opportunity to touch her. My fingers work their way down her neck, rubbing out the small knots as I move to her shoulders.

"Numbers," I murmur against her head. "You're holding a lot of tension in your shoulders."

"That's so it doesn't come out in my fists," she hisses, with irritation.

Snickering, I wrap my arms around her waist. "I'm sorry. I know you mean every bit of that threat, but you're too damn cute when you're ragging."

Simone releases a long-winded sigh. "I'm not really mad at you. Annoyed, yes. But you came to my rescue."

"I'll always come for you," I murmur against her temple.

She trembles as my lips press a soft kiss to her delicate skin. My heart surges like cranking the throttle on my hog. I'm so damn excited to be this close to her after a year.

Simone lets me hold her from behind, sinking against me. It's been far too long since I've held her like this. It makes me hesitate bringing up my reservations. The last thing I need her to think is I'm a controlling dick, even though I kind of am with her. The point is, I want to be better for her. Jo and Atlas are always yapping about how open communication is needed in healthy relationships. Here goes nothing.

"Numbers, I'm not happy with you staying on this case."

"I know. But you need me."

“Fuck yeah, I need you.” I give her a gentle squeeze on her tapered waist. “And not only as my woman. You’re right for the job. Trent being involved is my only issue. The prick has no right to be near you. I just want to shelter you from him and any feelings resurfacing.”

She huffs. “I have no romantic feelings left for the jerk.”

I grimace, hating how Simone once did care for the creep. I push down my annoyance, focusing on her. “I was talking about the hurt he caused you. I don’t want you exposed to it—never.”

Simone turns in my arms, her gray eyes softening as she looks into mine. “I appreciate it, Chase. I do. But you need to trust me. I can handle this case, and Trent.”

My forehead presses to hers. “I know you can handle yourself. You always have. I have mad respect for your grit. It’s him I don’t trust.”

I want to tell her she doesn’t have to fight alone, that I’m here to defend her. Hell, I want her to let me handle all of it. But Simone wouldn’t like to be told to step aside—it goes against her nature to stand down and let a man handle business. Would it be horrible if I told her I’ll fight beside her?

Maybe another night. I’ve said enough already.

With the heavy stuff out of the way, I kiss her forehead. “I promise to behave if we get undressed.”

Half-expecting her to tell me to fuck off, I’m thrilled when I see her pull down the top of her dress, exposing her naked breasts. She doesn’t stop till the fabric has shimmied over her wide hips to a saturated pile on the shower floor. Her panties follow close behind.

I groan, fisting myself through my saturated jeans. Promising to keep my hands to myself was a mistake I regret making.

She juts out her chin at me. “Your turn.”

Shaking the lust from my thoughts, I try to pull my shirt over my head. Wet fabric has a tendency to cling to muscle

mass. Simone helps me tug the shirt off, her fingers trailing down to the waistband of my jeans. I don't dare stop her when she undoes them. Her touch is soft against my skin, feather light and ticklish. She pushes my jeans and boxer briefs down my legs, and I kick them aside.

Simone's eyes are trained on my straining cock. Unable to help myself, I clench my ass muscles to make it jump at her. She gulps, her eyes shooting to mine.

I raise a pierced brow at her. "I promised to behave. I never said I wouldn't get hard for you."

Simone's hands hesitate above my dick, like she wants to touch, but she knows touching will lead to heavier petting on both our parts.

"You really have a thing for piercings, don't you?"

She's referencing the impressive amount of metal bars and hoops I have adorning my cock and balls. "Do you want to touch?"

Her pink tongue sweeps out of her mouth to trace her top lip. It earns her another penis jump from me. "Did any of them hurt?"

"Pain doesn't bother me like some—I find it sexually enjoyable. The hafada ladder and lorum were nothing. But the apadravya hurt like a *sonofabitch* and took three months to heal."

"I've felt the apadravya when we..." She blushes a delicious cherry red.

If I was a gentleman, I'd drop the subject to save her from embarrassment. I'm anything but. "You mean when you let me rail your juicy, tight pussy?"

Her hands fly to her face to cover her flaming cheeks. "CHASE!"

"Did it feel good?" I ask, ignoring her protest when I remove her hands from her face and squeeze them in mine. "Answer me, baby. Did my dick metal add to your pleasure?"

The pretty blush on her cheeks has spread over her entire body. “Yes,” she whispers.

“Good. From the moment I came across your photo, I knew you were going to be mine. I only got it done in preparation to be with you. I wanted to give you more than I’ve given anyone before. Putting a barbell through the head of my cock seemed like a good way to add a pleasure button.”

Storm cloud eyes meet mine, but the typical thunderous anger isn’t present. A look of longing is in its place. “Chase, don’t tease.”

I take her oval face in my hands, staring deep into her eyes. “There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for you, Simone. You ask, and I’ll grant it.”

She bites her full bottom lip, white teeth scraping against the tender flesh. I wish it was me biting her instead.

“It’s been over a year since I moved here,” she states in a breathy whisper.

I stiffen, my nerves on high alert.

“I’m ready to move forward.”

My eyes dance between hers, trying to understand what she’s getting at. I have a wild guess, but my heart isn’t ready to get my hopes up yet. I need to hear her say the words.

“What are you saying, Simone?”

“I’m willing...”

Yes?

“...to start...”

Come on, baby.

“...dating.”

Dating?

“Say what? Date who?”

“You, you blockhead.”

I frown. “Dating? As in not a committed relationship?”

She cocks her hips, with her hands going to her waist in that all too familiar *I'm in charge* stance. “We need to work up to a commitment, Chase.”

“Why go through the formalities? You want me. I want you. Let’s make it official.”

Simone huffs. “Shawn Brighton!”

Using my legal name is a clear indicator I’ve pissed her off—again.

“I’m willing to stride toward a devoted relationship. Are you seriously fighting me on this?”

Yes. I’ve waited a long, long time to claim this woman in all the ways that matter. Dating seems arbitrary when we both know she’s going to be my wife sooner than later.

I run my wet hands over my face, willing myself to calm down. Simone is right for expressing what she needs to get us to the next level. And I’m being a stubborn dick for not looking at the bigger picture.

Simone wants to date me. She wants to build a relationship with me. This is progress.

Still upset it isn’t wedding bells, I manipulate my face into a smile. “Fine. We start with dating. But I have some boundaries.”

“Okay. Shoot.”

“We’re only dating each other—no one else.” To hell if she thinks she’s going on the dating market. She’s mine only.

Simone nods. “Agreed. Anything outside of monogamy is a deal breaker for me.”

Good. “Same.”

On to the next. “When we meet Trent next week, you’ll tell him we’re together as soon as the opportunity arises.”

Simone rolls her eyes. “I have no intention of discussing anything other than business-related topics with Trent. My private affairs are none of his concern.”

My jaw tics as my impatience builds. Professional or not, I want the fucker to know she's with me. "Simone..."

"Okay, okay. Cool your territorial, alpha ass."

If my woman thinks I'm currently behaving like an alpha, she has no idea how alpha I'll become if Trent makes a move on her. I'll go full king of the pride. The more I dwell on the idea of filling in Trent, the more certain I am of informing him sooner rather than later.

"Promise you'll tell him."

She relents, with a heavy sigh. "Fine."

"And if possible, I want to be with you when you say it to him."

"Why?"

"I don't need to steal your thunder, but I want to be your backup." My woman never needs to fight alone again.

Simone is quiet for a moment as she absorbs my request. She lifts her chin to me. "Under the unusual circumstance Trent asks about my personal life, I will inform him we're dating and make sure you're present."

Excellent. My lips tug upward into a smirk as I amend her statement. "Blissfully."

If my words annoy Simone, she's biting her tongue. "Yes. 'Blissfully' dating."

Now for the grand poobah of requests. "I want to hold you tonight. We don't need to have sex, but I need to feel you in my arms. It's been far too long, and I miss you laying next to me."

Simone's hard face melts away. In its place is the prettiest lace of a smile. A genuine smile with crinkles in the corners of her stormy eyes. One she only uses when her defenses are down. It's fucking radiant, and all for me.

"Deal," she whispers, with her eyes shining like silver coins.

We make quick work of showering, equally eager for this long-awaited reunion. After toweling off, I hang my clothes on the towel rack. Now that I'm dating Simone, I'm not going to risk streaking back to my room in the morning, possibly upsetting her. I sure as hell wouldn't appreciate it if our situation was reversed and she did it. Jealousy is alive and well.

With nothing dry to wear, I internally sing with joy at having to sleep naked beside Simone. If only Simone didn't have clothes, too. Unfortunately for me, Simone tugs on a gray camisole pajama set—sexy, but not as hot as naked Simone.

Beggars can't be choosers.

The bed smells exactly like Simone's natural musk—floral and feminine. It's inviting, giving me the overwhelming sense of returning to my rightful place beside the woman I love. It feels like home, like Simone is my safe place. I slip under the covers, patting the bed for her to join me.

She points a finger at me. "Behave."

Tell that to my dick, beautiful. "I'll try."

With that, Simone scoots in beside me, her head on my chest over my heart, where the muscle spasms happily to have her right where she belongs—with me.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It's Friday morning—day one of the team's road trip to Sacramento. Chase and Butch plan on riding their hogs, since the weather is decent. Punk will drive the company SUV with all our gear. Unfortunately, that means I'm riding shotgun with the moron.

Jo pulls me in for a sideways hug. I can't hug her face-on with one of her twins harnessed to her front, while the other's strapped on her back. The woman is going to be jacked by the time she's done carrying the twins around.

"Promise not to be too mean to Punk. He's a real sweetheart, if you give him a chance."

I roll my eyes. "I'll behave if he behaves." I kiss her cheek, then the heads of my adorable nephews.

My parents are next for some love.

"Travel safe, sweetheart," my dad says, giving me a tight hug.

My mom steals me away from him to give me a hug of her own. She kisses my temple before whispering, "I put some mace in your purse."

"Mom!"

Jo snorts. "That's nothing. I put a taser in her suitcase."

"You guys are acting like I'm going to war."

"Better to be prepared," my dad counters.

"Don't worry, Pop," Punk hollers from the driver's window, "I'll keep her safe."

Jo nudges me in the ribs. “See? He’s nice.”

It’s not like I haven’t seen moments of Punk’s kindness. He’s capable. But he always flips it on its head...

“And if not, I’m sure her shrill voice will be enough to chase the douchebag away,” Punk adds.

...like that.

My nostrils flare. “My voice is *not* shrill!”

Punk cringes against his seat. “Case in point.”

Ugh. “You’re such a moron, you moron.”

“How original,” he taunts. “Perhaps you can work on your comebacks on the ride to California. You suck at them.”

A growl rumbles in my chest. I swear, if this is how our entire time together is going to be, one of us will not be making it out of the SUV alive. My bet is on Punk not living past this afternoon.

Atlas finishes giving his orders to Chase before the two of them join our group. My brother-in-law scowls at Punk—a warning to behave. Atlas pulls me into a hug, tight and secure. “You call me if things become too much. No one will blame you if you want to pull out of the assignment at any point.”

I squeeze him back. “Thank you. But I’m going to be okay.”

“I’m not worried so much for you as I am for your ex. Seeing you running this show is going to be a junk punch for the bastard. Make it hurt.”

I laugh, pulling away from his embrace. “I’ll be fine. Take good care of my little sister and nephews while I’m gone.”

“Always.”

The team says goodbye to the rest of the crew, giving hugs and backslaps. Candy can’t help looking between me and Chase before giving me a wink. The woman is gung-ho about me being claimed by Chase.

As I pull open the door to climb into the SUV, a hand stops me. “What are you doing, baby? You don’t ride in there. Your place is with me, at my back, on my hog.”

“Chase, I’m not riding on your bike.”

He glowers, the lines between his eyes deepening in the furrows. “Why the fuck not?”

I wave at myself in my billowy dress. “Do I look like I’m dressed to ride on a bike?”

“Go throw on some jeans real quick. We’ll wait.”

“I don’t own jeans.”

Chase balks. “How the hell do you not own jeans? Everyone owns jeans. It’s a clothing staple.”

“Not for me. I haven’t needed to wear them while working as an accountant around the clock.”

“News flash, Simone. You work for an MC now, not a snobby finance firm. You can leave the business attire behind.”

I scoff, folding my arms over my chest. “I like my clothes, thank you.”

Chase leans in closer, his smile wicked. “I like your sexy clothes, too—on you and off.”

Jesus! To hell with worrying about pants. If he makes another dirty comment, I may need to change my underwear.

“Back to the point. Jeans never fit me right. They’re either too tight and show off too much or cut too low where my underwear is hanging out the back like some flipping whale tail.”

Chase releases a low, throaty groan of pleasure. “Sounds perfect to me.”

I roll my eyes, climbing inside the SUV. Chase yanks my seatbelt into place, making sure I’m secure. It’s unnecessary. I’m not a child in need of assistance, but his gesture is sweet all the same.

He gives me a measured look. “I’m buying you jeans.”

“I don’t need them,” I retort.

“You’re dating a biker—you’ll have them when you ride with me.” He closes my door before he leans into the open window. My heart flutters deliciously at how close his face is to mine. “And soon you’ll be wearing my property patch.”

Just when he was saying all the right things, he had to ruin it with his caveman talk. “That shit is chauvinistic and degrading,” I chide him.

Chase gives an evil smirk, nipping at the tip of my nose. “It’s club culture. Get used to it, baby.” He stalks off toward his bike, his ass looking mighty fine in tight denim.

“Way to make him all grouchy, Priss.”

“I kind of like it when he gets all growly,” I admit, with a shrug.

Punk barks a laugh, turning over the engine of the SUV. “Well, you certainly bring it out in him.”

Eight hours in a SUV is a long flipping time when you’re stuck in a vehicle with Punk. We bicker the entire way. We fight over the radio, the air-conditioner, the speed we travel, the snacks we buy along the way—everything is an argument.

The only thing we seem to be civil about is gossip regarding the Mercy Ravens crew.

“Tank asked Eb to go on a date with him this weekend,” Punk says.

“Noooo! When? What did she say?”

“Yesterday. She told him ‘maybe.’”

Wow. “Why is she holding herself back? The guy is gaga for her. He’s such a romantic.”

Punk snorts. “That may be the problem. Eb grew up in a one percent MC. She doesn’t understand romance when all she knows is men who take what they want. She promised herself a long time ago to never be claimed.”

“I understand her distaste for the property status. However, to not have a romantic relationship seems like a lonely life.”

Punk glares out the windshield. “I’m not entirely sure, but I guess it has something to do with being powerless while at the mercy of men who don’t give a shit about her. She and I have been close over the years, you know. We connected because like recognizes like.”

I’m not following. “What do you mean?”

“We both came from fucked up homes,” he answers tentatively. “I came to the club when I lost Nat to my half-brother. Eb came to Mercy Ravens when her brother betrayed her. What he did, I have no clue, but something happened in her old MC, something dark. Not sure what, but I know well enough to not press when something’s painful.”

“That’s heartbreaking. Maybe Tank can change her perspective.”

“We can hope.”

We’re silent for a moment, each of us staring ahead out the windshield. Punk has mentioned his ex to me twice, each time with a hitch in his voice.

“Do you miss her?”

Punk breathes in deep through his nose, letting it out slow through his mouth. “More than I should, and a fuck-ton more than she deserves.”

It hurts hearing Punk longs for a woman he’ll never have again. When I recall Trent and his betrayal, it burns, but I don’t pine for him or the *what ifs*. Trent may have checked all the boxes I previously found suitable in a partner—aside from the lying adultery part. Yet our relationship lacked the embers to stoke the flames of desire. Perhaps Trent’s embers for me cooled long ago. But if I’m being honest, mine had been fading for him as well.

My love for Trent is gone. No residual burning coals. For Punk, his lost love still burns.

I have nothing to compare with him. Well...I guess I understand, in a way.

With Chase, my feelings are intense. Have been since the moment I came to the MC. Two nights of romance with him a year ago showed me how strong our chemistry is. When we went cold turkey, those feelings never dimmed—they were as strong as they had been our first night together.

Punk clears his throat. “Anyway, how long are you going to torture my best friend with this dating bullshit?”

I shake my head, looking out the windshield at Chase and Butch riding their hogs in front of us. As if he can sense we’re talking about him, Chase looks over his shoulder at me. His aviator sunglasses cover his brown eyes, but I can feel his penetrating gaze pierce me with a pleasant current of warmth in my chest. He faces back around, breaking the lustful spell.

“There’s nothing wrong with taking things slow.”

“Unless it’s a waste of time when you could be happy together,” Punk counters bluntly.

“I’m not against a happily ever after. I’m against rushing.”

Punk gives me a side-eye. “Your hesitation wouldn’t have anything to do with seeing your ex again, would it?”

“Absolutely not. Unlike you, my feelings for Trent died the day I caught him with another woman.” I’m such a bitch for throwing Punk’s ex in his face, but accusing me of holding out for Trent is as caustic as drinking battery acid.

“Must be nice,” Punk mutters low under his breath. He grips the wheel a little tighter, probably imagining it’s my neck—I know I would if the roles were reversed.

My guilt wins out—fucking Catholic upbringing. “I’m sorry.”

Punk glances at me, a small smirk on his angular face. “No, you’re not.”

I rotate my hand at him. “It’s half-and-half. If you cross me, I might take my apology back.”

He returns his eyes to the road ahead, chuckling to himself.

Talks about exes are doing nothing to combat my nerves over facing Trent again. I lean my head against the headrest, gazing out the passenger window. “Since we’re sharing, can I tell you something?”

“Sure.”

I close my eyes. “I’m sick to my stomach about seeing Trent. Nothing to do with reserved feelings for the troll, but a lot to do with proving myself.”

“*Ah*. By confronting your ex and his mistress with your head held high, you’re showing them you’re better off without him.”

“Something like that. And I want to show Chase that Trent isn’t competition, and never will be. I worry he may feel like the rebound, or he may have felt like that, back when we...” I hesitate, trying to formulate the most eloquent way of explaining a hook-up.

“What? First banged?”

My eye bulge. “First got together! *Gah*. You’re so rudimentary.”

Punk shrugs off my slighting. “You have nothing to prove to Chase. Be yourself, be honest.”

Skeptical, I peek at Punk. “Really? It’s that simple?”

“There’s nothing complex about Chase—he’s as laid back as they come. Your truthfulness is all he wants from you.” Punk looks at me deadpan. “Talk to him. Let him know where your head is at. Communication is crucial in a relationship. I sometimes wonder had I not been overseas, where my time for talking was limited, maybe Nat wouldn’t have turned to my ass-wipe brother.”

I don’t agree with his assessment of his ex, but I agree with his suggestion. Talking to Chase before we begin the

assignment will help us get on the right page and prepare us for whatever situation we'll walk into tomorrow.

“For a moron, you're actually insightful.”

“I'm full of useful knowledge, but it always surprises everyone when it comes out of my mouth.”

The SUV veers to the right as Punk takes the exit. Our hotel destination is next to the highway in West Wendover, Nevada, roughly halfway in our road trip. By the time we pull into the parking lot, Chase is already walking out of the hotel with key cards. He hands one to Butch, then comes toward the SUV.

Punk rolls down the window. “Let me guess. I'm bunking with Butch?”

“You'd be right.”

Scowling, I hold up a hand. “Chase—”

“Don't start, Numbers. We always room with another team member. Don't think you get special privileges because you're female.”

Punk throws his head back, laughing. “Burn!”

“I never said I needed my own room. However, I should choose who I room with.”

Punk sobers. He looks stunned, pointing at himself as he mouths, “Me?”

I backhand him lightly in the chest. “No, you moron. I meant Butch.”

“Ah,” Punk muses, understanding. “For a moment there, I was scared. I wouldn't put it past you to slit my throat in my sleep. You rooming with Butch makes way more sense.”

“The fuck it does,” Chase snaps at his best friend, his face turning an angry shade of red.

He's butt-hurt, assuming I don't want to be roommates. Truth is, I do, but I'm trying to take things slow with him. Rooming together is going to speed things along faster than I intend.

“The only roommate who makes sense is me,” Chase argues. “We’re *dating*.”

More like his ego wouldn’t handle me bunking with another male. “I’ll room with Butch.”

“Hell. No. Don’t get me involved in your lovers’ quarrel,” Butch chides as he unties his bag from his bike. He makes quick work of it before striding inside the hotel to get away from us.

Silently brooding, Chase hauls my suitcase out of the SUV. I scramble out of the vehicle to take it from him, but he gives me the stink eye. “No woman of mine carries shit.”

Stubborn, cranky mule.

Punk comes up to my side, amusement in his voice. “What was that you said earlier about liking him growly?”

“Shut it, Moron.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Day two of traveling is no better than day one. Reluctantly, I ride in the SUV with Punk the rest of the trip. It's more of the same, passive-aggressive comments or sharing gossip to pass the time. By the end of the drive, we're eager to get space from each other.

Chase booked reservations at the Kimpton Sawyer Hotel, a chic upmarket hotel a mile east of P.L. Moore Financial, in downtown Sacramento. It should make our commute easy while we work the case, but the cost has my eye twitching.

As the Mercy Ravens accountant, I've done the books long enough to know this isn't the usual hotel accommodations the MC uses for security assignments—it's double the expense.

I'm about to scold Chase for wasting company funds when I see him take out his personal credit card to pay for our room and the company card to pay for the suite the other guys will share. The expenses are a wash. But why would he pick this location when there are several cheaper hotels nearby?

"He wants to treat you," Butch murmurs next to me, reading my mind.

Oh. How sweet. And unnecessary. Chase shouldn't feel obligated to spend his hard-earned money on me when we're not official. I'm more than willing to pay my fair share.

Determined to make things equal, I dig through my purse to find my wallet. Punk lays his tattooed hand over mine. "Don't even think about it, Priss. You'll insult him if you open your wallet. Let my brother do right by you."

“It’s too much,” I rasp with exasperation. I’m not a kept woman—I pay my own way.

Punk shrugs. “The fucker is loaded. If he wants to make a dent in it, let him.”

Annoyed, I tap my foot impatiently as I wait to give Chase an earful. When he turns around with the biggest smile on his face, I stop short. He takes my hand and brings it to his lips. “I know this goes against your independent nature, but thank you for letting me do something nice for you. A woman like you deserves to be treated like a queen.”

Well, fuck. How can I rip him a new one when he’s literally giving me a gift of luxury? “I’m only letting this slide for the night. The rest of the time, we go Dutch.”

He smirks, biting on his lip ring. “Sure, Numbers. Whatever you say.”

It’s a fair assessment to say Chase is going to make splitting expenses difficult.

After checking in to our rooms, Butch and Punk head out into the city for some fun—it may be a while before we can let loose again. I consider joining them, but after days of traveling, going out drinking doesn’t appeal to me.

My mind is jittery, thinking about tomorrow’s events. Facing Trent will be challenging. I need something that’ll flex my muscles and calm my nerves.

The answer is simple. I change into my practical, yet classic one-piece bathing suit, ready for my date with a swimming pool.

Chase’s eyes follow me from where he lies on the lavish starch-white bed as I gather my things. His searing gaze is like a flame dancing across my skin—hot and dangerous.

On further inspection of myself, I realize the black suit is high cut, riding past my hips. *Meh.* Big deal. I’ll be under the water most of the time.

“I won’t be long,” I announce in a shaky voice, self-conscious as I wrap myself in my black sarong. “A quick dip.”

“You don’t think I’m letting you go by yourself, do you? Especially when you’re showing off those sexy thighs of yours?”

His compliment makes me blush. No man has ever complimented my thighs before. They’re thicker, more muscled. Though I’d prefer more trimly legs, I work with what I got and own it. I do my best to temper my giddiness over Chase’s compliment.

“You can handle me showing off a little leg.”

Chase stands from the bed, his eyes narrowing as he takes me all in. “I’m coming with you.”

“Do you have swim trunks?”

Glaring, he folds his corded arms over his chest. “I’ll make do.”

“Then hurry.”

I don’t give him a backward glance before I’m out the door, marching my butt outside. I’m not wasting precious time waiting around for him to get his crap in order.

The luxury pool is expansive, lit up under the hotel lights. You can hear the city life, but it’s muted by the palm trees and thick tropical gardens surrounding the hotel grounds. With the heat of the day still lingering in the air, I can’t wait to jump into the cool blue oasis. It’s late, and only a few hotel guests are lounging around the pool zone, leaving me free to take advantage of an empty pool.

Twenty lengths sounds like a good way to loosen my muscles while cooling off. After dropping my stuff in a private cabana, I quickly braid my hair—no need to get it tangled. Walking to the water’s edge, I dive in. My legs kick together under the surface, propelling me through the water. When I come up for air, I go right into breaststroke formation.

Back and forth I go, until twenty laps have come and gone. Tired, I lay on my back, free floating. Here in the water, my body finally relaxes.

The moment is short-lived.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch movement rushing toward me. Chase dives into the pool, spraying me in a tidal wave. I flounder about, choking and spitting as I attempt to get my bearings back.

Before I can wipe the water from my eyes, he's on me, grabbing me around the waist in those sexy, muscled arms of his.

"Mmm, you're fine as hell. I swear if I had to watch you frog leap through the water another lap, I was going to lose my mind."

"What are you talking about?"

"You are whom I'm talking about. Watching your thighs spread out again and again..." He leans in to kiss my forehead, groaning deep in his throat. "You had me stripping in record time."

Shocked, I glance down, taking stock of him. "Are those your underwear?"

Chase winks, his eyes crinkling at the corners with amusement. "I won't tell if you won't."

Concerned, I shake my head. "Oh, my God. You're going to get us kicked out of the hotel."

"Look around, beautiful." Chase waves an arm at the surrounding space. "The place is all ours."

Sure enough, we're alone. "Did you chase all the other guests away when you started undressing? Where are your clothes? Your glasses? Can you even see without them?"

He chortles. "If I started stripping around others, they wouldn't be running away from the show. Babe, relax. My stuff is sitting next to yours. I can see you just fine, and that's all I care to see. There's no need to get upset."

He's right. We're alone in this outdoor sanctuary. There's no need to get agitated over nothing when I have plenty of other things to be concerned with—specifically tomorrow. I inhale and slowly let it out, willing myself to settle down.

"That's it, Numbers. Unwind and let me do the worrying."

Slightly more at ease, I place my hands on his tatted chest, tracing the beautiful artwork adorning his skin. His heart thrums hard underneath my hand.

Chase looks down at where I'm touching him, then back at me with a lustful gaze. His eyes drop to my mouth, where I'm biting my bottom lip. How can he say so much without saying words?

Wanting to be closer, I wrap my arms around his thick neck, pulling him toward me. He moves into the space, the warmth of his body enveloping me. "You were watching me swim and couldn't help peeling out of your clothes?"

"Yes. I always watch you," he confesses on a murmur, his eyes transfixed on mine. "Can't rip my eyes away from you."

"Some might say you're obsessed."

"I am," he admits, unabashed.

Maybe it's my year-long sex drought making me ignore the red flags. Most women wouldn't be turned on discovering a dominating man is obsessed with them. However, his confession causes warmth to build in my core. There's something to be said about a man who isn't afraid to admit how he feels about the person who consumes him. It gives me a sense of empowerment.

We're silent for a moment, floating together. I hate to break our tranquil moment with talk of tomorrow, but I'm concerned with how Chase may react upon meeting Trent. Especially with how possessive he can be with me.

"Are you going to behave tomorrow? We can't have you beating up the liaison."

Chase grimaces, squeezing me tighter. "I make no promises other than doing the job we're hired to do. People don't hire us because of our friendly disposition. They choose us because our company is the best and we promise results. Trent wouldn't be the first client we've had where I've been a dick. I don't play games. I don't fuck around and see. If he steps out of line regarding you, I will put the little dick back in his lane."

“You know you have nothing to worry about with him, right? I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again—I have no feelings for Trent.”

Chase says nothing, staring at me with his warm brown eyes.

“Do you know why I waited a year before coming back to you?”

“To drive me nuts?”

I smirk before schooling my features. “No. I needed space, time to grieve. I also didn’t want to rush into another relationship where you might feel used. You’re not a rebound, Chase. You mean so much more to me than someone I’d use to get over my heartbreak.”

Chase swallows hard. “Are you saying you care about me?”

Wow! He really needs me to spell it out for him. “I’m crazy for you. Have been since the day you pushed yourself into my life.”

His lips twitch upward in the corners. “Day one of coming to the club?”

“Day one,” I admit.

He crushes me to his chest, holding me tight in his embrace. “Fuck, woman. You have no idea what you do to me.”

I smile, having a very good idea of what I do to him. He does it for me, too.

My face falls as I work up the nerve to express my worries. “Can I be honest with you?”

“I would hope you’d always be honest with me.”

I lick my lips. “I’m anxious to confront Trent and Cynthia tomorrow. Even if it’s only to conduct our case, it puts me on edge.”

Chase palms my cheek with one hand while holding me tight with the other. “Numbers...”

“I don’t want them thinking me pitiful or spiteful for being the lead auditor. I shouldn’t care what they think, but I do on some level. Like I need to prove they haven’t got to me.”

“I think I understand,” Chase murmurs. “You want to show you’ve outgrown them.”

Perfectly stated. “Yeah.”

His warm lips press lightly to mine tenderly, yet his kiss sends shockwaves of delicious current through my core.

“Simone, you’re the most professional woman I’ve ever met. Without a doubt, you’ll walk into that firm tomorrow and handle the situation like a seasoned veteran. They’re going to think what they want, but by being yourself, you’ll show them their opinions mean dick to you.”

“You think so?”

“I know so.”

I lean my head against his chest. “Thank you. I wish I felt as confident as you. Wish there was a way to chase away the nerves.”

Strong fingers grip my hips. “You want me to help you relax? Settle your anxiety so you can sleep well?”

Does a cat like milk? Of course I want him to “help” me relax.

Motioning with my head for him to follow, I turn toward the pool stairs, but Chase stops me, walking us back against the pool wall. “Where are you going, Numbers?”

“To our room, where I’m cashing in your verbal coupon for ‘relaxing.’”

Chase gives me a devious smile, arching his pierced brow. “Why trek back to our room when we can do it here?”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

There's no way we were going to make it back to the hotel suite. When you go a year without sex and suddenly the moment arises, you don't risk fate fucking you over by walking back to your room. You capitalize on the moment, taking it like a bull by the horns.

The spark between us has grown into an inferno, too searing to wait a second longer. I'm going to own Simone, here and now.

My fingers dig into her flesh on her hips where her swimsuit cut's high, showcasing lots of tantalizing skin. The fingers on my right hand move up to tease her nipples, pebbling under her wet suit.

Simone's gray eyes go wide. "Chase! We're in public."

If she thinks copping a feel in an empty pool is scandalous, her head will spin with what I do next.

Simone whimpers when my free hand skims down the center of her body, rubbing the lips of her pussy through her sexy swimsuit.

"Chase," she gasps, her fingers trying to restrain my wrist. "What if someone sees?"

"We're alone, baby. Spread your legs for me. Let me make love to you with my fingers."

Simone's lips pucker, disapproval etched into her lovely face. She wants to defy me, to challenge me—it's in her nature to take charge, not take orders.

Slowly, her need to comply with my offer has her shuffling her feet apart. Obedient only for me.

Eager to feel her quiver around my digits, I kick her legs further out with my foot, earning me another dick-arousing whimper. I lower my body until my hips settle between her legs, her hot core pressed tight against my growing erection.

With deft fingers, I pull her suit aside, poised at her welcoming center. I lean into her ear, my lips brushing against the delicate lobe. “Let me touch you, Simone. Give yourself over to me.”

She gives a stiff jerk of her head. It’s all the permission I need to run my fingers through her silky folds, slippery with her arousal even in the water.

“Already wet for me?” I kiss her temple, then nip my way down her jaw. “My dirty, wanton woman.”

She tilts up her chin, giving me access to the long column of her neck. With my tongue and teeth, I lick and scrape along her heated flesh. Her skin erupts in goosebumps where I’ve marked her. Seeing my marks on her turns my dick from semi to rock solid, aching to be inside of her.

Not yet. I may not be a gentleman, but my woman’s needs will be met before mine—always.

Back and forth, I glide my fingers through her pussy lips. When she cocks her hips to rub against my hand, I insert two fingers deep inside of her. Her inner walls flutter around my fingers, making my cock weep with want.

Simone bites her bottom lip to stop her mewls from escaping. I don’t want her silence—I want to hear her sing.

With my goal set on making her scream, I pump my fingers in and out of her velvet heat, priming her. When she slowly grinds down on my hand, I insert a third finger, filling her. She no longer holds back, releasing a keening cry.

“Yes,” I murmur in a ragged voice ravenously against her cheek. “Let me hear you purr.”

Simone rotates her hips, bucking against my hand. I press my palm firmly against her clit, rubbing her sensitive nub as I finger fuck her succulent cunt. Curling my fingers to rub against the back of her clitoris from within, I pull back enough to watch her come undone.

Her eyes grow bigger as she looks at me. *No*. Past me. “Baby?”

“Chase,” she squeaks, “we’re being watched.”

Raising an eyebrow, I look over my shoulder, scanning the pool surroundings. It’s not until I look up that I see a pair of men on the balcony terrace of the hotel bar looking down at us. I may not make out the details of their faces without my glasses, but I can see they’re eye-fucking my woman as my fingers continue to glide with ease inside her velvet heaven.

Smirking, I turn back to Simone. “If I were them, I’d be staring at you, too. I almost feel sorry for what they’re missing out on.”

Whether it was on purpose or a natural reaction, Simone’s snatch clutches around my fingers.

Holy hell, she will ruin me. Any other woman, and I’d have my dick in her so fast. But Simone isn’t any other woman. She’s my woman, and I don’t share.

A groan rattles in my chest. “Fuck, Numbers, does the thought of others catching us turn you on?”

Simone looks at me with bewildered eyes, a whimper her only response.

“Do you want them to watch us?”

She gives a small shake of her head, her eyes hooded and lust-filled.

Relief floods my system, and the tension in my shoulders unwinds some. Simone likes the idea of being caught, not being watched. And I like that.

I like that she wants to be risky with me. I like that she wants to throw caution to the wind with me. But I love that she wants to censor it, that what we share is private.

She's perfection.

I pull my fingers from her velvet heaven, yanking her flush against me. "I don't like creeps thinking they may peep at what's mine. It makes me territorial, like I have something to prove. If you don't want me showing them who you belong to, then you better wrap your sexy legs around me right fucking now."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Something about those men on the balcony catching us in the pool made my insides burn and sex clutch. Of course, Chase noticed—he notices everything. And to my relief, he didn't judge me.

No, he wasn't disgusted; it turned him on. I could have sworn his dick jumped in his boxer briefs while trapped between our stomachs.

I've barely koala-strapped myself around Chase's body before he grabs the side of the pool and hauls us out in one fluid motion, as if lifting me wasn't a strenuous act. The fast movement has me catching my breath, my blood spiking with fervent anticipation.

Chase turns to the peepers on the bar balcony, giving them a three-finger salute—the same three fingers he had inside of me. He shoves those same fingers in his mouth, sucking on them hard. His eyes close as heavy, content sounds rumble out of his chest. He pulls his fingers out with a loud *pop*.

Stunned, I gape as Chase announces loud enough for the patrons on the bar balcony to hear. "Fuck off. She's mine."

With his hands holding me under my ass, he spins us in the cabana's direction, where I placed my belongings. He dumps me unceremoniously on a lounge chair before yanking the cabana curtain closed.

There's enough light filtering into the private space without others being able to see inside, but in this moment, I've never felt more exposed.

Chase turns back to me, his gaze dark and molten. My heart sprints like a helpless animal trapped by a hungry wolf. He stalks toward me, possession etched into his face.

I gulp, unsure of what to say. “Chase...” I should tell him to stop. Fornicating in public could get us arrested for indecent exposure.

However, my desire for his touch overrides my common sense. No man has so brazenly declared me as his, like Chase did in front of those other men. To say it’s a turn-on is an understatement—he’s set my insides alight, eager to show the world I’m his and he’s mine.

Chase pounces, knocking me flat against the lounge chair, his weight pinning me down. His long fingers curl under the straps of my suit, yanking the stretchy fabric harshly down my body. I gasp when the cool air hits my nipples, making them furrow into tight pebbles. He doesn’t stop until he’s stripped me bare, tossing the suit to the ground like it’s the most offensive thing he’s ever touched.

Exposed, I lay panting, simmering with need as he sheds himself of his wet boxer briefs. His cock is long, hard, and pointing right at me, like a directional arrow.

My nerves have me licking my lips, tasting Chase on my tongue. “This is crazy.”

“No, Numbers. This is fucking perfect,” Chase purrs as he lowers himself, climbing over my body. He captures my lips with his, owning them like he has every right. And I let him because, at this moment, I want to be taken by this man. Having Chase claim me in the most primal of ways for anyone to see only heightens my desire for him.

Who would have guessed engaging in exhibitionism would be this thrilling? The small hairs covering my body stand at attention as I envision what those men outside must imagine we’re doing.

A feral growl rips through Chase as he devours my mouth. Something about his dominance triggers my own. I suck hard

on his bottom lip, pulling at his lip piercing. He groans into my mouth, seeming to enjoy my aggression.

“Chase, what are you doing to me?” I pant deliriously between kisses. “You have me doing things I never dared before.”

He pulls an inch away to look at me. His chest heaves as he asks, “Do you want me to stop?”

“Don’t you dare,” I threaten, locking my ankles behind his back.

He grips my neck, holding me in place to stare into my eyes. “Those fuckers wanted a show. I’m not willing to let them see what’s mine. Yet, I certainly will let them hear me claim your tight pussy while you scream my name. Hold on, baby. This won’t be gentle.”

Heat pools between my legs, covering my pussy lips with my wetness. “Then fuck me already.”

“No, Simone. I’m going to own you.”

With no warning, Chase slams inside of me. It’s brutal and exquisite all in one blow. I throw back my head, crying out with pleasure. “CHASE!”

“That’s right. Let them hear who you belong to.” Chase pulls out, only to plow home again, going deeper than before. “Let the world hear you’re my woman. Fucking scream for me.”

And I do, again and again.

With the strength of a stallion, Chase thrusts into me, indenting his massive cock into the back walls of my sex. I’ll hurt in the morning, but in this moment the pain only mixes with the pleasure, adding to the orgasm building rapidly within me.

As if he wasn’t already tapping me good, Chase pivots his hips, planting himself to the hilt, hitting my G-spot with his cock piercing and torturing my clit with his pelvis.

My fingers fly into his wet hair, yanking at his roots while pulling him closer to me. “Oh, Chase. Right there. Don’t

stop.”

“Don’t stop what?” he taunts, grinding himself against my engorged clit. My insides quiver violently.

I whimper, so close, yet so far. “Don’t stop fucking me.”

Chase roughly collars my throat. Not enough to bruise, but enough to show me he’s in charge. My body sings with relief as I submit, handing over control. He leans in to lick a wet path up my cheek. “Not fucking you. Owing you.”

Hooking one of my knees with his free hand, Chase throws my leg over his shoulder. The angle adjustment plunges him deeper into me. My back bows, my breasts brushing against his expansive chest. Chase increases his pace to something beastly, plowing into me with voracity. The lounge chair groans in protest.

“Who owns you?”

Lost in ecstasy, I can only moan.

“Numbers, answer me. Who do you belong to?”

I swallow thickly around his hold on my throat. “You.”

He grinds hard against my clit. The exquisite friction has me practically levitating off the patio furniture, pushing my aching breasts into his chest. “Say it louder. I want those fuckers outside to hear you scream for your man. Who do you belong to?”

“YOU! Fucking you!” I bellow in a strangled cry, lost in his touch.

He releases my neck, throwing my other leg over his shoulder, all the while increasing his rutting.

My throat is raw from screaming, my insides are humming like a current running through a cable, and my legs shake uncontrollably. I need to peak before I short circuit and black out.

“You want to come, baby? Does your greedy snatch need to release on my cock?”

Unable to form words, I bob my head, pleading with my eyes.

Chase moves his hand between us, taking my clit between his thumb and forefinger. The moment he pinches my nub, I burst apart. But I don't want to go over the edge alone. I grab both his nipple bars, gently twisting right as my orgasm sweeps me away in a beautiful high.

“FUCK! YES! FUCK!” Chase bellows, bucking into me until I feel him coating my insides in sticky warmth.

Exhausted, he collapses on top of me. I welcome his weight like a blanket to shelter me after we exposed ourselves to anyone in earshot.

Chase raises his face to mine. His hair is disheveled and falling loose from his bun, casting his face in shadows in the already dark, intimate space. It makes him look feral, matching the obsessed urgency in his whiskey-colored eyes.

“I'm a possessive asshole, Simone. I will not apologize for it. In my book, you're mine. All dating bullshit aside, you belong to me now.”

My heart leaps, liking the sound of being Chase's woman. I bite my bottom lip to stop myself from admitting it to Chase.

Tenderly, he cups my cheek, leaning in to brush his lips against mine. “These lips are mine.”

He trails his free hand down my chest, softly molding it around one of my heaving breasts. “These tits are mine.”

My eyelids flutter, enjoying his gentle touch and words of declaration.

His long fingers continue a leisurely path downward until his hand palms my bottom. “This ass is mine.”

He surges forward with his cock still embedded deeply inside of me, not yet soft. I moan, my body responding to his as wet heat pools around the base of his shaft. “This pussy, this fucking perfect pussy, is mine. Nobody will ever take this from me. I will curb stomp any *motherfucker* who tries.”

Chase moves his hand back up to my chest, splaying it across the left side of my breastbone. His whisper is so soft over my pulse pounding in my ears, I nearly miss him saying, “And soon this heart will be mine, too, like you own mine.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The alarm on my cell wakes me from a deep sleep. I attempt to roll toward the beeping to turn it off, but Chase's arms flex around me. He holds me in place, reaching over my body to turn it off himself. He snuggles back into position, with his warm body cocooning mine. Those warm brown eyes I adore of his drift shut, causing his long lashes to dust his cheekbone.

If it weren't for this assignment we're working, I'd watch him sleep all day. I brush a lock of his tawny-colored hair off his handsome face. "Chase, we need to get up. We can't be late."

Scowling, he doesn't open his eyes as he answers. "I hit snooze. Give me ten more minutes with you in my arms before we have to face the day."

If only we could pause time. An extra few minutes of sleep is precious time I lose in my morning routine. Besides, I'm too nervous to relax. Confronting Trent for the first time since I left Sacramento has my insides twisting in an uncomfortable knot. More than anything, I want to get the worst of this first encounter over with and get on with the investigation. The sooner we start, the sooner we can return to our lives in Colorado.

Shaking my head, I unlace Chase's arms from my torso. After last night's sexcapade, I'm in desperate need of a shower. Chase grumbles when I climb out of bed, but he lets me go without too much of a fight. He must sense I need this time.

I'm not entirely sure how Chase and I made it back to our room last night. Depleted of energy, I could hardly stand. There was no way I was going to wrangle my body into my wet bathing suit, let alone walk. Hell, I have a hard enough time tugging the thing over my boobs when it's dry. My mind is fuzzy, but I recall Chase wrapping me in my sarong and lifting me into his arms. The possessive biker must have carried me the entire way—my Thor in biker's clothing.

I reach in the shower to turn on the water before I relieve my bladder. A quick test of the water temperature, and I step into the hot spray. My fingers are working shampoo into my hair when Chase enters the shower. He gently takes me by the hips, leaning in to kiss the tip of my nose. We shower in silence, his hands occasionally groping my ass or breasts. The man is handsy, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy his rough fingers fondling me.

I'm hopping out of the shower a lot sooner than what I'm sure Chase would like, but I'm counting down the minutes until I face my ex. My eyes dart to my cell on the counter, checking the time.

Quickly, I towel off before going through my normal routine. Brushing my teeth, moisturizing from head to toe, and blow drying my hair come first. Styling my hair and applying my makeup before getting dressed in one of my best gray pant suits comes second. Adding my favorite diamond stud earrings and a simple gold necklace are my final touches.

Chase's routine is shorter than mine, but only by a handful of minutes. The guy takes male grooming seriously, drying his hair straight before putting it in a man bun and oiling his short beard.

Getting ready together feels oddly domestic, considering we're not official per se as much as Chase claims I'm his. However, I don't feel self-conscious around him, as one normally would with someone they're just getting involved with. Being around Chase in my unfiltered state feels natural, something I could become very comfortable with.

Several times, he catches me ogling him. He winks or flashes me a smile, making my heart palpitate happily. He's a delicious distraction, flexing his muscles in his black tactical pants with a gray T-shirt reading *Mercy Ravens Security*.

The crew rarely wear their leather MC cuts when working security and mercenary assignments, but tactical clothing is interesting attire for a non-mercenary assignment.

"How come you guys don't wear suits when working IT?"

"Not our style, Numbers," he drawls as he sits on the end of the bed, putting on his black biker boots. "We may work with computers for most of this case, but in our experience, it's best to be prepared. You never know when someone at one of these gigs feels the heat and goes postal."

Alarmed, I ask, "You think the person responsible for the bilking could work for the firm?"

"That's usually the case. Inside jobs happen more often than you imagine—it's less work to infiltrate a security system when you're on the inside. It's easier to find where things are. You can befriend the right co-workers, getting the information you need from them without difficulty. Once you have all that, breaking into the system is child's play. Outside jobs are a lot more work, and unless you're incredibly skilled with computers, the chance of success is far less."

My stomach turns. "I hate to think someone I used to work with could be a thief. But I also didn't think my boyfriend would sleep with my boss, so my judgment is shit. Anything is possible, it seems."

At the mention of Trent, Chase's face hardens. I'm not sure why the mention of my ex upsets him when last night I made it clear he has nothing to worry about regarding Trent. Still, it's clear Chase is stewing about something.

My possessive biker is waiting for me to finish, his eyes following my every movement. The creases in his forehead grow more pronounced the longer he watches me flutter around the hotel suite, collecting my things for the day.

Done, I turn to him. "Do I look okay?"

“You look incredible—you always do.” Chase stands from his seat on the edge of the bed, sauntering toward me with his sexy swagger. His hand brushes my hair away from my neck, where he leans in and inhales, sending delightful shivers up my spine. “You smell amazing, too.”

I bite my lip to stop my moan from escaping.

He hands me my purse, takes my hand, and leads us out of our hotel room. I glance at the time on my phone as we head to meet Butch and Punk. Chase is oddly quiet in the elevator. If he was making smart-aleck remarks about last night by the pool or tried to cop a feel in the elevator, I’d expect that behavior from Chase. Silence isn’t his norm around me, and it’s making me slightly anxious, on top of already being apprehensive about seeing Trent.

I peek at my biker, noticing his scowl. “Are you okay?”

Chase looks at me, his frown deepening. “No. I’m not going to pretend to be happy about your ex being around you again.” He squeezes my hand tighter, possessively. “He’s going to make a move on you. I know it.”

Grimacing, I shake my head at the unappealing thought. “He won’t.”

“The fuck he won’t. Have you looked at yourself this morning? You’re breathtaking.”

“That’s incredibly sweet, Chase.” I motion down at myself. “But I’m not dressed any differently than I normally am.”

“That’s exactly the point,” Chase gripes. “You’re fucking hot all the time. Trent may be a twat, but he knew you were a beauty. You think a year away from you has dimmed his senses? Please.”

The elevator door dings open. I scoff at Chase’s absurdity. Dropping his hand, I exit the elevator. Chase follows, hot on my heels. “I bet you a grand he asks you out by the end of the day.”

“I’ll match your bet and raise you another grand he’ll ask before lunchtime,” Punk challenges him, striding toward us with Butch.

“Stop egging him on, Moron. He’s already stressed enough,” I chide. I look at my cell, noting the time. “We’re running short on time. We should skip breakfast if we want to arrive early.”

Chase folds his arms, defiance radiating out of him. “Why do we need to arrive early? They aren’t paying us extra for being a half-hour early. You need fuel after the workout I put you through last night.”

Butch smirks, pretending his attention is elsewhere. Punk is not so subtle. He sticks his finger in his mouth, making a gagging sound.

Ignoring the others, I address Chase. “I don’t want to risk running behind. Sacramento is not Fort Collins. Downtown traffic can be a real bitch in the morning. We should leave now.”

Chase steps into my bubble. “Are you sure you’re not just eager to see Trent?”

“Oh, shit,” Butch mumbles under his breath, shaking his head. “Retreat while you still can, bro.”

Pissed, I place my hands on my waist and cock a hip. “Don’t start this shit with me again, Chase. We’ve discussed this.”

“Doesn’t mean I’m fucking fine with it. You think I haven’t noticed you checking the time all goddamn morning? You practically jumped out of our bed to get dolled up to meet that fuckwad.”

Fuming, I jab my manicured finger into Chase’s chest. “Listen here, you knuckle-dragging cave dweller. This is how I always dress, and you know it. I don’t *doll up* for no man. Checking the time has nothing to do with seeing Trent, and everything to do with my anxiety. I told you last night in the damn pool, I was nervous about today. Or have you forgotten what we discussed because all the blood in your head was draining into your penis?”

Punk covers his smile with his fist. “Did you two fuck in the open? Priss, I’m impressed. Didn’t think you had it in

you.”

“Shut up, Punk,” Chase and I snap in unison.

He laughs harder. “That’s not a denial.”

As much as I’d like to slap the smile off Punk’s pretty boy face, my anger is for Chase.

Chase doesn’t appear to be any calmer after I dropped my hard truths. He’s glaring at me, his molars grinding on his clenched jaw. I don’t know what else to do, so I glower back. He’s being an asshat, and he knows it. To hell if I let him think his wild accusations hold an ounce of truth.

“Hey, Priss,” Punk interrupts our glower showdown. “Do your man a favor and just grab a coffee and bagel. It’ll appease his ornery ass. He wants you to eat. You can prove you’re not eager to see your ex-dick by grabbing food on the go.”

“Fine,” I concede bitterly, stomping from the hotel to the café next door. I should drop it, but the stubborn side of me needs to have the last word. “And he’s not my man.”

“The hell I’m not,” Chase growls beside me as he angrily jabs out a text on his cell.

With four cups of coffee and a bag full of bagels in hand, the team exits the café and heads to our vehicles. I’m climbing into the SUV when Chase hollers at me. “Simone, could you come help me with something?”

The urge to roll my eyes is strong, but I suppress it. Something tells me it would set Chase off. He’s already being extra, and I don’t want to deal with any more of his absurd bullshit. “Chase, we don’t have time for diddle dallying.”

“Five minutes tops, I swear.”

I drop my purse in the SUV, handing off the food and drinks to Punk. Irritated, I stomp over to Chase’s silver hog, where he’s fidgeting with the second helmet he keeps strapped to his bike. “What’s going on?”

Without warning, Chase stuffs the helmet over my head. My noggin gets suctioned in with an audible *whoosh*.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I shriek, trying to tear off the stupid thing.

“Stand still, you little hellion. I need to adjust it to fit.”

“Dammit, Chase. We don’t have time for this. Not to mention you ruined my hair!”

Ignoring my protest and slapping hands, Chase secures the helmet safely in place. Pleased, he nods at his handy work and climbs on his bike. “Hop on,” he orders.

I recoil. “Like hell.”

Chase points at my legs. “No dress. No skirt. You’re in pants, meaning you can ride with your man.” He cuts off my rebuke by starting the motorcycle, revving the engine.

This is ridiculous. There’s no way I’m climbing onto his bike in my nice business suit. I turn on my heels to head back to the SUV. I’ll worry about the helmet and my hair on the way to the firm.

Before I take a step, Chase grabs the waistband on my dress slacks. I squeal as he hauls me into his lap, cradling me bridal style. He rockets off, only giving me time to wrap my arms around his neck. Doesn’t matter that I’m screaming at the top of my lungs, Chase hauls ass down the road. Butch follows close at his side on his hog, and Punk trails in the SUV.

The ride is short, but not short enough. The wind whips in my face, making my eyes water. I swear if my mascara has run down my face, I will beat the snot out of Chase.

A few scream-filled minutes later, Chase pulls into the parking lot in front of the firm—a white contemporary structure with large windows. It looks like something out of the future with minimal landscaping, all in the various shades of green. It once appealed to me, but now it looks like a blah eyesore.

I’m throwing every insult under the sun at Chase as he turns off his bike. He pulls off his helmet, grinning like an arrogant jackass.

“Have I told you your filthy mouth is the biggest turn-on? And your juicy ass rubbing against my dick...*mmm*. You have me harder than a baseball bat.”

My mouth drops. The nerve of this guy. What’s more surprising than his crudeness is the wetness collecting in my panties. Dirty talk never was my turn-on until this man entered my life, and it frustrates me how he affects me this much.

I want to give him a piece of my mind, but unfortunately, my mind isn’t cooperating with my mouth. “You...you...”

“I love how frustrated I make you, especially sexually. It makes us even.” He bops me on the tip of my nose with a tatted finger to piss me off even more.

“Ugh! If you don’t get this stupid thing off my head, I’ll be throwing a fast pitch at your baseball bat.”

“Mmm, foreplay. I love it when you talk rough kink. But it’ll have to wait. Our client is here.”

Before I can retort, a voice from the past brings me to a screeching halt. “Simone?”

CHAPTER TWENTY

“Simone, is that you?”

I freeze, not ready to face the man who ripped out my heart. Chase slowly turns his head toward my ex, his eyes narrowing to lethal slits behind his thick-framed glasses.

Why is Trent outside? Did Chase plan for him to see us together? Disbelief colors my voice as I ask Chase, “Were you texting him earlier when we left the hotel?”

Chase turns his face toward me, his eyes softening as a smug smile tugs at the corners of his lips. “Yes.”

Un-fucking-believable. The last thing I wanted to do was come across as petty to my ex. But rolling up in a threshold-carry on Chase’s bike isn’t exactly a subtle way to show I’ve moved on. Chase is trying to turn this into a pissing competition when there is no contest.

“We will talk about this later,” I grit through my teeth.

The pompous ass’s smile turns wicked, showing his perfect teeth like a wolf snarling. “We’ll be doing more than talking later, Numbers.” He bites the air between us, declaring dominance.

Scoffing, I scramble away from Chase’s embrace, trying to find my footing in my stilettos as I slide off his bike. He helps me stand upright, his smug smile still planted firmly on his obnoxiously proud face. I turn my attention to my nemesis, only to realize the stupid helmet is still on my head. I tug, but it doesn’t come off. My fingers fumble with the straps, but I can’t figure out the clasp.

Giving up on the helmet, I attempt to come across as smooth by cocking my hip and placing my hands on my waist like I'm wearing the latest hat fashion. "Hello, Trent."

It's been over a year since I last saw my ex, yet he looks exactly the same as he always had. Expensive fitted suit with buffed shoes compliment his Ken doll haircut and a heavy apricot spray tan. Sure, he's handsome in a polished way, but I've outgrown clean-cut men. I've acquired a taste for man buns, facial piercings, and hipster attire.

Gobsmacked, Trent stares at me like his mind can't comprehend what he's seeing. "Simone." He staggers forward, his arms outstretched like he wants to pull me in for a hug. I stiffen as he approaches.

Movement behind me has Trent halting in place, his eyes growing wider as he takes in my giant biker climbing off his motorcycle. Chase presses close at my back, his warmth seeping through my blazer. His tatted arm snakes through mine to wrap around my waist. His hand sprawls across my stomach to pull me against him in an obvious display of ownership.

Trent doesn't miss the movement. His eyes drop to where Chase's hand rests above my navel, and his face puckers with disapproval.

Well, he can fuck right off. Trent doesn't get to have an opinion on who I'm with.

My head swivels back and forth between the two men as a standoff begins, dread building in my core.

Chase stares coolly at my ex, nodding a stiff hello. "Trent Grills."

My ex's hazel eyes grow cartoonishly wide. "I'm sorry. Who are you?"

"Name's Chase. I'm head of intelligence for Mercy Ravens Security. Thank you for agreeing to greet us outside while we unload." Chase thumbs his MC brothers, who come stand beside us. "Buzzed-hair guy is Butch. He's second-in-

command for IT in this case. Shaved-head guy is Punk. He's our head of security."

Confusion clouds Trent's face as he looks at me, like he's struggling to figure out what I'm doing with the investigative team. "Simone?"

I open my mouth, but Chase beats me to the punch. "My woman is our lead auditor."

"Chase," I hiss through clenched teeth in a low voice, whipping my head to him. "We agreed we'd tell him about us when it was appropriate."

"And I'm making the moment appropriate," Chase hush-whispers back. He turns his attention back to Trent. "I'm sure P.L. Moore Financial's higher ups will appreciate having a gifted accountant working this investigation, especially one who used to work at the firm and knows the ins and outs. Simone's expertise will be extremely beneficial to the case."

Trent shakes his head like he's trying to wake himself out of a stupor. "Wait. What? Your woman? Simone is assisting *your crew*?"

"She isn't assisting," Punk interjects. "She works with us, as in she's MC."

Trent's mouth drops open like a fish out of water. He swings his head back to me, pointing at Chase. "You joined a biker gang? You're with *him*?"

I roll my eyes at his condescending tone. Fuck being professional for one minute—I need to put my ex in his place. "Trent, you and the firm are well-aware Mercy Ravens Security is run by a club, not a gang. Before you bombard me with questions, check yourself at the door. What and who I'm involved with is none of your concern. If you must know, Chase and I are dat—"

"She's my old lady," Chase interrupts.

"Dating," I correct in a sharp pitch before clearing my throat and continuing. "I'm here to audit your firm. Do you think you can handle my involvement, or should we ask upper management to assign someone else as liaison?"

“I can handle working with you,” Trent says all too quickly, in an apologetic tone. A small smile replaces his furrowed brow. “I’m surprised to see you, is all. Pleasantly surprised. It’ll be like old times.”

Chase’s grip on me tightens. A territorial growl rumbles low in his chest.

“Let’s continue talking inside,” I suggest, ignoring Chase’s growing tension. “I would like to get rolling on this investigation.”

“Certainly. If you would grab your things and follow me.”

Chase motions with his head for the guys to unload our gear. Ignoring Trent, Chase turns me to face him. He quickly unclips my helmet and removes it. My hair stands on end with an electrical charge. Chase runs a hand over my wild hair to lay it flat. His hand comes to rest on the back of my neck, pulling me in for a chaste kiss on my lips.

“Chase,” I warn. Doesn’t matter if I like his lips on mine. He’s purposely being inappropriate in front of our client, like a territorial jerk.

When I turn back to face Trent, he’s grimacing, saying nothing as he waits for our team. He probably senses I’ll hand him his balls if he comments on my relationship again. It’s obvious Chase is attempting to goad Trent, but I don’t see Trent showing any interest in me other than being judgmental, and maybe a little curious about my alternative lifestyle.

Before heading inside, I give Chase a last look of warning to knock it off. However, I have a feeling Chase is only getting started as he winks back in response.

CHAPTER TWENTY- ONE

Seconds later, our crew is being led inside P.L. Moore Financial. The inside of the building is as modern and sterile as the outside. I have a newfound appreciation for my sister's warm, mid-century modern designs. I used to think monochromatic interior design was sophisticated. Now, it feels cold and unwelcoming. I miss the soothing earth tones of headquarters.

Trent sets our team up with security clearance key cards at the welcome station before escorting us into the main offices. A few heads turn toward our team, mostly women, along with a few men, tripping over the impressive display of man-meat walking through the firm. Can't say I blame them—the MC guys are an entirely different breed of muscle men.

It's not long before old, familiar faces notice I'm walking with the MC entourage. I can hear the loud whispers and gasps as we move along the corridors. Uneasiness seeps into my gut.

What are they thinking about my reappearance? Do they know what transpired between me, Trent, and Cynthia?

It pisses me off their opinions are affecting me. I'm Simone Holland—I know my worth and shouldn't give a crap about what others think of me.

I never said a word to anyone about why I was leaving, but who knows what Trent and Cynthia told others. It's not like the rest of the company didn't know Trent and I were a couple. Private relationships within the company are only off limits if one person in the relationship is the boss of the other. It might be a conflict of interest. Trent was a manager in a different

department. Thus, our relationship didn't go against company guidelines.

When human resources asked why I was leaving the firm, I said it was time I move on. However, if Trent and Cynthia went public with their relationship after I left, I'm sure my former co-workers may have speculated their relationship drove me away.

Though my feet are moving, each step becomes more difficult to take, the more eyes land on me. I'm a professional, but I'm not a robot. I have feelings. If I don't get ahold of myself, my nerves will get the best of me.

Intuitive as always, Chase seems to sense my discomfort. He rests his hand at the small of my back, encouraging me to move forward with my head held high. He leans forward to whisper in my ear as we walk.

"I'm here."

As furious as I am with his earlier caveman stunt, I'm grateful for his support. It may seem minor, but as someone who's been doing everything on her own for years, this little gesture means a lot. It means I'm not alone. Finally, someone is in my corner.

We move deeper into the building before Trent waves his hand at the door leading into the main computer service room. "As we agreed in the contract, you have clearance to all areas of the building, aside from management's offices. You must give notice to access those areas prior to entrance. Please understand this is to protect our clients who may be here on appointment.

"Data servers are in here. We stationed all the company security cameras across the hall in our security service room. The file room holding hard copies is located down the hall. Since the room is fireproof secure and not accessible to all staff, you'll need to access it using the key cards we gave you, but we request a manager to assist you. There's a conference room next door for your belongings. Simone can direct you on where things are if I have to step away for whatever reason."

Butch and Punk push past our group to unload the team's IT equipment in the designated conference room.

Ignoring Chase's dominating presence at my back, Trent addresses me directly. "Because of the volume of archived files you requested from offsite storage, the main floor conference rooms aren't large enough to accommodate them. We have them on the top floor, in one of the management conference rooms."

Having worked in the firm, I'm well-aware of the limited space the lower level conference rooms offer. I nod, understanding why Trent made the call to move the audit to the top floor. Chase, however, is far from lenient.

"Hold up. Your onsite archives for the current year are in fireproof storage on the ground level, but you moved our auditor to the fourth floor, away from the current client files she'll need to access routinely?"

"Chase, the space is an issue. I would take up two smaller conference rooms, as opposed to one larger room," I supply.

"I don't care if you take up three conference rooms. I want you with the team. Not running ragged, fetching onsite files. That's unacceptable."

What Chase means is, he wants me close, where he can monitor Trent's interaction with me. "I have Punk," I pacify, reminding him his best friend's job is to monitor Trent's behavior around me.

"The closer you are to the archives, the more *efficient* you'll be." His hard stare speaks of his unvoiced concern. The more inconveniences we face, the longer I'll be in Trent's presence.

"I'm able to recruit help from our staff to retrieve client files from onsite storage, if that'll help in your investigation," Trent offers.

A reasonable solution. "We would appreciate the help."

Chase's jaw snaps shut, grinding his teeth in frustration. He takes a moment to collect himself, crossing his thick arms

over his chest before he addresses Trent. “Who will assist Simone?”

“Our document control staff is assisting with our own internal investigation into the potential breach, which leaves us with another manager who has access.”

I raise an eyebrow at Trent’s odd word choice. “Potential breach?”

“Sorry for the confusion. That’s how the powers above are referring to it,” Trent clarifies. “One, they’re hoping the funds aren’t gone and are simply misplaced, where we can easily regain access to them. And two, they’re trying to reduce panic among our employees. This pilfering operation could shut down the firm. We can’t afford to have employees jumping ship. It’s best if we don’t involve staff outside of middle management or higher.”

I sigh. This is becoming more complicated. “How are you explaining our presence?”

“The staff has been told you’re assisting with our internal audit.”

Chase pinches the bridge of his nose, pushing his glasses askew. “So we’re expected to hide our true intentions to appease the firm’s administration? Do you realize how much this could impede our investigation? One slip of the tongue from any of our team members could cause hysteria among your employees. Mercy Ravens Security is not a company that deceives its clients—your staff is part of that group.”

“If we don’t hide our true intentions, we could risk the staff leaving, and possibly the culprit. Chase, I think it’s best if we keep our true purpose here to ourselves,” I suggest.

My possessive biker grimaces, running his hand into his tawny-colored man bun. “Fine. But we’re not being held responsible if word gets out among staff and chaos ensues. You’ll pay us in full for our time committed to this project. I need it in writing from your upper management before we move forward in this investigation.”

Trent nods. “I’ll speak with the board about your conditions before proceeding.”

With our position made clear, I press on. “Who will assist me when I need access to document control’s files in onsite storage?”

“I’m able to do it, but I’ll request another manager in case I’m with your IT team when you need access,” Trent offers.

Chase shakes his head. “Like hell.”

“Chase—”

“No, Numbers. You recall what I said last night?”

As if I could forget his crude declaration of ownership while he was balls deep inside of me. I also can’t forget the threat he made to beat the tar out of anyone he found to be a threat to our budding relationship. I don’t believe Chase would attack anyone without cause, but I certainly don’t want to test him either.

My attention returns to Trent. “As you know, auditing is slow-paced. However, Chase will uproot things left and right once he infiltrates the firm’s data servers. He’ll need someone from the firm at all times to make executive decisions. Your time would be better served with Chase’s team. Who else can assist me?”

Trent’s lips thin, but he schools his features quickly as he looks past us. “I have someone in mind.”

“And who is that?” I ask.

“I believe Trent is referring to me,” a seductive woman drawls from behind me.

My eyes close involuntarily. It just had to be *her*.

Beside me, Chase curses under his breath. He wraps an arm around my waist, almost like he’s trying to channel his limited control into me.

Slowly, I open my eyes, turning to face my former manager. “Hello, Cynthia.”

CHAPTER TWENTY- TWO

“Simone,” Cynthia sings sweetly, stepping around us to stand beside Trent. “It’s good to see you again after so long. Gosh, it’s been what? A year? How time flies.”

To my great displeasure, Cynthia looks as gorgeous as always. I may have fantasized about her having a serious breakout of warts across her face a time or two. Of course, that isn’t my luck.

My former boss is taller and more slender than me, pulling off her fitted cream-colored designer suit like a Paris runway model. Her shoulder-length chestnut hair is professionally styled, complementing her artfully done makeup. Her appearance screams management, demanding obedience from her subordinates.

A year ago, Cynthia intimidated me with her striking appearance and superior complex. Not anymore. I expected to experience some residual anger facing her again. Yet all I feel is indifference. She’s no longer very impressive or someone to admire. Her appeal is only surface deep and artificial. Emulating fake is not something I wish to replicate.

Her eyes land on Chase, going wide as she takes him all in. “Oh, my. You must be from the security company.” She holds out her hand, looking like the temptress she is. “Cynthia Higgins.”

Chase looks at her hand, refusing to release his hold around my waist. Instead, he holds out his other hand, forcing Cynthia to switch hers. “Chase. And yes, I’m leading the

Mercy Ravens Security team on this investigation. Looks like you'll be *assisting* Simone."

His comment ruffles Cynthia's feathers. She attempts to plaster a fake smile on her face to hide her scowl. "Yes, whatever Simone needs. We want to return to normal quickly." She leans in to Trent to add emphasis to her words, running a hand down his arm, with a smug smile.

Her poor attempt to make me jealous has me fighting my eye roll. As if I'd still want that cheating scumbag?

Have at it, Cynthia. He's all yours.

"We all have our lives to get back to, and I'm sure you want to be back in Colorado, where you belong," Cynthia adds.

Trent's behaving professionally, but clearly Cynthia is not. If she's attempting to take a dig at us, her insult falls short.

Chase smirks. "You're right. We'll make fast work of this assignment. Our crew has other pressing cases to investigate. Besides, Simone and I want to get back home to our family."

Cynthia's mouth pops open, her eyes dropping to my stomach. Trent makes a choking sound, croaking, "Family?"

"He means the crew and my immediate family," I amend quickly. What is Chase trying to accomplish?

"Well..." Chase drawls, squeezing my side. "We'll be adding our own brood into the mix soon enough."

Trent's eyes widen. "You're expecting?"

Oh, my God! I'm going to strangle this biker.

"No," I declare, a little too loudly. I clear my throat before continuing. "Let's leave our private matters alone and focus on the investigation."

"Of course," Trent says gruffly, with red-tipped ears.

He ushers us into the designated conference room our team is using as headquarters for the duration of this project. We take our seats around a sleek glass table. A large window dominates the exterior wall, letting in lots of natural light.

Butch and Chase scowl at the space—they prefer the dark interior intel cave Jo created for them back home. I admit, I feel a lot more exposed in this space.

Cynthia attempts to enter the room, only to be stopped when Trent steps in front of her. “Cynthia, I appreciate your willingness to help, but this meeting is for those involved in the investigation.”

She chortles at his dismissal. When she notices Trent is serious, her eyes narrow. “Trent, love. If I’m to be helping, then I have a right to sit in on this meeting.”

He shakes his head, refusing to budge. “Pulling files does not make you a member of this investigation. It means you assist as needed, and when asked. You can return to your work. Be on standby for when we officially begin the audit.”

Punk whistles low between his teeth. He flinches when the tip of my heel connects with his shin. We don’t need to add to the drama.

Cynthia’s face puckers at Trent’s rejection, but she schools her features quickly once she notices our crew is blatantly eavesdropping. “Very well. I’ll be in my office if you need anything.” She quickly takes her leave.

Trent closes the door with a soft click. He drops into a chair at the table with a sigh, seeming to be more at ease with her gone.

Punk is the first to speak. “You know you’re going to pay for that later, right?” He jerks back in his seat when the toe of my shoe makes contact with his leg again. “Damn, Priss. Ease up.”

“Knock it off,” I hiss in warning.

“Stating the obvious, is all,” Punk claps back.

“Punk, so help me...”

Trent waves me off. “It’s fine, Simone. Your teammate is only speaking candidly. And he’s not far off the mark.” He exhales, running a hand over his face. “Perhaps it’s best if we address the elephant in the room before we start.”

He looks at me across the table. “I have no problem working alongside you, Simone. We always worked well together. But obviously, there’s bad blood between us.”

“And whose fault might that be?” I accuse sharply.

“I’m not saying it’s your fault. We know the failure of our relationship lies in me. But you had to know you reappearing after a year would cause some sort of feeling. A little warning would’ve been nice.”

I’m about to spit nails when Chase leans across the table on his muscled forearms, glaring daggers at Trent. “My woman doesn’t owe you shit after what you did to her.”

Chase’s defense is appreciated, but I wish he’d lay off the claiming vocabulary. It doesn’t help when trying to deescalate a hostile situation.

“The warning wouldn’t have been for me, but for Cynthia,” Trent implies.

I jab the table with my finger. “It’s not my job to make your situation easier. I’m not responsible for the negative feelings my presence may produce for Cynthia. An auditing company doesn’t have to say who’ll officiate before the day of, and neither does ours. Courtesy has nothing to do with it. You’re just uncomfortable with having to deal with the backlash.”

“Clearly, Cynthia feels threatened seeing you again. I didn’t ask her to be involved with this case. Don’t tell me you didn’t see the gossip train going full throttle when we walked through the building. The news obviously got back to Cynthia, and she came to find us. I saw her behind you, knowing she probably overheard us discussing who would assist you. I’m not surprised she volunteered.”

“She’s keeping tabs on you,” I state, understanding.

He bobs his head. “Not that I want to talk poorly of her, but she’s always been the jealous type. She was extremely resentful of you and felt threatened by your outstanding performance in the company.”

This is absurd. “Why on Earth would she be jealous of me?”

He looks at me like I’m dense. “You never could see yourself clearly. Never could see how amazing you are.”

“Watch it,” Chase warns in a gravelly voice.

Trent holds up his hands in surrender. “I’m not trying to start anything. I’m stating a fact—Simone is more humble than most, not realizing she intimidates other women by just being herself.”

I balk. This is probably one of the nicest things Trent has ever said about me to me that wasn’t superficial, like how nice my boobs are or how good I am in bed.

Trent stares at me with something resembling regret in his eyes. It makes me uneasy.

It’s too late for regrets. He made his bed. Now he can lie in it.

“I’m sorry if my sudden appearance causes issues for you and Cynthia. I suggest having a conversation with her after work, informing her she has nothing to worry about regarding me. You’ve moved on with her, and I’ve moved on as well. Our history together is simply that—history.”

Chase releases a tiny rumble of pleasure, only loud enough for me to hear from where I sit beside him. He throws an arm over the back of my chair, looking pleased.

Trent stares at me a few seconds longer before he swallows thickly. He gives a curt nod. “Yes. A history.”

He quickly scans the rest of the faces before saying, “Okay. Let’s begin.”

CHAPTER TWENTY- THREE

After walking Simone's ex through our objectives and plan of execution for the investigation, Trent left to go talk to the board members about our new stipulations regarding keeping our true intentions a secret from the remaining staff. Not thirty minutes later, Trent returns with legal documents agreeing to our demands to continue with the audit.

With everything settled, our team is ready to break into our separate roles. I'm still heated at having my woman three floors above me, but I trust Simone when she says the accommodations on the upper floor make more sense.

As Simone talks about some accounting gibberish with Trent, I motion for Punk to step out into the hall with me. Butch remains behind. He knows to watch out for my woman while I'm away. It's the MC way, to stand guard over another brother's old lady when he's not able to do it himself.

When we're away from the others, Punk cocks his shaved head at me. "What's up?"

"The fucker may have been playing nice in there, but I don't trust his good guy act."

"Yeah, I got the impression he's trying to get back into Priss's good graces. Painting up his new bitch as unhinged." He shakes his head. "I don't trust any man who talks bad about his woman, especially when she's not present to defend herself."

"Agreed. Trent regrets screwing around with Cynthia. He's stuck with her. Did you see how the fucker eyeballed my woman in there? He wants her back."

“I don’t disagree with you, man. But I don’t think you can say or do anything to him while we work this case.”

I grind my teeth. “Maybe not, but I won’t stand by and watch the prick move in on my woman. He’s my problem to deal with, which makes Cynthia your problem.”

He rolls his blue eyes. “Figured as much. I’ll be with Simone mostly, anyway.”

“There’s not a doubt in my mind Cynthia’s going to be trouble. I shouldn’t be putting Simone into situations that could negatively affect her. It doesn’t sit right with me as her old man.”

My job as her partner is to protect her. To shield her from all the people and things that want to harm her. Having her working side-by-side with a two-faced bitch goes against my obligations to Simone.

“Chase,” Punk stresses, with sympathy in his blue eyes. “I get it. I do. But you’re underestimating your woman. Priss is like titanium. Shit can’t break her down for nothing.”

“No one is immune to verbal abuse forever.”

“You let me handle that. Okay? My job is to watch over her, and I will, Chase. You’re my brother, and by default, Priss is my sister. I won’t let Cynthia get to her.”

Attempting to calm down, I heave a sigh. I wish we didn’t have to deal with Trent and Cynthia at all. This is where I have to trust my brother has my back. I grip his shoulder firmly before releasing him to walk back into the conference room.

What I see once I enter the space has me coming to a screeching halt.

Simone and Trent are still talking. What was once a calm discussion has turned into a whispered altercation. Trent is leaning toward Simone, crowding her in-between the conference table and himself.

The fuck? I’m away for a minute, and this carrot-colored yuppie is making a move on her?

My stubborn accountant masks her emotions well. However, after studying her for as long as I have, I've learned her tells. Her rigid posture and crossed arms are a clear sign she's uncomfortable and being defiant. Whatever Trent is saying to her, it's making her angry.

Nu-uh. He doesn't get to upset my woman.

Seeing red, I'm about to go yank him away from her, but Butch beats me to the punch. My brother, not so subtly, wedges himself between the two of them with his rolling equipment, forcing Trent to step back against the wall and Simone to move to the side. Butch plants his workstation directly between the ex-lovers, making it impossible for Trent to get closer to her.

Amused, I hide my chuckle behind my hand. Butch glances at me from where he sits, giving me a little smirk.

Clear of the table, Simone promptly moves to the other side of the room. It's almost like she's desperate to create distance between herself and Trent.

Good. I want her to be as far as possible from the d-bag while working this case. Seeing she doesn't want to be near him helps calm down the jealousy building inside of me.

I move toward Simone, shaking off my temper. No reason for her to think I'm enraged by anything she's done when it's solely Trent's doing. When I get close enough to touch her, I run a free hand down her arm. She stiffens at my touch, stepping back.

Clearly, she hasn't forgiven me for my earlier stunt out front. I knew she'd be hella pissed. Yet I couldn't stop myself from making our status known to her ex. I'm not sorry I did it, nor will I apologize for publicly stamping my claim on her. She'll accept it—*I hope.*

Simone looks at me with those storm clouds brewing in her gray eyes, her face a serene mask covering the uneasiness I know my woman feels. I know all too well, since I feel it myself.

I side-eye Trent across the room before looking at Simon and asking, “Everything okay?”

“Nothing I can’t handle,” she answers coldly.

No doubt she’ll handle it, though she doesn’t need to deal with Trent alone. One look at her stubborn face tells me she won’t be opening up with her ex nearby. We’ll address it later, when we’re alone.

“You good to go?”

She gives me a stiff nod. “I am.”

“I’ll escort you upstairs and show you how we have the files arranged. It’ll help you find things faster,” Trent announces from behind me.

I glance over my shoulder at the douche canoe, unable to stop my molars from grinding together. Trent squirms under my stare—typical of any coward who knows he’s overstepped.

My attention returns to my woman. I hate having her leave with him, but we need to get this show on the road.

Simone gives me a once-over—a warning to behave—before collecting her things. It’s cute how she thinks she can keep me in check with a pointed look. Shit never worked with my caretakers at the orphanage when I was younger, and it’s not about to start now.

I’ll let Simone believe she has some control over me, if only to put her mind at ease. My woman is stressed enough without me adding more fuel to the fire. As long as Trent doesn’t step out of line again, I won’t have to throw down the hammer.

She follows Trent out of the conference room, and out of my eyesight. The first chance I get, I’ll gain access to the building’s internal security feeds. Until then, I have Punk as my eyes and ears.

Punk pats me on the bicep, murmuring, “I got this.” He quickly shovels a bagel in his mouth and grabs two of the coffees we picked up prior. He salutes me with one of the disposable cups in his hand as he follows my woman.

Though I have faith in my brother and Simone, it's only a matter of time before Trent makes his next move on her. Let's hope we're all prepared for when he does.

CHAPTER TWENTY- FOUR

“Simone?” Trent pleads in a whisper next to me as we make our way to the elevator.

“Save it. We have nothing to discuss.”

Trent was nervy to approach me in the conference room minutes ago. But he’s downright out of line to ask me to join him for drinks this evening.

I’m already angry with an unruly biker. Throwing Trent’s bullshit into the mix is doing nothing but stoking my rage to new heights.

Fucking men.

Rejecting Trent feels good, righteous even. As if I’d entertain the idea of spending time outside of this assignment—hard pass. Unfortunately, Trent isn’t accepting my refusal.

“How can you say that?” Though his voice is whiny, he keeps it low. Probably trying to avoid having Punk overhear our conversation, since he’s trailing close behind. “We were together a year, shared a life, a home. We had something special.”

“No, I thought we had something special. That illusion burst like a bubble the moment you got your dick wet in another woman.”

Giving him my back, I effectively cut off the conversation when I jab the elevator button. I turn in time to see Punk closing the distance between us.

Thank God! For the first time, I’m happy to have the moron as my security detail.

Trent stews, clenching his jaw the way he always has when we've fought in the past. Past experience indicates he won't let me brush him off.

The elevator dings open, and we usher ourselves inside. Not much is shared, aside from a few tense glances in the elevator on the way to the top floor. Punk hands me my coffee, without a peep. He stands close to my side, his blue eyes laser-focused as he watches Trent. His vigilant behavior seems over the top. Then again, I've seen him behave the same way when he's guarding my little sister. This is just how Punk operates, and he's damn good at his job.

We exit the elevator, following Trent to the airy conference room. The board members use this space to host the firm's elite clientele. It's about twice the size of the room Chase and Butch are using, and it's packed with boxes, probably the off-site client files.

The sheer volume of paperwork is intimidating, but it's nothing I can't handle on my own. I'm trained in investment banking and have the skills to spot fraudulent operations. If you know what to look for, the telltale signs have a way of popping out at you. It's time consuming but manageable.

Trent points to the furthest wall. "It's in alphabetical order, starting there. Older statements in the front of the client's files, moving up to the most recent transactions in the back of their files."

"Sounds good." I slip off my blazer, hanging it on the back of a chair. I might as well make myself comfortable—this place will be my home until we finish the investigation.

Punk does a sweep of the room, taking in everything. Satisfied with the space, he comes to stand beside me.

Trent picks up a notepad from the center of the glass table, jotting something on it. "These are my and Cynthia's office numbers, if you need help. I'll add my cell, since you'll have better luck reaching me on there if I'm with your IT team."

"I recall the numbers," I say dismissively, waving away the notepad. I may have been gone a year, but prior to leaving, I

worked here long enough to have them drilled into my brain.

He throws the pad of paper down with more force than necessary. His face morphs into a frown. “Oh? I could have sworn you’d forgotten my cell, seeing as how you never returned my calls.”

Is he really going there? In front of Punk?

“Calling would imply I wanted to speak to you. Thus why I didn’t. I thought we agreed to keep private matters out of this investigation?” I remind him frigidly, giving him one last chance to drop it before I go nuclear.

My tone does nothing to deter him. His nostrils flare. “We have unresolved business.”

A full mushroom cloud erupts deep in my brain. My voice is low and lethal. “The. Hell. We. Do.”

Punk leans his backside against the tabletop, crossing his legs at his ankles to get comfortable for our showdown. He watches us with an eager smirk on his face.

“Yes, we do,” Trent insists fervently. “I never explained myself. We could have reconciled. We should have.”

Heat rises to my cheeks. As if he could explain away his betrayal. “There is nothing to explain when you’re sleeping with my boss in our bed.”

“What you saw...” Trent rambles. “It’s not what it looked like.”

Punk barks a laugh. “You sinking your dick into another woman was what, then? A team building exercise? Last I heard, those employee bonding workshops didn’t involve being balls deep in some easy pussy.”

“Do you mind?” Trent glowers at Punk. “This is a private matter not involving you.”

“Actually, I do mind,” Punk chides, pushing off the table. With his arms folded over his lean chest, he steps in front of me to face Trent. “Seeing as how you’re trying to start shit with my brother’s old lady.”

“Punk, I’m not his old lady.”

“Right,” Punk taunts. “And Jo’s not our sister.”

“I can handle this.”

“Never said you couldn’t. But I’ve seen how violent you get when provoked. Don’t think I haven’t forgotten how you gave me welts when you whipped me with your property jacket. I’m just trying to keep us in a job. If I have to referee, so be it.”

Not going to lie. He has a point. I throw hands when pushed too far.

With teeth bared, Trent tries to walk around Punk to come face-to-face with me. Punk steps in his way. Trent goes to the left, and Punk follows. He then goes to the right, and Punk goes right along with him. Back and forth they move.

Punk holds out his arms. “I can do this dance all day, dude. Though I prefer to get down with a woman, unless you’re trying to tell me you’re into me.”

Trent jerks back. His face contorts in a mixture of disgust and fury.

“Aww,” Punk muses aloud, with a smile in his voice. “You like me, don’t you?”

My ex shakes his head angrily. “Simone, call me. Seriously.” He spins on his loafers, marching for the door.

“Don’t be like that, man,” Punk calls after him. “I can’t make any promises, but I’ll try anything once.”

Trent slams the door behind him.

Alone with Punk, I smack the back of his head.

“Ow. What was that for?”

I roll my eyes. “You’re as bad as Chase. Did you really have to hit on him?”

Punk snorts. “As if. He’s totally not my type.”

“Right. Because he has a dick.”

“Are you sure about that? I could have sworn he had a pussy.”

I scoff. “Such a misogynistic stance that women are the weaker sex because we have vaginas. Women are strong.”

Punk rubs his chin. “You’re right. My apologies. Pussies are tough. They can take a pounding and keep going. Your ex is exuding little dick energy. I bet he can’t make it past the ass cheeks.”

“I can’t handle your energy today,” I admit in a tired voice, walking to the wall of boxed files.

“And are we pretending the blowhard isn’t orange?” Punk persists.

“Spray tanning is popular in Sacramento,” I mumble, opening the first box.

“I don’t recall you being colored like a dreamsicle, Miss Pale Ass. Who the fuck spray tans to the point where they shine? The dude stands out like a highlighter. Seriously, how did you date a *Fanta*-looking weasel without laughing in his face?”

Shaking my head, I pull out the first file. Punk’s description plays on repeat in my head as I skim through the contents. A small laugh bubbles in my chest. I attempt to disguise it by clearing my throat.

“He is sort of orange looking, isn’t he?”

Punk sits in a chair, kicking his boots up on the table. “Like a prison jumpsuit.”

CHAPTER TWENTY- FIVE

Anxious, I pace my sleek, modern office, tugging at my clothes before smoothing them out again.

Simone's here, in the building and with my man. The bitch is back, and Trent looks pleased.

This isn't good. Simone is too close. With her back onsite, Trent may be tempted to rekindle a romance with his ex.

Oh, who am I kidding? Trent has been ready and willing to go back to Simone since the day she caught the two of us in bed together. The only reason Trent is with me is, Simone wouldn't take him back. As much as I loathe Simone, I owe her for leaving Trent.

But she's here, auditing the firm. I nearly fell out of my heels when a staff member from the ground level called to inform me she spotted Simone walking through the building with a group of muscled men.

Impossible. I couldn't believe the news, didn't want to believe it was true. Having to see if the gossip was real, I rushed downstairs. To my great contempt, it was. And to make matters worse, Trent was standing beside Simone, looking the happiest he'd been in a year.

Fuck. Fuck. FUCK.

With shaky fingers, I snatch my cell from my desk, punching out another text message to Trent.

Come to my office.

It's the same message I've sent a dozen times, each one going unanswered—not his norm.

Old insecurities have me running my hands over my hair, ready to rip it from the roots. I may have the desired pedigree, the Ivy League education, the better job title, more income, but Trent still favors Simone, the woman who has none of my qualities.

It doesn't help my ego when Simone is a far more superb financial accountant. The pressure I got from upper management to increase my productivity to the same level as Simone was enough fuel to detest Trent's ex. I may have been Simone's boss, but the firm favored Simone.

Waiting for Trent, I continue to pace a hole in the carpet, slipping back into the past as I recall what my life was like when Simone worked in the firm.

No matter how many projects or clients I took on, Simone was doing more, running circles around me and our department. I was living in the shadow of my underling, and others noticed.

Jealousy is an ugly thing, and I'm green with it. How could a young, buxom, state college, Los Angeles projects kiss-ass outshine me?

It wasn't fair. I should be the favorite, the one all staff want to emulate. I was the total package, but no one took notice of me.

People make assumptions when you come from money, like you have things handed to you. Not me. I worked my ass off, even engaging in colleague sabotage a time or two to get where I am today. My efforts didn't make me the smartest; only the most conniving. And I'm okay with it as long as it made me the top dog.

But I wasn't the alpha accountant. Simone was.

Attempting to set Simone up to fail, I purposely gave her a larger workload compared to others on our team. All it did was make Simone work harder, to the point where upper management was looking for a way to advance her from under me to a level above me. With every success Simone had, my contempt for my employee grew.

And then there was Trent, the crown jewel in Simone's life, or at least in my eyes, he was.

Trent was an attractive man, by far the most handsome in the company. He was intelligent and well-educated. His vast knowledge of investments and financial planning brought in a slew of A-list clientele to the firm. The man was a celebrity in the financial world.

For years, I secretly pined for his affections, flirting shamelessly with him, with no reciprocation. When Trent finally showed interest, it came as a complete surprise. What made Trent change his mind out of nowhere? I never questioned. It didn't matter. Trent was paying attention to me, and I was enamored.

Although Trent was already in a committed relationship with Simone, it wasn't a deterrent—it was an incentive. And in a sick, vindictive way, I justified the affair as reclaiming the power Simone took from me in the firm.

I fell hard, faster than Superman dodging a speeding bullet. From when Trent returned my affection to us escalating our secret relationship to the bedroom was less than a month. The sex was something to be desired, but it was all the sweeter knowing I was fucking Simone Holland's boyfriend behind her back.

And here we are a year later, with Simone walking around the firm like she owns the damn place and catching Trent's attention once again. His shutting the door in my face seems more like foreshadowing than refusing me access to a private auditing meeting.

Trent is mine, I chant in my head, reminding myself I have everything Simone doesn't.

The office door swinging open snaps me back to the present. My posture sags with respite when Trent enters, shutting the door behind him.

Sporting a pinched expression, he clips, "I'm here. What's so important you keep blowing up my phone while I'm with the auditors?"

Ignoring his indifferent tone, I rush forward, throwing my arms around his neck. He grunts at the impact, though he allows me to hug him. He's never been overly affectionate. I try not to let it bother me when he doesn't hold me with the same enthusiasm.

“What took so long? Is Simone giving you a hard time?”

Maybe mentioning Simone was the wrong thing to do as I pull my head back to look at Trent's expression. His jaw tics, and his brows pull together, something he does when he's annoyed. Trent takes my arms, extracting them from around his neck, and places them at my sides.

“I'm liaison for the firm, Cynthia. You can't expect me to drop everything and run to you whenever you want.”

I frown. He's never not come running before.

“They've been here a couple of hours. I doubt much has happened beyond formalities.”

He must sense I'm not going to let him weasel his way out of my questioning. Sighing, he steps around me, taking a seat in one of two chairs across from my desk.

“It's not like I could leave right in the middle of going over procedure and regulations with the security and auditing team.” He rubs his chin, deep in thought and not focused on me.

I don't want to contemplate where his thoughts are, but I have a guess. Folding my arms, I walk around my desk, taking a seat.

With Trent's earlier slighting still fresh in my mind, I bitterly ask, “Did you have to dismiss me from the preliminary auditing meeting? You made me look like a fool in front of them, especially Simone.”

Trent glowers. “Did you honestly expect me to let you stay? Come on, Cynthia. You're not on the team, nor were you assigned by the firm to assist the investigation outside of what I may assign you. Your presence in that meeting would have drawn the attention of other employees. Simone knows I'd be going against the firm's protocol. The investment banking

department—your department—you can't be directly involved with the investigation.”

Trent closes his eyes, pinching his nose with a low groan. He's annoyed, but I'm too heated to let the issue slide. As liaison, Trent has pull. He can do whatever's needed to assist the investigation, including having me sit in on the meeting. He excluded me, and I have a fair idea why.

“You couldn't have announced I was assisting you outside of being Simone's file bitch?”

“Jesus Christ, Cynthia. Use your pretty little head. It's a conflict of interest to have employees of the department being investigated included in the audit team.”

“Isn't it a conflict of interest having a former employee audit the firm?”

“You would need to prove there's a conflict of interest, and the firm would need to contest the auditor assigned to the case. But I'm telling you, the firm isn't going to challenge it. Simone left the company under good circumstances. The board was pleased with her performance when she was an employee, and they're pleased she's on the team auditing us now. She knows the investment banking division, has insider knowledge of how the firm works. Considering upper management wants to uncover why their clients' money is disappearing, and quickly, Simone is the ideal candidate to audit. She's here to stay.”

The last sentence of Trent's explanation has me biting my tongue. The word *stay* seems disparaging, at least for me. I cannot afford to have Simone audit us, for more reasons than one.

We're silent for a long pause, Trent daydreaming and me subconsciously trying to bring him back to me.

“Is her presence going to be a problem, Trent?”

The question has Trent hesitantly meeting my gaze, his eyes slightly widened. I'm surprised I asked it aloud, too. Normally, I keep my insecurities regarding our relationship

locked away. Simone's presence is triggering all kinds of reactions in both of us.

As always, Trent collects himself quickly. "Don't be ridiculous. This is business. Stop reading into it."

"Am I?" I challenge him, scrutinizing his reaction.

Trent raises an eyebrow, saying nothing. From experience, I know challenging his silence will be brushed off. He'll claim I worry for nothing. The same as it always has been when I'd question his love for me. And I foolishly accept it each time.

But I know better. His silence says more than his words ever could, and I fear losing him is one step closer to becoming a reality.

CHAPTER TWENTY- SIX

The first day on a new cyber security assignment involves getting acquainted with the equipment we'll be dealing with. Butch and I go through each system meticulously, learning the ins and outs of each program. The process is tedious without having your woman's ex-fuckwad glaring daggers at the side of your head.

If Trent thinks he can intimidate me with a scowling orange face, he's sorely mistaken. His mug is so scrunched up, he looks like a puckered bung hole. It takes plenty of effort to keep the smile off my face.

Trent's been in a foul mood since he returned from dropping off Simone and Punk on the top floor. No idea what crawled up his ass, though I'm willing to bet my woman either gave him an earful or Punk was screwing with him—I'm cool with either option.

At least Trent's ego isn't so bruised, he can't assist with things as we need. I'll give the idiot some credit—he's good at his job, knowing the company as if he memorized the handbook. The firm's decision to assign him as liaison to our case makes perfect sense.

Ten hours later, Butch and I complete our rundown of the company's IT systems. It's the longest I've gone in months without having eyes on Simone. Her being near two people who emotionally hurt her has been eating away at me all day. Although Punk gave me text updates often, seeing Simone with my own eyes will help settle my nerves. I need to hold her in my arms and breathe in her natural floral musk to calm me.

With a heavy chunk of our work completed, there's no reason to push harder today. The work will be here in the morning. Besides, my mind isn't going to focus until I see my feisty accountant.

Butch and I close up shop, gathering our things. We head to the top floor to retrieve the rest of our team.

The fourth floor is eerily quiet. Most of the staff has left for the day. A room with glass walls is lit near the middle of the floor. Inside, Simone works diligently over her files spread across the glass table. Several stacks surround her working space. She must have put a good dent in her caseload. It's not surprising—Simone is a wiz at tracking numbers.

Punk is pacing the room behind Simone's chair like a caged lion. He needs to be let out for the night, or he's going to be one irritable bastard.

I knock on the open door. "We're calling it a night. Let's roll."

"Thank fuck," Punk mutters, breezing past me to escape into the main office area.

Simone doesn't move, either too engrossed in her work or ignoring me. Knowing my woman, it's probably both.

Backtracking into the hall, I approach Punk. "How was it?"

My best friend shrugs. "Boring as fuck-all. I don't know how Simone does this for a living without losing her shit. No wonder she's always ornery—she has mathematical constipation."

Butch has to cover his face to hide his laugh.

Punk prefers the stealth or top security cases our MC takes on. The more action, the better. But not all Mercy Ravens assignments are the run-and-gun kind. You need to take the desk jobs with the fast-paced ones, too. Out of our four-person crew, he's definitely going to have the hardest time working on this mission.

"Did Cynthia make any appearances?"

“Nah. She strode past the conference room several times, probably checking to make sure her limp-dick boyfriend wasn’t hanging around Miss Priss.”

Trent ducked out on me and Butch a handful of times throughout the day, claiming he had other things to check on. “Did Trent drop in?”

“No. I saw him walk through the office twice, but he was a man on a mission. He glanced at Simone but averted his eyes when he saw me. No other activity, aside from Simone mumbling numbers and running calculations. Oh, and she muttered a few threats, swearing to do you bodily harm for the stunt you pulled earlier.”

Fuck. I rub the back of my neck, sighing. “She’s not going to make this easy on me, is she?”

“You think?” Punk mocks. Beside him, Butch sniggers, not bothering to hide it anymore.

I turn my attention back to the conference room, where Simone continues to work. Her pouty mouth moves as she does the math in her head.

“Well,” Punk taunts. “Go grovel already. Some of us want to eat tonight before we have to do this shit all over again tomorrow.”

Butch ushers me in the direction of the conference room with a sweeping grand gesture of his arms.

“Assholes, the both of you.”

My brothers smirk, watching as I make my way on the eggshell path toward Simone. The windowed walls give them a first row seat to witness my ass being handed to me. We all know Simone’s ruthless when pushed too far. There’s no chance I’m getting out of this without a thorough tongue lashing.

At the threshold, I steel my spine and walk in like I would any other situation. I’m a hardened biker—nothing intimidates me.

Nothing aside from the bombshell in stilettos sitting in front of me.

It's fine. I'll crank my allure level to max, buttering her up nice and good. Hopefully, it'll be enough to appease her until I can get her back to the hotel. I'd prefer she chastises me in private.

"Numbers," I purr, turning on the fuck-boy charm.

Simone slaps her hands on the table as she stands. "Don't you dare try to 'Numbers' sweet talk me, you arrogant ass."

Damn. Too bad I'm not a snake charmer to tame her viper-tongue.

"Baby, can we do this back at the hotel?" God, I sound pathetic, hearing the plea in my voice. The guys are going to heckle me for sure.

Simone ignores my request with a flip of her hair over her shoulder. She straightens herself, hands on her waist and cocking a hip.

Ah, shit. Her battle pose is activated. There's no waiting until later. Shit's going down now.

Resigned to my fate, I hold out my arms. "Alright. Let me have it."

"How could you? We agreed to keep our relationship private unless prompted."

My molars grind together. It goes against the grain to justify my actions when I don't feel I was wrong. Unfortunately for me, my pride rears its ugly head.

"So I nudged things along to clue the bastard in. What's the problem?"

"What's the problem?" She harrumphs, pacing the length of the table between us. "The problem is, you completely went over my head by texting Trent to meet us outside. You tricked me into riding with you into the job. You deliberately put me in an uncomfortable position, all to boost your ego."

Was I conniving when I set up the meet-and-greet? Absolutely. I'm not exactly known for making smart choices with marking Simone as mine. The only thing that makes me halt my snarky response is hearing she felt uncomfortable.

Shame isn't an emotion I'm familiar with, but *dammit* for it budding inside my chest. Hating myself for causing her unnecessary unease, I round the table. I need to be closer—to touch and comfort her.

She stops her pacing when she sees me approach. Her storm-colored eyes narrow the closer I come. When I'm within touching range, I reach out to run my hand down the curve of her oval face.

Simone swats away my hand. “Ugh! Don't even think about it.”

Internally cursing her fast reflexes, I shake out my hand. “Let me in. I need to make this right.”

“Physical touch isn't going to make me less pissed. It's not my love language.”

“Why the fuck not? It's one of mine. All I need is you near me to relax when I'm ragging.”

One of her eyes twitches. “Ragging! I am not ragging—”

“Could have fooled me.” My temper's getting the best of me, but I'm not able to get a handle on it. Thank fuck we're alone in the building. All I need is a bigger audience to see me epically losing my shit. “If you're expecting an apology, it ain't coming. I told you I'm a jealous bastard. There was no way I was going to walk into this job without your ex knowing exactly who I am to you.”

“Chase,” Simone sighs, with exacerbation. “We. Are. Dating.”

“Simone,” I mock in the same annoyed tone. “You're. My. Woman.”

“How can we have a relationship when it's all one-sided? A relationship needs to be fifty-fifty.”

Every time she brats off, saying we're dating, more than my temper grows. My cock is rock hard, ready to drive the attitude out of her.

"I agree. How about this? I give you my last name, and you scream my first. There—fifty-fifty."

"Jesus Christ, can you not think with your dick for one minute? You didn't take my feelings into consideration," she accuses me heatedly.

Her comment enrages me. "You've got to be kidding me. The orange cockblocker hurt you, and I wanted to give him a reason to stay away."

"You may have wanted to protect me, but this was more about you staking your claim."

I flinch, not because her comment hurt, but because she's not wrong. The whole orchestrated entrance was to warn Trent off by implying she was mine. It made me look like a territorial prick in Simone's eyes.

"Did Trent hurt me in the past? Yes. But you hurt me today when you treated me like a piece of property to be fought over. You already have me, Chase. Yet you thoughtlessly bulldozed right through the trust I put in you. We discussed how we'd handle Trent—together, as a unit. But it was more important to you to brush my wishes aside and showboat for fucking Trent. Why is it so difficult to get through your thick skull?"

Her response has me frozen solid. An uneasy sensation sweeps over my body, causing my palms to sweat. I rarely get nervous, but anxiety floods my body.

I hurt her.

Why can't I do or say the right things when it comes to the woman I love? With all the progress I've made with proving myself to her, I went and blew it out of the water.

I'm usually fast with a response, quick to smooth shit over. But my head flounders under pressure to formulate the right words to undo the damage I caused.

Fuck Chase, say something. Anything!

When I don't respond, Simone grabs her purse off the table and pulls her suit jacket off the back of her chair. She doesn't look back at me as she speed-walks right toward Punk.

"Can you drive me to the hotel, please?" She doesn't wait for his response, rushing to the elevators.

Punk raises an eyebrow at me. He doesn't move, giving me one last shot to make it right.

My hurt ego has me waving him off. There's no way I can fix my mistakes while we're still hot-headed and my brain can't articulate the correct words.

He shakes his shaved head, clearly disappointed with my response. Without saying a word, he follows Simone to the elevators.

Butch approaches me, rubbing his jaw. "I may not be an expert on women, but I don't think you groveled properly, bro."

"I prefer it when you talk less," I mutter as I stalk off to the elevators. Butch follows close on my heels, snickering.

CHAPTER TWENTY- SEVEN

Back at the hotel, I give Simone some breathing room. She deserves some time to decompress without me putting her on edge. That, and I still have no clue how to correct my clusterfuck.

To kill time, I hit the hotel bar and order a bourbon neat. My fingers play with the rim of my whiskey tumbler, while Simone consumes my thoughts. I stare vacantly ahead at nothing in particular as the wheels in my head try to orchestrate a way to fix things with Numbers.

When I have no answers after finishing my first drink, I order another. Maybe a buzzed mind will offer more clarity than a sober one. If nothing else, it may dull the ache growing in my chest.

My head swivels around the bar, taking in the ritzy establishment. It's a posh room decked out in matte black and stark white furnishings, with touches of gold to make the space a swanky retreat. It's a far cry from my MC's woodsy local water hole, Mikey's Pub. I stick out like a sore thumb in my tactical clothing, piercings, and tattoos, looking more like a bad decision than a businessman.

Simone would be in her element in this sophisticated space. I can imagine her blending right in with the other white-collar patrons, talking stocks and sipping wine—a queen holding her court. I guess I'd be the jester in this scenario. I may not belong, but I'd rather be her fool than not be in her orbit.

Fuck. I should be in bed with my arms wrapped around her, whispering every filthy thing I want to do to make her body hum. Not sitting here alone in this cold bar, losing myself in the bottom of a bottle. I bite at my lip ring to suppress my needy groan.

A couple sitting at the opposite end of the bar paint the picture of what Simone's life may have been like when she was with Trent. The two lovers are dressed in expensive suits, heads bent toward each other as they share the events of their day. It hurts to admit it, but Trent fits into this picturesque world—a world my Numbers favors—and I never will.

Thinking of the Cheeto-colored bastard has me clenching my fist around my drink, imagining it's his scrawny chicken neck. Before I crack the tumbler, I raise the glass to my lips, knocking back the last of my bourbon. The burn numbs my insides yet does nothing to numb my turmoil.

I'm fairly good at solving problems—it's part of my job description. But romantic relationships are outside my jurisdiction. I would talk to Punk if I thought he wouldn't harass me for being clueless. Butch is a no-go, too. He has as much experience dealing with the opposite sex as I do, probably less.

There's only two guys on the crew who've been in a long-standing relationship with a habit of screwing up and setting things right again. I need their guidance. Pulling my cell from my back pocket, I pick the name at the top of my contacts.

The phone rings once before Atlas's deep baritone voice greets me gruffly. "Chase? What's going on, brother?"

"Hey, Prez. Do you have a few minutes to spare?"

There's movement on the other end of the line. I hear the distinct sound of lips smacking before I hear the soft click of a door shutting. Knowing Atlas, he kissed Jo before excusing himself into a private area.

"Everything okay with the case?"

"Yup. We got a good head start today." I pause, unsure of how to broach the subject I wish to discuss.

After giving him the silent treatment for an unmeasured amount of time, Atlas clears his throat. “Chase?”

“Hmm?”

Atlas growls, his normal response when irritated. “Don’t tell me you called me in the middle of the night, pulling me away from my old lady’s warm body, to not spit out whatever the fuck it is you want to talk about.”

My eyes quickly glance at my Luminox wristwatch. It’s midnight here, meaning it’s later back home. I should have considered the time zones before calling the man with infant twins.

Damn, I’m slipping tonight.

I groan, rubbing at my eyes under my glasses. “Fuck, Prez. I’m sorry. I’ll let you go.”

“Nu-uh-uh. You woke me. Now you’re going to tell me why you called. It’s not like you to not have your shit together. The Chase I know would’ve realized it’s one in the morning here in Fort Collins. Where are you? I hear lots of voices.”

“In the hotel bar.”

“Alone?”

“Mm-hm.”

“Someone has you off your game. What’s going on between you and my sister-in-law?”

I palm my forehead, caving. I confide everything to Atlas, from how I reneged on our agreement to keep our relationship private to me manhandling her onto my bike and presenting her in my arms to her former lover.

Atlas is laughing hard on the other end of the line. “Damn, bro. You’re as bad as I was.”

“It gets worse,” I admit. “I refused to apologize. I’d do it all over again to keep that slippery prick away from her. She accused me of not taking her feelings into consideration, being a possessive jerk, and breaking trust.”

He sighs. “I understand why you did it—been there, done that. I’m not one to call out a brother for being territorial about his woman. But she isn’t wrong. You broke a promise. Doesn’t matter that you did it to protect her from him. You made a decision that affects her without consulting her first. What you did is a betrayal in her eyes. Her trust was already thin to begin with. After everything her ex put her through, your duplicity is another log on her pyre for men.”

Dammit all. He’s right, and I’m such an idiot for not looking at the broader picture. I may not have been the man who hurt her the most, but I’m dealing with the consequences of Trent’s actions. My transgressions aren’t something she’s willing to tolerate after having dealt with the mother lode of bullshit from the man before me.

Defeated, my head hits the bartop. I no longer care if I look pathetic to the other patrons. “How do I fix this?”

“Own your shit. Admit your fuck up and beg her to forgive you.”

My face twists with displeasure. “Sounds extremely unpleasant. Isn’t there an easier way?”

Atlas chuckles. “Nope. When Jo came into the picture, I learned real quick my pride would get me kicked to the curb. I swallowed my arrogance like razor blades, but I manned up because that’s what she needed—a real man. A real man isn’t afraid to admit when he’s wrong and asks for forgiveness. A real man puts his woman’s heart before his ego. You’re not losing a part of yourself by admitting failure. You’re growing into the better version of yourself, for her and for you.”

His words wash over me like a baptism, cleansing me of my toxic behavior I refused to acknowledge before our conversation.

“Let me ask you something. Do you love her?”

“Absolutely.” It’s the first I’ve admitted it to anyone aside from Simone when I was half-asleep.

“Then do the right thing, Chase. Or you can kiss your shot with your queen goodbye.”

A baby wails in the background. “Gotta go, man. You good?”

I stand from my stool, striding out of the bar. “I’m good.”

“Are you going to take my advice, or do I need to order you to do it?”

I hit the button on the elevator, sliding inside as the door opens for me. “I’m already on the move.”

CHAPTER TWENTY- EIGHT

The bed is cold when I wake in the morning. Not wanting to appear desperate, I pretend to still be sleeping and slowly inch my hand across the sheets, seeking Chase's warmth. No matter how far I reach, all I find is emptiness, similar to the hollow feeling in my chest.

When Chase hadn't returned last night, I worried. I refused to call or text him, not wanting to appear like the overbearing girlfriend. Instead, I called Punk. A part of me worried he'd give me crap for trying to keep tabs on his best friend. Not once did Punk give me grief for my concern. He told me to give him space—Chase would return once he was ready. They weren't the words I wanted to hear, but I understood the need for distance when emotionally overwhelmed.

I attempted to stay awake until Chase returned, but the events of the long day, along with my weighted emotions, won out. I crashed hard, something I haven't done since I caught Trent and Cynthia together. Sleep is my body's way of avoiding the pain. Depression has that effect on some.

We've only shared a bed for a couple of days, and I'm already accustomed to Chase's heavy presence beside me as I sleep. The way he molds his long, muscled body around mine is like the weighted blanket of my dreams.

Where has he been all night? My gut twists as several unsettling scenarios play out in my head. Have I finally driven him away with my unrelenting demeanor? Did he share a bed with a more willing woman last night? Does he even care about my feelings?

I pull my arm back, wrapping it around myself to hold the hurt in. I was furious with Chase's antics yesterday. Not only did he disregard my wishes to keep my private life out of the mission, he thinks Trent is a threat to our relationship.

How can my handsome, brainy biker be stupidly jealous of an orange troll?

When we were arguing, I only focused on the betrayal, leaving out how my heart belongs to him. Seeing he's not in the bed with me, I wish I had said it.

My nose stings as the onset of tears ready to break free.

Sniffing, I swipe at my eyes, catching the falling tears. With a shaky breath, I roll to get out of bed. My heart leaps into my throat, strangling my cry.

"Easy, Numbers. Don't be frightened."

Chase is sitting in a chair he dragged to my side of the bed. He's still dressed in his clothes from yesterday, looking rather rumpled. His tawny hair is loose and messy, like he'd been pulling at it in handfuls. However, it's his face that makes my heart squeeze. He looks tired, but more than that, he looks at me with remorse. His warm brown eyes hold mine, beseeching me.

"Don't cry, baby. I hate that I'm the reason for those tears."

Am I still crying? My hands quickly brush over my cheeks to remove the evidence. To hell if I show him, he got the best of me.

He reaches out for me. It takes all my willpower to pull back from his touch when all I want to do is crawl into his lap and wrap my arms around his neck. I move to the other side of the bed, swinging my legs over the edge to stand.

"Simone," he moans with a hitch in his voice as he rises out of his chair. He's breathing heavily, worry clear in his tense stature.

"Where have you been?" I demand, turning to face him with my arms folded over my chest. He has a lot of explaining to do.

Chase shakes his head, a little frown of disappointment creasing his brow. “Not far. After I left our room, I went to drink my frustrations away at the hotel bar. Didn’t help me any—couldn’t stop thinking of you and the disappointed look on your face from our fight. All I wanted to do was erase that sad look from your face, but I didn’t have a fucking clue how to go about it.”

Is he serious? Was he only at the bar? Unsure of what to say, I wait for him to continue.

“Everywhere I looked, I saw someone who reminded me of you. And every male who accompanied a woman who slightly resembled you became fucking Trent,” he mutters in a pained voice.

Mention of Trent has my nerves on edge. Considering he’s the reason Chase and I are currently quarreling, any topic comprised of my ex is not one I want to have. Chase must see my tension rising, because he’s quick to add, “I could see what your life once was—all glitz and refined beauty—and how at odds I am compared to the life you mourn.”

His words tug at my heart, hating how he felt like the odd man out. Yes, I once grieved my old lifestyle, but I no longer feel like my old self. That part of me doesn’t belong in my new life, and it certainly never defined my identity before. It was only part of a standard of living in my old circle, one I could not care less about. I don’t belong in Sacramento any more than I belong with Trent.

“Chase—”

“But it doesn’t matter if I’m as opposite to you as day and night,” Chase interrupts, rushing to get out his words, possibly worried about what I may say. “I’m the right man for you, and my actions need to reflect my worth.”

I hold up a hand to stop him. “Chase, you are worthy—more than worthy in many wonderful ways. Please, stop thinking I want *this*,” I say, waving at the elegant room as a representation of all the resplendency I had before. “My only request if you’re my man is to respect me. You don’t make promises if you can’t keep them—your words will mean

nothing to me if you keep breaking them. That's all I want, and that's why I'm upset with you."

He woodenly nods his head, looking directly into my eyes. "Pretty much what Atlas said, too."

Shocked, I raise an eyebrow. "You spoke to Atlas about us?"

"I needed an outside perspective from someone who's dealt with his fair share of upsetting his woman."

My chest warms with hope. If he's willing to ask for counsel to help our relationship, then he's willing to take ownership of his faults. "You sought guidance for our relationship?"

"I'd do anything for you. I'm not above asking for help to fix my piss poor behavior."

The physical distance between us suddenly feels like too much space. Slowly, I move around the bed until I'm standing in front of him. "And do you agree with your friend? Do you understand what you did was crossing a boundary with me?"

Chase stares intently at me, longing and sadness etched into his handsome face. "I'm nothing like Trent, but my behavior yesterday had me ranked amongst the worst men you've encountered. I don't ever want to be anywhere that isn't in your good graces. I was a possessive dick, and I'm not proud of myself for embarrassing you the way I did. It wasn't my intention, but it was an outcome of my actions, and I take full responsibility for my behavior. You and Prez are right—I fucked up, and I need to cut that shit out if I stand a chance of earning your heart."

As much as I want to forgive him in this moment, a nagging in my subconscious has me holding off. My throat constricts and pain laces my voice as I ask, "Where did you stay last night?"

Deep brown eyes stare hard into mine as he points at the chair he was sitting in when I woke up. "I was sitting here, watching over you—I'm always watching you. Don't think for a moment I'd be anywhere else. My eyes and heart see no

other but you. It's only been you. And there's nowhere else I'll ever be, but beside you."

My resolve slips. A whimper of relief escapes my lips. I cover my face with my hands.

Strong arms are around me at once. Chase kisses the top of my head, sighing heavily into my hair. "I didn't think you'd want to share a bed with me. You were already asleep when I returned. I thought it best not to disturb your sleep after all the shit you dealt with. Would you have preferred me in bed with you?"

"I would have preferred for my partner not to have been a massive dick in the first place."

My biker chuckles against my head, his arms constricting in a tight hug. "I'll be on my best behavior when it comes to your interest. I'll only give you massive D from below my waist from now on."

I laugh at his suggestive comment—it's classic Chase.

Chase swats me playfully on my bottom before guiding us into the bathroom, where we rush to get ready for another hard day. At least I'll go into this day with no more unwelcoming surprises from my horny biker.

CHAPTER TWENTY- NINE

True to his word, Chase doesn't behave like a Neanderthal when we arrive at the financial firm. He escorts me to the top floor and makes sure I have everything I need before kissing the air at me and leaving me with Punk.

I continue to tackle the mountain of file boxes against the wall, going about my system with meticulous care. One day in, and I have several files pulled aside and recorded for discrepancies. Some are minor, others major, and some are beyond over the top. It would be impossible for any accountant to overlook. My piles are organized in gradients of increased severity, steadily increasing in volume.

I'm walking back and forth between the copy machine continuously, slowing down my production. Unfortunately, my need for the copy machine has me running into Cynthia.

"Morning, Simone. How is your day going? Any developments in the investigation?"

It's a struggle not to tell her to piss off. "Good morning. The investigation is well underway, thank you. However, I'm not at liberty to disclose anything in the case until our team is ready to report our findings."

Cynthia's lips thin. "I suppose it's necessary if funds are truly missing."

Surprised by her response, I ask, "You don't believe there's been a breach?"

She gives a contrite shake of her head. "No, I don't. My department would have caught any discrepancies."

“You should have caught a pilfering operation,” I agree, with a slightly accusatory tone. Had I still been employed here, I certainly would have. Cynthia isn’t the best financial investigator. She’s a smooth talker, giving others the impression she’s up to par. But the reality is, Cynthia is as useless as a hole in the head.

I continue to make my copies. “Trent made a similar comment, saying something about upper management downplaying the issue.”

At the mention of Trent’s name, Cynthia stiffens. Her demeanor becomes frigid. “I wouldn’t concern yourself with Trent.”

Wow. Territorial much, Cynthia? “Avoiding him is impossible when I have to work with him on this case.”

Having noticed Cynthia is near me, Punk storms in our direction. “You need help, Simone?” He motions to the files in my hands, but I know his comment is referring to if I need assistance dealing with Cynthia.

Playing along, I hand him several of the files and head back to our space, with him close to my side. Back in the sanctuary of the conference room, Punk asks, “Was she harassing you?”

I shrug. “She low key told me to not involve myself with Trent.”

Cynthia passes the glass wall dividing us from the rest of the office space. Punk glowers at her as she turns to look at us. “From now on, if you make copies, I go with you.”

“She’s nothing to worry about,” I assure him. “We’ll avoid interacting with her until we need access to this year’s hard copies. I can handle a run in here and there.”

“I’ll be the judge of what’s best for your security while we’re here,” he interjects, with a clip. “Let me do my job, and I won’t interfere with yours.”

I glower at Punk, not appreciating his attitude. Though I understand he speaks from a place of knowledge. He wouldn’t

be in the position he's in if he wasn't good at his job. Still, the bitch in me isn't going to roll over and take it.

“Aye aye, Major Asshole,” I mock, with a salute. “Prepare yourself for a lot of walking unless you want to move one of those beast-sized copiers in here.”

Punk looks at the machine, rubbing his chin. “I got a better idea.” He reaches into his pocket for his cell, no doubt calling my biker. Punk gives a quick rundown of the situation, while I examine more files.

Within an hour, Chase has a military-grade laptop and tabletop scanner delivered to me, with a note saying: *To make your life a little easier.* — *XX Chase*

My work process moves faster with the use of the new equipment, and my feet are grateful for it. With my own copies of the files scanned into the computer, I'm able to sort the errors into a spreadsheet.

Using the security password the firm gave us on our first day, I login to the digital records to compare the hard copies to the digital records. Careful observation reveals patterns of funds being skimmed from many clients, with more withdrawals from client accounts heavily invested in the financial firm.

What's bizarre is, some account transfers are better hidden, and others are downright blatant. Why wouldn't a thief be consistent with how they're moving funds? It's controlled, then sloppy, almost like two different culprits are at fault. It's a risky operation as is, why chance being caught?

If only Cynthia and her current team members compared digital files to the hard copies like I'm doing, they could have avoided this. Problem is, most staff never look at the hard copies. Files are created digitally, printed for record, and never bothered with again unless audited. The firm only accesses the digital copies when reviewing a client's file.

I'm poking around in the digital records when I freeze. “Shit.”

Alerted by my concerned tone, Punk leans over me to see what I'm doing. "What's wrong?"

"The login I used to access the company's files was assigned by P.L. Moore's financial quality control department, meaning it's tracked."

Punk grimaces, cursing under his breath.

"This is detrimental to our investigation. If our thief can see who's accessing what files, it could make them run or try to bury the funds further."

We already expect the mole is a staff member. Alerting Trent isn't an option until I have more solid evidence. I quickly text Chase.

I have a hunch. Can you come upstairs alone? If Trent asks what's going on, explain I'm having issues with my new laptop.

Five minutes later, Chase strides into the room alone. "What do you have, Numbers?"

Punk moves to the doorway to monitor the office area or anyone who might eavesdrop on our conversation.

"Several digital copies were altered from the hard copies. No accountant could overlook these many errors, but they haven't been routinely checking the hard copies—that only happens once during the fiscal year. Not even Cynthia could miss this much, and this shit runs through her department. This is how they probably discovered a few discrepancies to begin with."

"Tell me what you need from me, and I'll make it happen."

"I need you to hack into the digital records."

He gives me a quizzical look, his brows pulled together. "But we have access to the digital records."

"We have access through the security passwords they've assigned us. Every time we access the digital records, they're alerted on their end. They can track what files we're going through."

“Under the table, to keep them in the dark,” Chase states, understanding our predicament.

Without saying another word, he takes my laptop and types feverishly away on the keyboard. Mere minutes pass before Chase slides the laptop closer to me, showing me how to access the records, tripping no alerts on the financial firm’s end. It’s like he created a back door into their computer software.

“You’re scary smart,” I murmur in awe.

My biker gives me a dirty smirk, the kind I’ve grown to adore. He leans in toward me, close enough for us to share the same air. My lips tingle with the memory of his rough kisses. I dig my hands into my lap to stop myself from fanning my face.

“Need anything else, Numbers?”

Yup. You inside of me. I keep my thoughts to myself, shaking my head.

His smirk grows wider. “Don’t think I don’t know where your pretty little head was at. In case you were wondering, I was thinking the same thing.” He gives me a chaste kiss on my needy lips before leaving me to return to my investigation.

Hours pass. I’m comparing digital copies of the client files to the hard copies when the most unconcealed of tampering comes to light. The more I uncover, the more my head spins. I press my fingers into my temples to ease the tension, groaning.

Punk glances at me with a long face. “That doesn’t sound pleasant.”

“This isn’t some petty pilfering operation. It’s bigger than we expected,” I whisper to Punk as I comb over the files.

“How long do you suspect the embezzlement has been happening?”

“Nothing pops up until a month before I moved to Colorado. I was traveling most of the month and rarely in the office.”

Punk paces, his eyes watching the staff situated outside the conference room through the glass walls. “It could be a clue.”

“What do you mean?”

Without taking his eyes away from the staff outside the conference room, he says, “You’re a damn good financial investigator. Perhaps the perp waited until you were out of the office before fudging the numbers.”

“I’d like to think I could have caught this before it got to this point, but we can’t make assumptions. You don’t think you’re reaching?”

He shakes his shaved head. “No. Who was assigning your projects and managing your schedule in the months leading up to all this shit going south?”

“Cynthia.”

Punk looks at me, deadpan. “I don’t think it’s a coincidence.”

“There’s no way. Cynthia relied on me to keep her daily schedule organized, something minor compared to an enormous embezzlement operation.”

“You’re too close to the source, Simone. Think bigger. Cynthia may not be as sharp as you or any of the other tools in this place, but she didn’t get into her position being dumb.”

How do I say this without sounding like a bitter ex-girlfriend? I sit back in my seat, folding my hands in my lap. “You’re giving her way more credit than she deserves.”

Punk pulls out the chair next to me to get on my level. “Think about it, Priss. Cynthia controlled what projects you worked on, thus controlling what you had your eyes on. She was filling your schedule to the max for well over a year to set up the perfect opportunity for her to muck up the numbers between the digital and hard copies. When you were too preoccupied, she used it to her advantage.”

“Okay,” I say, entertaining his idea. “But there’s a hole in your theory. At some point, I would have caught all this.”

Punk gives me a sly smirk. “True. That’s why she needed to cause you to leave the firm.”

My stomach dips. I swallow the lump lodged in my throat. “The affair.”

“Catching your boyfriend bonking your boss would be a surefire way to get you out of the picture.”

My head is racing, trying to tie off all the loopholes for a solid case. “The only problem with your hypothesis is, neither Cynthia nor Trent knew I was returning when I did. I was flying home early to surprise Trent for his birthday, since I finished on a client’s case ahead of deadline.”

“Did you use the company credit card when scheduling your flight home?”

“Yes,” I admit as the puzzle pieces click into place. I run a shaky hand through my hair. “Large purchases would need a manager’s approval. Cynthia would’ve had to sign off on it. Do you think she was monitoring when I was heading home to orchestrate me walking in on them?”

Punk leans back in his seat, scratching his head. “If she was trying to sabotage your relationship to run you off, yeah, it makes perfect sense.”

“But why stay with Trent after the fact?”

“Who the fuck knows?” he says, throwing his hands in the air. He’s had enough of my combativeness in his theory. “Maybe she developed genuine feelings for the Oompa Loompa and hung on to him. It doesn’t matter. We have a lead, and we need to follow it.”

He pulls out his cell, calling Chase. “The hound is in pursuit of the fox.”

I cut my eyes to Punk, my temper rising. “Am I the dog in your reference?”

Punk ignores me as Chase rambles something quickly on the other line. He hands his cell to me.

“Chase?”

“Numbers,” he whispers.

“Where are you? Is Trent with you? We shouldn’t be discussing anything if he’s within earshot.”

“I’m alone in the men’s restroom. Who do you suspect it is?”

“It’s more Punk than me, but it has merit.” I quickly fill Chase in on my and Punk’s discussion.

Chase is quiet through my explanation. He then clears his throat and says, “Listen carefully, Numbers. We don’t have a lot of time. Are all the questioning files you’ve come across scanned into your new laptop?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Put all the hard copies away—*now*.”

I look at my neatly organized piles of tampered files. “But ___”

“Cynthia is problematic. She has access to all levels in the firm. Meaning she has the potential to sabotage anything you may work on. We can’t have anything visible that gives Cynthia a clue we’re on her trail. You hear me, baby?”

“I understand.”

“Good. Get it done as quickly as possible. It’s late enough. We’re going to wrap it up for the day and regroup back at the hotel. I want you to walk me through everything on your laptop.”

Chase disconnects, and I quickly get to work filing the documents as if the piles had no significance to our investigation.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Before I return from the bathroom, I send Butch a text stating we have a lead and have to pack up. My brother is already shutting down equipment when I hustle into the conference room. The two of us move quickly, packing up any gear that could be tampered with. It isn't standard practice, but we're not accustomed to dealing with a potential culprit this close to the situation. Better to be safe than sorry.

Trent watches, scratching at his head. "Um, are you guys coming back tomorrow?"

"Yup." I wave a hand at our equipment. "We're just taking work home for the evening."

Trent visibly relaxes. "Okay," he says, with a nervous laugh. "You had me worried when you started packing everything."

Simone and Punk enter the room, encouraging me to wrap up my talk with Trent. "See you in the morning."

Not giving him a chance to respond, I grab my laptop case and wrap my arm around Simone's waist, swiftly escorting us out of the building. We have a lead, meaning we need to assess the situation promptly.

Butch and Punk load our equipment in the SUV, and we head back to the hotel. We set up base camp in my and Simone's suite. Punk orders Thai takeout for dinner, while Butch and I set up our shit in the room's corner.

I pull out my laptop from my bag, firing it up. With Trent no longer glued to my side, I can hack into the firm's security

feeds. I could mention to the d-bag I'm doing this for the investigation, and he probably wouldn't dispute it. However, I don't want any of the staff knowing I'm monitoring live video feeds. It's easier to spot shady shit when nobody knows someone's watching them. And although the company has security cameras, it's not like they have a guy in a room monitoring them all day.

Within five minutes, I've hacked into the cameras' live feed. It should be surprising a company with high-paying clientele has such sucky security, but the truth is, it's all too common. Lots of big companies don't enjoy dishing out more than they have to for anything, even if it's protecting them and their clients. I shake my head at my computer as I scroll through the live security images.

Simone side-eyes my work with thinned lips. "Is that to watch me?"

"Partially," I admit, unabashed. There's no point in lying to her. "I like being able to check on my woman when I want." I wink at her to lighten the intensity of my confession. "It's mostly to spy on the staff. Maybe we'll catch the perp in action."

"Good plan," Simone murmurs, returning her eyes to her spreadsheets on her laptop.

Punk joins our group. "Food should be here in thirty minutes."

"It gives us enough time to go over what I uncovered," Simone says.

In the next half-hour, Simone explains the erratic patterns of money being funneled out of the financial firm.

"Do we know where the funds are going?" Butch asks.

"Not precisely. Larger amounts of cash are doing this round robin sort of scenario to conceal where the funds originally came from. Numbers get split and shuffled into different areas of investment, making it difficult to track. From there, they divert the funds into accounts that appear authorized to receive payments and transfers."

“A true Ponzi scheme,” I groan. Flustered, I yank out my man bun, pulling at my hair. This case had red flags from the start. We knew the risks going into this operation. But company theft versus embezzlement is another level. “This isn’t going to be a quick operation.”

“It’s a fucking nightmare,” Butch mutters, shaking his head. “We’re supposed to be in and out. How are we going to manage hunting our embezzler in such a brief window, Chase? We have other assignments already lined up on the calendar.”

“We’ll call Atlas and explain the situation,” Punk offers. “He and Gauge can rearrange the schedule to give us more time, I’m sure. It’s not like this is our fault. These were unforeseeable circumstances.”

“Doesn’t matter if it’s outside of our control. Atlas isn’t known for his tolerance,” I grumble.

Our crew grimaces. Nobody enjoys dealing with a raging Atlas. His anger issues have massively improved since Jo came into the picture and he started counseling, but he still has his moments.

Simone sighs. “Deeper digging will prove if these accounts are a front. If they are, then our perpetrator can take the funds for personal gain. There are bills and receipts for activities that appear legit at first glance but under closer inspection most likely never happened. Portions of the funds return to the original account, giving the illusion of a poor investment or expenses accrued. Some of it is clean and straightforward, though harder to discern since it involves smaller amounts. Others, not so much—it’s large, traceable sums being handled sloppily.”

“You need me and Butch to do the deeper digging,” I state, understanding this is more than she can handle solo. “No problem. This is what I expected us to do anyway. It’ll just be on a wider scale. We already have access to the firm’s hub. It should make it easier for us to track.”

“This could be hard to juggle with Jack-ass-o’-lantern in the room,” Punk points out.

Butch shrugs. “We’ll manage.”

True. We’ll manage as we do with all our cases. It may be more work, but we’ll deal with it.

Simone bites her full bottom lip, hesitant. “You may need to use your skills outside of the firm’s intranet.”

This can’t be good. Butch and I eye Simone wearily.

“More than likely the money was transferred to offshore accounts,” Simone informs. “If that’s the case, it’s going to be hard to retrieve the funds without the account information.”

Butch’s head fall into his hands. “Fuuuck. We’re never going home.”

It doesn’t take a genius to guess Butch’s piss-whining has a lot to do with him not seeing Candy for an extended period. Poor bastard. I’d be miserable, too, if it weren’t for Simone being on our team.

Punk looks agitated. His leg bounces a mile a minute where he sits on the edge of the bed. “At what point do we wash our hands? Shouldn’t the feds be handling this shit?”

“We can’t hand this over to the feds until we have more evidence,” Simone explains. “I made a dent in last year’s files, but I haven’t gotten to the current year’s documents yet. Besides, the payday on this will be huge. We’re getting paid for the work we do, but we’re also on a commission. The more we return to the financial organization, the bigger the percentage we take home—Atlas had me draft it specifically into the contract with P.L. Moore Financial.”

“Smart move,” Punk compliments.

Money is nice, but it isn’t everything, especially when it could cost us a shit-ton of time and resources. “Exactly how much cash are we talking, Numbers? What’s our cut at the end of all this?”

“Guesstimate? We’re looking at eight figures.”

I nearly choke. “Double digits—in the millions?”

“From the little I’ve calculated in the missing funds, I’m being conservative in my estimate.”

Butch lets out a low whistle.

“I know the MC isn’t hurting for money, but it would be nice to have a large reserve for when shit goes south in the club,” Simone continues. “If it weren’t for Piero Bianchi flipping the bill on Operation Bring-Home-Jo, we would’ve been financially screwed. We need this big score if we want to do large-scale operations while remaining independent from investors.”

As much as it’ll drive me nuts to work this case longer than any of us wants to, Simone’s right. The MC would benefit from having this lump sum.

“How long are we talking?”

“I’m not sure,” Simone admits. “We originally thought two weeks. It could be double or more.”

“A month is a long time,” Butch mutters, with a morose face.

The wheels in my head have been turning since Simone mentioned the inconsistency in the perp’s procedure. Humans rarely don’t follow a pattern. They may go off course occasionally, but they always revert to old habits. And habits make it easy for hackers like me to hunt people through the dark web. I chew on my lip ring, mulling the ways to speed things along.

“We could cut down the time,” I venture. “If I created a program to help with the algorithm of the operation, we could get out of here on time.”

Butch scoffs. “This isn’t like Turing developing the Bombe to crack the Enigma Code, Chase. We don’t have time to fuck about.”

“Your lack of faith in my ability hurts, bro. Turing would have killed to have me on his team. Besides, we aren’t dealing with a system constantly changing its cipher—we have two systems at play. One precise, and one erratic. The program itself is straightforward.”

“How can you say there are two systems at play? The whole embezzling procedure appears intermittent, making it difficult to see the common patterns,” Simone reminds me.

“It may appear sporadic, but more than likely you haven’t had enough time to spot the trends. That’s where my skills come in.”

Simone looks doubtful as she lists off the obstacles. “How are you going to manage tracing the money while creating a program to crack the thief’s code, all while juggling Trent?”

“Divide and conquer, Numbers. Butch will trace the funds, and I’ll make the program. We can give Trent enough busy work to keep him out of our hair. If I work on the program tonight, I may finish by tomorrow evening.”

My sassy accountant throws her hands in the air. “And when are you going to rest, huh? You couldn’t have slept last night in the chair, at least not soundly. You won’t be any use to the team if you run yourself ragged.”

“Chill-lax, Priss. This is old hat for my brother. He never sleeps. He’s your textbook insomniac.”

Simone looks at me with worried eyes, a deep V forming between her brows. “Is the moron talking out of his ass again, or is it true?”

Sensing she’s concerned for my well-being, I take her delicate hands in mine. “He’s not bullshitting. All-nighters are normal for me. The only time I get any solid rest is when I’m sleeping with you.”

Punk gags. “TMI, man!”

Ignoring him, I gaze at Simone. Those stormy gray eyes of hers I adore lose all their hardness. She reaches up to run a hand through my long hair.

“Chase...”

Desperate for a kiss, I cup her face and lean toward her tempting lips. Leave it to my idiotic brothers to mock our happy moment with overzealous *awes*.

“Piss off,” I snap, finally reaching my tolerance threshold. I’m not afraid to show affection in front of my brothers, but I sure as hell don’t like being teased for being openly sweet with my woman. There’s only so much a biker will take.

“Not until we address how we’re going to handle Cynthia,” Punk rebukes.

Simone grimaces. “I understand why you might consider her a suspect, but I’m telling you guys, this is above her brink of understanding.”

Punk rolls his eyes. “Your opinion is biased because you hate her, Priss.”

“It isn’t biased if I’m stating a fact. Yes, I dislike the uppity bitch. But if I was driven by hate, I’d be all for our crew pinning her down with this crime.”

Butch backs her up. “She’s got a point. We don’t know this chick. Simone does.”

“Who cares if Cynthia’s elevator doesn’t go to the top floor? You said yourself the way the perp was going about transferring funds wasn’t always smart,” Punk gripes. “They handled large amounts half-ass. Sure sounds like it could be your ex-boss. Smart or dumb, she’s our number one suspect as of this moment. We need to proceed with caution around her.”

“For now, we don’t do anything other than what we have already been doing. Simone, you’ll continue to comb through the hard copies and compare them to the digital records using your new laptop and scanner. Butch will work on tracking where the money’s going from the info Simone collects. I’ll monitor the surveillance footage. Hopefully, by the end of the day tomorrow I can start inputting the account info into the algorithm program.

“Punk will keep his eyes and ears open. When you aren’t watching Simone, I want you to observe Cynthia. If she’s gutsy enough to start an embezzlement operation, we can’t say what other risks she’d take. For now, we treat her as a threat to our operation and persons.”

A knock at our door has us all falling silent. Punk bounds to his feet. “Put a bookmark in the planning, bro. That would be the dinner bell. If we’re going to be up all night working on this shit, we need to fuel up.”

He’s not wrong. It’s going to be a long night.

CHAPTER THIRTY- ONE

The night has been a real ball-buster. The team helped until the early hours of the morning. Outside of Butch, the other two couldn't do much but keep us alert and fetch us caffeinated beverages.

When Butch yawned, I told everyone to go to bed. Simone needs her energy for the mountain of files left to investigate, and Punk needs to be on the lookout. Only Butch and I are monitoring the tech end of this operation, and one of us needs to be fully functional for the workday.

Though I'm accustomed to lack of rest, it doesn't mean I enjoy it. Especially when my woman is sprawled across our bed, looking like a lingerie model in her satin night romper and hair an unruly mess of wheat-colored waves across the sheets.

Goddamn, she's a beautiful sight. I'll never grow tired of staring at her. The more I see her, the more I crave her. I'm a junkie for her, and she's my fix.

My eyes drift above the screen of my laptop, often throughout the night, to gaze at her. Seeing my queen in her slumber is enough of a reminder to keep my head in the game if I want this assignment to wrap up in time. The sooner we finish, the sooner I can get Simone back home to start our new life together—far the fuck away from Trent.

I've been awake nearly two days straight. Between me and Simone fighting the previous day and creating a program to help decipher the embezzler's method of operation, I'm fried.

When my eyes fight to stay open, I throw in the towel. There's enough time for me to catch a few hours of sleep before another day starts.

With sluggish limbs, I strip down to my boxer briefs and slip under the sheets. My arms circle around my queen, drawing her warm body close to mine. Simone immediately rolls against my side, her head nuzzling my chest. Her body instinctively knows where she's meant to be—wrapped in my embrace.

Unable to stay awake a second longer, my eyes roll back in my head. A sigh of contentment blows slowly past my lips as my mind shuts down and I sink into sleep.

I haven't been asleep for more than an hour when an annoying buzz has my eyes cracking open. With a groan, I wipe the sleep from my lids. Simone's cell is lit up on the nightstand with a text notification. I monitor all incoming and outgoing messages within the MC, and there's only one person who drops Simone messages at odd hours.

Trent. My guess is, he sends my woman messages when Cynthia isn't able to monitor what he's doing. *Fucking oily bastard.*

With a clenched jaw, I reach over Simone's prone body, grabbing her cell to confirm my suspicions. For anyone else, this would grossly violate privacy. However, I either see it on her cell now, or I'll see it when the notifications come across my computer screen when I turn it on. It's a horse apiece, and she's well-aware I monitor everything when it involves MC members.

I tap my thumb on the screen. Sure as shit, it's him.

Hey, beautiful. I've been thinking about you a lot lately, more than I already was. Please, Simone. Meet me for breakfast at Butter My Biscuits. You can get the frittata special you love so much—I'm sure you've missed it. We don't need to get into a deep discussion today. Let's just chat like old times. I'll be there at eight, waiting for you. Please come.

Red fills my vision. This prick has some nerve hitting on my woman when he knows I'm in the picture.

For a half a second, I contemplate erasing the message. My thumb hovers over the delete option.

Am I really that guy? The one who's beyond insecure and has to hide shit from his partner to keep her?

I'm a lot of things, but I'm not a liar or a sneak.

Annoyed, I toss her cell back on the nightstand.

Before, when Trent reached out to Simone, it pissed me off. I couldn't do anything about it. She wasn't mine. The beauty curled up with her head over my heart reminds me that's no longer the case. Dating bullshit aside, we've agreed to be exclusive. She's my everything now.

I'm tempted to send him a message, telling him to fuck off. All it will do is encourage him to find a different way to reach out to her.

No. I need to cut the head from the snake before he strikes again. The best way is to confront him. I need to be at that restaurant when Trent arrives.

A small voice in my head tells me to *stop*. I ignore it. My mind is on a one-track course, ready to collide into Trent with my fist.

Carefully, I slip out of bed, tucking Simone gently back in. As silently as I can, I slip on my street clothes. I've got two hours before it's game time.

Normally, hanging around one spot for too long will draw attention to oneself. Lucky for me, I know how to remain inconspicuous. Seven years of Navy SEAL missions trained me well, and working three years of mercenary assignments for the MC has only helped hone my skills. Trent will never see me coming.

My hand is on the doorknob when the nagging little voice in my head tells me to take deep breaths. To calm down before I do something stupid.

For whatever reason, I listen. Inhaling through my nose and exhaling out my mouth languidly several times. The red haze in my vision dissipates, along with my erratic thoughts.

My eyes land on Simone's still figure in the bed, snuggled into the sheets like she'd been with me. Her face is serene, something it rarely is while resting. Usually, she's restless in her sleep, her mind never shutting out the negative events surrounding her or us. And I'd hate to be the reason for disturbing her peace when she has so little of it.

What the hell am I thinking?

As appealing as it would be to beat the piss water out of Trent, I can't risk losing this job for the MC. More importantly, I can't do anything to endanger my relationship with Simone. I've done enough desperate shit to put me on the chopping block. Any more, and she may pull the plug on us. I'd suffer a lifetime of desperate text messages from her ex to hold on to my queen.

My system remains flooded with pent-up rage—I need to dispel it. An hour in the hotel gym should help.

Quietly, I slip out of my clothes in favor of my workout gear. With a parting kiss on my woman's brow, I head for the gym. Thirty minutes of cardio on the stairs and another thirty working my chest and back tire my muscles. However, adrenaline is still pumping through me faster than a freight train without a conductor.

Unfortunately for me, it'll have to do. I have to get ready for another day stuck in a room with the bane of my existence.

My cell vibrates in the pocket of my sweats. Whoever it is, they can wait until I return to my hotel room. I'd rather talk in private to whomever, and I'm nearly back.

When I enter the suite, Simone is wide awake. She's rushing around the room, tugging on her clothes in a panicked state. "Stupidly beautiful, jealous-ass caveman. I swear to God, I'm going to strangle him," she mutters to herself as she grabs her purse.

I'm instantly on edge. "The fuck is going on?"

Simone spins, spotting me standing in the doorway. She heaves a heavy sigh, dropping her stuff on the carpet. “Thank fuck.”

Where the hell was she heading? My mind immediately jumps to Trent, asking her to breakfast. I shut the door behind me, a little harder than necessary. My emotions are on the cusp of unpredictable.

“Going somewhere, Numbers?”

“To find your sorry butt, that’s where,” she huffs, with her hands on her curvy hips.

My eyebrows shoot to my hairline, daring to believe her. “Seriously?”

“Yes, seriously. My alarm went off, and you weren’t in the room. I saw a text from Trent. You were gone, along with your cell. I tried calling you, but you didn’t answer. I assumed you saw the message and went to confront him.”

Hope swells in my heart as my anger recedes. I remind myself not to get ahead of myself. I need more affirmation from Simone. “You were scrambling to what? Stop me?”

She rolls her gray eyes in true Simone’s exasperated fashion. “Duh. Why else?”

“Are you sure you weren’t rushing to warn him I was coming for him?” I ask in a tight voice, chewing on my lip ring with uncertainty. I hate showing vulnerability. Simone has a way of stripping me down, displaying my insecurities to her—I’m powerless against this woman.

As odd as it may be, I’m not sure I want to hide my worries from her. If we’re going to have a future together, she needs to see me in my raw form.

“Trent isn’t my concern. I was coming to stop you from making another foolish mistake, jeopardizing this job and our relationship.”

Guilt settles in my gut. It would be easy to lie and say the thought never crossed my mind. What kind of man would I be if I hid the truth from Simone? I’d be no better than Trent.

“What if I told you my initial reaction was to confront him? That I had every intention of going to the restaurant to make the prick stop contacting you?”

Simone takes a long, hard look at me. She slowly approaches. “But you didn’t. You stayed.”

“For you—I stayed for you. I won’t risk losing you,” I vow, my chest rising and falling rapidly with how close she is. “I went to the gym to work out my aggression instead.”

Warm, soft hands settle on my shoulders. “I was wrong to jump to conclusions. I’m sorry.”

A smile tugs at my lips. “Can’t say I blame you. I have a bit of a reputation for acting irrationally with you, Numbers.”

“Still, it doesn’t make it right,” she admits, a frown creasing her delicate brow.

Hating how she’s being hard on herself, I take her hands and hold them to my chest. I gave her a reason to doubt me. Now I have to give her a reason to trust me.

“Stop beating yourself up. You had good reason to suspect I was going after your ex. Hell, I wanted to go after him. I was heading out the door until I looked at you sleeping. I knew I couldn’t do anything else to hurt you—I refuse to be another guy who doesn’t put you first. Fuck my anger and ego. You’re the only thing that matters to me.”

Simone’s eyes mist, her bottom lip trembling slightly. My woman is strong, rarely showing her softer, vulnerable side. If she’s giving me her tears, it means I’ve said something right. I’m finally doing right by her.

“We’re bound to make mistakes while we navigate this relationship. The important part is, we’re both learning to be better for each other,” I whisper, leaning in to kiss her forehead. My blood buzzes as I take in her floral musk, potent and distinctly my woman’s.

She gives me a tender look, tears slipping down her pale cheeks. “You’re right. We’re together in this, and we need to trust the other has the best intentions when it regards us. But I’m still sorry.”

“Give me your lips, baby,” I coo, lifting her chin to kiss her properly.

Her mouth molds around mine in a deep, unhurried kiss. Her body goes slack against me as all my tension disintegrates. My anger ebbs. This is what I needed, to feel her love me as much as I love her.

Simone pulls away first. A vixen smirk pulls at the corners of her puffy lips I thoroughly abused. “Let’s go out to breakfast. I know a place you’ll love.”

CHAPTER THIRTY- TWO

“This is good,” Chase mumbles around a forkful of extra crispy hash browns. Crumbs stick to the corners of his lips in his scruffy facial hair.

Snickering, I lean over the table with my napkin, wiping at his mouth, careful of his lip ring. “I knew you’d like it. The breakfast menu at Butter My Biscuits is excellent.”

The industrial chic restaurant is filling for the early morning rush. Diners chat excitedly on all sides of us. The smell of loaded omelets and buttered pancakes wafts through the tightly packed space.

Trent was never a fan of this place, preferring more refined restaurants. But the food couldn’t be beat here. No amount of classy ambience could win me over the taste of greasy morning deliciousness. Trent suggesting it via text was a trick to weave his way into my good graces.

Unlike me or Trent, who stuck out like sore thumbs with our tailored suits, Chase blends into the atmosphere here. His long hair, piercings, and tattoos fall in line with most of the hipster patrons. Seated across from Chase at our little table, I feel like I belong. It doesn’t matter if we’re opposites—we go together.

A content sigh slips by my lips. It’s nice to eat here without Trent dropping condescending remarks about the restaurant. Chase’s company suits me way better than my ex’s ever did.

Chase picks up his coffee, watching me expectantly over the rim of his mug. “Are you sure about this, Numbers? He’s

not here yet. We could leave.”

After we had our little heart-to-heart regarding Chase doing right by me, I felt it best to do right by him. This morning’s conversation was enlightening. Listening to Chase admit he’d rather put up with Trent’s advances toward me than risk losing me for acting out upset my soul. I don’t want Chase to feel he has to deal with another man competing for me. If our situations were reversed, I wouldn’t appreciate tolerating another woman coming on to my man for the sake of a case. I’m ashamed I haven’t seen how unfair this scenario is for Chase until this morning.

It’s time I show Trent his attempts are futile—he and I will never be together again. My words have done little to repel him. Perhaps embarrassment will dig deeper into his ego.

I dab the corners of my mouth with my napkin, unfazed. “I’m not tucking tail, Chase. Trent needs to get it through his thick skull. I’m not interested. He chose Cynthia, and I chose you.”

“You have nothing to prove to me, Simone,” Chase assures me, sliding his hand across the table to encompass mine. “Don’t feel you have to do this for me because I was being an insecure twat waffle. Contrary to my past behavior, I’m okay. I know you’re mine and you’re not going back to him.”

“Yes, I’m doing this for you, but I’m also doing it for me. I screwed up by not blocking his number, giving him the opportunity to communicate. Doesn’t matter if I never responded to his texts or returned his calls—he saw an opening and took advantage of it. I can’t block him while we work this case, but I will shut down all forms of contact once we conclude the assignment. His advances end now.”

My possessive biker bites at his lip ring as a giant smile threatens to crack his face in half. “Have I told you how sexy you are when you set your mind on something?”

“Only half a dozen times this morning,” I tease, with a wink.

The tap of expensive loafers grows louder the closer they approach, stopping at our table.

“Simone, love. You’re here early,” Trent says in slight annoyance, coloring his tone. He pulls out a chair at our table to have a seat. Ticking his jaw, he picks up a menu, scanning his options. “And I see you’ve brought your co-worker. How thoughtful of you. Though I had wished to spend some one-on-one time with you. Perhaps tonight, over dinner.”

I have yet to look at Trent. My eyes are preoccupied, held captive in Chase’s gaze. My biker smiles softly. A gleam of pride swirls in his warm brown eyes as he stares back at me. There’s no hint of jealousy, no doubt in his expression. He squeezes my hand, letting me know he’ll follow my lead.

With one last sip of my coffee, I address my ex. “Good morning, Trent. Yes, I thought it would be nice to bring Chase to one of my favorite breakfast joints while we’re staying in Sacramento. I enjoy sharing everything with my new *boyfriend*.”

Chase chokes on his coffee, sputtering all over himself. He coughs slightly as he runs a hand over his face to wipe it clean. His eyes are wide with disbelief as he assesses me. It’s amusing, catching Chase off guard. Normally, he’s the one taking me by surprise.

Trent’s lips pucker as he glances at me over the menu. He sets it down in front of him, folding his hands on the table, all prim and proper. “Boyfriend? Last you spoke of your relationship, you were dating.”

I shrug, turning my attention back to Chase. “Things have progressed in the last couple of days. We were already exclusive. Now we’re official. Dating seemed...‘arbitrary,’ I believe that’s what you called it. Right, hun?”

My biker has recovered from my boyfriend bomb. Chase leans back in his seat, his lips turned up in one corner of his lips. He levels me with an intense stare, full of scorching heat. “Never liked the dating phase of our relationship. I wanted you—all of you—from the start. Whenever you’re ready for the next tier, I’m game.”

Typical Chase—I give him an inch, and he takes the whole ruler. Not surprising. Though I have to fight from smiling, I give him a pointed look, warning him not to push his luck. He seems to get the hint, covering his smile with his hand.

Trent stares at the table, his jaw ticcing back and forth. His face looks flushed, but it's hard to tell with his deep, orange tan.

“Any-who...sorry to eat and dash. We can't stay,” I say breezily, setting my napkin on the table. “Chase and I have to get a decent head start on the investigation if we plan on cutting out early to enjoy a night out on the town. We stayed long enough to share our special news.”

Yanking out his wallet, Chase throws down more than enough money to cover our tab. He stands, holding his hand out to me. I slip mine into his, relishing the rough texture of his calluses on my softer skin. It's weathered, warm, and comforting—like my biker.

“Enjoy breakfast on us,” Chase digs in a wry voice, patting Trent on the shoulder. Trent looks like he wants to rip Chase's hand off him but remains still as stone, saying nothing.

We head toward the exit, but I turn back. I'm not done driving home my point.

Chase is hesitant to release me, but he does. I feel his eyes on me the entire way back to the table. Trent's eyes widen with a sliver of hope as he watches me approach.

Too bad for him, I'm about to burst his bubble.

“I forgot to mention I'll be declining any requests for time alone in the future. I don't spend quality time with any man other than my partner. You should do the same. I'm sure Cynthia would appreciate a faithful boyfriend.”

“Simone,” Trent whispers in a pained voice. “You have it all wrong—I did what I did for us.”

“Don't insult me, Trent. You did what you did for yourself. There's no way I would have agreed for you to sleep with anyone outside of our relationship.”

“If you gave me a moment, I could make you see reason, make you want me again.”

Having heard enough, I shake my head. I dodge Trent’s hand as he reaches out to take mine, sidestepping him to head back toward my future, standing at the exit with his arms across his broad chest.

My steps are a little lighter, having dropped a lot of dead weight. I can’t help feeling giddy, enjoying the freedom of this moment.

Chase’s warm brown eyes devour me with each step I take closer to him. The biggest smile stretches across my face when I’m right in front of him.

With a wide grin of his own, he places his hand on the back of my neck in a gentle but possessive hold. He maneuvers us out of the busy restaurant to the sidewalk outside, his thumb rubbing soft circles right at the soft flesh under my ear.

We don’t make it a few feet outside before he’s dragging me back by my neck to face him. His other hand grasps me by my hip. I’m cocooned in his protective hold, like I’m worth loving, worth possessing. Familiar brown eyes peer into mine, cherishing me with a single look. Nothing has felt more right than this single moment.

“Boyfriend?” Chase muses aloud, his pierced eyebrow raised. The hand holding my hip quickly slaps my bottom. Surprised, I jump, breaking out into a stream of giggles.

“You could have warned me, brat,” he teases, nipping softly at my lips.

I throw my arms around his neck, not giving a crap about our very public display of affection on a very crowded sidewalk. “You’re not upset, are you?”

“Not in the slightest. But you know this juvenile title crap doesn’t work. We’re a little more hardcore than the fluffy terms. You’ll call me your man, like I’ll call you my woman. You feel me?”

I press my body flush to his front, letting him feel way more of me. “I do.”

Chase barks with laughter, his head thrown back, exposing his stubble hair growing on his neck. When he lowers his head back to me, his brown eyes are dancing with delight. “Fucking hell, woman. You don’t realize what kind of fire you’re messing with.”

“I beg to differ. I know exactly what I’m getting involved in,” I purr seductively.

Without warning, Chase throws me over his shoulder. I squeal with laughter as blood rushes to my head. “Chase, you brute. Stop going all primal on me.”

“You have no clue how primal I can get. But here’s a taste of it.” Chase bites my right ass cheek. It’s not a soft bite either—it’s territorial.

I gasp, shocked by the pain yet also amazed I enjoy it. My thighs squeeze together with an onslaught of heat pooling low in my belly.

He inhales loudly through his nose. A low growl vibrates through Chase, shaking my whole body. “Numbers, you smell delicious. I have an appetite, and you’re everything I’m craving. You better stay wet for me all day. I want you sopping by the time I rip your panties off tonight.”

Pretty sure I’ve gone tomato red. Good thing no one can see my face hanging upside down with my front to his back.

He clears his throat, addressing the passing pedestrians. “You all saw it. I marked her. Therefore, she’s mine.”

A few people laugh, some even clap and hoot as Chase stalks off down the sidewalk, with me draped over his shoulder.

“My caveman,” I tease affectionately, slapping his butt.

He slaps mine right back. “Damn right, I am.”

CHAPTER THIRTY- THREE

My day couldn't be any better unless I was rolling around in bed, balls deep in the love of my life. Simone finally agreed to be my woman—*mine*.

Every snotty remark she utters, every tempting curve of her luscious form, and every rare sweet smile she offers is all mine from this day forward. There's not a damn thing in the world that can burst my bubble, not even the orange turd sitting beside me, glaring daggers at me.

The atmosphere in the micro-size conference room is heavy. Not from the heat our equipment is omitting, but with the bitterness oozing out of Trent like an overripe fruit in the scorching summer sun. He reeks of jealousy, and it permeates the small room like a thick cloud of negativity.

Doesn't bother me one bit. If anything, I'm rolling in Trent's misery like a hog in mud. The fucker deserves to see the woman he stupidly threw away being loved by a *real* man. Assholes like Trent always regret what they tossed aside after they realize the person they hurt is no longer an option for them to fall back on.

Soon enough, he won't be anything but a bad chapter in my woman's book. And I'll be there to fill all her remaining pages with love, praise, and everything she could wish for.

A smile has permanently taken residency on my face as pleasurable thoughts of Simone swirl in my head. My smile grows only more pronounced the longer Trent scowls at me. Doesn't matter if my face aches from using muscles long forgotten, I'm fucking thrilled to have Simone. The whole

damn world can suck a bag of dicks if they have a problem with it—Trent included.

Morning turns into afternoon, with Trent's hostility rising. His silence stretches, aside from the few yes or no answers he gives us when we ask direct questions related to the financial firm's servers. He drums his fingers on the conference table in a steady, methodical tempo, his eyes honed in on the side of my head. He's probably contemplating all the ways to conjure death to come for me. Sucks for Trent. Pretty sure death smiles fondly on the Mercy Ravens when we feed him the darkest souls of the world.

Butch's attention does a constant surveillance rotation, from working on his computer, where he's trying to track the missing funds, to swiveling between Trent and myself. He gives me a pointed stare, a look alerting me to the impending confrontation about to spark between me and Simone's ex. If Butch is sensing the tension growing thicker by the second, he'll be on standby to keep me from strangling the prick to within an inch of his life.

Another tense fifteen minutes pass. My keystrokes slow as I add the finishing touches to the program I created. It should help to figure out our perp's method for pilfering money from the firm.

Butch can hear the difference in my typing. He looks up from his computer, waiting for confirmation. I give a slow nod, letting him know I've finished it. There's no way we'll vocalize anything with Trent sitting in the room with us.

Trent must sense the shift in our work as well. He snorts with disdain. I wish his hairy testicles would drop already. It's getting old waiting for Trent to man up and say what he's been dying to say to me all day.

Naturally, I give him a little shove to move along his pathetic hide. I wouldn't be me without overstepping boundaries.

“Best stop grinding your molars unless you want to pay out the ass for a few dentist visits,” I taunt, my eyes not leaving my computer screen.

“I don’t know what she sees in you,” he says in disgust.

“Doesn’t matter what she sees in me. I have her.” I lift my fixed gaze to his, wanting to drive home the point. “And I sure as fuck am not letting her go. She’s mine.”

“You honestly think she’s going to be satisfied with you long-term?” Trent asks flippantly, looking down his nose at me. “A corrupt biker who plays off his hacking skill as some noble cause? Please. You’re not part of her world. You’re a fleeting phase, nothing more.”

Butch’s keystrokes halt as he pushes back his chair. He stands from his seat and rounds the table toward us, anticipating a physical altercation on the horizon. I raise a hand when I feel him behind me, halting him. I’m in full control of this situation.

There’s no way this beady-eyed bastard will get the best of me. “I agree. Simone is in a league of her own—refined and regal, like the queen she is. But you underestimate her, Trent. And you sure as fuck underestimate me.

“You made assumptions you could screw around and she’d accept it. What you never considered was, a queen kneels to no one, unless she wants to. She didn’t want to yield to you when you were an unfaithful dog. A queen only wants a king who’ll see her as an equal and build her up. She doesn’t need a fool to pull her down.”

Orange nostrils flare. Trent’s ready to snap like the weak twig he is.

I press on. “Unlike you, I see her as the badass she is and nurture the fuck out of it. I don’t dampen her fire. I pour the gas on it and watch her wield those flames at those who piss her off. I’m her king, her man, her everything. You best remember your place is in her past, or I’m gonna share more than words with you. Got it?”

Trent leans forward in his chair, gripping the arm rests like he needs to anchor himself to his seat to avoid throwing hands. I wish he would throw a punch—I’d settle this shit real fast.

No such luck, though. Trent only glowers at me murderously. If he's trying to intimidate me, he needs to up his game. Insecure men with fragile egos are laughable and go down easily.

“Simone prefers a certain lifestyle, one she won't find living in the foothills of Colorado. She'll tire of your crassness and lack of culture, and I'll be waiting for her to return to the comforts she has grown accustomed to.”

His words nick my armor. My smile falls, all my bravado gone.

Our differences have always plagued my insecurities, questioning if I'm enough for her. She's a white-collar queen from a wonderful family, and I'm the hipster biker from the wrong side of the tracks.

We're opposites in many ways, but our variations aren't a hindrance. Our diversity complements. We fit in each other's crevices, filling in where the other lacks until we're one complete piece, as opposed to opposite ends.

Trent's argument is bullshit. Simone doesn't need to change for me, nor I for her. We'll embrace our individuality, as we have since the moment we met.

Simone doesn't care I bleed in code, occasionally break some laws for the greater good. She doesn't care I demand her submission when intimate. As long as I can stand beside her in my leather cut and biker boots with her hand in mine, the fuck with all the rest.

I don't care if my woman surrounds herself in all the sophisticated crap that shimmers in the world. If it makes her happy, I'm happy. She's more than materialistic arm candy to me. She's a good woman, hardworking and loyal. And one hundred percent all mine.

My lips pull up in one corner of my mouth, smugness returning with full force. “It's sad you think Simone needs a man who mirrors her likes, and it's disgusting you think she's a materialist snob who looks down on others who work with their hands.”

“She’s made for the finer things in life, not for roughing it with the likes of you.”

A low chuckle breaks free of my lips. “You forget Simone’s roots are anchored in blue collar blood. Rough is what she knows.”

Trent flinches like I flicked something dirty on him. “Doesn’t matter where she came from. Her parents and sister may have decided not to advance themselves into the corporate world, but Simone is above the simple life and manual labor.”

Now I’m pissed. Fuck all what he says about me. He’s insulting my woman’s family—my family. That shit doesn’t get brushed off.

I lean forward in my seat, getting right in Trent’s personal bubble. He screws up his face in revulsion, leaning as far away from me as his chair will allow. *Good*. I want him uncomfortable in my presence.

“Watch what you say about the Hollands. Simone’s parents worked themselves to the bone to give their daughters a better life—there’s nothing but respect for those who give up their wants and needs for those of their children. And Jo, my MC first lady, is a fucking titan in the architectural engineering industry out in Colorado. Runs her own goddamn company in a male dominated field, rising above all of them. Say another word about any of them, and the whole Mercy Ravens conspiracy will rain down on you, with my woman leading the flock.”

Trent swallows hard, realizing he’s overstepped. “You’re twisting my words. There’s nothing wrong with wanting a life of comfort and opulence. Simone is not wrong in seeking it out. She enjoyed what I could provide her.”

How dare he insinuate my woman needs handouts from a man? This fucknut needs a reality check on how little he truly offers Simone.

“Nothing wrong with wanting some lavishness, I agree. However, what Simone wants, she gets by earning it. You act

like you put a roof over her head and clothes on her back. Your name may have been on the title of that bougie-ass condo you shared, but Simone was paying for half—of everything. I can pull up her bank transactions if you need a refresher. Stop acting like only you can give her the high life. She never needed you or any man to give her anything.”

Frustration grows on Trent in a red hue, glowing underneath his fake tan. He bares his teeth as he grits. “I’m not only talking about the financial provisions, but about what we shared in the bedroom.”

Butch comes to my side, cracking his neck. He’s ready to unleash a few punches on Trent on my behalf. I get it. I, too, would do it for him if someone was talking trash about his Candy. The brotherhood takes care of its own.

My smile turns feral, showing him all my teeth. “Naw, man. My woman prefers a working man’s hands compared to puny, manicured mittens. She likes them rough, taking control.”

I don’t say anymore—my and Simone’s bedroom life isn’t something I wish to share with anyone. He can let his imagination run wild.

Trent’s eyes double in size as my words sink in. “She... Simone would never...”

Butch snorts, returning to his seat. He knows I won the battle.

“You’re lying,” Trent argues weakly. “I know my Simone. She would never...she never submitted. She likes control, needs it.”

Not in everything. No wonder the guy never could please Simone. He never got to know the real her—a boss on the streets, and a brat in the sheets.

Done with fucking about, I return my attention to my laptop, focusing on putting my program into action. “Whatever helps you sleep at night, Trent, or whatever helps you not think about Simone asleep in my arms.”

My words finally hit their mark. Trent pushes away from the table, standing quickly. He speed-walks out of the conference room like his shoes suddenly caught fire.

When he passes over the threshold into the hall, I hit the start button on my program, smiling. Victory is sweet.

CHAPTER THIRTY- FOUR

“Crap,” I mutter, flipping through a client’s file.

I’ve combed through it three times, and the one form I’m looking for still isn’t with the rest of the documents. It’s rare if paperwork goes missing. Usually, it means they pulled the form for verification and never returned it to the previous year’s file before they sent it offsite. This means the form is most likely with the current file in document control’s fire safe storage room on the first floor.

“Crap,” I repeat, with a groan.

“If you need to take a shit, go already. You don’t need to announce your bathroom habits to me,” Punk chastises. “I told you the salad you had for lunch was going to wreak havoc on your gut, but would you listen to me? Noooo.”

I close the file and slap him on the back of the head with it. “Don’t be such a moron. I’m not complaining about a bowel movement.”

“Then what are you moaning about?”

“I’m missing a major form regarding the client, and it’s most likely in document control with the client’s current year file.”

“Ah. Meaning, we need to interact with your floozy ex-boss, correct?”

“Exactly.” I sigh, defeated. “It’s not like I could avoid interacting with her during the investigation, but I was hoping to hold it off until I’d finished all the previous year’s files.”

Punk stands from his chair, stretching his arms above his head. “Let’s get this over with.”

“You’ll stay with me, right?” I ask, biting my thumbnail. Even I can hear the desperation in my voice.

“Yeah, Priss. I’ll be with you the whole time. No worries.”

Reassured, I get to my feet, straightening out my outfit. I swipe the file off the table before I stride out of the conference room, with Punk at my back.

A bizarre sense of déjà vu sweeps over me when I find myself outside Cynthia’s office. Many times I stood outside this door, asking permission to dig deeper into a client’s file. The only difference this time is, she’s not my boss.

There are loud, muffled voices on the other side of the door, but I think nothing of it as I raise my fist to knock.

Before my knuckles meet the door, it quickly swings open, hitting the interior wall. I jump in my heels, my heartbeat ratcheting up a couple notches. To my surprise, it’s not Cynthia on the other side of the door, but Trent.

His tie is loosened and askew, the top button of his dress shirt popped open. Trent’s posture is stiff as he exits the office, stopping dead in his tracks when he spots me in his path. His sour expression turns into one of confusion.

“Simone?”

“Uh...sorry for interrupting. I need Cynthia’s help with a file in document control.”

Trent glances hastily over his shoulder into Cynthia’s office, where she’s seated on the edge of her desk, her head bent forward and fingers gripping the overhang on the glass top. She raises her eyes to us, her lips pinched tightly together. It doesn’t take a genius to decipher the couple were at odds about something prior to my arrival.

Trent veers his attention back to me, a forced smile fixed on his lips. “She’s all yours. We’re through.” He leans in toward me, his voice loud enough for only my ears. “Come find me if she gives you trouble, or if you want to talk.” He

steps around me, brushing his fingers against mine as he passes.

My fist clenches in response as I fight the urge not to flinch. I don't need Cynthia witnessing her boyfriend shamelessly flirting with me. It will only add tension to an already tense situation.

Cynthia stands, hustling to the door. She pokes her head into the hallway, hollering after Trent. "We'll finish our discussion tonight at home, dear."

Trent continues walking, not bothering to acknowledge he heard her when there's no way he couldn't have in the short distance.

She runs a hand over her hair, like she's smoothing out her frustration, before addressing me. "You said you needed a file?"

"Yes. The Oldani account." I involuntarily shiver. No reason other than it's an Italian surname. My experience with a now dead Italian mob enforcer is to blame. Still, the name seems familiar, like I've seen it somewhere before.

Cynthia's brows pull together. "Oldani, you said? Are you sure you want that file?"

The name nags at the back of my head. "Yeah."

Cynthia gestures for us to follow her to the elevator. She taps her foot impatiently as we wait for the doors to whoosh open. The tension increases as we enter the elevator. Cynthia frowns at the steel doors as we descend.

Punk glances at me with a raised eyebrow, almost like he's asking if her aggravation is normal behavior. I shake my head. This is a side I've never seen of Cynthia. The woman is always as cool as a cucumber, nothing ruffling her composure on the worst of days.

Whatever she and Trent were disagreeing on, it was big.

As we near the conference room Chase and Butch are using, Punk whispers low behind me, "Ten bucks he's going to

be watching us on the live feed when he sees the office homewrecker with us.”

“Ten bucks he’s already monitoring the situation,” I counter.

He grunts but doesn’t take my bet.

Chase has his eyes on us when we come into view, his fingers going warp speed as he continues to type. When a guy monitors a woman’s every movement, it’s characteristically for predatory reasons. Not with Chase. There’s something comforting in knowing he’s always watching over me and the rest of our MC family. He’s like a ranger, scouting for danger where others can’t.

Punk and I snicker quietly, waving as we pass. Chase stares on with a raised pierced brow. He’s too predictable.

Cynthia leads us to the document controlled file room, swiping her badge and opening the door. The word *room* is a bit of an exaggeration. It’s more of an oversized walk-in closet with rows of rolling metal shelves that can be moved with cranking a wheel on the sides of the units. It’s a stuffy, tight space with limited room to move about.

“Would you mind if your *guard* stays outside?” Cynthia questions snidely. “It’s difficult enough to maneuver in the room without someone big taking up space.”

Punk folds his tatted arms, refusing to budge. “I go where she goes.”

She turns up her nose at him but concedes. “Try to stay out of the way.”

We enter the tiny room in a single file. I crane my neck, looking at the shelving units where the Oldani file should be located, and frown when I don’t find it. “Has the filing system changed in the year?”

“Yes. A new manager in document control wanted to rearrange our old system for one that better suits the client’s, as well as our firm. Files accessed more often are put toward the front as priority in alphabetical order. Client files accessed

less are toward the back. The longer the time has been between accessing the client's file, the deeper they're stored."

Double crap. I have no clue how recently they've looked at the Oldani file. Flipping the previous year's file open, I scan the contents to get a better idea of when it was last accessed. "The end of September last year is when the last entry was inputted."

Cynthia grimaces. "There's no guarantee it hasn't been accessed recently. Let's start from the front and work our way back."

"Sounds like a plan."

We work together, searching through the first filing unit. Punk makes himself as small as his tall frame allows, sticking tight to the wall as we hunt for the file. After fifteen minutes of searching, we move on to the next file unit.

No one speaks as we work, more interested in finding the file than making idle chit chat. Occasionally, I catch Cynthia peeking at me. She quickly diverts her gaze, returning her attention to the files, and says nothing.

The silence becomes unnerving the longer we take to find the file. I'm about a second away from commenting on the weather to cut the tension when Cynthia clears her throat. "I understand you and Trent had breakfast this morning."

Punk curses under his breath, moving to stand closer to me.

"No, we did not. I was having breakfast with Chase, and Trent showed up," I correct her diplomatically as my fingers run over each file, pleading internally for the file to appear so we can avoid this awkward confrontation.

"Oh," she says in a cynical tone, lifting a manicured eyebrow. "So the text he sent you this morning asking you to join him for breakfast was a coincidence?"

Triple crap. "I never responded to his text message."

"Sure. He just continues to send you text messages with no responses. Please."

Her accusatory pitch has my hackles rising. “It’s the truth.”

My fingers move faster over the files. I murmur the name of each client as the file passes until my finger lands on the Oldani file, vastly out of order from where it should be. A weighted sigh leaves my lungs.

“I found it.”

“About time,” Punk mutters behind me.

With the file in my hand, I head for the door, only to be blocked by Cynthia. She looks at the file in my hand, then at my face.

“You’re telling me you haven’t been in communication with him at all?” Cynthia accuses me coldly.

“Yes. I gain nothing from lying.”

Attempting to end the conversation, I open the client’s file, turning over the pages as I scan each one before coming to a halt when I find the missing form. It’s not the form that has me frozen solid, but the personal info of the client on the form.

Luca Oldani, from Denver.

Sweat builds along my hairline as flashes from the recent past flood my mind. A tattooed hand with a single word—a name—written in cursive reaches out to grab at my shirt.

The name Oldani is familiar because I’ve seen it before inked into the skin of one of the most vile men I’ve had the misfortune of encountering.

I’m only half-aware Cynthia is bitching, too consumed by the name on the page to hear everything she’s spewing.

“Simone? Are you listening to me? Do you honestly expect me to believe you haven’t been leading Trent on? Why else would he continue sending you messages?”

“Beats the hell out of me. Take it up with your boyfriend.”

“I have. He refuses to answer me. I’m asking you.”

“Not my circus. Not my monkeys.” I squeeze past her, knocking her slightly against the shelving unit. “Excuse me.”

Sorry.”

Cynthia makes a growling sound of irritation. “Simone? Simone! Are you running from me?”

“Only to get back on my case,” I clip as I hurry with Punk. I turn the file around and show him the name. “Am I imagining things, or could this be him?”

Punk looks at the file but isn’t following me.

“It was tattooed on his hand, Punk. On Lucky Luca’s hand.”

It takes Punk less than a second to register what this file means. Swiftly, he takes me by the elbow, leading me out of the storage room. We hustle down the hall toward Chase and Butch.

Cynthia runs behind us, struggling to keep up in her heels. “Simone, stop. I’m talking to you.”

I enter the conference room, with Punk at my back. He turns in the doorway to stop Cynthia from entering. She huffs her agitation.

“Move aside.”

“Get a clue, woman. Your man’s actions are his own. Deal with Trent and leave Simone out of it.” Punk shuts the door in Cynthia’s surprised face, with a little more force than necessary. “Delusional snob,” Punk mutters as he turns around to face our team.

Still seated, Chase watches us with a pierced eyebrow raised. “Care to explain what’s going on?”

Punk takes a seat at the table. “Assumed you’d be watching, bro.”

“I was. But I’m referring to what you saw in the file,” Chase clarifies, motioning to the file in my hand. “Show me what you found, Numbers.”

I hand the file to Chase, my hand trembling. Though it’s been a year since Chase and Butch ended Luca’s life, the fear

Luca instilled in me remains. “It could be nothing, but my gut tells me this is something the MC would want to know.”

Flipping open the file, Chase scans the documents. His eyes widen, a smile curling the corners of his lips. “I’ll be damned. Looks like we have a lead on Bianchi’s money.”

CHAPTER THIRTY- FIVE

My call to Piero Bianchi goes straight to voicemail. This is unacceptable. I need to reach him. He hired me to find his money, and Simone found our first solid lead on a sizable chunk of it. I crack my fingers, typing away into my computer. A couple hacks into Piero's cellular data, and my call goes through.

A few calls go unanswered before Piero concedes and answers. "This better be fucking important. You're disrupting me in the middle of a business deal," he seethes through the speakerphone. "I don't know how you tampered with my phone, but I'm not amused, Chase. I've killed men for lesser offenses."

"Nice of you to answer, you grumpy bastard. What's got your silk boxers in a twist?"

"You, ya damn hippy. You have me in a twist."

"I prefer hipster over hippy, and biker over anything else."

"For Christ's sake, fucking spit out your business, or I'll throw this phone against the wall to prevent you from interrupting my meeting again."

"Geez, he's a pleasant man," Simone harrumphs, with her hands on her cocked hips.

Piero falls silent, aware he has an audience other than me. "Is...is that the lovely Jo I hear?"

"No, I'm her sister, Simone."

"Ah, yes," Piero purrs, pissing me right off. "I recall you. The striking one with the silver eyes. Impossible to forget."

How are you, *amor*?”

I snarl under my breath. The dickhead either has tungsten balls or a death wish for hitting on my woman.

“I’m fine, thank you. You, however, need to get ahold of your anger issues. You’re going to develop high blood pressure if you don’t rein in your temper.”

“My apologies, *amor*. You caught me in a weak moment. My annoyance is for Chase, not you. The blasted biker has a way of dragging me down to his level.”

Simone smirks. “He certainly has a way of whittling away on you to the point where you concede.”

“Ah, *amor*. It pains me you’re a victim of his insufferable behavior, too.” He sighs dramatically. “Can you forgive me for my lack of decorum earlier?”

“Only if you play nice with my man.”

“Your man? As in Chase?” Piero barks a laugh. “My condolences, *amor*. To be tied to Chase is a nuisance I wouldn’t wish upon my greatest enemies.”

Simone’s gray eyes sparkle with mirth, looking at me while addressing Piero. “Give him a chance—he grows on you.”

Piero scoffs. “Like a parasitic fungus, no doubt.”

My woman can’t help throwing back her head, cackling.

I pinch the bridge of my nose, forcing my glasses to ride up on my forehead. “Are you done roasting me in front of my woman?”

“Done? I was warming up,” Piero taunts. “I enjoy making you squirm. You and the bald one deserve a dose of your own medicine.”

“Oh, I agree,” Simone interjects, still laughing. “Especially the bald one. He needs to be humbled.”

“Hey!” Punk protests. “I’m not bald. I shave my head. And humble this, Priss.” Punk gives Simone the finger.

She rolls her eyes, flipping her wheat-colored hair over her shoulder. “Moron.”

“I like her, Chase,” Piero openly confides. “I like her a lot.”

“Claimed and taken, man. Can we please get back to the reason I hijacked your phone?”

“Yes. Does this have something to do with my cousin’s missing money?”

“Yup,” I say, leaning my forearms on the table to get closer to the speaker. “Lorenzo wasn’t a stupid man. He spread his money out, but Simone found something we never considered before.”

“Which is...?”

“Lorenzo was using the names of his closest associates, more specifically, the maiden surnames of their mothers, to create financial accounts. Simone found a financial credit file for Luca Oldani: aka Luca Amato, son of the late Gioia Amato, nee Oldani.”

“*Gesú Cristo!*” Piero curses in revelation. “No wonder our teams, along with the FBI, couldn’t find most of my cousin’s money. No one was looking under the inner circle’s mothers’ maiden names.”

“Your cousin was a piece of shit, but he wasn’t an idiot.”

“True,” Piero hums in agreement.

“We cross-referenced the rest of data in the file and have confirmed the account did indeed belong to your cousin’s second-in-command. Most likely, Lucky Luca was aware of the account but unable to leave the state with the feds monitoring the state borders. It’s why he was staying in a roach-infested motel south of Colorado. He was waiting for an opportunity to continue south to Sacramento.”

“You’re lucky this is a secure line, Chase. Awfully specific details to give on a man who’s missing,” Piero warns in a hushed whisper.

Simone bristles beside me. Unworried, I take her hand, pulling her into the seat next to mine. I rub soothing circles on the back of her hand with my thumb. “You have nothing to fear, Numbers, and neither do I.”

“Nothing to fear with me,” Piero agrees vehemently. “And thank you for handling that tedious trash for me, too. It was on my to-do list, but I’ll cross it off. Anyway, your woman, the MC accountant, uncovered all this?”

Pride swells in my chest as I glance at Simone, sitting straight with all her regal beauty and a small smile on her face. “Damn straight she did.”

“*Ben fatto*, Simone.”

“*Grazie*.”

“Do we have the money? Who is responsible for taking it?” Piero asks, with enthusiasm.

“No,” Simone answers. “What we have is the original account. From here, Chase and his team will track where the funds were transferred.”

He groans. “And how long will this recovery operation take, Chase?”

The mob boss isn’t going to like my answer. “I won’t candy coat it. We’re not even sure if the funds can be retrieved if we can locate where they are.”

“*Oh, cazzo!*” Piero curses loudly. “Then why are you calling me, huh? Wasting my time with bread crumbs. I am paying you to find my money, not tease me with leads.”

Fucking ungrateful mafia cocksucker, talking to me like I’m his personal assistant who’ll tolerate his abuse. To hell with this guy.

Before I can retaliate with a harsh comeback, Simone dishes out a nasty verbal thrashing. “Listen here, you pompous prick. You have a lot of nerve talking to my biker like he’s your errand boy. We found a lead, and we updated you on the progress. Excuse us for assuming you wanted to know something positive in the case, as opposed to staying in the

dark. Now that we're clear your Royal High-Ass doesn't want to be disturbed until we have a name or have the cash in hand, we'll leave you alone."

Simone jabs my cell with a manicured nail, ending the call. "Jackass."

Butch gives Simone two thumbs-up. "Classy."

Scowling, she folds her arms across her ample chest. "I don't give a shit. He was out of line. Who the hell does he think he is? King of Colorado?"

"Only his 'Royal High-Ass,'" Punk chuckles. "I'm going to steal that phrase."

My cell buzzes. Chuckling, I accept the call, putting it on speaker. "Long time, no talk, Piero."

"Did your brat hang up on me?" he snaps. A man of Piero's pedigree isn't accustomed to strong-willed women. I imagine he's snorting and frothing at the mouth like a raging bull.

"And I'll do it again if you cop an attitude."

"She doesn't let anyone speak negatively to me outside of herself."

"Exactly," Simone says testily.

Piero pauses a moment, groaning. "You can tell she's Jo's sister."

"Well, aren't you observant? Yes, bitchiness runs in my family's genetics."

Piero howls with deep laughter. "These MC women are too much."

His laughter softly fades as he collects himself. "Simone's right. I should be pleased with the positive update instead of going off the rails. It wasn't the news I wanted to hear, but it's promising. Move forward with the investigation. I'll pass along the maiden surnames' info to my tech team. It should help in other recovery operations. Keep me updated, but don't be a dick by interrupting my business meetings again."

“No problem,” I chuckle.

“And Chase...”

“Yeah?”

“Claiming a woman like Simone means nothing, unless you put a ring on it. I suggest you propose soon.”

Simone’s eyes widen when I wink at her and say, “Already planning on it.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

I sip my pinot noir, staring at the front door of Trent's posh condo. Hours have passed, with no phone call or text. Still, I sit in Trent's dark Hollywood glam living room, surrounded by all his ornamental belongings. All I have the strength to do is watch for his return, willing him to come home.

The room is deathly silent, no television or radio to fill the void. Only my heartbeat keeps me company, filling my ears with my pulse and steadily growing faster the longer I wait.

It's not like I'm surprised by Trent's sudden absence. He's been pulling away from me for many months, going back to when Simone discovered me and Trent that fateful night—the night I orchestrated for Simone to catch us in the act, ultimately ending their relationship and allowing me to have Trent all to myself.

The late-night calls and text messages Trent sent Simone aren't going unnoticed. I'm well-aware of his ability to sneak behind my back. After all, he demonstrated the same behavior while in a relationship with Simone. I've seen the call logs, the pleading messages my boyfriend sent to his ex, and there isn't a damn thing I can do to stop his behavior.

As much as I want to confront Trent for his lack of faithfulness, I fear his response wouldn't be in my favor. It's hard enough living up to Trent's unrealistic expectations of an ideal partner, but I still compete with a woman who Trent has on a pedestal. No matter how hard I try to knock over Simone's pedestal, it's no use. I'm not Simone and never will be.

It's why I began stealing from clients at the firm, to give Trent a reason to stay with me. When Trent expressed his desire to open his own firm, I thought this was the way to win him over. If he saw what lengths I'd go to make his dream a reality, he'd leave Simone for me.

However, I couldn't guarantee my thieving in the name of love would be enough of a motivator to convince Trent to choose me over Simone. Hence, why I bombarded Simone's caseload, sending her all over the country to deal with "important" clients. Out of sight, out of mind, I'd hoped. And with Simone not breathing down my neck, double-checking all the accounts, it made funneling money into my offshore account easier.

Sure, Trent was rolling in the sheets with me, but he wasn't cutting Simone loose, ignoring me in favor of Simone when she'd return home from business trips. His favoritism was obvious—Simone was who he preferred to share his life with, and I was who he preferred swiping information with.

Unwilling to remain Trent's sidepiece, I upped my game. I broke company protocol, giving Trent anything he wanted, usually personal data on clients I had direct access to. He used that info to give him an edge over our other financial investment colleagues, allowing him to advance rapidly within the firm. Everything he requested, I handed over without question, all in the hopes he'd pick me.

Still, I wasn't the one he wanted to come home to.

On the week of Trent's thirty-fifth birthday, I was thrilled to spend his special day with him. Simone was away on a business trip I couldn't attend because of "other commitments," meaning Trent was all mine.

Things went sideways when I saw an expense report Simone submitted for approval. She'd booked a flight to return home earlier than anticipated.

Once again, Simone would ruin everything, spoiling the one weekend I planned to have Trent all to myself. And I was fed up with taking scraps of time Trent would throw at me when Simone wasn't present.

Instead of getting angry, I decided enough was enough. Action was needed. I was going to put an end to Trent and Simone's relationship.

The plan fell into place perfectly, with little effort other than keeping Trent hard long enough for Simone to catch us in bed together. It took all my willpower not to laugh with glee when Simone entered the bedroom.

Trent was frantic to salvage the relationship, but thankfully, Simone was done.

There were moments in the two weeks leading to Simone's resignation deadline where I worried I'd lose Trent. I heard him beg Simone late at night when he thought I was sleeping. Every promise to correct his fuck-up and plea for forgiveness was a knife to my jaded heart.

To combat his regret, I strategically put myself in his space, staying connected to his hip and limiting his alone time. If he had no time to communicate with Simone, he had little chance of winning her back.

It worked. Simone left California, and I was on Trent's arm.

Although Trent's grief was perceptible, I believed it was temporary. I would fill the void and be everything he needed.

How wrong I was.

Confessing my embezzlement operation infuriated Trent. I expected him to be horrified, but his anger was unexpected, accusing me of ruining everything.

"What do you mean, I'm ruining everything?"

He cursed under his breath, clutching the spreadsheet I'd printed off, showcasing my pilfered funds, in his fists. "Interpret it however you want. Did you honestly think you could run with this and not have it come back to you? You're not even skimming the accounts, but pulling funds too massive to brush off as poor investments. You don't have a fucking clue what you're doing, Cynthia. If you don't stop and cover your tracks, you risk being caught and facing serious jail time."

“What? You think I’m too dumb to pull this off?” I asked, my pride bruised. “Would you be jumping all over Simone if she was doing this?” As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I wished I could retract them.

Trent sneered, “Simone has a moral compass, making her incapable of stealing from others. But if she were to do it, she’d be smarter and not take such stupid risks.”

“Right, Simone, the golden child who left you. Trent, open your eyes. I’m doing this for us, for the future we want to build.”

“Dont.” He shook his head fanatically, pointing a stiff finger in her face. “You did this to trap me. There’s no way I won’t be implicated if you get caught, since the whole firm speculates Simone left because we’re together now. You’ve put my career and reputation on the line. If you’re caught, the firm won’t believe I had no involvement. My livelihood could be ruined over your senselessness. I can’t believe you fucking did this to me.”

It hurt knowing Trent had no faith in my ability to make this scheme work. However, I refused to stop, becoming bolder in my moves. The faster I transferred the funds to an offshore account, the sooner the two of us could leave the firm and start our own company. Trent may not agree, but he’ll accept it in time, when this is long behind us.

Although Trent continued to reach out to Simone after she moved away, I could ignore it, deluding myself into believing it was words, and nothing more. Many men had weak moments, and Trent was no different. It was manageable with Simone states away.

However, ever since the moment Simone reappeared, shit has gone south. Trent isn’t bothering to hide his feelings or intentions at rekindling a romantic relationship with Simone. He’s slipping through my fingers each second Simone remains on the case, like pieces of sand unable to be contained in my palms.

Having drained my wine, I set the glass down before rising from my chair to fetch the bottle to refill my glass. I’m

returning to the living room with the wine when the front door opens. Trent waltzes inside, dressed in sweats. He appears to be in a better mood than when we last spoke in my office.

With a smug smirk on his tan face, he breezes past me, snatching the wine bottle out of my hand. He takes a long swig from the bottle. It's rather unbecoming of his refined nature, but I'm not going to point out his poor manners.

"Should you be drinking after a workout? Water seems a more sensible option."

Trent takes another pull from the bottle, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. "I wasn't working out."

I figured as much. Trent normally cycles in the mornings. "Then where were you?" I question heatedly. "I've been waiting over two hours for you to come home."

"Well, I'm here," he snips, spreading his arms wide. "You can stop your mothering."

I purse my lips, straightening my shoulders. "Where were you, Trent?"

His only answer is a cheeky wink as he raises the bottle to his lips, turning to disappear into the master suite.

If he thinks he can ignore my questioning, he has another think coming. I stride after him, determined to get an answer. Once I put my mind to something, I rarely fail in achieving my desired outcome.

"Trent, we need to talk."

"Regarding where I was exactly?" he asks, placing the bottle on the bathroom vanity. He reaches behind his neck to pull his sweatshirt over his head. "I went for a walk, trying to clear my head with the shit show you created, stealing funds."

Chastised, I bite the inside of my cheek. Ever since the firm caught on to shady transactions occurring inside its walls, my pilfering operation has been a bigger hindrance in our relationship. I only need a little more time to accrue the money we need to leave this dull life behind.

“I’ve tried talking to you. Hell, I tried today in your office, but you don’t want to listen to reason. You never take me seriously.”

“You mentioned Simone—”

“And her team,” he interrupts me heatedly. “You only heard Simone’s name and tuned out all the rest, as per your usual.”

He’s not wrong. Anytime Trent speaks of Simone, I immediately see red, and my ears buzz. The very name drives me up the wall. When he brought up his ex earlier in my office, I verbally lashed out at Trent, accusing him of still harboring feelings for Simone.

“I only brought her up because I was trying to warn you.”

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. “Warn me?”

He yanks down his sweatpants, standing naked in front of me. For a moment, I’m distracted by his lean but toned frame until he drops a bomb on me. “Do you realize Mercy Ravens Security is only a few short days away from discovering who’s been stealing from the firm?”

My heart stops, dropping to my toes. “W-what?”

Trent nods, his face grave. “They have a program scanning all the digital records, sorting discrepancies from the hard copies Simone’s discovered. Your system for picking what accounts to take from is going to be cracked. Chase has attempted to keep it undercover, but it’s impossible to hide everything from me when I’m sitting in the goddamn room with him. That’s what I was trying to explain to you before you cussed me out of your office.”

Nervous, I scratch at the skin on my forearm. This is a nightmare. Yes, I had taken risks—enormous risks—by moving sizable sums of cash. But I thought I covered my tracks well. Apparently, not well enough.

“What do we do?”

“We?” he scoffs before turning on the shower and stepping into the spray. “You mean you. I’m not going down with this ship, Cynthia. Had you stopped when I told you to, this could have gone unnoticed. I’m not sure there’s much you can do other than dump the money into an account and abandon it for the security team to find.”

Abandoning the funds is not an option, not after all the effort I put into acquiring it. It was my lifeline to keep Trent in his place beside me. Without it, there’s nothing to tie him to me or hold over his head. And with Simone back in his sights, jumping ship was likely on his mind.

Desperation crawls up my spine, making me tremble. “No, Trent. I’m not returning the money, and I sure as hell won’t go down alone.”

Stiffening, Trent slowly turns his narrowed gaze on her. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” I swallow the lump in my throat, forcing my voice to be louder. “If I go down, you’ll come with me. You’ve been aware of this operation since I told you a year ago. You never stopped me, never turned me in. Law enforcement will consider you my accomplice.”

It’s a bold move, but I’m under the knife. I have to keep Trent in any way, shape, or form. Losing him would be my undoing.

Trent’s fingers coil into talons right before he rushes me, gripping me by the hair and pinning my body against the sink with his. Pain radiates down my body from where he yanks the roots from my scalp. I scream, tears springing to my eyes.

“Is this how you plan to keep me, Cynthia? With threats?”

I whimper pathetically in his hold, my fingers prying helplessly at his hands. Trent’s sudden aggression may have been triggered by my threat, but he’s never shown this level of violence before. Yelling matches are typical. Throwing shit against the walls when angry is normal behavior. Physical assault is not standard. The abuse is escalating, and it’s all because Simone returned.

As suddenly as Trent attacked, he releases me, shoving away from me as I grip at my sore head. I bite back my cries, alarmed by Trent's viciousness. "What the fuck, Trent?"

"Don't. Threaten. Me. Again."

Still shocked, I try to justify Trent's violent behavior. The man had lost his damn mind in the heat of the moment. He's under a lot of duress, monitoring the auditors and making sure they don't discover I'm the one stealing funds from the firm.

He's trying to protect me. And I cruelly threatened him with jail time. It's my fault he reacted the way he did.

A part of me knows there's no excuse for assault, no matter if it's provoked. But I squash those thoughts, ignoring the red flags as a one-off. It won't happen again.

Cracking his neck, Trent returns to his shower as if nothing transpired between us. "You have forty-eight hours to dump the funds."

Forty-eight hours isn't nearly long enough to unload the money without the Mercy Ravens finding connections leading to me. "Why the short time frame?"

"It's all I can give you. Any longer, and I'll risk my reputation." He's being vague. *Why?*

"And how will you buy me two days?"

Trent finishes rinsing off the soapsuds, stepping out of the shower to grab his towel. "Already handled."

A glimmer of hope swims around my chest, hope Trent took the precautions to protect me when I was unwilling to listen to the trouble brewing with the investigation. "You were proactive for me?"

Trent drops his towel in the hamper, stalking out of the bathroom without bothering to look at me. He calls over his shoulder, "No. I did something for me, something to distract the filthy biker's attention away from the case. But what I've done will benefit you, too."

CHAPTER THIRTY- SEVEN

Chase had to run a few errands after work, leaving me with Butch and Punk. Honestly, I'm grateful for the break from him. I need a little distance from my pushy biker to process what I learned today.

When Chase mentioned proposing, my heart stopped before going into instant overdrive, pounding against my sternum to the point where I thought it would crack my breastbone. It's not surprising Chase wants to marry me. He's always stressed we're endgame. I just wasn't aware he was thinking of wedding bells this soon in our brand spanking new relationship. He's consumed with claiming me as his woman. I assumed all the rest would come with time—a lot of time.

The guys want to hit the weight room, but they don't want to leave me alone in my room. With the gym facing out toward the pool, I told them to go work out while I swim. Win-win for all of us.

The laps in the pool are a great way to relieve some stress. While my arms and legs glide through the water, my head goes over the pros and cons of Chase proposing soon.

Cons: it's early days. We're still in the adjustment period after I agreed to be his woman. He's a domineering alpha who pushes the boundaries too far and has a tendency to be overly territorial for no good reason other than he has a hunch another man wants me.

Pros: this man would go through hell and back to love, worship, and protect me. He looks at me like I hung not just the moon, but the galaxy. He values my work, my family, my

personality, my interests. Chase is everything I could hope for in a partner—loving, loyal, hardworking, and intelligent.

My list never ends with his praises. And the fact that he's a drop dead gorgeous Thor-lookalike dressed in biker clothing with a hipster twist is the icing on my favorite cake.

Can I see myself married to this man? Yes. Yes, I see us happily married, building a family, a home, a lifetime of memories. I see road trips on his motorcycle, working more cases together, watching our children grow into fine adults, spending time with the crew for all the special occasions to come. And when I leave this world, I see it with the man I love beside me, holding my hand and following me through those pearly gates into whatever our heaven may be.

Realization hits me hard. I stop mid-stroke, flipping over on to my back to stare up at the evening sky, seeing nothing but Chase's face.

I want to marry Chase—like yesterday.

All this time, I've been terrified of falling in love, getting my heart broken, and starting all over again. Chase has been with me every step of the way since I left Trent, loving me in any form I allowed him to give me. The man lived a celibate life—not because I asked, but because he wanted to—waiting for me to see he's a man worthy of my love.

Who cares if it's early days? We've known each other for a year, learning all the private and intimate details about each other. We fit together, our opposites connecting us like puzzle pieces. His possessive side makes me swoon as much as it drives me up the walls. The way Chase takes ownership of my body in the bedroom has me begging for more. And there's nothing more amazing than when he takes me in his arms, holding me to him like I'm the most precious person in existence.

"I love Chase," I whisper to the sky in stunned awareness.

The man told me he loved me a year ago in his sleep, and I'm aching to say it back to him.

Tonight. I'll tell him tonight when we go out on our date.

Oh, my God. Our date! I need to get ready.

To anyone watching me toss about in the pool as I rush to get out, I must look like the world's most ungraceful mermaid, losing all coordination ability. Fuck being graceful. I have a date with the man I love, and I have to look amazing when I tell him I love him, too.

I'm running like a wet duck in my flip-flops past the weight room when Punk hollers after me. "Priss? Where's the fire?"

"No time to explain," I call over my shoulder. "I have to get ready for Chase."

My face is flushed when I return to the hotel suite. Running sucks major hairy balls, but when I'm motivated, I'm one hell of a sprinter. I jump in the shower, quickly shampooing and conditioning my long hair to remove the chlorine smell. Thank goodness I splurged on waxing before this investigation started—with how jittery I am, I couldn't be steady with a razor.

My body wash is swimming down the drain when I hear the suite door beep open. With a towel wrapped around my body, I bound out of the bathroom, finding Chase tossing several store bags onto the bed.

His return has me smiling like a lovesick teen. "There's my sexy caveman."

He eyes me with a raised pierced brow, a smirk tugging at his lips. In three long strides, he closes the distance between us, taking my face in his hands. He bends to connect our lips, kissing me deeply. "Fuck, baby. Away two hours, and I missed you something fierce."

My heart flutters, beating excitedly against my chest. A girl could get used to his sweetness.

As much as I want to drop those coveted three words that mean everything, I hold back. He deserves to hear them in the perfect setting, probably after he's taken me for a proper ride and stopped his bike somewhere for us to share a private moment together.

“Missed you, too. What’s all this?” I gesture at the bed littered with *Harley Davidson* merchandise bags. “You went retail shopping without me?”

“I went shopping *for you*,” he corrects me, shrugging out of his cut and unlacing his boots. “I’m gonna grab a quick shower. Try everything on.”

Huh? Shopping for me...at a biker store. Interesting and terrifying.

Ripping open the first bag, I groan. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Inside the bag are several denim pants. Reaching in, I pull out the one on top. With a flick of my wrists, the pants unfold. I hold the offensive material out in front of me, eyeing them with apprehension. It’s been years since I wore jeans, mostly because I never found a pair to fit my curves without looking like a stuffed sausage.

“What’s wrong with my linen pants?” I call into the bathroom. Linen pants are flexible and comfortable, I have plenty of those.

“They’re not safe enough. You need a layer of protection in case something goes south on our ride,” he hollers from the shower.

With a resigning sigh, I toss my towel on the bed. My undergarments go on before I thoroughly moisturize my legs. Extra lubricant will be needed to slip into these puppies.

In goes one leg, then the other. With my fingers, I pull the dense fabric over my thighs. Typically, it’s a struggle to get jeans over my hips, but this must be some magic denim. It stretches over my curves easily, with minimal tugging. The button snaps shut above my navel, holding in everything.

Dumbfounded, I clamor over to the full-length mirror on the closet door. My mouth gapes as I assess my new favorite pants. They’re high-waisted, bootcut jeans in a distressed finish, molding around my figure in a tastefully seductive way.

“They’re perfect,” I muse aloud.

“Do you like them?”

I hadn't heard the shower turn off or Chase's approach. Then again, I never hear him when he sneaks up on me.

Going for flirty, I smile over my shoulder at him. “I want to hate them, but I absolutely love these. How did you know my size?”

Chase stands behind me, his towel sitting low on his trim hips. Water droplets follow the creases between his cut muscles, dripping below the towel. The man has me wishing I was a single drop of water going south on him. Goosebumps break out across my skin where his fingers slowly travel over my exposed arms.

“I know everything about you, Numbers. Memorized every inch of your beautiful body. When you've been watching someone as long as I've been watching you, you learn every hill and valley, like the roads I ride daily. It wasn't difficult when you already told me your likes and dislikes regarding jeans. These...” He pauses, releasing a guttural groan as his eyes fixate on my round backside. “These show off your shape perfectly.”

Seeking more of his touch, I turn to face him. His fingers slip into my back pockets, molding around my bottom as much as the fabric allows. With one fast tug, he has me flush against his damp chest. A girlish giggle slips past my lips, slowly morphing into a low moan as he runs his nose along my neck, breathing me in. He hums deep in his chest.

“Chase,” I whisper, sensing my resolve slipping. I ask my next question before I give in to my needy desires. “Have our plans changed? Are we staying in tonight?”

He places a soft kiss under my ear. “No. Now that I finally have you, I'm taking your fine ass out on my bike, where I can show you off properly. Make every fucker with eyeballs jealous.”

“Are you sure you're going to handle others ogling me?” I tease.

“As long as they stay in their lane, they can admire you.” He tightens his hold on me, our lips an inch apart. “If they attempt to do more...I’m not above putting them in their place.”

With a smile on my face, I shake my head at him. “So possessive.”

“Only with you,” he vows.

Part of me—the needy, wanton part—wishes he’d throw me on the bed. However, an evening out as a couple isn’t something to shrug off. And there’s that whole other thing about how me telling him I love him for the first time would mean more outside of the bedroom, where he could dismiss my declaration as words misspoken in a moment of passion.

I bop the end of his Roman nose with my fingertip. “We best finish getting ready.”

CHAPTER THIRTY- EIGHT

Thirty minutes later, after several longing looks and a few stolen kisses between dressing and doing hair, Chase and I walk hand-in-hand toward the hotel parking garage. I'm giving him directions to a great restaurant with live music when we round the bend where our vehicles are parked.

"The hell?!" Chase releases my hand, sprinting to where his bike is lying on its side on the concrete ground.

In front of the wreckage, his hands fly onto his head, gripping his long tawny-colored hair. Kneeling, he looks closer at the damage. His face twists in an angry snarl. "FUCK!"

Chase's bike is an extension of himself, as it is for all bikers. Seeing him crawl all over it with frantic fingers to investigate the dents is heart-wrenching to watch.

Helpless, I ask, "What can I do?"

"Call Butch. Tell him to bring my laptop."

"What do you need with the laptop?"

His fingers continue to run over his bike, checking the entire surface area of the motorcycle. "To hack into the hotel security cameras. I need to see who the fuck tipped my hog."

I pull out my cell from my purse, hitting Butch's number. "Tipped your bike? Like on purpose? How do you know this wasn't an accident?"

Chase gestures to the bitch seat on his bike, where months ago he had my nickname—*Numbers*—embroidered into the

leather cushion. The embroidery has been slashed away, like someone wanted to remove it.

Shocked by the sight, I gasp, my hand covering my mouth.

“This was no accident,” Chase spits wrathfully. “It was Trent. And I’m going to prove it.”

Butch picks up the call. I don’t waste time with pleasantries. “Butch, we have a problem.”

His gravelly voice greets me with concern. “What’s wrong?”

“Bring Chase’s laptop to the garage. His bike was...” I struggle to find the correct verbiage.

“It was fucked with by that fucking fuckhead!” Chase grunts, using his anger to lift the metal beast. His Thor-like body makes it look easy, but I know otherwise. Harleys are heavy. Sweat collects on Chase’s brow, but he gets her standing upright.

“I’m on my way.” Butch disconnects.

Five tense minutes pass before Butch and Punk race into the garage with Chase’s laptop. Butch hands it off to Chase, his eyes scanning over his brother’s hog. “What’s the damage?”

Chase is already typing away on his computer. “Mainly my seat and a decent dent in the gas tank, where it took the brunt of the fall. The chrome is scuffed in a couple areas as well. Doesn’t look like there’s more, but I want it thoroughly checked before I ride her anywhere.”

“I’ll call Eagle. He may have connections to bike shops in the area,” Punk offers, already on his cell to call their brother, one of the main mechanics for the MC. “There’s got to be plenty nearby in this city.”

“Finding one who can do a rush job will be tricky,” Butch surmises.

Chase’s fingers slow their typing. He must be in the hotel security system. His eyes are trained on his screen, the light reflecting off the lenses of his thick-framed glasses. The guys

move to watch the screen behind him. I have to strain my neck to see around their bulky bodies.

The cameras show a man enter the garage—or what I assume is a man based on size and build. He's dressed in sweats, with a hoodie over his head, hiding his face. How he could bypass the hotel security guard stationed out front is anyone's guess. The man's head swivels around, constantly looking over his shoulders as he walks directly to Chase's motorcycle. He stops beside it, staring down at it for a solid minute. His hand hovers above the bitch seat—the area where my name is embroidered. The suspect digs into the front pocket of his hoodie, pulling out something similar to a Swiss army knife.

What happens next, I can only describe as manic. The man slashes frenziedly at the leather motorcycle seat. His movements are jerky, almost like he's out of control.

Worried, I glance at my biker to see how he's faring.

Chase is as stiff as a board, studying the screen. His eyes don't blink once while he watches the security recording.

My attention pans back to the laptop screen. The suspect's upper body is heaving. He pockets his knife, turning to leave. For whatever reason, he turns around and kicks with all his might at the hog. It's just enough impact to cause the motorcycle to lose the fight with gravity. The suspect is running before the bike hits the ground.

Chase pauses the screen. He looks at his brothers. "What did you see?"

"Suspect is the right height and build of Trent," Butch states.

My insides twist with regret. Had my actions from this morning at the restaurant caused this? Did Chase and I push Trent too far by making him jealous of our relationship?

"Punk?" Chase asks his best friend. "What did you notice?"

"The perp was smart enough not to touch your bike without gloves."

My biker nods, his face stern. “You noticed his hands weren’t gloved. Did you notice anything else about them?”

Punk frowns. “Play it again.”

Chase hits play. All of us focus on the suspect’s hands.

“Oh, my God!” I place a hand on my chest, having a hard time choking out the words. “They’re orange.”

“It may as well be a fingerprint.” Punk gives a humorless chuckle. “Few orange jackwagons roaming around this city.”

“Shouldn’t we be filing a police report? Talking to hotel security?” I question, concerned with seeking justice for what happened to Chase’s bike. “The hotel let him slip through.”

Chase crosses his arms over his thick chest. “The hotel will pay for the damages, since I paid extra for vehicle insurance in their garage.”

Makes sense. “And the police report?”

Chase’s face is cold and calculating. “I’d prefer to handle it our own way.”

My eyes widen. “You will do nothing of the sort.”

Before I can say more, Chase’s phone buzzes. He takes a quick glance at his text message. “Eagle says his buddy at Hog Restoration will take good care of my baby. He’s heading over with his flatbed truck.” He turns to Butch. “Can you grab the hotel manager? I want him to see how badly his security fucked up.

“On it.” Butch turns on his heels, heading back inside the hotel.

“Have Eagle’s mechanic friend give you a quote right away,” Punk suggests. “Make sure you squeeze every dollar out of this place for allowing that nutter to get in here.”

“You know I will,” Chase verifies.

Huffing, I place my hands on my hips. “Chase, we need to call the police.”

“Filing a police report is inevitable. The hotel will want to find the person responsible for the damages, otherwise they’re on the hook for the bill. However, we can’t say shit about who we suspect the perp is. We have a case to solve, and unfortunately, we need your ex for the time being.”

“We should hold him accountable,” I argue.

My biker gives me a deadpan stare. “There are other ways to hold him accountable.”

“Do any of those ways involve not beating him to a pulp?”

Chase and Punk share a look, one filled with insider knowledge I have no clue of.

Punk scratches his head. “I mean, we don’t have to rough him up too much. Only enough to get the message to stay the hell away from you and our stuff.”

My eye twitches. “How about no?”

Before I can say more, Butch returns with hotel security. A man in an expensive suit, who I assume is the manager on shift, is among the group. His skin turns an unhealthy shade of green as he takes in the damaged motorcycle. Dealing with bikers is something he’s most likely unaccustomed to, especially one whose bike someone vandalized under his watch.

The man in the suit holds a shaky hand out to Chase. “Mister Brighton, my apologies. I’m the manager in charge. I came as soon as someone alerted me to the situation.”

Grumbling, Chase shakes the man’s hand, diving right into the matter at hand. “Care to explain how someone could bypass your security?” Chase turns his computer around to show him the video of the incident.

The manager’s eyes grow wide as he looks at the video footage. “How did you get access to our security cameras?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Chase clips. “What matters is, my bike needs body restoration because your security slacked on their job.”

“Mister Brighton, let me assure you, we’ll pay for all damages to your property. Have whatever garage you take her to send us the bill. I’ve alerted the police. They’ll be here shortly.”

As if called on cue, the police arrive.

A warm hand engulfs mine. Chase stares intently at me, his eyes beseeching me. “Baby, please.”

I know what he wants without him elaborating on his request. He wants me to keep Trent’s name out of my statement to the police.

As badly as I want Trent held responsible for his violent behavior, I give Chase a curt nod. The odds Trent would post bond and be out of jail within the day are high. Whatever justice Chase has in mind, it’ll be more fitting than Trent paying for the damages accrued. Chase is asking for me to trust him to do what’s best, and I need to give him that reliance.

My biker raises our linked hands to his lips, kissing my knuckles. “Thank you for trusting me.”

“Don’t make me regret it,” I warn him as the police approach.

CHAPTER THIRTY- NINE

Statements were given, pictures taken, and video footage handed over. Preoccupied talking with law enforcement and going over expenses with the mechanic, I hadn't noticed how late it was until I finished watching the mechanic tie down my baby to his flatbed truck, hauling her off to his garage. My woman was yawning, fighting to keep her eyes open, and I was equally exhausted.

Our night was shot. We were hungry, tired, and hella pissed off. Simone and I walked hand-in-hand back to our room, ordered room service, and crashed hard after our stomachs were full.

Having an internal alarm clock can be a real bitch when it wakes you at four in the morning. However, this morning I appreciate the early wake up call. I have a score to settle.

Staying close to Simone, I work on my laptop beside her in bed. She snores quietly with her back to me, completely checked out.

Good. I want her relaxed, accepting I'll deal with Trent in my own way. I know she worries about me doing anything that could get me arrested. But this is my life—I bend the law daily for the greater good. Only this time, it's not for someone else. Today, it's for me.

No one fucks with me, my woman, or my hog and gets away without a reality check.

Luckily, Trent is making it easy to track him. The douche is brand-loyal to a fault. Apple products are special, allowing a person to link all their other Apple products together. Laptops,

tablets, watches, phones can all be connected. From there, it can upload your info to apps, such as fitness or social media accounts.

And when these accounts are made public...well, it makes my job a cakewalk.

Seems Trent's a cycling enthusiast, riding every morning at the same time—like damn clockwork. The idiot boasts about his mileage, posting his achievements on his Instagram. His entire account is like some sort of exercise diary.

And the moron rides the same course. Every. Single. Day.

Excellent. His habitualness is going to weigh heavily in my favor.

After memorizing his route from his latest Instagram posts, I scan the city surveillance, picking a location with few cameras and fewer people. The less there is to trace back to me, the better.

With my location selected and Trent's estimated time of arrival calculated, I have enough time to put my plan into action.

Dressing in silence, I tug on my clothes. Ready to leave, I walk to the bed where Simone sleeps. The last time I left without informing her where I was going, she panicked. My woman doesn't need to worry unnecessarily.

I lean over the bed, placing a gentle kiss on her temple. "Numbers? I have to go. I'll be back shortly."

Simone stirs, blinking awake. She reaches for my hand. I slip mine into hers. "Are you going after Trent?"

More than anything, I want to keep her in the dark. The likelihood of getting caught is slim, but there's always a risk. The less she knows, the better. I settle on withholding specifics.

"Not the way you think, baby. Just evening the score, is all."

Her gray eyes narrow, studying my face. "Is it worth the risk?"

“The dick cut your name out of my hog, Simone. The way I see it, he wasn’t only attacking me. If I do nothing, he may assume he can get away with more. The hell if I sit back and let him.”

Instead of fighting me, like I expect her to, Simone cups my cheek in her slender hand. “Be careful.” She lifts her head, pressing a gentle kiss against my lips. It’s almost enough to make me say fuck it, roll over, and bury my frustration inside of her warm center.

“I want more of those sweet kisses when I return.” With one more kiss, I leave the hotel and head to the parking garage.

I find Punk sitting on the fender of the SUV with his arms folded across his chest, legs crossed at his ankles, chilling like it’s normal to be sitting in a deserted parking garage at this hour. He lifts his head as I approach.

“About time you showed up. I’ve been waiting forever.”

“The fuck you waiting out here for me?”

He gives me a side-eye glance full of condemnation. “Do I look like I’m gonna let you go after Sir Tans-A-Lot alone? Jesus, Chase. Do you know me at all, bro?”

“What I’m about to do can wind my ass up in the clink. I can’t ask you to get involved.”

“Good thing I don’t need you to ask me.” Pushing himself off the fender, he walks to the driver’s door. “Get in. I’m driving.”

Climbing in the passenger side, I look at my best friend. “You sure?”

“Brothers don’t ride alone,” he responds, starting the SUV. He gives me a wide smile. “Besides, this shit should be fun.”

Twenty minutes later, Punk and I sit in a parking lot outside an opening to a cyclist trail. The sun paints the sky in a pinkish hue as it crests the horizon. We’ve seen a few early risers out exercising, but no one looks our way.

Punk stares out the windshield in the direction Trent should come based on his previous GPS tracking on his smart watch. “What’s the plan?”

“He fucked with my bike. Figured I’d pay it forward.”

Mercy Raven MC may be on the right side of the law, but we’ve broken a rule or a hundred when desperate times call for desperate measures. This, unfortunately, is not one of those times.

“Eye for an eye. I like it.” Punk does his signature high-pitched giggle when he’s excited. “We running him over, too?”

Disappointed, I shake my head. “I wish.”

“A little manhandling wouldn’t hurt,” Punk muses aloud, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel as we wait.

“Agreed. However, we still need him for the investigation. If the firm had to appoint someone else as liaison, we may face a delay.”

My tablet beeps, alerting me as Trent enters the proximity. The urge to lay the dude out flat grows strong the closer he gets. I know I said we needed Trent for the rest of the investigation, but...

“Remind me again why I shouldn’t end this fucker.”

The asshole beside me smiles as he says, “Your knees wouldn’t hold up in prison.”

A bark of laughter bursts from my lungs. I can always count on Punk to lighten my sour mood. Smiling, I slug him in the shoulder. “I would be nobody’s bitch, and you know it. Give me another reason.”

Punk sobers. “Because you got a life with Simone to look forward to.”

“Because I have Simone,” I repeat, slipping out of the SUV. I quietly close the door—can’t risk drawing attention our way.

A thick bush close to the entrance of the paved trail heading into the park makes the perfect place to hide for an

ambush. I hasten my pace to my location as the cool morning breeze whips around my hair. Birds chirp their morning song as I crouch behind the thick vegetation, painting the backdrop of a serene morning.

Won't be like that for long, at least not for Trent.

My muscles twitch with adrenaline and anticipation. This is going to feel real fucking good after all the bullshit this guy has dished out all week. I reach into my back pocket, retrieving a set of latex gloves. Leaving fingerprints behind is not an option.

Heavy breathing is my first indication someone is approaching, like extremely heavy. If the person sucks in any more air, the whole world will need to plant more trees to counterbalance all the carbon dioxide.

I glance at Punk with a raised eyebrow. He has the same incredulous look I'm sporting. Punk is trying hard not to laugh as he nods at me, letting me know it is, in fact, Trent coming our way.

For someone who exercises daily, Trent's a loud mouthbreather. Obnoxious sounding. He probably wakes people with his groaning when he bikes past their open windows in the mornings.

Damn. My poor woman most likely endured that slippery bastard's manic huffing while intimate. I swear a silent vow to make up for Trent's grossness. Simone deserves only the best from me.

Shaking my head clear, I push all other thoughts aside, focusing on the task at hand. With my head in the game, I calculate the exact moment I need to take action.

Timing is crucial with what I'm about to do. I can't jump out of my hiding spot too soon, or Trent will see me. And if I wait too long, I'll be chasing after him.

Punk starts the engine of the SUV. We'll need to scam fast before we're caught by any passersby.

Trent's breathing blares as he rounds the bend, passing the oversized bush I'm hiding behind. Wasting no time, I step out

around the backside of the bush as soon as Trent comes into view. I reach out with both hands, grabbing hold of the backside of the bike's frame. With all my strength, I yank my arms back, tugging the bike with me.

The sudden surge of backward momentum doesn't stop Trent's forward force. He flies over the handlebars into the grass off the paved trail. He lands with an audible oomph, splayed like a starfish on the ground.

Moving fast, I toss the bike into the road right as Punk drives into its path. The SUV bounces slightly as it rides over the expensive bicycle. The screeching of metal dragging across the blacktop is both hideous and satisfying to hear.

Punk slaps the outside of the SUV door through his open window. "Let's roll, bro."

I hold up a finger, indicating for him to wait. I stride to where Trent's groaning on the sod. The oily prick is a little scrapped up but otherwise fine. Lucky bastard.

Squatting to his level, I get right in his face. His eyes widen with terror when he sees who's in front of him. He scrambles backward, stopping when his back hits a tree two feet away from where he landed.

"Fuck with either of my babies again, and I'll make your next accident your last."

I stand upright, glaring down at Trent. He makes an easy target, shaking in his spandex at my feet. My boot would look so nice connecting with his face.

Somehow, I'm able to walk away without inflicting any more abuse. I did what I came to do to get my point across. My bike may need work, but Trent's is scrap metal.

"See you at the office," I call pleasantly over my shoulder before climbing into the SUV and driving away, with Punk giggling like a kid.

CHAPTER FORTY

When Chase returned to the hotel, I was relieved. Him safe and not in cuffs was all I cared about. Judging by the larger-than-life grin on his handsome face, justice had been served. I didn't ask what he did, partly because I didn't want to know, and partly knowing Chase would keep me in the dark to protect me. Whatever he did to even the score, I trusted Chase settled it.

Doesn't mean I'm not sweating bullets as we walk into P.L. Moore Financial to start another day on the case. I'm not sure what I expected as I exited the elevator on the top floor, but finding Trent pacing the conference room with an angry scowl crinkling his orange face is not it.

Before I've crossed the threshold, Trent is snapping at me. "Your boyfriend is a lunatic!"

"Good morning to you, too, Trent," I sigh, setting my purse and laptop on the conference table.

Trent rounds the table to stand in front of me, pushing right into my bubble like he's entitled to be there. Punk doesn't approve of his closeness, stepping between us. He places his hand on Trent's shoulder, forcing him to step back a few paces.

"Six feet apart at all times. Invade her space again, and I'll throw you out of the damn room."

Anger radiates from Trent as he swats Punk's hand off his shoulder. "Get your hands off me. You're as deranged as your partner."

Punk beams, obnoxious as always. “Why, thank you.”

Enough of this bickering. I have work to do. “What do you want, Trent?”

“Your biker tried to kill me this morning,” he seethes.

I don’t bother suppressing my eye roll. My tolerance is nonexistent regarding Trent. “Not true. If he had wanted you dead, you would be.”

“Are you serious, Simone?” Trent points at his chin, where he has an abrasion. “What about this?” He lifts his scraped palms. “And these?”

I shrug, unaffected by his minor wounds. “It looks like he was showing restraint.”

“Your bodyguard rode over my bicycle,” Trent nearly shouts, pointing an accusatory finger at Punk.

His harsh tone makes me flinch. “Keep your voice down,” I chide, my temper steadily increasing.

“Simone, you know how much I love my bikes,” Trent whines.

About as much as Chase loves his motorcycle. Oh! I wonder...

My inner bitch smiles, rubbing her hands together. “Was it the bike I bought you?”

“Yes! I cherished that gift.”

Perfection. The asshole had a lot of nerve keeping that bike after I caught him and Cynthia together. The more I imagine Chase and Punk running over Trent’s bike with the SUV, the harder it is not to laugh. It takes everything in me to snuff the urge. A bike for a bike. The irony is not lost on me.

“Simone,” Trent protests, “this was completely unprovoked.”

Punk’s chest inflates, irritation contorting his face as his nostrils flare. “Are you shitting me?”

“I’m not speaking to you,” Trent hisses, holding his hand up to Punk. “Learn to know when you’re included in a conversation.”

Punk’s boisterous laughter fills the conference room. “Counteroffer: learn to know when a woman is done with you.”

Before Trent can react against Punk, I bring his attention back to me. “Trent, if you think for one second I don’t know you’re responsible for damaging Chase’s motorcycle, then you’re wrong. I saw the security footage. Wearing a hood to hide your face was a smart move. Though next time, wear gloves. Your orange hands are distinctively yours.”

He quickly shoves his hands into his dress slacks like he’s trying to hide the evidence. “I don’t know what you’re going on about. Whatever lie your boyfriend fed you, you’d be foolish to believe it.”

“Chase doesn’t need to lie. I have my own eyes, Trent. Your actions triggered this morning’s reactions.”

Giving up on the charade, Trent gives me a pleading look. “Simone, you can’t be serious about him. He’s not good enough for you.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” I huff, sitting down at the table and opening the next client folder to investigate.

“What the hell can he give you? Has he given you a vacation to Belize like me? Or the latest Coach purse every season? The trips to the spa? Or the condo in Folsom?”

My temper gets the best of me. I slam down the client file on the table with a loud *smack*, glaring at Trent from where I sit.

“Things, Trent. You gave me things. Guess what? I can buy my own things. I can buy the vacations, the condos, the latest fashion accessories—I don’t need a man to buy me anything. Chase isn’t an ATM I need to shake down to get what I want out of him. What I want is commitment, loyalty, and love. Chase delivers on all of it, more than what I could

ask for. And he does it freely, without expecting a return on his investment.”

He releases a patronizing snort. “Money makes the world go ’round, my love. If he isn’t bringing something to the table financially, where’s the security in the relationship? He’s a damn vagabond. Probably freeloading off your checkbook.”

Punk growls, stepping forward to do God knows what to Trent. I reach out, grabbing the waistband of his tactical pants before he can do anything to jeopardize our mission. “Punk, I have this.”

“Then finish it,” he spits. “Or I will.” Mercy Ravens defend all family when under attack. Stepping aside to let me handle the situation is difficult for the moron. I appreciate him letting me take charge.

Facing Trent’s nasty glower, I square my shoulders. “Assuming my man is some kind of penniless bum is completely off the mark. Not that it’s any of your business, but Chase earns double what you make in an entire year.”

Trent balks. “Not possible.”

“Believe what you want. I handle his accounts and have no reason to lie. Chase already offered me a home with him, and a family.”

Something I said makes Trent pause. His eyes meet mine with a wild urgency. “A family? You would have his kids? He can’t possibly be what you want,” Trent argues, his face twisting into a snarl.

“He’s everything I want and all I never knew I needed,” I answer honestly.

Ignoring Punk’s earlier warning, Trent steps around him. He makes it one step in my direction before Punk grabs him around the back collar of his shirt, hauling him to the door like a bitch teaching its pup manners.

Trent helplessly digs his heels into the carpet, seething. “Get your fucking hands off me, you filth!”

“Language, Trent,” Punk warns. “We don’t want your colleagues getting involved, do we? Would hate to let them know what you’ve been up to in your free time. Behave, or else we’ll get the police involved. They’d love to have a suspect in the latest vandalism case at our hotel.”

“You can’t prove a thing,” Trent hisses, trying to break loose from Punk’s hold.

Punk doesn’t let go. He’s stronger than he appears. Lean muscle doesn’t mean lack of strength.

He shoves Trent out into the hall, blocking his access back into the conference room. “Video evidence is on our side. What’s on yours?”

A few heads pop out of offices, curious eyes trying to make sense of what they’re witnessing. Cynthia is among them. She takes a hesitant step out into the hallway behind her boyfriend, her flawless face lined with confusion.

Trent must sense the eyes of his colleagues watching. He straightens his suit, hiding the evidence of his altercation with Punk. “I’m here, Simone, whenever you’re ready to come back.”

Before I can tell him *when hell freezes over*, he turns on his loafer heels and strides away.

“Trent?” Cynthia calls after him, a tremble in her voice. Her head swings to me, hurt clear as day in her sad eyes. Her sadness is quickly replaced with a look of contempt. She hurries down the hall after her boyfriend, calling his name like a plea.

Punk turns in the doorway to face me. “Double?”

“I fibbed, so sue me. I wanted to hurt his ego, not crush it.”

Trent doesn’t need to know it’s triple. I reopen the client file, with Punk chuckling behind me.

CHAPTER FORTY- ONE

This morning's altercation with Trent fortunately didn't derail my focus from my work. I made a big dent, finishing the client files from the previous year. Tomorrow, I hope to attack the current year's files in the firm's archives, located in document control.

Regrettably, it means having to work directly with Cynthia. After the look she gave me this morning, I can guess it'll be a less than friendly interaction.

It's late. The bulk of the firm's employees left long before our team called it quits. Only a few staff members remain, looking as exhausted as I feel and finishing their tasks for the evening.

Punk and I make our way down the empty hallway toward the elevators when I decide to make a pit stop in the bathroom. All the caffeine I drank to keep me running during the day has finally reached max capacity.

"I'll be a minute."

Punk opens the bathroom door. "Sure thing. Let me clear the restroom first."

My bladder spasms. Unable to wait a second longer, I push past my bodyguard into the white marble bathroom. "Outta the way. I need to go."

"Fine. Make it quick, or I'm coming in after you," he grumbles as the door swings closed.

After holding my bladder all day, I nearly sigh with relief when I enter the stall. I quickly finish my business and wash

my hands in the sink.

One of the stall doors creaks open on the far side of the bathroom. I think nothing of it as I look up in the mirror to see who it is. My stomach clenches with unease as Cynthia emerges from the stall.

Great. I can already sense the hostility vibrate through the air between us. All I need is a confrontation with her this late in the evening in an empty bathroom.

She says nothing as she comes to the sink next to mine. Instead of washing her hands, she grips the sink counter. It's as if she needs the extra support as she clears her throat to speak. "Can I ask you something, Simone?"

In a hurry to make a quick getaway, I rush with scrubbing my hands while I say, "Sure."

Cynthia's eyes meet mine in the mirror, with shrewd conviction. "It's understandable if you still have lingering feelings for Trent."

An unattractive snort escapes me. "I don't."

She ignores me as if I said nothing. "But I don't understand why you're here after nearly a year."

"You know why I'm here. I'm auditing the firm. There's no ulterior motive behind my presence."

"Have you returned to win Trent back?"

"What?" I shake my hands dry before placing them on my hips. It's my defense pose, and right now I need to be on the defense. "Absolutely not."

She closes her eyes a moment, huffing. "I don't believe you."

"Okay. Whatever." Cynthia has made her assumptions, and I'm too tired to give a damn what she thinks or attempt to change her perspective.

"Whatever?" Cynthia's body shakes, her eyes snapping open to pierce me with a glare in the mirror. "WHATEVER?!"

“Yeah, whatever. Believe it or not, I want nothing to do with Trent. He’s all yours.”

Cynthia’s lips curl. “Then why is he always reaching out to you? Why does he text you late at night when he thinks I don’t know? Why does he take off at odd hours since you returned to the city?”

Jesus fucking Christ. Why am I getting pulled into their relationship drama? It’s not my fault Trent calls or texts me. I don’t respond. Why am I the guilty party in this mess when it’s all Trent’s doing?

“This is a conversation for you to have with him. There’s only one person initiating communication, and it sure as hell isn’t me. I can’t answer your questions when I don’t know why he does what he does.”

“But I’m asking you. What is so special about you? Why has he suddenly lost interest in being with me? It’s like he’s forgotten we’re together.”

She doesn’t deserve my pity, yet I feel sorry for Cynthia. I understand Trent’s rejection, since I’ve been on the receiving end of it. “I’m sorry you’re going through this.”

Cynthia sneers, closing the distance between us. “This is your fault.” She shoves me in the chest, pushing me back a step.

Ow! I resist the urge to rub my sternum where she shoved me, but damn, does it hurt. Why is she starting a physical altercation?

“Get a grip, Cynthia. Trent is a philandering jerk. I’m not a willing participant in his advancements.”

“I could ignore his daily texts to you when you were states away. I could excuse his obsession with stalking your social media accounts as him just being a man. But watching him throw himself at you while I’m standing right there is too much. You should have stayed away.”

She screeches, launching herself at me.

Unprepared for her sudden attack, I barely have time to brace myself as she collides into me, sending us both skittering to the tile floor with a hard *thud*. She's on top of me in a flash, straddling my hips and clamping her hands around my neck.

Gasping, I choke, realizing she's trying to strangle me. My hands reach up, pushing into her face. She tries to shake me off, but my upper body is stronger than hers from all my years swimming.

Though I'm struggling for air, I continue to shove against her face, forcing her head back. She loses her grip on my neck, and I heave her off me. Scurrying, I quickly get to my feet, racing from the bathroom and straight into Punk's chest.

He grips me by the shoulders, examining me with concern. "I was coming for you. I heard screaming. What the fuck, Priss?"

I point at the bathroom, rubbing at my throat with my free hand to work the muscles to speak after Cynthia bruised them in her death grip. "Cyn—" *Cough*. "Cynthia!"

"She did this? That fucking..."

Punk releases me, marching straight into the bathroom. I can hear Cynthia shriek on the other side of the door. Concerned Cynthia will attack Punk, I race back into the bathroom.

He has her pinned against the wall. Cynthia thrashes violently against his tatted forearms, struggling to break free.

"Attacking my brother's old lady," he snarls. "You're lucky I don't beat the shit out of women."

"I'd like to see you try," she challenges him, with a sinister laugh. "The police would have you in cuffs and thrown in jail, where trash like you belongs."

"Maybe," Punk muses aloud. "Or maybe I'll make an exception for you and snap your neck. It's impossible to tattle when you're dead."

Alarm crosses Cynthia's perfect features. Her eyes widen to cartoonish proportions when Punk reaches for her throat.

She releases a surprised squeal.

“Punk,” I croak. “Let her go. She won’t try anything again.”

“Do I have to?”

“Punk...”

He groans, retracting his hand, yet he keeps her pinned against the wall.

Cynthia gives me a cruel smirk. “What makes you sure I’m through with you?”

“You’ll do no such thing. Come at me again, and I’ll press assault charges against you,” I rasp, pointing at my throat. “Attacking the lead auditor investigating the firm’s missing funds isn’t a good look for you. You’d lose your job without a severance package.”

“Not to mention, it makes you look hella guilty,” Punk adds.

Cynthia stiffens. Her eyes shift between the two of us. “Guilty? Of what?”

“I think you know,” Punk accuses her, his tone serious. He releases his hold on Cynthia. She slumps down the wall with Punk no longer supporting her weight.

Cynthia’s tongue quickly licks her lips as she rights herself. “Wait. You think I’m the one stealing funds from the firm?”

Neither Punk nor I say a word. We’ve already said too much, although this could benefit us. Sometimes it’s best to let a suspect speculate on how much we know.

“Me? Steal from the firm?” Cynthia eyes the bathroom exit, looking to escape our accusation. “Ridiculous!”

My thoughts exactly, but I stay silent. The guys are convinced she’s our prime suspect, and I’m willing to entertain the idea. She had access to the client files, had the means to wire the funds elsewhere while covering her tracks, some

covered better than others. All we're doing is following the lead.

Cynthia covers her mouth with her hand, hiding a smile forming on her glossy lips. The act proves fruitless. She bursts with laughter, throwing her head back as she cackles. Her laughter carries on longer than normal, making me sweat with apprehension. Punk tenses, shifting his body to put himself between me and Cynthia.

Her laughter dies abruptly, eerily. Her lips curl into a smug smirk, giving a dainty shrug of her shoulders.

“Good luck proving my guilt.”

She shoulders her way past us and out of the bathroom.

CHAPTER FORTY- TWO

Following the altercation with Cynthia in the women's restroom, I was too unsteady to stand without aid. Seeing Cynthia react violently over something I had absolutely no control over and being on the receiving end of it was worrisome. The exchange left me light-headed and nauseated.

"Let's have a seat. I'm afraid you may faint in the elevator with the drop in pressure," Punk suggests softly. He wraps an arm around my waist, escorting me back to the conference room, where I sink into a chair.

"Thank you," I choke out, with gratitude. "Chase? I need him."

"Sit tight, Priss."

Punk takes his cell out of his leather cut. I vaguely hear him explaining to Chase what occurred in the bathroom with Cynthia, as well as the altercation with Trent this morning that possibly triggered Cynthia's attack. My mind has shut down, blocking out the last fifteen minutes. Maybe it's my way of protecting myself.

Something similar happened after my ordeal with Luca. And Chase was there to soothe me, hold me, even kiss me. He knew what I needed in that moment and provided it.

The only difference this time is, I want more than cuddles and kisses. I need an outlet, preferably one filled with pleasure. My body is begging for a release only Chase can give me. My tense muscles won't relax until I'm filled with his warmth, until his skin is pressed against mine.

It's a few minutes before Chase comes barreling into the room, along with Butch.

My biker rushes to my side, kneeling in front of me. His eyes are wild, running from the crown of my head to the tip of my heels, as he examines every inch of me.

Gently, he cradles my face in his large hands, tilting my head up enough to inspect the marks Cynthia left on my throat. He squeezes his eyes shut, dropping his head. "This is my fault."

My hands wrap around his wrists as I shake my head. "No. It's not."

"It is," he rasps with pain in his husky drawl. "I should have turned cheek when Trent fucked with my hog. Had I ignored it, he wouldn't have caused a scene in the conference room, setting off Cynthia."

"Stop. This is no one's fault but Cynthia's." I lift his chin with my fingers, pressing my lips to his. It feels good, not enough to take the edge off, but a brief reprieve. I lean into him, searching for more comfort.

Chase deepens the kiss, his hands holding my head in place to avoid hurting me. "Are you in pain?"

"A little," I admit. "Some ibuprofen, and I'll be fine." Not true. I need him.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here to stop it from happening."

"The only way you could have stopped Cynthia is if you had the gift of foresight. No one expected her to assault me in the bathroom."

"Why would she?"

I recap the conversation Cynthia and I had leading to the attack, stating she didn't believe I was here with good intentions for the audit, but to steal Trent back.

Chase clenches his jaw. He glances over his shoulder at Punk. "How much of your altercation with Trent did Cynthia witness?"

“Most of it.” Punk pauses, rubbing the back of his neck. “The woman has been obsessed with Simone’s movements since we started this case, constantly walking past the conference room to peer in on her. Approaching her at the copy machine when she thinks I’m not watching. Her stalking behavior has increased with Trent’s increased interest in spending time with Simone. It’s all connected. I’m sorry, I didn’t sweep the bathroom before letting Simone enter alone. I’m fucking angry with myself.”

“It’s not your fault,” Chase and I say in unison.

“Sure as hell feels like it,” Punk grumbles, with a downturned mouth.

“Stop,” I cough, rubbing at my sore throat. “I’m the one who went against protocol. You tried, and I pushed you out of the way. From now on, I won’t interfere with your security procedure, and I’ll be more vigilant about my surroundings.”

“And I’ll be connected at your hip,” Punk pledges.

Internally, I groan. All I need is more Punk and me time when we barely tolerate each other as is.

“Do you want me to take you to the emergency room to have your throat examined?” Chase asks, his concerned gaze holding mine.

There’s only one thing I want, and it doesn’t involve a doctor, unless it’s some kind of role play.

My throat may hurt like a *sonofabitch*, but I’m wound tight. I’m desperate for a release to relax me and melt away my anxiety. The release only Chase can provide when he demands my submission and takes away the burden of my decision making.

As I stare at him, I shake my head and lick my lips. “I don’t need a doctor. I need you.”

Chase blinks once, twice, before he understands what I’m implying. With his eyes never leaving my face, he unclips the SUV keys from his tactical belt and throws them at Punk. His brother catches them in the air, his eyebrow raised.

“You and Butch can head out. I’ll stay here with Simone until she’s steady enough to walk.”

“How will you guys get back to the hotel?” Butch asks.

“We’ll call an Uber or something. Don’t worry about us.”

Punk purses his lips. “Just don’t have her walk the mile back if she’s unsteady, okay?”

My mouth falls open. Am I hallucinating? Did Cynthia cut the oxygen off to my brain when she attempted to strangle me? It sounds like Punk is concerned for me.

I almost tell him he’s being sweet before he opens his mouth. “I don’t want to hear her complain tomorrow about her feet aching after walking back in her stupid heels.”

My hands clench into fists. It’s better than swinging out to clobber the moron. On wobbly legs, I stand, pointing at the doorway. “Leave, Moron.”

Punk raises his hands in surrender, snickering as he heads for the exit with Butch. “We’re going, we’re going.”

With the guys gone, Chase does a swift sweep on the upper floor, checking for any remaining staff. He returns with a bounce in his swagger, his long strides eating up the distance between us. His lust-laden eyes sweep over my needy body.

“All clear for me to wreck and ravage your flushed little pussy,” he drawls in a low timbre.

Instinctually, I step back. But Chase keeps pursuing me until I’ve walked myself backward against the glass conference table.

Heat pools deep inside of me, anticipating what fun we’ll do next.

Toe-to-toe, our breaths mingle until his air becomes mine, and mine his. I want to kiss him, feel his lips on mine, controlled and forceful.

“Please kiss me, Chase.”

He presses a finger to my lips before wrapping his hand around the back of my neck. “Nu-uh. Don’t be commanding

me what to do. That's my job, and I'm gonna do a lot more than kiss you." His mouth descends on mine, powerful and molten. He takes and takes, holding me by the nape of my neck as he plunders my mouth. My fingers tangle in his hair, trapping him in place. And I give back, molding my lips to his, meeting his aggression with my own.

After what seems to be an endless kiss, Chase is the first to break contact, yanking his mouth from mine. We both pant, clinging to each other like we're afraid the other might slip through our grip.

With steady hands, Chase lifts me behind my thighs and sets my bottom down on the table. My breath hitches when he runs his hands up my calves, slowly spreading my legs apart. He doesn't stop until my feet are resting on the armrests of the chairs that bookend us. My pencil skirt bunches high around my waist, giving him access to my most intimate parts.

Chase steps back, drinking me in like I'm the finest bourbon. Even though my top half is completely covered and my lace panties cover my sex, sitting spread eagle on this cold table in the middle of a vacant office building, I feel completely exposed under his fiery gaze, like he can see who I am on the inside.

"You're beautiful. Sexiest woman I've ever seen. The only one I want. Look at you sitting there patiently like a good girl. Waiting for me to dip my dick inside your tight, wet heat."

This man is going to make me come with only his words if he continues with the dirty talk.

Leisurely, he steps forward, taking his sweet ass time as his eyes hold mine. He creeps his fingers up my thighs, curling around the elastic waistband of my panties. A shiver ripples through my body, making Chase grin.

"Up," he commands.

My ass lifts from the table without a thought, allowing him to slide my panties down my legs, leaving a wet path down my thighs to broadcast my shameless want.

A deep, bassy groan of approval rumbles from him. “You’re fucking perfection.”

I practically preen from his praise, whimpering with need. My body is more than ready to accept him, to be impaled on his shaft.

Things are bound to pick up pace with him, seeing how much I’m aching for him. But he hasn’t made a move to speed things along. Where’s my caveman when I need him?

Still, I expect him to cage me in, lay a claiming kiss on me, anything but what he does.

He holds my stare as he sinks to the floor on his knees. “Eyes on me. Don’t you dare look away. You’ll watch me worship you. I want to be all you see when you explode on my tongue.”

“Chase,” I whine, my voice sounding pathetically helpless. If he doesn’t release some of my tension quick, I’ll take things into my own hands. And I’d much rather receive an orgasm from him.

“Don’t worry, Numbers. I’ll take good care of you.” His tongue swipes out with the barest of contact on the tip of my clit.

Unable to help myself, my head falls back on a loud moan.

He smacks the inside of my thigh, and I squeal from pleasure and pain.

“Eyes on me, or I’ll smack this pretty pussy next.”

“I’m sorry,” I plead on a pant. “I’ll be good, I promise.”

“That’s right, dirty girl. You behave for your man.” He uses the broadside of his tongue, dragging from my weeping pussy to my clit.

Again, my eyes shut on their own accord, too distracted by the pleasure.

“Naughty, brat.”

The crack of his hand contacting my sex followed by the delightful sting throws me over the edge into orgasmic bliss.

“I’m coming!” I scream hoarsely.

Chase shoves his face against my pussy, slurping my arousal and flicking my clit to make my orgasm continue longer than normal. My fingers claw into his hair, holding him tight against me to make the experience last. He doesn’t stop, doesn’t slow his unrelenting pace until he’s wrung every drop of pleasure from me.

Before rising to his full height, Chase’s lips press to my sex once more with a tender parting kiss, making my body shiver violently with new arousal.

Exhausted, I slump against the table, sucking precious air into my lungs. My heart continues to hammer in my chest, full of need and adoration for my biker.

The heaving of my chest catches Chase’s attention. He fists my blouse by the collar, yanking downward. The thin fabric shreds without effort, parting to expose my bra-covered breasts.

“Chase!” He’s lucky my blazer buttons shut, or I’d have been tempted to pummel him in his thick head.

He palms my breasts with his hands, squeezing and kneading. Forgetting my irritation, I groan low in my throat at his harsh touch, loving his aggressiveness.

“These tits should be illegal.” He tugs down on each of the cups on my bra, pushing my already large breasts upward like the world’s best pushup bra.

Licking his lips, Chase sucks one of my nipples into his mouth with a hard pull. On a cry of ecstasy, I arch my back upward, pushing my breast further into his mouth. The softness of his tongue swirling around my nipple contradicts the sting of his teeth nipping at my tender flesh. He licks and sucks noisily, only to release my nipple with a loud pop before attacking my other breast in the same manner—rough and unrelenting, exactly like Chase.

Back and forth he runs his hands, lips, and tongue over my breasts, covering me in love bites and his saliva. I’m a

withering mess of pleasure as heat blooms between my legs. God, I ache for this man.

“Please tell me you want more than sucking my chest.”

Having poked the beast, Chase snarls, releasing my boob from his mouth with a trail of wetness clinging to my oversensitized skin. His heated stare holds mine hostage as his shirt-covered broad chest heaves against my abused breasts.

His face is inches from mine, close enough for me to smell the heady scent of my arousal still clinging to his short facial hair. “Tell me what you need, greedy woman?”

“I need you to give me your fat dick,” I pant, unabashed, fumbling with his belt. “I need you to distract me, stop me from thinking about the last few days. Take the lead. I need you to own me.”

A guttural, raw growl rips from Chase’s lungs, like I’ve said the magic words to motivate him into action. His hands join mine, tugging on his pants’ button and zipper. I shove his jeans and boxer briefs down his muscled thighs, freeing his rock-hard cock, already dripping with precum.

Widening my legs to accept him, I’m amazed when Chase doesn’t plow right into me. Instead, he grabs my forearms, yanking me to my feet. I squeak when he spins me to face the table, one large hand clutched at my shoulder, while the other grips my hip.

Roughly, Chase bends me over the table. Not enough to hurt me, but enough to demonstrate he’s in charge. The cold, glass surface has my nipples pebbling into hard diamonds, adding another layer of stimulation to my already heightened libido.

Removing his hand from my shoulder, he turns my head sideways, pressing my cheek flat against the table. I fog the chilly glass with my hot breath coming out in little pants of exhilaration.

My wrists are pulled behind my back, gathered in one of Chase’s larger ones, restraining me. I sag against the table,

relieved Chase has removed my burden for control. At his mercy, I'm beyond willing to follow his lead. I crave it.

"Please, please, please," I chant, pushing my ass out toward his pelvis.

Smack. A small gasp spills past my lips from the exquisite sting of his spank. No doubt he left a handprint on my ass. But I don't care. I need more and wiggle my hips to encourage him to do it again.

Smack. He runs his calloused hand over my sore bottom, palming my thick cheek. "You like that, don't you, brat?"

"Yes," I groan. "Yes, Chase, yes. I need this from you."

He chuckles darkly, bending over me to whisper in my ear. "The things I want to do this ass."

I stiffen, unsure if I'm willing to go there tonight.

"Easy, Numbers. Another night," he murmurs softly, his hand moving from my bottom to slide between the wetness of my lips. "Fucking soaked."

"For you," I emphasize, drilling it home I'm his.

Chase moans the most ovary-quivering sound, sending an instant gush of wetness around the lips of my sex. There's something erotic about a man barely clinging on. He pulls his fingers away from between my legs, sucking them noisily into his mouth.

"You taste like mine."

Not caring how needy I sound, I plead in a shrill voice, "I'm yours, I'm yours. Fill me. Bury your cock inside my—"

My voice dies when he shoves his shaft deep within my pussy. The force of his thrust shoves me forward. The wetness he left on my breasts earlier makes a cross between a *squelch* and *squeal* as my skin drags against the glass.

Having prepped me well, Chase doesn't need to give me time to adjust to him. He pulls all the way out before plunging back inside, rotating his hips to hit all the hidden pleasure

areas within me. He repeats the process three more times before he quickens his pace, thrusting mercilessly into me.

A keening cry rips from my lungs as pleasure courses through my veins like a string of dynamite on fire, my orgasm racing toward detonation.

Chase is swept away in the pleasure as much as I am. His grip on my wrists tightens a degree, pushing into my back to hold my body in place as he spears me harder. His free hand pushes gently on my head, another anchor point to keep me pinned under him.

He fucks me with a level of earnest I've yet seen. He fucks me into the table like a man possessed. He fucks me in a way only he can.

Owning me, singeing me, making me irretrievably his.

Our groans fall in sync with the wet, slopping sounds coming from below our hips. They echo around the glass room, sounding louder than what it truly is but adding to the sexual experience like an erotic soundtrack.

My insides quiver, fighting against the hard plunge and forceful withdrawal of his thick cock. Warmth pools deep in my cells, pulsing erratically the closer I approach climax. "Chase," I whimper. "Please. I want to come."

"Fuck," he moans in a gravelly rasp. "You're so pretty when you beg to come. Do it. Cream on my cock like a good girl."

Unaware I needed his permission, my body responds like the strike of a match. Flames envelop me, propelling my orgasm to the surface at neck-breaking speed. I explode, gushing around Chase's dick and down my thighs.

"CHASE!" I scream, convulsing against the table and around his hard length.

A primal growl breaks through the ringing in my ears. Chase pulls free, releasing his hold on me. Rough hands grab me, flipping me onto my back before yanking me to my feet.

I stumble, but Chase has a firm hold on me. He shoves me to the ground in front of him, forcing my chin up with his hand. “Open your brat mouth before I hose your designer suit.”

My mouth falls open, wantonly ready to accept him. His fingers lace into my hair to hold me still as he pushes his glistening cock into my waiting mouth. I taste the sharp flavor of arousal clinging to his shaft, mixing with the salty taste of his precum. My tongue rubs frantically against the thick vein under his length, toying with his piercings and eager to tip him over the edge into pure bliss.

“Look at me,” Chase groans, his voice pitching higher.

My eyes immediately obey, staring up at him, trying to express my feelings to him with a simple, submissive look of affection.

Sensing he’s close, I swallow as much of him as I can, hollowing my cheeks and sucking—hard.

Chase’s head falls back, his gurgled moan ricocheting around the acoustic room as he shoots his load down my throat.

“Swallow,” he chokes on a gulp of air, holding my head down on his dick. “Every damn drop.”

And I do. I drink him down, my tongue wrapping around his cock to milk him dry.

A fine tremor rolls through his body as my movements draw out his pleasure.

When the last drop of his release is swallowed, Chase pulls free from my mouth with a wet smack. I look up at him, licking my lips to capture the last taste of him.

Tracking my lips, Chase lifts me under my arms to my unsteady feet. He pushes me until my butt rests against the conference table again and attacks my mouth with his own. His kiss slows from frantic to leisurely within a few heated seconds, his tongue caressing mine in a sensual dance.

“You taste like mine,” I pant between kisses, repeating his earlier words.

Chase smiles tenderly as he presses his forehead to mine. “I love you, Simone.”

My heart gallops. He said the words aloud, conscious and alert.

He loves me. Me! Sass and all.

Before I can say them back, he places a soft kiss on my bruised lips. “Don’t say it back because I said it first. You say it when the moment is right for you, and not because you feel obligated to repeat it.”

I want to tell him it’s not an obligation, that I feel the same for him, but our moment ends when I hear the distinct sound of a door squeaking open. “Oh, my God. Were we not alone?”

Chase yanks his pants up, fastening his belt buckle. “We were alone, but I’ll go check again. Get sorted, and I’ll handle the problem if there is one.”

When Chase marches out of the room, heading to where he heard the sound, I quickly tug down my pencil shirt. I fumble with the cups of my bra, pushing the girls back into their holding cells, before buttoning my blazer shut across my chest to hide my now lack of blouse.

My heart is in my throat when Chase returns. “Anything?”

He shakes his head. “Probably the building making noises.”

I chew on the inside of my cheek, my face flushing with the possibility of being caught. How humiliating it would be to face whoever saw us tomorrow or have our team fired from the investigation for lack of decency.

“Are you sure no one’s creeping anywhere?”

Chase chuckles, leaning in to kiss my burning cheeks. “Doubtful. I was thorough when I did my initial sweep, and again now. We’re alone, Numbers.”

A long, winded sigh leaves my lungs.

Chase pops my relaxed bubble when he says, “But if there was someone, we gave them one hell of a show.”

I swat his chest. “Stop teasing.”

His deep laugh fills the space. He slings an arm around my shoulder, escorting us from the room. “You’re cute when you’re paranoid. Come on. Let’s head back to the hotel, where I can make you scream all you want without worrying.”

CHAPTER FORTY- THREE

Shit. Shit. Shit.

I internally chide myself for stupidly letting my emotions get the best of me. With how on edge I've been with Simone being in proximity to Trent, it was only a matter of time before I lost my cool. And boy, did I lose it.

A normal person might get snippy or say some off-colored remarks to the person they're enraged with. But I had to strangle the bitch. My behavior was beyond acceptable. It was erratic. If I'm not careful, I'm going to land myself in jail.

Though her voice was barely above a choked hiss, Simone's threat of police involvement was sound. I can't afford to be arrested for assault charges. I'm still dumping the funds I stole from the firm, and I need one more day to make sure all the funds have transferred into the new account without it being traced back to me.

Trying not to trip in my heels, I hurry down the back stairwell to the first level. I have to find Trent, to warn him of what I've done and the fallout it could bring.

As I suspected, I find Trent poking around in the conference room where Mercy Ravens' security works. Both men from the security team are gone for the evening, giving Trent the opportunity to see how much they've uncovered.

"Fuck," he mutters, running his hands through his hair.

"Trent," I cry, running to his side. I wrap my arms around him, burying my face into his neck as I blubber.

“Not now, Cynthia,” he growls, shoving me aside. “Can’t you see I’m busy?”

He jabs the keys of one of the crew’s laptops, but nothing appears on the computer monitors. Again, he curses, moving on to the next laptop, only to discover it, too, doesn’t turn on. “How the hell am I supposed to get into their computers if they keep them locked tighter than a damn penitentiary?”

“Trent, forget about the audit for a second. I’m in trouble.”

He snorts, blowing me off. “No shit you’re in trouble, and you could drag me down with you. Did you listen to me for once and dump the money?”

“I’m working on it, but I have another problem.”

Trent moves around the conference table to where the team’s larger computer system is sitting. He presses button after button, with no results.

When Trent shows no care for my current dilemma, I sob and say, “I attacked Simone.”

Trent’s head rears back, his mouth falling open. His face instantly transforms from one of shock to one of rage. He stomps toward me, his face darkening as the blood pumps to the surface of his skin. “You did what?!”

Alarmed by his anger, I involuntarily take a step back. But Trent keeps coming toward me, forcing my feet to backtrack until my back hits the wall. “Trent, please.”

His fists clench at his sides. “Did you hurt her?”

I flinch when he slaps the wall by the side of my head. “Answer the fucking question, Cynthia! Did you hurt Simone?”

“I don’t know,” I answer on a cry. “Maybe a little? She got away and had her guard dog restrain me. I didn’t stick around long enough to examine her too closely after she threatened to report me to the police if I tried anything again.”

Anger radiates from Trent like heat waves on asphalt. His chest rises and falls with increasing speed. “You’re lucky it was her bodyguard who got to you first.”

Pain like no other sweeps throughout my soul. Trent couldn't have hurt me more than if he reached inside my chest and ripped my heart from my body. Again, he's favoring Simone.

I'm losing him. He only cares about his ex and could not care less what the punk did to me.

“Why the hell would you attack her, Cynthia? What has she done to you? For fuck's sake, you've put our careers on the line again.”

“Everything!” Angry, I push Trent away to give me breathing room. “She ruins everything. Always the favorite. Always praised. Always getting her way.”

Trent irritably shakes his head. “Christ, you're a jealous cunt.”

“Excuse me?! How can you talk to me like this? She's literally trying to steal you right out from under me, and you accuse me of being jealous?”

“Will you get a grip? Simone isn't trying to take me from you.”

“But you want her.”

There. The dreaded words are finally out. How Trent responds will be the truth.

As if the words pain him, Trent closes his eyes before turning his back on me. “It's always been her.”

Clutching my chest to protect my tattered heart, I lean against the wall, slowly sinking to the floor. My suspicions are confirmed. Trent loves Simone, and I was only a placeholder until she came back to him.

No. This isn't how this is supposed to go. Trent and I are meant to be. Our love story is the only one that matters. Simone is the bad guy, trying to come between us. I only need to make Trent see how much more I love him. To show him I'm the one who'll always have his back.

How does that Stephen Stills song go? *“If you can't be with the one you love, honey, love the one you're with.”*

“They’re aware of the Oldani file,” I blurt.

Trent freezes. He slowly turns back to me, his eyes wide with horror. “How do you know about the Oldani file? You agreed to stay out of my clients’ accounts.”

I sniffle, standing back up on my shaky legs. Yes, part of our arrangement was that I wouldn’t meddle in his affairs, but it only made me curious as to what Trent was up to.

“I came across your client’s file when I was looking for potential accounts to pilfer money from. There were so many zeros behind that initial number. It was tempting. But I saw you were the investment accountant assigned to the client and left it alone. I didn’t want to mess with your work when you brought in the top clientele to the firm. I have never wanted to jeopardize your career.”

“And you’re lucky you never did,” he snarls, getting into my personal space. “The account is tied to one of the most nefarious organized crime families in the country. Your life would have been forfeit. What did you all see in that file?”

I gulp but keep my mouth shut. I won’t admit to knowing more than what I’ve revealed. Trent will never know I looked deep into the account before resisting temptation. It’s not important what Trent has gotten involved with. The only thing that matters is keeping him with me.

“Nothing,” I breathe. “I saw your name assigned to the client and stopped there.”

His hazel eyes swivel between mine, seeking the truth. Whatever he sees, it must be convincing. He sighs, backing away from me. “Did they say anything to you about the file?”

“No. Simone must have come across some discrepancies, or something, in the previous year’s file and wanted to cross-reference the current year’s file. She wasn’t exactly forthcoming with why she needed the information.”

Trent watches me with a narrowed gaze, nodding for me to continue.

“I tried to lead her away from the file by making her start at the front and work her way back—”

“Why would you try to stop her from finding the file?” he questions me, his stare cold.

This is thin ice I’m walking on. I need to be careful about how I answer. I don’t want to reveal knowing more about the Oldani account than I should. “I knew it was your client, and I didn’t want her giving you hell if she found an error. You know how she’s a stickler for precision. God forbid there be a cent missing or a grammatical typo. I tried to distract her by asking questions about you.”

“About me?”

“Yes. I’ve seen the text messages, Trent. I downloaded your call history. I wanted to know why you were reaching out to her so much.”

Trent’s nostrils flare. He’s probably enraged I invaded his privacy, but I won’t apologize for it.

Before he can scold me for snooping, I quickly add, “I thought if I could pester her enough, she’d either get fed up and leave or be too distracted to find the file, giving me time to take it instead.”

“Did she find the file?”

“Yes. Simone scanned it and saw something that sparked her interest. She and her henchman ran to their team with it.”

Trent runs a trembling hand through his hair. “Fuck. When did this happen?”

“Yesterday, late afternoon.”

“And you didn’t mention it until now?” he thunders, making me shake in my heels.

“A lot happened yesterday. I’m sorry if it slipped my mind. I wasn’t exactly thinking clearly, wondering if you were with her while I waited at home for you.”

Muttering curses under his breath, Trent paces the room. His hands grip his head, his face strained with worry. With a lump the size of a baseball in my throat, I stay quiet, watching my lover panic.

After what seems like an eternity, Trent straightens with an odd calmness. “It appears we both need time on our side.”

“You said you couldn’t buy me more than another day.”

“I have a backup plan.”

A flare of annoyance surges inside me. “A backup plan? You had a backup plan, and you didn’t want to use it for me when I was asking for your help yesterday?”

“Shut up,” he snaps. “Not everything is about you, Cynthia. This plan is a backup for a reason. It’s going to send the whole firm into a frenzy when all hell breaks loose.”

He strides to the door. I automatically follow.

“No.” He halts me, holding his hand up between us. “You stay here. Keep watch for anyone coming and going. It may be late, but that doesn’t mean we’re the only ones here. We can’t have anyone tying this back to us. I need to go to my office and get something.”

I nod, not fully understanding what Trent has planned, and too worried to ask. He leaves me alone in the conference room, waiting.

Time crawls by. Five minutes turn into ten, then fifteen. A full thirty minutes pass before Trent returns, looking redder in the face than when he left. He aggressively loosens his tie, popping the top button of his shirt. His chest rises and falls as he comes to lean forward on the conference table, his palms flat on the surface.

Zoned out, Trent stares at the glass surface.

Did something happen on his way to his office? Something to upset Trent more than I already have?

Hesitantly, I hedge, “Is everything okay?”

“No,” he admits in a biting tone. Instead of elaborating on what’s eating at him, Trent pulls out what looks like a micro flash drive from inside his suit coat. “But it will be.”

“What is it?”

“Security.”

“What exactly will it do?”

He sighs, annoyed by my relentless questioning. “It’s malware.”

My jaw drops. “Where did you get it?”

“What does it matter where I got it? I have it, and it’s all we’ve got to help us.”

I eye the flash drive before looking at Trent. Licking my dry lips, I bravely ask, “Why do you have it?”

Trent is silent for a moment. His jaw tics like he’s contemplating answering my question. “When you told me you were pilfering money, I reached out to a guy on the dark web who creates software viruses for poor suckers like me. I knew your thieving could backfire and screw everything up.”

Stepping around me, he goes to the larger of the computers set up in the room. He inserts the flash drive into the computer before shooing me away. “Head out the back way. If you run into anyone, keep your head down and avoid communication. Don’t stick around to talk. Don’t engage.”

“And you? What are you going to do?”

“I’ll take the front exit.”

“But you’re more likely to be seen,” I rasp, my voice laced with concern.

A tight smile forms on his face. “Don’t say I never cared.”

A sob bubbles up from my lungs, optimism gripping my heart.

“One more thing.” Trent bends to one knee.

For a joyful moment, I hold my breath, as it looks like he’s about to propose. I’ve seen the ring in his top drawer, the one he had since the beginning of our relationship, a ring never meant for me. It’s been missing the past week. Could he have pawned it to use the money to get me a ring instead?

Instead of pulling out a ring, Trent pulls out his pistol from his ankle harness. He hands me the pocket-sized Beretta. “Take it. In case you need to make an emergency getaway.”

My hand trembles as I take the small weapon into my possession. I knew Trent had a handgun, but he always kept it under lock and key at home. “Why is this on you?”

“After what happened this morning on my bike route, I felt it necessary to be armed at all times.”

Shaking, I put the tiny handgun into the waistband of my slacks, concealing it under my suit jacket. I swallow the emotions clogging my throat as I stare at the man I love doing what he must.

“I could kill them for what those bastards did to you.”

Trent gives me a tired smile, ushering me to the door. “I know. Now get out of here.”

“We’re good? You still want us to be together?”

“There isn’t going to be an ‘us’ if you don’t move your ass. Each second you waste is another second we risk getting caught,” he clips icily. “You need to go—*now*.”

Complying, I rush to the door, roughly swinging it open. It hits the wall in my haste.

Shit. Hopefully, no one heard the bang. It would be one more thing for Trent to reprimand me for.

Speed walking toward the back exit, my heart erratically pounds in my chest. I hold the air in my lungs when I spot two members of the cleaning crew emptying waste receptacles into a janitorial pushcart.

My first instinct is to hide, but I don’t get a chance before one custodian spots me.

“Evening,” he says in a rough but friendly voice.

Trent’s words echo in my mind: *Don’t stick around to talk. Don’t engage.*

It seems rude, but I don’t reply, ducking my head to conceal my face from their view. I walk briskly past the custodians like my feet are on fire, feeling their eyes on me all the way to the exit. I don’t stop walking until I reach my car.

Not wasting a second, I hop in, turn over the engine, and whizz out of the parking lot, leaving tire marks in my wake.

CHAPTER FORTY- FOUR

After a solid night's rest, our team returns to the firm, bright and early. I'm eager to get moving on the case, but not enough to part from Simone yet. With her warm hand intertwined with mine, she follows me and Butch into our conference room. Punk trails behind, his eyes sweeping our surroundings.

"We should head up, Simone," Punk suggests as he checks the time on his watch.

"Don't be such a buzz kill," I tell my brother. "Stick around a while."

"We may as well," Simone says airily, sinking into the seat beside mine, right where she belongs. "I won't be able to do much until Cynthia arrives. I need her to give me access to the file room."

My molars grind together hearing that contemptible woman's name. "Can't believe I'm going to say this, but I'd rather Trent let you into the file room."

"I second that," Punk agrees, with an edge in his tone. "Cynthia shouldn't be anywhere near you."

Simone runs a shaky hand through her straight hair, like she's attempting to brush off the events of yesterday. "Trent needs to remain with our tech team. I can request someone other than Cynthia, but the odds of the firm handing over a member of document control when they're still conducting their own internal audit aren't high. It is what it is."

Flustered, I turn my neck to the side. The vertebrae pop under the pressure. I silently withdraw my pocket knife from the sheath attached to my belt. Simone's eyes widen when I show it to her. I demonstrate how to open and close the knife before handing it to her.

She frowns, hesitantly taking the weapon from me. "What is this for?"

"Protection," I say matter-of-factly. "It's small enough to keep in your blazer pocket."

She shakes her head, trying to return the knife. "There's no reason for me to have this."

"The woman assaulted you in a bathroom not even twelve hours ago," Punk snips. "You take the knife and keep it close."

Thank you, Punk. Glad my brother has my back.

With a sigh, Simone slips the pocket knife into the pocket of her blazer. "There. Are you happy, caveman?"

"Not as happy as I'll be when you give me some sugar."

Punk makes a gagging noise. We laugh before she leans in, giving me a proper kiss.

It feels like a crime pulling away from my woman's sweet mouth, but work awaits. I turn on my computer, while Butch does the same with his. The room hums with the buzz of the equipment's internal fans. I get to my feet and cross the room, hitting the buttons on our larger equipment. The machines turn over, thrumming to life when a harsh siren sounds off on all our computers.

Butch and I connect eyes from across the room before we spring into action. I yank the plug from the main computer, while Butch runs to read the alert on his monitor.

"Not good, Chase. We have a virus."

"Fuck," I race around the table toward my computer. Punk and Simone scramble out of my space. I dive into my seat, my fingers flying across my keyboard before I'm seated comfortably to tackle the problem.

As fast as I put up roadblocks to stop the virus from digging deeper into the system, the virus tunnels as fast, causing massive amounts of damage to our internal hardware and the firm's intranet.

"How's it looking on your end, Butch?"

"Fucking awful," he grits through his teeth, his eyes and fingers never leaving his computer. "I can't get ahead of the damn parasite."

"Me neither."

"What can I do?" Punk asks beside me.

"Go around the computers. Look for anything suspicious. Someone was tampering with our equipment, because this shit certainly didn't come from our end of the system."

Punk moves to the computer beside mine, his fingers running over all the surfaces.

"What are you doing?" Simone asks Punk.

"Checking the ports to see if anyone hooked anything up to the equipment," he answers before moving on to the next computer.

Flustered, I let loose a string of curses as I work, chasing after the virus. My eyes are dry from trying not to blink in an attempt not to miss anything important crossing my screen.

As I work, I feel the warm grip of Simone's hands on my shoulders. "You got this." She can't help at the moment, but her presence and encouragement spur me on.

Sweat builds on my brow as my fingers pick up the pace. My heart beats fitfully inside my chest, worried our team inadvertently let a virus loose into their software. It will be a miracle if I don't suffer a heart attack from this experience.

"The virus hasn't been able to penetrate through any of our system's security walls yet, but it's causing havoc to the firm's security system," Butch hollers from across the room.

"What about the added security we installed when we first started the case?" I ask, desperate for anything to give us some

reprieve.

“Negative. Our shields held it off for a while, but it’s tunneled through the barriers like Swiss cheese and webbed out.”

Shit. This is bad.

“Do we have backup on the entire system?” Butch asks me.

“From when we shut down last night, yes. It’s probably the only thing that’s going to save our asses. But any business after we finish will be corrupted.”

“Chase!” Punk calls from the opposite end of the room. “I think I found something.”

“Describe it to me,” I order him, refusing to look away from my computer.

“Looks like a micro flash drive in the main computer.”

Makes sense to corrupt the biggest system. It’s what I’d do if I wanted to plant a software bug.

A controversial idea pops in my head. It’s a risk in its own right, but it should slow the virus if it doesn’t stop it altogether.

Sliding my chair down to the next computer, I holler, “Plug the main system back in when I tell you, Punk, and turn it on.”

“Has the alarm gone to your head, Chase?!” Butch chastises me. “You’re going to push the malware faster.”

“Gotta trust me, bro.” My fingers type out a code system unlike any I’ve drafted before. Butch isn’t wrong to question if I’ve fallen off my rocker. Creating something to do damage without testing the exact impact it could have is unwise.

But we’re out of options, and what we’re currently doing is not sustainable.

I hastily enter my counterbalance and yell at Punk, “Now!”

Punk plugs in the system and hits the power button. The super computer rumbles to life. I hold my breath, watching the

computer monitor in front of me. The damaged code rolling across the screen stops.

Nobody says a thing as we wait for the planted virus to overcome my Trojan. But it doesn't continue. My malware worked.

Butch runs his hands over his head, blowing out a long breath. "Fucking hell. That was close."

"We're not out of the park yet. Our Trojan stalled the virus, but we need to remove it and assess the damage," I instruct him. "At least we stopped the damage before it got worse."

I lean my head back in my seat, turning to look at Simone. She looks like my salvation. "Come here, Numbers. I need your touch."

With a grace only Simone has, she sashays to my side. She lays a steady hand on my shoulder, the other one running through my long hair, helping reduce the tension in my neck and shoulders. I place my hand over hers on my shoulder, relaxing into her gentle touch.

All of us are coming down from the high when Trent enters the room. His eyes sweep over us, taking in our irritated mood. "Everything okay?"

I grit my teeth. "No. Everything is far from okay." I release Simone and turn in my chair to face Simone's ex. "You have a saboteur in your ranks."

His brows pull together on his orange head. "Huh? What are you talking about?" He looks to Simone for an answer—always focused on my woman.

"Don't you look at her," I snap. "I'm talking to you."

"Chase," Simone warns me firmly. "I know you're angry, but try to calm down. Trent's simply asking a question—it's his job as liaison to ask what's happening."

My temper is steadily climbing with this asshole present around my woman after I told him to keep his distance the day before. No, I shouldn't be biting the dude's head off for asking what's happening regarding the case. And Simone is right to

tell me to ease up with the spokesperson for our clients. Yet, it pisses me off hearing my woman defend her ex.

“Someone in this company attempted to sabotage the main servers and fuck us over, Numbers,” I grit through my teeth before returning my attention to Trent. I narrow my eyes on the prick. “Have any idea who’d go to such lengths to fuck with me and my team?”

Trent blinks rapidly, looking stupidly surprised. “Why would someone do that?”

My fingers drum over the armrest of my chair, my patience dwindling. “Why do you think? Because we got too close to discovering who’s behind the thieving.”

“Shit,” Trent whispers, running a hand over his freshly shaved face. “How bad is the damage?”

“Nothing I can’t repair,” I say, crossing my arms.

Trent raises his brows. “Really?”

Is this jackass doubting my ability? Or is he surprised I can fix the situation?

“It’ll take time, but I’ll manage. In the meantime, you’ll need to inform your superiors the company servers will be out of order and explain why. They need to be made aware the case involves a member from their firm.”

“And how do you know this latest incident involves a member of the firm?” Trent argues. “I find it difficult to believe such a salacious lie. My co-workers are not crooks. An outside source is more likely. Where’s your proof of validating this ridiculous theory?”

Punk holds up the micro flash drive. “The idiot left behind a trinket. Hard for an outsider to plant something inside the company without having direct access to the building.”

“The culprit came after we left for the evening, inserting the flash drive into the main computer. When we turned on our equipment, the micro drive was activated, releasing a virus into the servers,” I explain.

Trent eyes the flash drive, licking his lips. “I see. Do you know who’s responsible for planting the virus?”

“Not yet. But we will,” Butch vows from his workstation, his attention focused on his monitor.

“And...this person, the one who planted the bug, do you believe they’re responsible for the missing funds as well?” Trent hedges, his tone cautious.

“It’s a safe assumption the two are connected.”

Trent stares at the ground, lost in thought. He sighs, his shoulders sagging. “The firm isn’t going to be happy about shutting business down for the day. I’ll explain it’s outside of your control. What should I say when they ask who’s responsible?”

I turn my chair around to face my computer, typing out a code for a new firewall. “Tell them I’ll have an answer for them soon.”

“But how?” Trent demands, an edge in his voice. “How will you determine who’s behind this?”

I pause my typing, cocking my head. Is Trent nervous? Is he worried about how his superiors will handle the bad news?

Intrigued, I side-eye Simone. She, too, is examining Trent inquisitively. Something’s off about the guy, but I’m not sure why he’s uneasy.

Informing Trent I’ll be checking the camera feeds once I’ve handled the virus is something I hesitate sharing. Instead, I say, “I have my ways.”

CHAPTER FORTY- FIVE

I spent the rest of Friday helping Chase and Butch double-check areas in the system that may have been compromised from the virus. A lot of what I did was pull client's files and cross-reference what was in the system. Luckily, what we were checking was easy enough without needing Cynthia's help. Trent opened the file room door for me and stationed himself in the hallway to assist both our teams. I appreciated his willingness to help us without getting Cynthia involved. He seemed as eager as us to discover who was behind stealing the funds and planting the bug.

Saturday was a repeat of Friday, with Chase and Butch successfully removing the virus. To ensure the system was safe, Chase had to remove his Trojan, with Butch ready at the computer to put another Trojan in its place in case the virus went live again. Thankfully, the system remained virus-free. Chase worked through most of the night, installing more barriers similar to what headquarters uses back home, making sure the software was military tight.

Sunday was the only day we took off from the case. After the shit week I had, I didn't want to make it worse by phoning home, but I owed my sister an update. I could only ignore her texts for so long before she'd send the motorcycle cavalry to retrieve me. There was no point in hiding the ugly from her when she asked how things were going. I confided everything and held the phone away from my ear as she screamed curse after curse. She insisted on coming to Sacramento to play interference. Fearing she'd go full Cornish Pixie on Trent and Cynthia, I tried to convince her to stay home. I hope she listens.

It's now Monday, and Mondays are always a drag. But coming back to this case after a day off is hellish, especially when our team is fried from the week before.

With the computer virus debacle behind us, Chase and Butch are returning to business as usual—tracking the missing funds. Punk is guard duty. And I'm returning to my solo project of combing through the archives.

Between my caseload and the tech team playing catch-up, we don't have enough manpower to stay on schedule, not when Chase wants to install extra firewalls to strengthen the security on our software and the firm's main servers.

The four of us sit around the conference table, spitballing ideas on how we can get ahead. I know having Cynthia off my back and Trent out of my hair would help me get through my files without added distractions. But since Trent is liaison, he won't be going anywhere. And because he's with our team, Cynthia will remain as close as she can to taunt me.

No sooner am I about to vocalize my thoughts than the evil duo enters the conference room. I groan under my breath. Chase's head snaps to me, concern furrowed in his brows.

"Good morning," Trent greets us before his eyes home in on me. A smirk plays on his lips as he takes the seat next to mine. "You look lovely as always, Simone."

Chase grinds his teeth beside me. I'd bet money he's fighting the urge to haul me into his lap. Cynthia looks equally put out, her face puckered with distaste as she takes the seat beside Trent.

Annoyed he'd say something to ruffle the feathers of me and our partners, I ignore Trent's comment, returning my attention to the conversation with the team. "Should we be calling headquarters for reinforcements if we want to stay on schedule?"

Chase opens his mouth to answer when we're interrupted by a pink-haired bombshell strutting into the room, wearing a short, skintight dress with a blazer over the top. Blazer or not,

the outfit is inappropriate for the office. Trent's tongue hanging out confirms that theory.

"Look no further. The reinforcements are here," Candy sings, with her arms spread wide to welcome us.

Punk balks. "How the hell did you get here?"

"I brought her," Ziggy answers, stepping into the room behind her. The guys rush to embrace their brother.

Excited to see a friendly face from home, I'm out of my chair and across the room, hugging Candy. She squeezes me back before releasing me to hug Butch. He smothers her in a tight embrace, before stepping back to admire Candy's appearance. His lips curl into a devilish smile. She gives him an equally naughty smirk in return.

After all our warm greetings, Chase motions for them to join us at the table. Candy smiles, circling the table to steal my vacant seat beside Trent, forcing me to sit across the table from them. I'm grateful to have an excuse not to return to my seat beside the weasel.

Trent doesn't seem to mind the changing of seats. He sits a little straighter, adjusting his tie as he side-eyes the MC beauty beside him. Cynthia crosses her arms over her chest, glaring at her boyfriend.

Glad he's not my problem anymore. What goes around comes around.

Fighting a smile, I focus on the conversation happening around the table.

"Who's managing tech at headquarters?" Chase asks.

"PT volunteered. His schedule is flexible this semester," Ziggy informs the team. "He's doing his college courses virtually, meaning he can be watch tech while in class."

"And Prez approved this?" We all like PT. He's a hard worker, trainable and intelligent. Even Atlas forgave the kid for spying on him and Jo when he was forced into the job by Lorenzo Bianchi's mob. Still, he's a college kid working on his computer science degree. Taking on tech control at

headquarters isn't something you want to leave with an amateur long-term.

“Prez wants the family back home. If it means the three of us have to work on the firm's servers, so be it. He wants this job done on time, and with positive results.”

Chase nods. “It's good to have our crew back together. The three of us will tackle the tech end of the investigation, while Simone works her magic in archives with Punk's help.”

Candy raises her hand excitedly, a devious smile playing on her full lips. “And me, too.”

“And you, too,” Chase agrees, with a wink. “Simone definitely needs your...skills.”

My eyes narrow on my biker. What exactly does he mean by Candy's *skills*?

As if she read my thoughts, Candy, not so subtly, adjusts her augmented boobs in her low-cut blazer, effectively catching Trent's attention. He's all but leering at her chest when he yelps, jumping in his seat. Rubbing at his lower leg, he scowls at Cynthia beside him. Knowing firsthand how aggressive the woman is, she probably kicked him under the table.

My eyes stretch wide as I look over at Chase. He meets my gaze, his full of delight. I grab my phone and send him a text, not wanting others to hear my question.

Did you invite Candy to distract Cynthia and Trent?

His response is fast. **Your convo with your sister sent Jo into a riot. She insisted Candy go in her place. Ordered her to raise hell and keep Cynthia away from you. Prez was pissed about what happened to you in the bathroom and agreed.**

*Oh, Jo. Always looking out for me. *And Ziggy?**

He's a bonus I didn't know about, but I'm fucking thrilled he's here. Bringing him on should help us finish the job on time.

I set down my cell, peeking at the unhappy couple quietly bickering while the rest of the crew discusses new assignment

roles.

Candy rests her elbow on the table, cheek in hand. She smiles tauntingly at Cynthia. The woman is nothing but relentless when she has a target in her sights. Cynthia seethes in her seat, shooting her an occasional daggered glare while chastising Trent's wandering gaze.

I'm sure Jo had her reasons for sending Candy out of all the MC women, but I'm not sure Jo's aware of what she's unleashed. Claws are sure to come out before this case is over.

An hour later, I'm alone in the conference room, with Punk standing guard in the threshold. I take a moment to call my sister and ask what the hell she was thinking.

She answers on the first ring, construction noises clattering around in the background from where she's working. "What's up?"

"Jesus, Jo! I thought you were venting when you said I needed interference on the job."

"Ah. The cavalry has arrived, I see. Wonderful."

"Jo, you sent Candy," I grumble, glancing out of the conference room, where I spy Candy trailing after Cynthia like a shark stalking a surfer. In less than an hour, she's drilled Cynthia on company policy and asked for a tour, setting Cynthia off from the start.

"Yup," she states, popping the "p" with amusement in her tone. "How's the mayhem going?"

Candy calls out to Cynthia. My ex-boss turns around to face her new foe. It's hard to hear what Candy is saying, but it sounds like she's asking for coffee.

Correction: she's demanding coffee, and for Cynthia to fetch it—something Cynthia would no doubt consider beneath her stature.

"The woman is messing with Cynthia hardcore."

Jo giggles deviously on the other end of the line. “Good. Nobody fucks with my sister. About time the bitch gets a taste of her own medicine. There’s no one who can get under someone’s skin like Candy—it’s the gift of bitch-hood. If it makes you feel better, Candy wanted to. She said, ‘Hell, yeah,’ without hesitation. With her meddling, you should be able to sort out the pilfering operation.”

There’s a screech of protest from the hallway.

“Ha! Catfight. Love it,” Punk chuckles, leaning against the doorframe to enjoy the show.

Wanting to know what the ruckus is about, I peek around Punk’s tall frame to get a better look at what’s happening.

Candy stands in front of Cynthia, shaking a coffee mug, sloshing the liquid all over the floor.

“Ugh. What the hell is this sludge? Can’t you make a decent cup of coffee?”

A couple of office personnel walk past their altercation, their eyes bugging out.

Candy smiles at the staff, cocking her head at Cynthia. “Good workers are hard to find these days, don’t you agree? Must have been hired to be another pretty face for the good ole boys to ogle at.”

Before Cynthia can open her mouth to protest, Candy cuts her off. “Forget your barista skills. Go to the Starbucks across the street and order me a grande, double-shot, three pumps sugar-free peppermint, nonfat, extra hot, no foam, light whip, stirred white mocha.”

Cynthia balks. “A what?”

Candy rolls her eyes, repeating the outrageous order slowly, using small words.

Outrage coats Cynthia’s skin in a red hue. “I’m not an assistant who has time to run errands.”

In classic Candy fashion, she belittles Cynthia with her eyes, looking her up and down. “Could have fooled me with your knock-off Louboutins.”

“Excuse me?!”

“I bought mine off the back of a truck in Denver.” She points at her heeled feet. “Mine look a hundred times more legit than yours. Not all black market dealers are alike. You should come shopping with me if you want to find the good stuff. Lord knows your wardrobe could use a facelift. Where are you buying your suits? Prudes-R-Us?”

“I’ll find someone to fetch your order,” Cynthia hisses through her teeth, trying to turn away.

“You’re not dumping your work on someone else. I asked YOU to fetch it.” Candy pats Cynthia on the cheek. “Now be a good girl and do as you’re told, or else I’ll put a collar around your neck and show you who’s in charge.”

My mouth falls open. Punk shoulders shake with silent laughter.

Candy gives Cynthia one of her signature cruel smiles. “I would hate to inform your superiors how uncooperative you’re being in this investigation.”

“Coffee has nothing to do with assisting this inquiry,” Cynthia blusters.

With a mischievous smile, Candy waves a hand at her enticing figure, sheathed in body-hugging material. “How much are you willing to bet I couldn’t persuade them?”

Muttering, Cynthia turns toward the elevators. If she doesn’t return with Candy’s coffee order, I’ll be surprised.

“Don’t forget the cup koozie. I don’t want my hands to burn,” Candy hollers at Cynthia’s retreating figure. She turns her head to me and Punk, giving us a thumbs-up.

Punk shakes his head, smiling. “Good call, Jo.”

“Holy crap. Candy was born for this role,” I whisper into my cell.

“You’re welcome,” Jo sing-songs before disconnecting.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

A new day brings new light to the case. Ziggy and Candy surprising the team yesterday was a hail Mary. Ziggy is a master at installing firewalls and antivirus software, something that needs reinforcement after current events. With Ziggy's handling the firewalls, Butch returns to tracking the money through the dark web. And I finally have time to check how my software is faring with cracking our perp's method for extorting money from the clients of P.L. Moore Financial.

Luck is finally on our side. My software can decipher how our thief was choosing accounts to target. The accounts have to hold above five million dollars to be picked and not exceed over fifty million. Accounts falling in this range were hefty enough to obtain a decent cash flow from, but not large enough to be on high alert, routine monitoring.

The amount from the accounts varies depending on how much the account holds. If it's a smaller account, they extract less. The opposite is true for the larger accounts—greater accounts mean they take more. The stolen funds are random numbers meant to look like legit transactions or investments in bogus stocks and fake real estate.

All the accounts Simone discovered followed this method except for one. And the oddball account belongs to one deceased Luca Oldani Amato.

Why Bianchi's henchman's account is the exception is anyone's guess. Maybe it was targeted by mistake. Maybe it was a gamble to see what the thief could get away with. Or maybe with it being one of the largest accounts in the firm, the cash amount was too tempting to ignore.

The reason doesn't matter. What matters is narrowing our search by focusing on the clients' accounts most likely to fall victim based on their size.

It's Tuesday, and Simone is adjusting her approach, examining the most likely poached accounts first, while I examine the surveillance footage from the night before the computer virus wreaked havoc.

Seated in my stiff, aesthetically pleasing chair not proper enough for computer work, I scan the footage from the previous week. The virus created several holes in the recordings, with some camera feeds scattered out of order and others missing entirely. Software can be patched, clients' files restored from our backup hard drive, but deleted video footage is nearly impossible to retrieve when it gets buried under layers of corrupted material.

I grind my molars as I dredge through last Thursday's footage, sorting the mismatched feeds into chronological order. Ziggy sits in one corner across the table from me, while Butch sits in the other. All of us ignore Trent, who paces the room, biting on his nails.

More than once, he's asked what I'm working on, peering over my shoulder to get a look at what's on my computer screen. When I told him I'm doing data recovery from the Trojan set loose in the database, he became agitated, a sheen of sweat coating his skin.

Either the guy is truly concerned for his place of employment or he's hiding something. I watch him from the corner of my eye, bringing up a different screen with code when he comes too close to witnessing what I'm doing.

At this moment, I can't rule Trent out as a potential suspect. He has access to our assigned conference room and witnessed how far we've gotten with tracking the perp. Although, I still believe our number one suspect is his contemptible partner, Cynthia.

Slowly, I collect the multiple scattered videos from Thursday and begin organizing them sequentially. The virus did the most damage to recent video recordings, with a sizable

chunk completely gone. My mood sours when I notice the footage of Simone and me together is among the videos missing. I would have loved to have downloaded it for us to watch later in private.

In the mess, I find a video from nine in the evening showing the main entrance. Trent comes into the screen, walking casually to the front doors. He runs into another employee leaving late—a young male temp from the first floor. The two exchange pleasantries, joking about being overachievers for burning the midnight oil. The men exit together, and the video cuts out.

The time stamp fits. Trent could have planted the bug in the main computer server. Yet I can't find footage of him anywhere near the conference room until an hour before, when Butch and I left to run upstairs after Cynthia attacked Simone. Video footage of him leaving the conference room is missing.

Frustrated, I rub at my eyes under my glasses, pushing them askew. I can't rule Trent out, and I can't pin him down as our suspect either. There wasn't a camera in the conference room until I installed one yesterday, meaning we have no video of the perp committing the crime.

As I continue to sort through the recordings, Butch jumps to his feet, hands in the air and bouncing on his toes like Rocky Balboa. "I found it! Holy shit, I found it!"

Springing from my chair, I run around the table to look at his work. "Where is this account?"

"Cayman Islands. The money was being tossed around like a hot potato, but it was dropped here. It's been sitting here since Friday. This is it."

Ziggy fists bumps Butch. "Good work, bro."

Trent sighs heavily, rubbing at his chest. "Thank Christ. Can you recover it?"

"I found it a minute ago, man," Butch quips, with agitation. "Besides, repossession is Chase's forte. He's better at retrieving funds from offshore accounts."

“You mean stealing it,” Trent says flatly, staring hard at our group.

We stare back, saying nothing to incriminate ourselves.

To my surprise, Trent’s face morphs into a wide smile. “As long as we retrieve the cash for our clients, I don’t care how it’s done. This is fabulous news.”

My brothers laugh, but the celebration is premature.

My brows pull in tight when I see the total amount in the account. “Something’s off.”

“What do you mean?” Ziggy asks, leaning in to look at the account details displayed on the monitor.

“The funds aren’t nearly enough. Simone hasn’t finished her investigation, meaning the predicted number is bound to be higher than what’s here if we include the Oldani account.”

Trent stiffens. He looks at me with wide eyes. “The Oldani account was one I handled.”

“When was the last time you checked the balance?”

“A week ago—I check it like clockwork. The funds were all present.” He swallows thickly, yanking his tie loose. “Ooooh, this is bad. Really bad.”

“You knew the Oldani account was a front to hide the Bianchi mob’s dirty money.” It’s not a question. Based on how nervous Trent got when he heard the name Oldani, it’s obvious he knew who the name was tied to.

Trent’s lips thin. “Pretty hard to forget a man holding a gun to my head, ordering me to do this for his boss or have a bullet put in my skull.”

Damn, that’s shit luck. “Who approached you? Luca or Lorenzo?”

He swallows, his face going green. “Luca.”

“When did he approach you?”

“Last June. Luca didn’t bother hiding who his boss was—he was confident he was untouchable.”

Butch and I share a fleeting look. The mob enforcer isn't untouchable any longer. His rotting corpse, cemented down at the bottom of an abandoned quarry, is a testimony to how touchable he was.

Ziggy brings our attention back to the matter at hand. "Last June was when Prez and Jo first hooked up. I mean, it could be a coincidence. But Lorenzo was obsessed with Jo. Maybe he was stashing cash away to grab Jo from Prez all along, liquidating his assets to make an escape easier."

"It would explain why most of Lorenzo's money hasn't been recovered by the feds. He was burying it months before he snagged Simone and Stella to coerce Jo out of headquarters. The kidnapping was the only sloppy bit of the operation, because we forced his hand when we exposed his pheromone poppers drug ring to the FBI."

A sick feeling builds in the pit of my stomach. I gnaw at my lip ring, fighting with myself. But I need to know the answer.

"Trent, when did you begin your affair with Cynthia?"

He looks me dead in the eyes. "Immediately after I opened the account for Mister Amato."

Fuck. I tug at my man bun. "You started an affair with Cynthia to cover the dirty account, didn't you?"

Trent has the decency to look ashamed. "What better way to hide an account than to bed the manager of the investment division trained to spot questionable accounts in the firm?"

"Fuck," I mutter, pushing my glasses up on my head to rub between my eyes. "Your relationship with Cynthia—"

"Is fake," Trent finishes for me, his voice rough with emotion. "I never wanted to hurt Simone. I. Love. Her. But what choice did I have, huh? My life was being threatened by the mob if I didn't protect their money. I was screwed if the firm found out about who I was doing business with, possibly go to jail for not reporting it to the police.

"Cynthia had been trying to get into my pants for years, so I took advantage of the situation. I was desperate, and this

seemed like the best answer under stress. I started the affair with her, using our relationship to keep her out of my clients' accounts. But Cynthia wasn't happy with keeping our relationship a secret. She orchestrated for Simone to catch us in the act, knowing full well there was no way my relationship with Simone could survive my infidelity. I couldn't go after Simone, or else I'd risk Cynthia exposing me to the firm's board members and the police. Cynthia has me by the balls."

My stomach turns, and I force myself to swallow the bile working its way up my throat. This is not the news a man wants to hear about his woman's ex, who she once loved. Yeah, the dude had a choice and chose poorly in his position. But lots of people make piss poor mistakes when under duress.

Simone dominates my thoughts. Would she understand why Trent made the choice he did, given the circumstances? Fuck, would she forgive him for what he did?

Am I at risk of losing my woman to her ex-lover?

There's only one thing I can do. I need to tell Simone the truth. Trent has been trying to explain himself for a year to my woman, and she's refused to listen to a word he says. She deserves to know what actually happened, what is happening.

And then she's going to have to make a choice. Me or this orange idiot.

"Lorenzo Bianchi may be dead, but Luca Amato is still unaccounted for." Trent sinks into the nearest chair, his head lowered. "How much is missing from the account?"

"All of it," I admit.

Trent grips at his hair. "Fuck. I'm as good as dead, aren't I?"

Seeing how anxious the asshole is, I almost feel bad for him, and maybe I would if the fucker was still alive and Trent didn't have a chance of winning my woman back. "The good news is, we found a drop spot for most of the firm's clientele. We'll continue our search for the Oldani funds."

Trent shakes his head, his expression grave and skin slick with sweat. "Right. Keep looking."

CHAPTER FORTY- SEVEN

The late afternoon sun shines intensely through the floor-to-ceiling wall of windows in the top floor conference room. It raises the temperature in this room by a sweltering ten degrees. I've stripped out of my blazer and thrown my hair up in a twist, held in place with two pencils, but the heat continues to bother me as I work.

Punk walks the length of the room, scanning the office area around us. He's been on high alert since Cynthia attacked me and is more uptight than his norm.

Candy sits across from me, staring out the windowed wall at Cynthia's closed office door. Her leg bounces in eager anticipation of the wicked witch leaving her lair.

"Staring at her door isn't going to make her come out any faster. It's okay to take a break and move around," Punk offers.

"The little cunt-cake has to leave her office at some point," Candy states, her eyes transfixed on Cynthia's office. "And I'm going to be ready when she does."

There's no doubting her words. Candy gave Cynthia one hellish experience after another yesterday, and most of this morning. Meetings with clients were the only things saving Cynthia from Candy's wrath over the last few hours. When Candy went with Cynthia to retrieve the files I requested from storage, I swear I could hear them slinging shade all the way from ground level.

Wiping my brow clear of sweat, I open another case file. I'm hunched over my work when strong, calloused fingers

graze over the warm flesh around my neck. I moan, leaning back into the familiar touch of my biker.

Chase tucks an errant lock of my hair behind my ear, leaning in to kiss the tender skin behind my ear. “Baby, you’re hot.”

“I’m sweltering.” I tug at my blouse, attempting to get air flow to my chest.

“How about a ride through the city?”

Shocked, I spin in my chair to face him. “Your motorcycle is done?”

His smile is blinding, but something in his eyes looks sad, almost like he’s forcing himself to be happy in the moment. I’m about to ask him what’s wrong when he interrupts my thoughts. “She sure is. Eagle’s mechanic friend did a good job, too.”

“You’ve seen it already?”

“The shop dropped her off thirty minutes ago. She’s waiting for us to take her for a spin.”

My smile falls when I look back at my caseload. “I can’t leave for a while.”

“Pack it up. Punk can bring it back to the hotel if you want to work later this evening.” Chase looks at his best friend. “You don’t mind, do you, brother?”

“Not a problem,” Punk agrees. “The sooner Priss calls it quits, the sooner we can leave this sauna.”

“The files shouldn’t leave the premises unless it’s a copy,” I object, watching Chase quickly stack my remaining files before placing them in my bag.

“Fuck those rules. This place has been breaking their own policies long before we came along.” Chase slings the bag over his shoulder and holds his hand out to me. “Come on, Numbers. We have a long overdue date.”

Excited, I grab my things and take his hand. His fingers engulf mine and tug me along. “Come on, Candy. Tomorrow is

another day to pull your dominant card out on Cynthia.”

“Aww,” Candy whines as she follows. “Do we have to leave already? I had a stellar plan in place to royally piss her off.”

“What did you have in mind?” Butch asks as we make our way to the elevator.

“I was going to suggest a different hairstyle, since her current one makes her look like an uptight prison warden who hasn’t gotten laid in a while.”

The guys throw their heads back, laughing.

“Her hair looks good, and you know it,” I tell Candy. “Cynthia is a walking advertisement for the fashion industry.”

“True, but she’d be second-guessing herself. The woman could benefit from being knocked down a couple pegs.”

Once outside, Punk parts ways with the rest of us, driving the SUV back to the hotel for some downtime. Candy rips off her blazer, rocking the bustier she had underneath like it’s an appropriate top to go cruising around in. Butch licks his lips as she climbs on his hog behind him. The two look like the perfect biker couple straddling his motorcycle.

Not nearly as daring as Candy, I unbutton the top two buttons on my blouse. Judging by the smirk Chase gives me, I’d say he’s satisfied enough. He opens one of the side saddlebags on his Harley and pulls out the retched property patch jacket he tried to give me months back, before we were in a relationship.

“You have got to be joking. You carry that misogynistic monstrosity around in your bike?”

“Yeah, I do. Been waiting for you to get on my hog to put you in it. Safety first.” He holds the jacket out for me to slip my arms inside, with a smug smile on his face.

I place my hands on my hips. “You’re unreal. And I call bull. If it was a safety precaution, you’d be wearing a leather jacket each time you ride, and you don’t.”

“Numbers...” he warns me, his face darkening. “You must like my hand on your ass.”

“Maybe I do,” I smart back.

He shakes his head, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth as he climbs on his hog. “Have it your way. But hear me, woman, you will wear my property patch soon.”

“Keep dreaming.”

My biker steadies his bike, helping me climb on behind him. Though I’m perched on the restored bitch seat with my nickname freshly embroidered on the leather, I’m confused about how close I need to be to Chase. Do I koala-strap myself to his back, or lean back and hold the bitch bars?

“Need you tight against me, Numbers,” he drawls in his deep voice. “I need to feel your pussy lips grinding against my ass crack. Hold me like you know you belong to me.”

“Jesus, Chase,” I mutter, my face flushing. “Can you lay off the bedroom talk? We’re in public, with family.”

Butch and Candy seem unbothered with our convo, but it doesn’t mean I am.

“No can do. You took me as is, cave dweller mode and all. Now hold me like you mean it.”

Inwardly, I’m squealing like an excited teenager, having grown fond of Chase’s alpha behavior. Outwardly, I huff with annoyance as I straitjacket myself to his back. To be an extra pain, I rub my pussy against his butt, like he instructed.

“You happy, Caveman?”

A dark chuckle rumbles through his broad back. “Fucking love it when you get bratty. The ride is going to give me a long time to think about how I’ll punish you later for it.” He starts his bike, revving the engine to cut off my sassy comeback.

Geez. This guy is going to ruin my panties.

The bike purrs as Chase pulls out of the parking lot, cruising down the road. I cling to Chase’s back, enjoying the breeze on my heated face. After working relentlessly on the

case in a sweltering glass box, this ride is a welcome relief. The crew's obsessions with riding motorcycles suddenly makes sense. It's liberating.

Butch follows beside us, with Candy perched behind him. Her arms fly out to her sides like a bird in flight as she crows happily into the wind. I laugh at her enthusiasm.

"They look good together," I yell to Chase as we fly down the road, hoping he can hear me over the roar of the engine.

"We look better," he shouts back.

"You're biased."

Chase shrugs. He removes one hand from his handlebars, running it down my calf and giving it a gentle squeeze. Where he touches me causes my skin to break out in goosebumps. The man knows exactly how to affect me in the most stimulating of ways.

"Don't care if I'm biased. I only care about you."

I hold him tighter, absorbing as much of him and his leather and peppermint scent as I can.

Chase signals to Butch with his hand. His brother nods, saluting us before turning off on a different road. Candy waves goodbye to us. I give her a small wave in return, keeping my arm close to Chase's body, for fear of losing my grip on him. I'm nowhere near as bold on a motorcycle as her. Maybe someday, when I've grown accustomed to riding with Chase, I'll be more relaxed.

We cruise along another handful of minutes, soaking up the sun while being cooled by the wind whipping around our bodies. Chase eases up on the gas, coasting us into the McKinley Rose Garden, one of the oldest botanical gardens in the city. Late fall isn't the prime time of the year to enjoy the roses that peak in the spring. Still, the lush gardens are lovely, showcasing a wide variety of seasonal colors and blooms.

This setting is unexpected. I don't know what I had in mind for Chase planning a first date, but I wouldn't be surprised with a brewery or war memorial museum. This is a pleasant surprise.

“What? Didn’t take me for a romance-and-flowers kind of man?” he taunts with a smile, helping me remove my helmet.

“No,” I admit. “Ax-throwing bars seems more your style.”

He chuckles. “They are. It’s on the agenda for our next date. But for our first, I’m taking you for a walk through flowers, since giving you a bouquet isn’t enough. You, Numbers, deserve all the flowers.”

My heart patters happily as my chest fills with warmth. “Damn. You’re sweet.”

“Only for you.” He takes my hand in his, guiding me along the grassy paths. I’m happy I settled on flats today when choosing my outfit. My heels would have sunk right into the earth.

We walk through the butterfly habitat garden, commenting on the tranquil beauty around us before finding a bench to sit and enjoy the space. Chase throws his bulky arm around my shoulder, pulling me snug to his side. He presses his nose into my hair, inhaling deeply.

“These flowers are okay, but nothing compares to your floral musk. Nothing compares to you.”

His words are beautiful, though I detect a hint of tightness in his tone. Twice, I’ve sensed something is off with him. Perhaps he’s looking for reciprocation, and I’m more than happy to confess my feelings toward this man. I open my mouth to tell him I love him when he interrupts me with an update in the case.

“I hate to talk shop while we’re enjoying a break, but I thought you’d like to hear some good news. Butch found the money dumped in an offshore account, like you predicted. I spent a good deal of time today trying to retrieve those funds.”

“Oh! This is good news?”

“Yes, and no.” Chase explains we still don’t know who’s responsible for stealing the money, and Bianchi’s money isn’t accounted for. He then tells me how Trent was forced by Luca Amato to open the account for Lorenzo Bianchi.

“Jesus,” I mutter, rubbing my temples. “What a mess.”

Chase looks lost in thought. He chews on his lip ring, with a pained expression.

“Chase? What is it?”

Sighing, he meets my gaze. “Baby...there’s something you should know, and I want you to listen to me. It’s going to be hard to hear it, but you need to know the truth. All of it.”

This doesn’t sound good already. “O—kay,” I whisper hesitantly.

Chase drops the bomb of all bombs. He explains why Trent began the affair with Cynthia, how he needed to have her on his side to avoid the account being uncovered, how he never wanted to have a relationship with my ex-boss and felt he had no choice, how he’s stuck with her or else faced her turning him in to the authorities.

Chase wraps it all up with, “Trent loves you.”

Stunned, I sink against the bench as I mentally try to take it all in. I slowly shake my head. “Unbelievable.”

My biker stares at me, worry marring his handsome face. “Do you still love him?”

His question has me jerking back from his embrace, annoyed at having to state the obvious. “No! Absolutely not.”

Chase doesn’t look convinced. He takes my hands in his rough palms. “It’s okay if old feelings resurface after learning the truth. I’d understand if you’re torn between us.”

Is this a joke? “Chase, you can’t be serious.”

“I am serious,” he husks. He grips my hands a little firmer to grab my attention, holding me securely, without causing me pain. “With you, I’m always serious. You’re all I care about outside of the MC brotherhood. I would do anything to make you happy, even let you be with that pathetic sap. He fucked up epically by making the wrong choice. Many people would when put into a hairy situation.”

My hands shake as anger takes hold of me. “You’re right when you say he chose wrong. There were a million other alternatives. Yet he fucked my boss behind my back.”

“I’m not saying what he did is acceptable,” he amends quickly. “I can understand why he felt like he had no choice. Seducing your manager was a shit thing to do, but it was effective, fast, and saved his sorry hide. The only thing he could never predict was Cynthia sabotaging his relationship with you.”

I yank a hand free of Chase’s grip, jabbing my finger against his chest. Tears sting my eyes as I blubber, “How could he not see he could end our relationship if caught? You wouldn’t have made the wrong choice. You would have found a way out of the mess and keep our relationship intact. You would have protected my heart.”

Chase pulls me into his arms, cradling me against his body. “I know, Numbers. I know. Let it out. It’s okay.”

So I do. I cry until I’ve drenched his work T-shirt. I cry until my shoulders ache from shaking. I cry until my throat goes dry and no more sound leaves my tired lungs.

And I cry because there’s not a damn thing I can say in this moment to make Chase believe me when he’s stubbornly blind to my feelings for him.

CHAPTER FORTY- EIGHT

My fingers clench and unclench into fists at my sides as I spy on Trent. He stares pensively after Simone in her dirty biker's arms. When Trent took the back stairs after the audit team left work for the day, I pursued him, following him out to the parking lot, where he got in his car and trailed after them. I hopped in my vehicle, joining the caravan.

After the pink-haired bimbo showed up on the job, I suspected Trent was enamored with her. He sure wasn't afraid to admire her whenever the trash came near him.

Imagine my astonishment when he continued to follow the motorcycle Simone was riding, not the one turning off down a different road with the infuriating Candy. It was worse than if he followed the new ass-candy. He was following his old love, the one I couldn't get him to forget.

With my heart in a tattered mess, I followed them to the historical garden, parking a safe distance from Trent and the biker. I walked along the border of the park, keeping out of sight from Trent as he stalked several paces behind the couple on the other side of the garden.

And here I stand, hiding behind shrubbery to conceal all of myself but my face, mirroring my lover's actions on the opposite side of the park.

Hurt and frustrated, I want to scream, to charge across the park and slap Trent across the face for harboring feelings for his ex when I've given him everything I have to give.

Why am I not enough?

Simone sobs in her boyfriend's thick arms, crying about God knows what. Trent looks about ready to burst across the lawn to snag her from the biker, his face lined with pain as he watches another man comfort his former partner.

It's too much for me to take in, too difficult to swallow and accept. But I can't look away.

My eye twitches the longer I watch the man I love pine for another. Unconsciously, I slip my hand into my coat pocket. My fingers curl around the cold metal of Trent's pistol, still in my possession. Since the day Trent handed me the weapon, I've kept it on me while at work. If Trent gave it to me for protection, then it's important to keep it close.

But maybe it could serve another purpose.

It would be easy to pull out the gun and fire at the bitch who stands to gain everything I want.

Tempted beyond measure, I bite the inside of my cheek to control my irrational urges. Blood coats my tongue in a sharp metallic tang. My eyes mist the more I fight the pull, close to caving into the appeal of committing murder.

In the end, Trent is the one to stop me from giving in to my murderous impulses. He backs away from the cypress he's hiding behind, retreating out of the park.

Where he goes, I follow.

I release my hold on the gun, and it falls into the bottom of my pocket.

Before I depart, I cast one last look at Simone, hating the woman with every fiber of my being.

In my haste to catch up to my boyfriend, my rushed footfalls cause my heels to sink into the grass path. My steps fumble as I try to right myself, twisting my ankle in the process. A hiss escapes my lips, catching Trent's attention.

He stops walking, cautiously looking over his shoulder. His hazel eyes narrow in on me with a look of disdain, a look I see too often from him.

I'm massaging my tender ankle when he spins on his heels and approaches me with a low snarl in his voice. "You're following me?"

"Yes," I spit back, with equal disparagement. "Followed my philanderer right to his heartstrings."

"Get a grip," he chides me. "I followed them to see what the biker would tell Simone after he discovered my involvement with the Oldani file."

I blink, blindsided by this recent development. "What do they know?"

Trent grows impatient. "More than they should. The worst part is, I had to implicate myself. A little digging, and they would have discovered the truth about my involvement with the account. I felt it best to be honest with how I became in charge of a mobster's funds."

Nervous, I lick my dry lips. "What else do they know?"

He pauses, anger blistering in his firm face. "They found your piggy bank."

"Good."

I sigh with relief. I didn't want to give up the money, but I did it when Trent told me I had no other choice. There were bigger accounts showing more promise anyway, some I was already pocketing from. I have to have an insurance policy in case shit goes south.

"Maybe now they'll go away."

"Don't be daft, Cynthia. They're not leaving until they identify the culprit."

My stomach plummets, but I can't help seeing a silver lining where one doesn't exist. "And that's why you're here? To spy on them and see if they drop names?" I press, hoping my earlier assumption was incorrect and Trent wasn't longing for Simone.

Without answering, he turns away, shaking his head. He walks back to his vehicle, leaving me in utter suspense.

CHAPTER FORTY- NINE

Yesterday in the park was one of the most difficult positions I've ever been in. And I've been in some shit scenarios, between my youth and my career. But telling the woman I love I understand if she wants to go back to her ex was by far the hardest thing I've ever done in my life.

After Simone cried her heart out, I took us back to the hotel, where I held her in my arms for the rest of the evening. I'm certain my woman is fighting an internal battle, warring between staying with me and going back to where she felt she always belonged, in a world of glitz on the arm of a polished financier.

Simone isn't a shallow woman, but she's worked hard in her career to live a certain way, in a fancy city, and to have the finer things this world offers. Fort Collins isn't a hole in the wall by any means, but it's not the lifestyle Simone would have chosen for herself. I can give her the home of her dreams and a fuck-ton of kids, but I'd always wonder if she was settling for me.

I'm grateful for her stubbornness. Had she not sent Trent up the creek, she may not have come to Colorado, and I would have lost the experience of loving her more than life itself. And if there's one thing in this life I'll never regret, it's loving Simone, no matter how long or short our time together is.

This morning when she woke, she rubbed away the sleep from her eyes, shoved me away while muttering, "Stubborn ass. Can't see what's in front of you."

I wasn't sure what to make of her comment—I'm still not sure what she means. But it damn near broke my heart when I got on my bike and my obstinate woman donned her helmet to climb on the back of my hog. How many more chances will I have like this before she comes to her senses and leaves me for Trent?

Needing a distraction from the pain tearing at my heart, I throw myself into my work. Simone must feel the same. According to the text I received from Punk earlier, Simone was on a roll, breezing through the files like a prairie fire gone wild. As of noon today, she finished the last of the files we suspected to be targeted by our culprit.

Simone was passing the time by continuing her investigation of all the remaining client files in the firm. She's thorough to a fault.

While I work to retrieve the stolen funds from the offshore account, Butch has taken over combing through the surveillance footage from the night of the computer Trojan incident. Neither job is fun, but my job is the only one that could wind my ass up in prison. Doesn't matter if I'm giving the money back to the rightful owners, the overseas bank isn't going to let millions be taken from them without a fight. This is where my hacking skills come in handy.

Malware dropped in emails of unsuspecting banking staff is opened, creating holes in the bank's internal servers. While the bank's security team is busy patching the holes in their software, I create a back door into the account. I wouldn't say it's easy work—it's not at all. All my focus is on not screwing up the coding I enter in my computer at lightning speed. This work needs to be flawless and fast. But it's a simple enough process for me.

Trent sits beside me, chewing on his thumbnail as he watches my screen. He says little, asking a tentative question here and there as I work. I want nothing more than to lash out with my fist into his pretty boy face for distracting me.

Instead, I answer his questions and continue on with the delicate process. Angering Simone is the last thing I want to

do—I don't want to give her a reason to leave me if she's toying with the idea already. And beating the snot out of Trent is a surefire way to upset her.

Sweat builds around my forehead, dripping into my eyes. I don't dare blink the sting away. There's no time for a small reprieve. Hell, there's barely time to breathe properly.

My fingers stop only when I'm inside the account. "I'm in."

"Fuck yeah!" Ziggy crows across the room at his computer. "Ready when you are to make the transfer."

"You need to be quick on covering my tracks, bro. We have less than a minute."

"Bring it, man. Let's do this."

My fingers hit enter, the numbers scrolling steadily up on my screen. "Go!"

Ziggy types frenziedly, throwing up software barricades to slow the offshore bank's security from stopping us.

I roll my chair over to another computer, watching the funds being deposited into a different offshore account one dollar at a time, too fast for my eyes to count. From here, we'll be able to transfer money back to the firm, making the trail exceptionally difficult to trace.

Butch joins me at my computer, staring over my shoulder. "Come on," he chants in a low voice as we eagerly watch for the last of the funds to be deposited.

The clock ticks loudly on the wall, counting down the final seconds before our cover is blown.

Ten...nine...

"Holy shit," Trent muses aloud, watching the money pour in.

Eight...seven...

"Keep throwing up walls, Ziggy!" I holler. "Almost there."

Six...five...four...

My eyes watch as we deposit the last dollar.

I rush to my first computer, quickly exiting the old account with a second to spare. “Halle-fucking-lujah!” I jump to my feet, high-fiving my brothers.

Trent falls back in his chair, rubbing his hands down his face. He looks at me with bewilderment in his wide eyes. “I can’t believe you did it. I can’t believe you got it all back.”

“Not all of it. The Oldani money is still MIA, but we’ll find it.”

Trent says nothing, appearing in shock as he stares at my computer screen. He shakes his head like he’s unable to believe what he’s witnessing.

Butch motions for me to follow him to his workstation. I sit beside him at his computer, looking at the video footage on the screen showing Cynthia. “You find something?”

“I didn’t want to disturb you in the middle of mission impossible, but yeah, I found something.”

Butch presses play on the surveillance recording. The image shows Cynthia running out of our conference room, where we’re stationed with our equipment. She jumps nearly out of her skin and slows her speed to a brisk walk when she hears the door she ripped open slam against the wall.

The video ends, and Butch starts the next one in the sequence. It picks up with Cynthia speed-walking through the back end of the building, where most of the staff cubicles are located. She spots the cleaning crew at work. Her steps falter, like she’s deciding where to go without being seen. One worker greets her. This snaps her back to reality. She lowers her head, her hair creating a natural curtain to shield her face from the cleaning crew as she hurries past them.

The next image shows her jumping into her car and peeling out of the parking lot like a bat out of hell.

“When was this?” I ask Butch.

“Just before her boyfriend left for the evening.”

I rock in my chair, recalling the video of Trent and how it vastly differs from the videos of Cynthia. Trent had left with ease, stopping to joke with a colleague before exiting the building, whereas Cynthia left like her ass was on fire.

One looked innocent, and one did not.

Absorbing this new information, I return to my computer to examine the contents we extracted from the Cayman Islands' dumped account. I didn't only transfer the money when I hacked the account. I took all the account info as well, meaning I have a link to our perp. I'm not surprised when the name of the person we suspected comes across my screen.

Cynthia Higgins.

With all the evidence we need to pass this case along to the proper authorities, I clear my throat. "Trent, I need to confirm P.L. Moore Financial wants to press charges against the person responsible for pilfering from its clients."

He raises a quizzical eyebrow. "The firm definitely wants to take legal action against the one responsible. It's why we hired your team to begin with."

"Understood," I say before I dial the FBI on my cell.

It's not going to be a good day for Cynthia.

CHAPTER FIFTY

I nstead of giving myself a pat on the back for finishing the audit on the most vulnerable accounts, I press on, digging through the remaining files. It probably isn't necessary, since Chase's program was spot-on with identifying the pattern the thief used for choosing accounts to raid, but I need to stay busy, or else my mind wanders to Chase.

I'm so damn pissed at my man. He's beyond intelligent, but he's unable to grasp my true feelings. A caveman mentality to fit his caveman possessiveness with me. *Unreal.*

How can he think I'm going to leave him after discovering the reason behind Trent's infidelity? Does he honestly think I'm going to see Trent's lack of better judgment as forgivable?

Come on! I can understand being between a rock and a hard place and making a bad call when under duress. But Trent could have gone to the police. He could have gone to the board of directors in the firm. He could have told me, and we would have figured out a solution together.

Instead, he stuck his dick into an easy hole and got his sorry ass blackmailed into maintaining a relationship with a selfish bitch.

And this is the man Chase thinks I'll choose over him?

No, thank you. I may have a new level of empathy for my ex I lacked before learning of his situation, but I sure as hell don't regret leaving him, and I will *not* pick him over Chase.

My heart beats for one man, and one man alone.

When we close up shop for the day, I'm going to grab Chase by his tawny-colored man bun, drag him down to my five-five height, and kiss the stupid right out of him. I'll prove to him he's the only one for me. Saying I love you isn't enough to convince him, but actions will.

As if my day doesn't suck enough, Cynthia enters the room with another bundle of files in her arms. She slams the paperwork down on the conference table, shaking the glass.

"The hell?" I mutter, glaring at her from where I sit.

"I refuse to work with your *assistant* a moment longer," she snaps, pointing a manicured finger at Candy, who's practically attached herself to Cynthia's hip.

Candy snorts, without amusement. "Like you're a joy to be around? Please. I've had pimps who show more warmth than you, you frigid bitch."

Cynthia chokes. "Bitch?! I'm not the bitch—you are."

Candy holds up an open hand, circling it in front of Cynthia. "So much face, not enough palm. You need to learn to shut your hole. A lesson in obedience would do you wonders. I'm sure there's a dog school in this city willing to help you."

Cynthia turns to me, nostrils flared. "Do you see what I'm dealing with? I will *not* subject myself to this disgusting piece of trash a second longer. Either you send your guard dog—"

"Hey!" Punk protests, with a miffed expression. "Candy's right. There's only one dog in this room, and I sure as shit am not a bitch."

"Correction," Cynthia seethes, "you come with me next time, or you can find someone else willing to assist you in document control. I'm done dealing with insults."

Annoyed with all three of them, I open my mouth to give them a piece of my mind when movement outside in the main office area catches my attention. My eyes widen with what I'm witnessing.

Men in SWAT uniforms with FBI written in bold letters across their chest stalk our way. Chase and his tech team follow close behind. Trent trails after them, his demeanor grim.

I scramble to my feet when they crowd into the room. Cynthia backs up next to me near the exterior windows, while Candy and Punk get pushed against the other wall.

“Cynthia Higgins?” a man in uniform asks in a commanding voice.

“Y—yes,” she stammers.

“You’re under arrest for the embezzlement operation at P.L. Moore Financial. Place your hands in the air where we can see them.”

“WHAT?!” she squawks, taking an unsteady step back.

“Put your hands up where we can see them!” the officer barks louder, raising his gun at her.

She gapes, her mouth hanging open. “This is a mistake. It’s not me.” She looks at her boyfriend with beseeching eyes. “Trent, tell them it’s not me.”

He shakes his head regrettably. “Do as they say, Cynthia. Don’t make this any harder.”

Something like pain contorts her flawless face into one of pure rage. “Did you do this?” Cynthia accuses him. “Did you lead them right to me, Trent?”

“I have nothing to do with this,” he says sadly.

“I don’t believe you,” she rasps, her bottom lip quivering.

Distracted by everything happening around us, Cynthia catches me off guard when she reaches out, grabbing me by my hair. I scream as she tugs me to her side. I reach for her hands, trying to tear them from my hair. My fingers bite into the soft skin of her hands. It has no effect, other than making her hold on to me tighter.

Before I can find another way to break free of her hold, she has the barrel of a gun pressed against my temple.

Around the room, guns are drawn, everyone yelling at Cynthia to drop her weapon. Chase pushes himself to the front of the line, his gun trained on Cynthia.

“Cynthia, be smart about this. Put your weapon down and let go of Simone. She has nothing to do with this,” Chase tries to reason with her, his eyes swiveling between the two of us, assessing me while monitoring her.

“The fuck she doesn’t!” she yells, shoving the gun harder against my temple. A small whimper leaves my lips. My stomach rises to my throat as the gravity of my situation hits home.

She’s going to kill me. There’s not a doubt in my mind Cynthia will take me down with her.

Grief overwhelms my senses. I don’t want to die. There’s too much left for me to do.

I need to hug my parents and sister one last time. I need to kiss my cherubic nephews all over their pudgy faces. Before I say my last goodbye, I need to look at the mountains near my home.

But most importantly, I want to ride on the back of Chase’s hog with my arms spread wide at my sides, to feel like a bird flying in the wind. I want to marry my biker, give him babies, build a life and home with him. To wake up in his arms, day after day, and share everything this world offers with the man I love.

I want a lifetime with Chase—not a moment in time.

If it’s the last words I utter in this life, I need Chase to know exactly what I feel for him.

“Chase, I—”

“Don’t you worry, Numbers. I’m gonna get you out of this, I promise, baby.”

“Cynthia,” Trent begs helplessly, his eyes red-rimmed. “Stop, please.”

“Fuck you, Trent!” Cynthia screams through her tears. “Fuck you. I did this for us, but you couldn’t let this dumb

bitch go. I wanted to give you the world. And all you wanted was her.”

She viciously tugs my hair. I cry out, unable to stop myself. Cynthia must enjoy my pain, yanking again for a repeat performance of my misery.

“Numbers! Look at me,” Chase pleads. My eyes snap to his. “Remember what I gave you?”

My mind draws a blank, too caught up in my fear.

There’s so much shouting going on around us, it’s hard to hear what he’s saying. I stare helplessly at him as he motions with his eyes to my midsection and mouths, “Knife.”

The pocket knife.

I give a small nod, all the movement I can manage in Cynthia’s tight hold.

“Cynthia,” Trent pleads on a cry, pushing his way to stand beside Chase. He holds up his hands in a surrendering gesture. “You don’t want to do this.”

“Yes, I do!” she shouts.

With Cynthia distracted, I release one hand from her death grip on my hair and slide it down my body to the pocket in my blazer. I hurriedly dig with my fingers in search of the knife.

Trent shakes his head in a panic. “No, you don’t want her. You want me, Cynthia.”

She stiffens behind me, her grip on my hair relaxing a fraction.

My fingers curl around the knife, dragging it carefully from my pocket to avoid alerting Cynthia.

“You can have me,” he says soothingly. “Let me take Simone’s place, and we can be together.”

Cynthia snuffles. “You chose me?”

I drop my other hand from her grip on my hair, working the pocket knife open with both hands close to my body.

Chase tracks my movements with his eyes, as do the FBI agents.

“Yes,” Trent nods encouragingly. “Let Simone go, and I’ll come to you.”

For a moment, I feel the gun ease against my head. The moment is short-lived.

Cynthia tightens her grip again. “You still care for her well-being before mine.”

Sensing my time has come, I rotate the knife in my grip and swing it back into her thigh.

She howls in agony, letting go of my hair. I stumble forward onto my hands and knees, with only enough time to look behind me as she swings her gun in my direction.

Pop. Pop. Pop.

Plumes of blood ricochet from Cynthia’s chest, while wider arches of blood explode from her back onto the glass window behind us. The gun slips from her grasp as she falls back against the ground.

Oh, my God!

The room erupts into action. Agents rush forward to remove Cynthia’s weapon from where her prone body lies. They kneel around her where she gasps for life, starfished on the ground.

Cynthia may be a thief, deeply disturbed, and wanted to end my life, but I don’t wish the same for her. I don’t want her to die. Not like this, gasping for precious air to fill her perforated lungs.

“Someone help her,” I cry weakly, only to be drowned out by the hysteria swirling around the room following the shooting.

One agent calls for paramedics, while the others do what they can to stop her bleeding. Their hands try to cover the blood pouring from her bullet wounds on her chest as more pools underneath her in a thick crimson tide.

I'm tugged away from the scene, pulled into the powerful arms of the man I love. "I got you, Numbers. Look away."

But I can't. My eyes are frozen on the horror lying in front of me.

Cynthia's head faces me, staring back at me with alarm on her beautiful features as she realizes this is her end. She claws at the agents' hands like they can somehow save her from her sad fate.

"It's okay," I whisper through tears, trying to sound convincing. "Help is coming."

She blinks at me and opens her mouth to speak. I can barely hear what she's saying over the agents' frantic talking and Chase murmuring reassurance against my temple.

"Trent..." *Wheeze*. "Oldani..." *Wheeze*. "Sto—" Blood spurts from her mouth, coating her cheeks.

Alarmed, I sink further into Chase's embrace and watch in terror as she chokes on her blood. I see the fear in her eyes as she struggles, drowning. She grips an agent's hand with her dwindling strength as she gurgles her last breath.

And then her fighting stops. Her hands slips free of the agent's, and her eyes stare past me, vacant of life.

Full of dismay, a wail breaks free from my lungs. Chase crushes me against him. I weep in his embrace, turning my body to throw my arms around his neck.

A few feet away in front of me, Trent is on his knees, his head in his hands. His shoulders shake as he sobs profusely. A gun lies on the ground beside him, still smoking from being discharged.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

After several hours of being questioned by the FBI agents regarding our audit investigation and how Chase positively identified Cynthia as the thief, we're released. The agent who questioned me was kind, understanding what I went through was traumatizing. I could barely give my statement as I watched the coroner bag Cynthia's body, wheeling her out of the room. Chase held me close to his side as I fell apart. The FBI agent in charge thanked me for my cooperation before handing me his card in case I recalled anything else I felt important to share with him.

Trent was equally upset, if not more. I couldn't blame him. He was the one who grabbed Chase's gun from his grip, opening fire on Cynthia when she aimed her gun at me. My biker was caught off guard, too focused on what was happening with me to react fast enough to stop Trent. My ex was trembling, apologizing to everyone and anyone for taking Cynthia's life. The FBI agents didn't make the experience any less stressful as they questioned him relentlessly. They kept pressing for answers as to why he took action and didn't let the authorities handle the situation. All he could say was that he feared for my life. With how distraught he was, it was convincing enough, and the feds let him go.

I ride back to the hotel with Punk in the SUV. Chase was worried I was in no shape to ride safely on the back of his bike the short mile up the street. It hurt to detach myself from his side as he helped me into the SUV and buckled me into my seat.

As I cry, Punk reaches over and grabs my hand. “It’s over now. We’re all safe.”

“Cynthia’s not,” I blubber.

“Don’t waste your tears on her, Priss,” Punk instructs, with an edge in his voice. “It was you or her. Trent made the right choice this time around.”

Trent. Hearing his name bothers me. Maybe because I can’t get the sound of Cynthia gasping it out of my head as she lay dying on the floor.

We pull into the hotel parking garage and exit the vehicle. Chase pulls in behind us, hopping off his hog and rushing to take me in his arms. He murmurs tender words in my ear, yet all I continue to hear are Cynthia’s final words.

“Trent...” Wheeze. “Oldani...” Wheeze. “Sto—”

What was Cynthia trying to tell me?

I know it was important, otherwise why say it at all? Why mention the Oldani file? What was the last word she was trying to get out before she choked to death?

Chase leads us back to our suite. He walks me into the bathroom, where he turns on the shower before turning back to me. He caringly undresses me, then himself. I’m ushered into the shower, where Chase shampoos and conditions my hair. My eyes stare at the white-tiled floor of the shower stained with pink swirls, watching the last of Cynthia’s blood drain out of existence.

“Trent...” Wheeze. “Oldani...” Wheeze. “Sto—”

My loving biker scrubs my body before I’m left under the rain showerhead as Chase cleans himself. He turns off the shower, dries us both before helping me dress in my night shorts and tank top.

He whispers, “It’s okay. You’re safe,” as he combs the tangles from my hair and braids it.

He tucks me into bed, where I curl into a ball, staring at the wall. The wheels in my brain turn, but nothing is sparking.

Chase orders room service and coaxes me to eat. I chew, tasting nothing.

I hear Chase asking questions, but I can't find the strength to answer. My tongue is numb and won't work.

“Trent...” Wheeze. “Oldani...” Wheeze. “Sto—”

With a shaky exhale, Chase crawls into bed behind me, wrapping his muscular arms around me like a giant shield. His closeness fills my heart with his love, but my uneasiness continues.

Something isn't right. Maybe I'm restless because I was close to dying. Maybe I'm out of sorts because I watched a woman die in front of my eyes.

Or maybe there's something more at work and my mind is too scattered to make sense of what's right in front of me.

“Come back to me, Numbers,” Chase whispers against my hair. He kisses my temple as my world fades to black, with Cynthia's words rattling in my head.

“Trent...” Wheeze. “Oldani...” Wheeze. “Sto—”

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

All night, I lay next to my woman, watching over her as she slept in my arms. She crashed hard after her adrenaline dropped. I've seen the effects shock can have on the body, experienced it a time or two in my SEAL days in the field. I took care of her as best I could, trying to make her comfortable before she fell into a deep sleep.

I don't wake her when the alarm goes off, turning off our phones to stop anything from interrupting her rest. My queen will wake when her body is ready to face reality. Forcing her to confront the day before she's ready could deal her mental health another setback.

To pass the time, I work on my computer, firing off an email to P.L. Moore Financial's board members. We found their thief, retrieved most of the money stolen from their clients, and reinforced their cybersecurity. We expect to be paid for the services we provided. I don't bother explaining the Oldani account, since they weren't aware of its existence thanks to Cynthia hiding it from their attention to protect Trent.

Withholding the account information would make it easier for Piero to recover it without having to go through the legality issues tied to the firm. Our team could continue to hunt for the Bianchi money back at headquarters now that we had a better idea of how Cynthia operated her scheme.

An hour after emailing the financial firm, an eight-figure number is deposited into Mercy Raven's Security account. Right on the nose for what Simone predicted we'd earn from this investigation.

Our job is done, and we're going home.

Simone stirs on the bed, little whimpers pouring from her sweet mouth. "Trent. Oldani. Sto," she murmurs in her sleep.

Hearing her say her ex's name in her sleep is disheartening, but I hope I'm overreacting. She's been through a lot in the last twenty-four hours. Sleep-talking randomness isn't unusual when exposed to extremely stressful situations.

Moving my laptop to the coffee table, I cross the room, crawling back in beside my woman. I wrap my arms around her, spooning her curvy body and breathing in her flora musk.

"It's okay, Numbers. I've got you."

Simone groans, turning in my arms to face me. She opens her tired eyes, and gray clouds stare back at me. "Chase."

"Numbers," I say, a smile in my voice. I'm relieved to see her alert. The shock from yesterday has worn off. Though I'm aware she's far from okay. "How are you feeling?"

"Awful," she admits, rubbing at her temples. "What time is it?"

"Almost noon. We're done in Sacramento. When you're ready to get up, we'll pack and head home to Fort Collins."

A sad smile forms on her lips, her eyes crinkling in the corners as a tear sneaks out and tracks down her smooth cheek. "Home," she says the word like a caress, filling my heart with optimism.

We're going to be okay. With a bit of time, and possibly some therapy, we'll be living our lives to the fullest with each other.

Five minutes later, Simone is out of bed, getting dressed. She puts on a maxi dress, the one she wore when I saved her dangling from a tree limb. It's what she likes to wear for comfort, and it'll be perfect for her ride home in the SUV. I want her at my back on my hog, but it won't happen today. Maybe tomorrow, if she feels up for it on the second leg of our trip.

While she gets ready, I pack my things, stacking them by the door to go out to our vehicles. Simone has finished brushing her teeth and is putting her hair in an elegant twist off her neck when there's a knock at our door.

It could be one of my brothers or Candy, but a lesson in my past where our VP beat my and Punk's asses with a sex baton taught me never to open the door without checking through the peephole first.

One look through the lens has my inside running cold. "Fuck," I mumble. I open the door, glaring at the orange weasel hell-bent on fucking with my happily ever after. "What do you want?"

Trent's lips are a thin line of determination. It's obvious he came here with a purpose and he's not going to coward out.

Interestingly, he's dressed for the business day. One would think after what transpired yesterday, he'd take a few days off. However, I, too, like to stay busy to cope with grief.

"Your team didn't come to work today. The board informed me you closed the case and they've settled your accounts. I..." He swallows, straightening his shoulders. "I came to speak with Simone."

I can read between the lines. The fucker is here to win back my woman.

"Who's at the door?" Simone asks, coming out of the bathroom with her toiletries in her arms. She dumps them into her suitcase on the bed before turning to face the door. Her eyes lose focus for a second as she whispers, "Sto."

That's the second time today I've heard her say that word. What the hell does it mean? Is it even a word?

"Simone," Trent says, attempting to step around me. My arm snaps out, blocking his entrance.

"Chase, it's okay. Let him through."

The fuck it is, but I keep my thoughts to myself and back away from the door.

Cautiously, Trent moves through the narrow opening I gave him into our hotel suite. He stares intently at my woman. “I came to check on you. Are you...okay?” He cringes at his own question. None of us is okay after what happened yesterday. I aged a decade when I thought Cynthia was going to kill Simone.

“No,” she answers, with a sigh. “But I will be, with time and the people I love near me.”

My ears perk up hearing her saying the word “love.” It’s not a word she throws around willy-nilly. I stare at her, anxiety building in my bloodstream.

Trent nods, seeming to understand what she means. “It’s important to have those you care about close at a time like this.”

He steps deeper into the room, closer to my woman. Simone stands still, like she’s waiting for him to approach her.

An oily sensation coats my gut, twisting my stomach uncomfortably. I’m not sure what I’m witnessing, but I know it isn’t good, at least not for me.

When Trent sees Simone isn’t backing away, he closes the distance between them, pulling Simone into his arms. He holds her like he’ll never let her go. Simone’s more hesitant, her arms and hands hovering around him, but it is an embrace nonetheless.

I move forward to intervene, stop the reunion. Simone holds up a hand behind Trent’s back, halting me. She doesn’t want me to interfere.

My heart stops in my chest, crushing under the weight of the air I hold in my lungs. Simone is hugging her ex in front of me, letting him hold her in his arms the way a lover holds his partner. I wait for the flare of anger to take hold of me like it typically does in my jealousy. But it doesn’t come. It’s like a bucket of ice water has dropped over me, dousing my flame.

I’m losing the love of my life, and there’s not a damn thing I can do to stop it. My anger will drive her away. Fighting with Trent will validate her reason for leaving me.

Do I want to upset her?

No, I've never wanted to see her sad. Reacting in any violent way will hurt her feelings.

The only emotion I've strived to give her is happiness. If Trent is what makes her happy, who am I to stand in the way?

I love Simone, every beautiful and spiteful piece of her. She deserves joy in her life, happiness beyond measure, and never-ending love. I've loved her from afar before. I can continue to love her from afar again, happy she's found her slice of eternal love. It'll hurt, and I'll never be the same without her, but when you love someone, you set them free.

Only in my case, she won't return. Some things aren't meant to be.

Trent pulls away a fraction from her, hope brightening his ridiculously tanned face. "Can we talk, please? We can go to the hotel restaurant, grab a bite to eat? I need you to hear me out. Please, Simone."

She gives a curt nod of her head, her face unreadable. She may as well have hammered the nail home in my coffin with that hard nod. My heart is broken, as am I.

Grabbing her purse and phone, Simone hesitates, licking her lips. Her demeanor screams she doesn't want to go with him, but she slides on her wedged heels, shuffling toward her ex. Coaxing her along, Trent gives Simone his arm, looping her hand through it when she doesn't respond fast enough.

As he leads her out the door, I touch Simone's shoulder. "Numbers...please, don't go."

There are so many things I want to say, but the words stick in the back of my throat. This may be the last time I talk to her, touch her, and I'm frozen.

She looks at me, determination set in her gray eyes. "Stop. I need to do this, Chase."

If that's her way of telling me I need to let her go, I hear her, loud and clear.

Unable to speak, I remove my hand from her body, stepping aside to let them leave. Simone's face puckers like she's trying not to cry. She gives me one last longing look filled with remorse before she lets Trent lead her down the hall and out of my life.

When she disappears from my sight, I release the air from my lungs, dropping to my knees as the gravity of my loss destroys my soul. My worst fear was Simone waking up and realizing I wasn't good enough for her. It's no longer a fear—it's my reality.

Overwhelmed with grief, I remain kneeling on the floor of the hotel suite as time carries on. This is how Butch finds me, catatonic and lost in my head.

“Bro? I've tried getting ahold of you. Your cell went straight to voicemail. I saw Trent walk Simone into the restaurant downstairs. What the hell is going on?”

“I—I lost her,” I choke.

Butch does a double-take. “I don't believe it.”

“Well, she's in a restaurant with her ex, and I'm sitting here by myself. Read that however the fuck you want,” I husk.

“There has to be a reasonable explanation, Chase. Simone loves you. I've seen the way she looks at you, the way she gravitates toward you, like you're the sun in her orbit.”

My head falls into my hands. “She told me to stop when I begged her not to leave with Trent. It's pretty difficult to misconstrue her words, dude.”

Butch falls silent. He waits for me to get ahold of myself before asking, “What do you need, Chase? Whatever it is, I'll help.”

I wipe the tears from my eyes, my heart blown to smithereens. “I need to get the fuck out of here, put some distance between myself and her.”

Butch lays a supportive hand on my shoulder. “Then let's ride out.”

CHAPTER FIFTY- THREE

The moment I saw Trent standing on the threshold of our hotel suite, Cynthia's words hit me like a sucker punch to my solar plexus, knocking the wind right out of me.

Trent. Oldani. Sto.

All this time, I assumed Cynthia hadn't finished her last word. It made no sense, but it was clear for someone struggling for precious oxygen to fill her shredded lungs. I assumed her gurgling was only gurgling when she was actually struggling to form syllables.

“Sto” meant “stole.”

Trent stole the Oldani funds, not Cynthia. She was guilty of stealing everything else, but she wasn't responsible for the missing mob money. Her dying breath was used to implicate Trent.

My mind races, trying to recall what she said in the heat of the moment before the bullets flew. The only thing that stands out in my head is her asking Trent if he led the authorities right to her. I assumed at the time she was referring to Trent guiding the SWAT team to the fourth floor. Never did I think she was accusing him of leading the investigation toward her guilt. It would mean he was aware she was the thief all along.

My God, did he kill Cynthia to save me or shut her up, using a moment of chaos to cover his tracks by removing her from the equation?

I never thought Cynthia had the skills to pull off this operation, and I was right, since she didn't get away with it.

But Trent...he's brilliant, not Chase-level brilliant, but a genius in his own right. He had the means and knowledge to carry out this crime.

Could Trent have orchestrated this whole fiasco to pull off the ultimate heist, walking away with Bianchi's millions while pinning the blame on Cynthia and taking the heat off himself?

I take less than a second to pass judgment. Watching Trent walk away scot-free isn't an option.

However, it damn near killed me to walk out of the hotel room, leaving Chase to assume the worst. But I had no way of informing him of Trent's guilt when the prick was in the room with us.

Chase will understand when I nail my ex to the wall. I just need proof. And there's no better proof than a confession.

While Trent orders our drinks and some appetizers from the hotel restaurant, I dig through my purse, retrieving the FBI agent's business card. I fumble with my phone under the table, punching in the agent's number, then turn down the volume on my speaker. With my plan in motion, I set my cell facedown on the table and pray for the best.

Trent finishes ordering and turns a beaming smile on me when the server leaves for the kitchen. He reaches across the table for my hand. I reluctantly place mine in his, praying my clammy skin doesn't give away my nerves.

"I can't believe I finally can talk with you." He laughs timidly. "After all this time and all the hell we've gone through, it's surreal to be sitting across from you, like old times."

"But it's not like old times, is it?" I challenge him. "A lot has changed."

Trent drops his gaze to our hands, unable to look me in the eye. "Yes, it has." His eyes drift back to mine expectantly. "But change brings fresh starts."

I take back my hand, folding my arms over my chest. "There's no new start for us unless you come clean. I won't accept lies, Trent. You need to tell me everything."

Our server returns with our drinks before disappearing again. Trent's jaw tics back and forth, possibly contemplating how honest he should be.

Uncrossing my arms, I lean across the table to take his hand in mine again, probing him in the right direction. "How can I trust you again when you shut me out?"

Trent huffs. "Can't we enjoy this reunion without hashing everything out this instant?"

The bastard needs to be pushed. "If you're going to insist on keeping me in the dark, then you leave me no choice." I drop his hand, push back my chair, and rise from my seat.

His eyes bulge, and his hand lashes out to snag my wrist. "Don't go, please. I just got you alone."

"I'm not wasting any more of my time. I deserve the truth. And here I thought I'd give you another chance—"

"You deserve the truth," Trent blurts quickly, interrupting me. "I'll tell you everything. Stay."

I make a big show of dropping back into my seat with a disgruntled grunt. "You have five minutes. If I feel you're holding back or being untruthful, I will leave with Chase."

He reaches for my hand again, and I reluctantly give it to him. Trent closes his eyes, shutting me out for a few heartbeats. When he opens them back up to look at me, they're full of conviction.

"I'm sure you've heard from your biker how Luca Amato forced me at gunpoint to create an account for his mob boss, Lorenzo Bianchi, to hide a portion of his wealth."

"I have," I answer, waiting for him to continue.

He licks his dry lips before continuing. "Luca approached me when you were away in Virginia for business. Do you remember how quiet I was when you returned? You asked what was wrong, and all I said was I was stressed with work."

I nod, recalling last June, when he seemed morose. I worried he was upset with our relationship, since Cynthia had me traveling for work constantly. Concerned, I confronted

him. He insisted all was well with us, said his workload was affecting his demeanor.

“It was so much money. No way to hide it from the firm without the board of directors inquiring as to how I landed such a wealthy client. Luca was specific in his instructions—the account had to be kept a secret, or I was dead.”

I squeeze his hand, encouraging him to continue. “You poor thing. How terrifying.”

“Naturally, I feared the account being discovered. There were nights when you were away on business, where I worried I’d fail the Bianchi mob and you’d come home to find my dead body. You need to understand, it stressed me out of my mind.”

I imagine it did. Speaking from personal experience, the Bianchi mob has a way of fucking with your sanity.

“Cynthia had a thing for me for years. I was never interested. You were all I wanted, and once I had you, I saw no one else. She could have spread her legs for me, and I wouldn’t get a tickle of excitement from it.”

Uncomfortable with his crassness, I squirm in my seat. It’s one thing to have a man talking dirty to you while intimate, but it’s another to hear a man talk crudely about another woman.

“I’m sorry,” he apologizes for his language. “But it’s true. I loved you—still love you.”

“Then why?” I ask flippantly, playing on old emotions to sell my act.

“Every account created crossed her desk,” Trent explains anxiously. “There was no way to hide it from her. You worked in her department, you know this. In order to keep the account from going public in the firm, I had to get Cynthia on my side. I never meant to start an affair. I assumed harmless flirting would keep my client safe. She agreed to stay out of my business and not poke around. However, Cynthia pushed for more than idle flirting.”

Trent looks away, swallowing loudly before returning his attention to me. “Sleeping with her was the fastest way to win over her loyalty. Do not assume this was a decision I took lightly. I hated it. I despised every moment I spent with her when it betrayed you.”

Though he seems sincere, I truly don't give a fuck if he enjoyed himself while he was with Cynthia or not. I have no love lost for the man before me. Nothing he says is a confession of thieving, only a confession of weak morals.

“After a couple months, Cynthia grew restless. She wasn't satisfied with quickies and one-nighters while you were off filling in for business trips she should have been attending. She saw a moment to expose our relationship and took advantage of it.”

“Your birthday,” I answer.

“It's like Cynthia knew I couldn't be forthcoming if she was present when I talked to you. I swear that's why she never gave me a moment to be alone with you.”

“She was there every time you tried to talk to me,” I admit.

“I couldn't get you alone, and Cynthia found every excuse to not leave me alone. You were gone before I explained why I was sleeping with her.”

His shoulders slump, a grimace on his face. “You wouldn't return my calls or text messages, and I couldn't come after you without risking Cynthia informing the board about my client.”

“Damned if you do, damned if you don't,” I muse aloud.

“Exactly,” Trent murmurs, clasping my hand.

I raise an eyebrow, holding his gaze. “Trent, you're not one to let someone hang something over your head. You had months to figure a way out of this situation. What else aren't you telling me?”

He runs his free hand over his tired face before he answers. “Shortly after you left the company, Cynthia came to me with a spreadsheet. I couldn't make sense of what she was showing me until she explained she was stealing funds from clients.

She recalled me saying I wanted to open a firm one day, and she wanted to piggyback on my dream.”

BINGO! We're finally getting somewhere.

I lean forward in my seat, eager to hear more. “You knew about her embezzling from the firm?”

“Yes. Cynthia wanted to ensure she trapped me with her for good. By telling me she was stealing money, she made me her accomplice.”

Finally, something of value from his confession. “What did you do?”

“What could I do? I couldn't report her to the cops without exposing the Oldani account. I couldn't go to the board without risking my job. I was doubly fucked any way you look at it. I tried to convince her to return the money. Lord, how I begged her to get rid of the cash. But Cynthia was delusional, consumed with these grandiose ideas of running away to another country, where I could start my business with her as some sort of trophy wife.”

Trent shakes his head in disgust. “Depressed with losing you, and unable to reason with Cynthia, I sort of floated along in my emotions. When Lorenzo Bianchi's death made national news, I wondered if Luca would come for the money. He was a wanted man and would need cash to start a new life far away from the states. I prayed every night he would come to relieve me of my burden, but he never showed.”

My throat swells, recalling how I felt those nights following Lorenzo's death, fearing Luca would come to make good on his threat to take me by force. I shove down my emotions. I'm on a mission to prove Trent's guilt, and nothing can derail me.

He lips thin as he looks me square in the eyes. “I'll admit, I fantasized about all the cash sitting in the Oldani account and the freedom it offered. As the months passed, I contemplated ways I could take the money and run. Cynthia's embezzlement operation gave me the perfect excuse to put my plan into action.”

“What do you mean?”

“Cynthia had given me the passwords to all her accounts, something she did long before the affair, to entice me into her bed. I had access to everything she touched. Her passwords would only change by the next number up—it was never difficult to guess her updated information.”

“How did you use her information to benefit you?” I try hard to keep the desperation out of my voice.

“I still had her spreadsheet of accounts she was targeting. I accessed the accounts using her key codes and made some extensive transfers into her offshore account.”

I feel my eyes widen in my shock. “You triggered the auditing investigation.”

“Cynthia’s actions were going to catch up to her eventually. I just moved things along.”

“And she never suspected you?”

He shakes his head, a sly smile growing on his face. The asshole is proud of himself. “Cynthia never double-checked her work, not wanting to leave a cyber footprint in the firm’s intranet. But I went in on her behalf all the time.”

“You left the trail for whoever the firm hired to audit,” I say, understanding before narrowing my eyes as new questions arise. “I’m not following your logic. You didn’t want to draw attention to the Oldani file, but your actions were drawing attention to everything happening in the firm. You had to know the Oldani file would be subjected to the same scrutiny as all the other accounts.”

“True, but all fingers would point to Cynthia,” he clarifies. “I could play innocent about my client’s true intentions, and Cynthia would be on the hook for letting the account slip through.”

I cock my head, attempting to seem captivated by his reasoning. “So...you took the Oldani funds? When?”

He beams. “It had to be timed perfectly. I couldn’t take it too soon in the investigations and send off alarm bells on

Cynthia's end, but I couldn't wait for your team to uncover Cynthia's involvement before I made my move.

"Every night, I'd check to see where you were in your investigation with the archived files. It became more difficult when you began scanning the files on your computer system. So instead, I accessed the accounts using Cynthia's pass codes, leaving her trail in my wake. I could see what accounts you'd accessed during the day, since each file is time stamped when opened with the key codes of who looked at the accounts."

"And since you were there when I was assigned my key codes on the team's first day, you knew my pass codes."

"Correct. I knew when you were getting close to the file. The day before I suspected you'd come into contact with it, I manually went into the records and removed the hard copy of the client's info, knowing you'd go to the document control file room to access the current records and find the missing form. I then went in and moved the funds from the Oldani account using Cynthia's password activation. I moved it to an offshore account before I transferred the account to a new owner in a different offshore account at the opposite end of the world."

"And you were the new owner of the funds," I prompt.

"Yes," he confesses, his eyes swiveling between mine, like he's trying to gauge my reaction.

My next question will determine Trent's fate. "What do you plan to do with the money?"

He gives a humorless laugh. "Isn't it obvious?"

"No, it's not. Do you intend to hand it over to the FBI and clear your name?"

Trent takes his free hand and digs into the inside pocket of his suit coat. He pulls a giant solitaire diamond ring from his pocket, holding it out to me. "I've waited a long time to give you this. Had it long before Cynthia came between us. I felt a ring wasn't enough to win you back, but maybe a nest egg would. The money is ours, my love. It's for us to start our new life together wherever we want."

I close my eyes and give him one last chance to make the right choice. “Trent, you need to hand the Oldani funds over to the feds. It’s blood money.”

“If I do that, Simone, I’m a sitting duck for the mob. The FBI may think Cynthia has hidden it away somewhere, but I have no clue who Luca or Lorenzo told about me overseeing the account. For all I know, there’s a target on my back. Starting a new life away from here is my only safe bet.”

A part of me wants to believe there’s good inside of Trent, but I see he’s lost in greed. “Then why did you wait? Why not take the money and run long ago?”

“Because I was waiting for you,” he rasps, his voice thick with emotion, almost desperate in its intent. “I stayed for you, hoping you’d return on your own once you calmed down. All my months of planning for this evacuation, I didn’t do it without factoring you into the equation. I wasn’t going to leave without you. You returning to audit the firm was the day Heaven answered my prayers.”

His brows pull together, and his tanned skin grows dark. He grips my hand too tight for comfort. Resentment permeates from him as he says, “But you showed up with *him*.”

I tug on my hand, but he won’t let go, rooting me to the spot.

“A fucking grease-stained biker.” His lips curl over his teeth. “Did you love him? Did you mean what you said in the conference room when you said he gave you everything you wanted and more?”

Again, I try to free myself from his hold. Fear spikes in my nerves. “Let go of me, Trent.”

“No. Answer me, Simone.”

“I’ll answer honestly if you answer one last question,” I reason.

“Then ask it,” he spits through his teeth. “But then you answer my question. If your answer is no, good—I hope it is. And if the answer is yes, you will come back to our condo,

where I will fuck you on the table like I watched him fuck you at the firm, until you forget his name.”

My mouth falls open, horrified.

How does he know about that?

My stomach clenches, recalling the events that night after Chase and I had sex in the conference room. The door I heard swinging closed afterward had to be Trent leaving after he watched us together.

Queasy, I cover my mouth with my free hand. My skin crawls knowing my ex witnessed me exposed and claimed by my lover.

His lips curl into a cruel smirk. “Yeah, I saw what you let that piece of shit do to you. Things you never did with me. You have no idea how badly I wanted to pull my gun on him and end his sorry existence. I had my firearm on me. Had it pointed right at his ugly head as you let him plow your throat like a cheap whore.”

Oh. My. God.

He sits back in his chair, completely blasé about contemplating murder. “Instead, I unleashed a virus into the computer servers to buy myself more time to win you back and set about finishing off Cynthia for good. Gave her the gun and watched her slowly unravel.”

I shake my head, tears springing to my eyes. He wanted to kill Chase. He was responsible for the Trojan malware being set loose. And he gave Cynthia the weapon she pulled on me.

Cold fear washes over me. The confidence I had at the beginning of this interrogation is long gone. In its place is uncertainty.

“Ask. Your. Question,” he snarls in a low tone, spittle flying from his mouth like a wild animal.

Something about Trent’s demand pushes my panic aside. I’m sick of being placed in shitty situations by shittier people. First, Luca threatening to rape me. Then, Cynthia pointing a

gun at my head. And now, my ex-boyfriend thinking he can force his way back into my life, where he isn't wanted.

Enough already. I am stronger than this. Nobody has control over me but me.

My voice shakes as I fight through my nerves, determined to end this. “Did you mean to kill Cynthia, or were you trying to protect me?”

Trent's eyes oddly soften, but his smile is evil incarnate. “There's no way I was going to let her take you away from me again. Killing her was bound to happen at some point. She just gave me a good excuse and cover to end her sooner.”

Got you, you sonofabitch!

Bolder than ever, I flip over my phone and see the FBI agent has stayed on the line. I turn up the volume and hit the speaker button. “Did you get all that?”

“Yes, I did. Trent Grills, please remain where you are. FBI agents have been dispatched. Surrender, and you won't be harmed.”

Trent stares wide-eyed in horror at my cell. He lifts his hazel eyes to mine, locking gazes.

Empowered, I lift my chin. “To answer your question, yes, I love Chase. And I meant every damn word about him being the one for me.”

And because it's too easy, I smile as I deliver the final blow. “Look at the bright side. Your skin will match your orange prison uniform—you're already color-coordinated for the occasion.”

Hurt, betrayal, and disbelief pass through his face in a single moment before he jumps from the table, knocking over his chair with a loud clatter. He spins away from the table, racing to the exit and throwing himself through the doors. I follow his movements through the restaurant windows as he takes off down the street, with sirens howling in the distance.

CHAPTER FIFTY- FOUR

As the FBI agent instructed, I wait for the feds to arrive at the hotel restaurant. They commend me on my bravery, thank me for exposing Trent's nefarious doings, and half-joke about me joining the bureau. I respectfully decline.

The agents ask a few more arbitrary questions and send me on my way.

Walking out of the hotel restaurant, I call headquarters' tech department. PT answers my call. "Mercy Ravens Security. How can I assist you?"

"Hi, Tom. This is Simone. Could you send me Piero Bianchi's number? I have information regarding his case."

"Sure thing, Miss Holland." PT disconnects and texts me the mafia don's number.

I take a deep breath and call Piero.

"Yes?" a silky accent greets me in a clipped tone. The man is all business, all the time. I appreciate his directness.

"Signore Bianchi," I greet sweetly. "I know who's responsible for stealing the Oldani funds."

"Simone? *Un momento.*" He pauses our conversation, giving muffled orders in Italian. It sounds like he may have been in a meeting and sent everyone out of the room. With the background now quiet, he chuckles into his cell. "Does your biker know you're calling me?"

"I'm handling this solo."

Piero hums with approval. “A woman taking charge—I like it.”

I roll my eyes, grateful the mobster isn’t able to see my reaction to his blatant flirting. “Taken, Piero—I’m taken. Well, I hope I still am. I’m afraid Chase may be upset with me at the moment.”

“The man would be a fool to walk away from you. He may be mad, but I’m sure it’s nothing a little conversation couldn’t fix.”

“My hope as well.”

“So...you have a name,” he purrs, anticipation coating his voice. I imagine him sitting back in his leather chair, rubbing his hands together like some master villain in a movie. It reminds me I’m talking to a very dangerous, high-ranking member of a notorious crime family with a reputation for breaking the law.

Warring internally, I rub at my neck, reminding myself I’m doing the right thing. Trent made his bed—I’m not responsible for how Piero may retaliate against him.

“The man responsible for taking your money is Trent Grills, former investment accountant at P.L. Moore Financial, in Sacramento.”

“Former?”

“Pretty sure the firm isn’t going to want him back. I sort of tipped off the FBI to him embezzling from the firm, and he’s now on the run.”

“Simone,” Piero chuckles. “You’re delightful.”

“You mind telling Chase that? I could use a good word.”

“I will sing your praises. Anything else I should know?”

“Find Trent, and you’ll find your money. You’ll need his access code to retrieve the money wherever he’s deposited it unless you have an amazing hacker like Chase. Passwords change, but Trent’s a creature of habit. Try ‘Simone&TrentForever8’ or a variation of it if he’s not cooperative.”

The mobster is quiet for a long moment before he asks, “This man, he was a former lover, *si*?”

“Once upon a time,” I grate begrudgingly. There’s no point dwelling on how Piero knows this intimate detail of my past. A man of his stature and wealth does his own background checks on those he associates with.

“Did he hurt you?”

“Nothing I can’t live with,” I answer honestly. “But he’s dangerous. He murdered his former lover, and he was rather aggressive earlier with me. He may be armed, and he’s good with a gun. Please be careful.”

I can hear him drum his fingers on a hard surface. “I will proceed cautiously. Thank you for your help, *amor*. I will deposit what I owe to your MC when we disconnect.”

“Pleasure doing business with you, Signore Bianchi.”

“Likewise, Miss Holland.”

I’m about to hang up when Piero says, “And Simone...”

“Yes?”

“If your biker refuses to listen to reason, reach back out to me. I would love to make him jealous.” He laughs, ending our call.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

Moving as fast as my feet will allow, I rush back to the hotel suite, ready to confront Chase and fully prepared to grovel if need be. The hurt in my man's face as he thought I was choosing Trent over him, completely misunderstanding my intent, was soul-shattering. I'm familiar with that crushing feeling all too well when your partner chooses another, and I hate I made him feel that way.

Chase may despise me currently, but when I explain what I've done, I'm certain he'll understand. Especially if I confess my love for him.

It's been a couple hours since I left the hotel room with Trent, a couple hours too long. Going a minute thinking your partner doesn't want you is torturous enough, let alone two hours. My heart hurts knowing he went all this time in pain when it wasn't necessary. If there's a way for me to erase the pain I've inflicted, I'll do it.

When I open the door to my suite, it's not Chase who greets me, but Punk.

He gives me a dirty look once I enter the room. "About time you came back. How was your lunch date with your ex, or should I say boyfriend?"

Ignoring Punk's jab, my eyes sweep the room, looking for Chase. "Where is he?"

"Why do you care?"

I run into the bathroom, hoping to find him there, but he's not. "Dammit, Punk. Where is Chase?"

“Gone.”

I pop my head out of the bathroom, dread filling my insides. “What do you mean, gone? Like he’s in your suite, or he went out?”

Punk shakes his head. His lips turn downward in a scowl. “No, gone as in he and the rest of the team headed back home as soon as you chose dick-for-brains over my best friend. The only reason I’m still here is as a courtesy to Jo. Also, Atlas would kill me if we left you without security. Trust me, I’d much rather be on the road with my brother than stuck here with you.”

My stomach twists. I wrap my arms around my midsection as my anxiety spikes through the roof. “He left me?”

“What did you expect, Priss?” Punk jeers, looking at me like I’m the dumbest person on the planet. “You chose your ex over Chase. Why the fuck would he stay when the job is done and he has no reason to remain here? Did you expect him to pine away for a woman who rejected him? Fuck that noise, and fuck you.”

“The job wasn’t done, Moron!” I shout in aggravation.

I dig my cell out of my purse and call Chase, but it goes straight to voicemail. If he’s riding his bike, he won’t answer anyway. However, if he turned it off, it means he doesn’t want to be bothered.

“Fuck!”

I do the next logical thing and send him a text, hoping he sees it once he turns on his phone. There’s no way I’m going to inform him I love him for the first time via text. I settle on a generic but pleading message instead.

Call me, please. It’s important.

Tossing my cell on the bed, I rush to the closet, grabbing my clothes off the hangers before hastily throwing them into my open suitcase, which I’d left on the bed earlier.

“We have to hurry and catch up to him.”

Punk grabs me around my forearm, bringing me to a screeching halt. “What do you mean, the job wasn’t done?”

“Punk, we don’t have time. I can explain on the road.”

“Make time,” he spits through his teeth, his face red with irritation.

With a frustrated cry, I yank my arm free. “Then shut up and listen for once, without being a dick.”

I explain how Cynthia’s last word didn’t sit right with me, how when I saw Trent again, it triggered my suspicions that he was at fault for the embezzlement of the Oldani account, and how I made a rash decision to go with Trent to lunch to get him to fess up while the FBI listened to our conversation through my cell.

“There was no time to explain it to Chase. Trent wasn’t going to confess anything unless I was alone with him, and I wasn’t about to let him get away with what he’d done. The feds are searching for Trent, as well as Piero and his men. Satisfied?”

“Why is Piero looking for him?”

“Because I told him who took his money.”

Punk gawks at me with his mouth hanging open in utter shock. “You sold out Trent? Do you realize how badass you are? That’s the ultimate ‘fuck you’ from a woman scorned.”

“Save your praises for later. We’re wasting daylight. Pack your shit. We have to find Chase.”

“Holy shit!” Punk springs into action, racing across the hall to grab his things.

We check out of the hotel and are in the SUV in less than fifteen minutes. “How long ago did they leave?”

“Right after you left with the fugitive.” He looks at his watch. “The team has a good two to three-hour lead on us.”

I run my trembling hands down my face. “Do we know where they’re staying once they stop?”

Punk turns over the SUV, pulling out onto the road. “Not a clue.”

Tears brim the surface of my eyes. Have my actions wounded Chase too deeply to earn his forgiveness? “I can’t lose him, Punk.”

He gently squeezes my shoulder. “I know. We’ll find him. It’s what our crew is best at, tracking people. And when we find him, you’re going to make him listen to you—I’ll hold him down if need be.”

Tracking! Why didn’t I think of that first?

Digging my phone out of my purse, I click on the crew’s tracking app, the one every member of the MC has as security. Chase is a bright red dot, a beacon to follow.

“He’s heading north on I-fifteen.”

Punk gives me a cheesy grin. “Look at you, taking a page out of your old man’s book.” He reaches over, rumpling my hair. “I’m so proud of you for finally figuring out your shit. You’re going to be so good for my brother. The fucker needs a dose of his own medicine to keep him in line. Never doubted your feelings for him.”

I slap away his hand but can’t help laughing at him. “You’re so full of it. Stop messing around, Moron. I have a biker to chase down.”

He laughs as he floors the SUV. “Hang on, Priss. It’s going to be one hell of a ride.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

S in City seemed like a good place to wallow in my pity. After finishing this last case, Atlas isn't going to tell me I can't have a fucking few days off before returning to headquarters. I sent a text to Prez stating just that, ignoring all the missed calls and texts from everyone else, including hers. I need this time to myself to build a wall around my fractured heart before confronting Simone, if she even returns to Colorado.

Bile rises in my throat at the thought of not seeing her again. She may not return to Fort Collins since she's back with the micro-dick. A moving company could easily return her things to Trent's condo in Sacramento. Her old firm would give her job back to her after the stellar work she did in the audit. Hell, they may give her Cynthia's old position, since Simone earned a damn raise for a job well-done.

Me begging her not to go and watching her choose Trent over me may have been the last time I ever lay eyes on her. The poignant look on her face before she turned away will forever haunt me.

I sip my bourbon, wanting to dash my sorrow away. Unlike some of my brothers, I don't feel the need to get shit-faced when I'm drowning in self-hatred. I center my attention elsewhere, focusing on something requiring all my concentration.

Usually, I'd find a willing woman to fuck for my distraction. The hell if I go there now, though. The idea of screwing another woman, let alone kissing one, has no appeal to me. Simone has ruined me for all others. A man can't return

to a fuckboy once he's found his other half. Even if she doesn't feel the same.

Instead, I sit at a blackjack table in an ostentatious casino on Las Vegas Boulevard, counting cards. A few hours have slipped by, with me fattening my wallet as the void in my heart grows.

Ziggy, Butch, and Candy hover nearby at a different table, giving me space while monitoring me. Their company on my heartbreak journey is comforting, but family can't fix a bleeding heart.

I didn't think much of Butch riding out with me—it's what our crew does for one another. He saw my pain and wanted to help.

However, I raised an eyebrow when Candy came bounding out the door with him and climbed on the back of his hog like it was old hat. The sad look on her face told me Butch informed her of what had happened between me and Simone. It bothered me slightly having my old lady's friend along with us, but I appreciated her keeping her thoughts to herself.

The biggest shock was when Ziggy climbed on the back of my hog to join our road crew. Ziggy and Candy flew out, meaning he didn't have his motorcycle. We couldn't take the SUV, because Punk needed a ride home.

To Ziggy, sharing a bike with a man is no biggy. He does it all the time with his husband, Jared. For me, it was awkward, never having had a man on my hog before. The only one who's ridden with me is Simone—it's her spot. But I had to leave Sacramento before I burned down the city, and the crew wasn't going to let me ride alone.

Shrugging, I said fuck it and rode out with Ziggy sitting bitch and Butch and Candy riding beside us. We had a lot of vehicles lay on their horns when we sped past on the eight-hour drive to Vegas. I suppose seeing two big, burly motherfuckers riding one hog down the highway is worthy of a few honks. It didn't help that Ziggy waved like a member of the British royal family each time we passed a car. Punk will never stop giving me crap about it once he finds out.

My best friend should be with me on this journey. I hate how Punk agreed to stay behind, but I'm grateful to him as well. There's no way I could have left Simone without someone watching out for her, at least until she's settled back into her old life. And there's no one I trust more than him. Punk will make sure she's safe before coming home.

Though I'm surrounded by flashing bright lights, beeping slot machines, a card game in front of me, and my MC family nearby, it's not enough to take my mind off Simone. I cannot shake her memory. She lingers in the recesses of my mind like her natural perfume on her pillow, faint but present. Never fading.

The more I recall her alluring scent, the stronger it gets, pulverizing what little remains of my tattered heart.

"Chase," her voice echoes in my head.

Desperate to dash away the ghost of her memory, I knock back the last of my drink, hating how the burn does nothing to soothe the ache in my body.

"Chase," her ghost calls out again.

Christ, I'm losing it. I grab at my head, my fingers digging into my tangled hair. Her scent grows stronger, burning my nostrils. "Please," I beg helplessly under my breath. "Go away."

"If you think for one damn minute I let Punk drive like a NASCAR maniac for eight hours to bring me here just to have you tell me to go away, then you have another think coming, Shawn Brighton."

"What the?" I mumble, raising my head slowly from my hands. I dare not breathe as I peek over my shoulder, too scared to believe what I'm seeing is real.

Simone stands directly behind me, looking angrier than a hellcat thrown into a tub of water. She pushes right into my space, the storm clouds in her eyes rolling dangerously. She jabs a sharp fingernail into my cut.

"How dare you take off and leave me in Sacramento? You honestly think I'd choose Trent over you? After what he put

me through, you thought I'd go back to him? You wouldn't even give me the opportunity to clear the air by answering my calls or text, you asshat."

I grab her wrist to stop her from bruising my chest. Her skin is warm under my touch, pliant and soft. I'm not imagining things. Simone is here, reaming me out.

Unable to speak, I stare at her, confused as fuck.

Simone cups my face with her free hand, leaning into me. "There was never a competition with you two. It was always you, Chase. You're my endgame."

My brows pinch together. The visual of her walking away with Trent still fresh in my mind. "You left with him."

"Christ, you're dense sometimes for having such a brilliant mind. Cynthia was a scapegoat. Trent was the one who stole the Oldani funds."

"Is that what you were saying in your sleep? Trent. Oldani. Stole?"

"It's what Cynthia struggled to say right before she passed."

Simone explains how Trent was the mastermind behind the pilfering operation. Cynthia was guilty of stealing from clients, but Trent was pulling the strings the whole time to distract us while he took the Bianchi mob funds.

"What she's saying is true, bro. The FBI is hunting Trent as we speak," Punk confirms, coming to stand behind Simone.

Trent took Bianchi's money? Why, that little prick!

"Fuck the feds," I snarl. I yank out my cell, calling the one man who'd be the most interested in knowing where his money is.

Piero Bianchi answers on the first ring. "Chase? To what do I owe the pleasure of your call?"

"You want the funds your cousin, Lorenzo, had stashed away at P.L. Moore Financial?"

"What is this? *Groundhog Day*?"

“Huh?”

“Unless you’ve located Trent Grills or have my money, I don’t have time to go through all this again.”

“Again?” I ask, bewildered. I take a second to look at my phone to make sure I dialed the right number.

“You really need to talk to your woman. Get over your hurt feelings already. She did your team a favor. She already informed me who has my money and how to access his accounts. My team is currently tracking Trent’s movements.”

Surprised, I slowly turn toward Simone. “You ratted out your ex to the mob?”

“Why are you surprised?” she asks defensively, her hands on her cocked hips. “He played us the entire time and killed a woman. Was I supposed to let it go?”

I can almost hear the wicked grin in Piero’s voice. “Forgive her, you lucky bastard. Women like her are as rare as winning the jackpot. Now if you don’t mind, I have a hunting party to get back to.” He ends the call.

Punk gives me a goofy smile. “Trent is toast.”

“Damn straight he is.” The asshole had it coming. I hope Piero makes it hurt.

I pocket my cell and wrap my arms around Simone’s waist, yanking her between my thighs where I sit in my stool. “Enough talk of the fucknut. I want to hear more about how I’m the one for you.”

Smiling, Simone melts against me as she wraps her arms around my neck, her flora musk engulfing me. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t choosing him over you. There was no time to explain. I acted on what I thought was the best interest of the team to nail the fucker.”

I smile at her, loving how she’s trying to deflect from revealing her true feelings. “I already know you’re sorry. Your presence proves it. I’m not asking for apologies. You know what I wanna hear.”

She scowls like she always does when I demand something from her, making me smile so damn hard, my face aches.

“You wanna know how I feel about you? Fine. I think you’re a crude, stubborn ass who isn’t happy until he gets what he wants.”

I bark with laughter. “Numbers, you’re an adorable brat. Just admit it, you’re crazy for me.”

She shakes her head. “Crazy doesn’t cover it.” She leans in until her nose grazes mine. “I fucking love you and have since our first night together. I was too chickenshit to admit it to myself for a long time. But I’m not afraid anymore. I love you, Chase.”

Her soft lips press against mine, kissing me with abandon. My fingers fly into her hair, lacing through her silky locks to hold her in place while I devour her. My lips force hers open, where I attack her tongue with my own, making love to her mouth the way I intend to do the rest of my life.

Wanting to taunt her further, I break the kiss and stare deep into her stormy eyes. “Prove it.”

Simone purses her lips like she’s contemplating something. She looks towards the front entrance of the casino. Nothing beyond the exit but more casinos, hotels, and chapels. I’m not sure where her head is.

She turns back to me, straightening her shoulders. A sly grin creeps across her face as she sinks to her knees. My eyeballs nearly pop out of my head at what I’m witnessing.

Punk slaps his hands over his eyes. “Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!”

I grab Simone by her forearms, trying to yank her back to her feet. “Baby, not here. Let me get a room first.”

Simone slaps me on my stomach. “Get your head out of the gutter, you fool. I’m not going down on you.”

Punk uncovers his eyes, sighing heavily. “Oh, thank fuck. I thought I was going to be scarred for life.”

“Then why are you on your knees?” I ask, embarrassed at reading the situation wrong.

“Because I’m proposing to you, you perverted caveman.”

There’s no way I heard Simone correctly. I gulp, croaking, “What?”

“Chase,” Simone says longingly. “Marry me. Here. Today. We can go to one of those chapels on the strip and make this as official as it gets. Please, Chase. Be my husband and old man.”

Never in a million years did I imagine Simone proposing to me. If anything, I half-expected to drag her down the aisle to marry her. And here she is, on her knees, asking me to be her forever man.

CHAPTER FIFTY- SEVEN

“**F**UCK YEAH!” I shout, snagging her under her armpits and hauling her in the air.

I stamp her plump lips with a claiming kiss, swinging her around in a circle. She squeals with laughter between my kisses.

When I set her back on her feet, I whistle to get the team’s attention. “Wedding time. Let’s move.”

They cheer and throw back their drinks before joining us.

Quickly, I collect my earnings at the blackjack table. I’m going to need this cash for all the wedding things I have planned. I take Simone’s hand and jog toward the other end of the casino.

“Chase, slow down. I’m not built for running.”

There’s no way I’m slowing down, not when I finally have Simone right where I want her. She’ll have enough time to rest once I send her sweet ass in to get pampered.

We push through the entrance of the spa inside the casino. The staff members gasp as I barrel toward the reception desk and slap my credit card on the counter. “Give my woman whatever she wants. Hair, makeup, nails, the works.” I motion to Candy as well. “Give her maid of honor whatever she needs, too.”

“Shawn Brighton, stop being a demanding ass,” my fiancée scolds, with a hand on her hip.

“Oh, baby. I love it when you clap back. Makes me hard as stone.”

Before she can brat me some more, I clasp my hand around the back of Simone's neck, bringing my lips down on hers. I kiss the sass right out of her, leaving her a panting mess.

Pressing my forehead to hers, I rasp, "I'll be back in a few hours to pick you up. Be ready, future Missus Brighton."

On a mission, I stalk out of the spa with the guys and go to cash out my winnings. The teller looks me over in my leather biker cut before he shrugs and pays me. Our crew chuckles quietly, knowing I played the casino. No one thinks I'm smart enough to count cards. They see a biker and assume I'm dumber than a rock.

Speaking of rocks...

The jeweler is my next stop. I demand the best, forking over sixty grand of my winnings for a five-carat, pear-shaped diamond engagement band. Another ten grand gets me pear-shaped diamond earrings to gift to my new bride, plus two wedding bands—one for her, and one for me. When I get home, I'm having Darnel tattoo a band on me like he did for Atlas, Gauge, and Ziggy.

"You know," Punk says, leaning his hip against the glass jewelry showcase, "your best man could use some black diamond studs. It would make such a gracious gift for racing your bride to you."

"Candy would love a pair, too," Butch adds.

"And some of those swanky money clips for your two other guests," Ziggy tacks on, with a waggle of his eyebrows. Butch grins, fist-bumping Ziggy.

Rolling my eyes, I end up buying everything. They helped bring me and Simone together, and it's not like I don't have the money. I have the jewelry sent over to the girls in the spa, minus Simone's rings. The first time she sees them is when I put them on her finger.

"Sir?" A hotel concierge approaches me with a key card. "Compliments of Signore Bianchi. He said to say,

‘Congratulations on your engagement.’ The penthouse is yours for the rest of the week. Enjoy.”

Knowing Piero or one of his men is watching us, I look up at the camera in the corner of the jewelers’ shop and give a salute.

Ziggy whistles low between his teeth. “Is there anything the mobster doesn’t own?”

Butch snorts. “Yeah. Us.”

Punk plucks the keycard out of my hand. “Works out good. Gives you enough time to clean your ugly ass up before we pick up the ladies.”

“My ass is not ugly.” I laugh, shoving him teasingly in the chest. “And I’m not wearing a monkey suit. I’m a biker. I’ll wear my cut, and she’s finally going to wear my property patch.”

Punk gives me a mocking smile. “Think again, brother. Priss isn’t going to wear anything other than designer when she walks down the aisle to you.”

We’ll see about that. I’ll have her in the property-patched leather jacket I had customized for her months ago by the time we exchange vows. I’ll even wager the rest of my winnings.

We spend the next hour sending over a fashion stylist to dress the women, cleaning up our scruffy faces at the barbers, and fitting me in an edgy outfit that looks fucking good under my cut.

I pace nervously outside the spa doors, waiting anxiously for Simone to emerge. I’m half-worried she’s changed her mind and made a run for it out the back door.

“I knew I should have marched her ass right to the chapel,” I mutter. “She’s going to keep me waiting on pins and needles.”

“She’s not doing it on purpose,” Punk says on a yawn, leaning against the wall. “A woman goes through a lot for an occasion like her wedding.”

My anxiety continues to spike until Simone exits the spa with Candy.

The air in my lungs gets trapped as I take in my future wife. She's wearing a body-hugging, white-wrap, mid-calf dress. She spins in a circle with her arms out at her sides to give me the full effect. It molds to her curves like a second skin, showcasing her hourglass shape in the most seductive way imaginable. A slit runs up the back of her skirt, stopping right under her heart-shaped bottom. Plenty of cleavage spills over the top of her bodice. Her hair is down the way I like but pinned back on one side to showcase the long column of her neck and earrings I sent over. And her makeup is artfully done, the way she always has it.

She's stunning, and she's about to tie the knot with me.

A groan escapes me as I reach out to pull her close. "Fucking hell, Numbers." I kiss her as softly as I can manage without messing up her blood-red lips. "After we've exchanged rings, I want your lip marks all over my face."

Simone cocks an eyebrow at me, a seductive smile playing at the corners of her mouth. "Only your face? I could have sworn you would have loved it around your cock."

And now I'm sporting wood like a pubescent teen.

"Chapel, NOW!" I holler to the rest of our wedding party, trying hard to calm down my erection. Getting married with tented jeans wasn't on the agenda. Guess I'll have to make do with it.

I'm running our asses across the boulevard to the chapel. Simone hollers at me to slow down. "I'm going to break a heel on one of my pumps if you force me to move any faster."

"I'll buy you another pair of heels. I don't care if they're fucking Louboutin or whatever the hell you like," I rasp over my shoulder where she drags along, my feet not slowing.

She yanks me to a halt. "I don't want my hair or outfit ruined. Stop tugging on me."

The woman may be a pain in my ass, but she's mine. Without skipping a beat, I throw her over my shoulder and

sprint the rest of the way.

Simone slaps my ass, and I slap hers back, with a smile. “This is going to be such a fun marriage.”

I storm inside the chapel, with Simone slung over my shoulder like a bag of flour. “Where’s the officiant?”

A man dressed as Elvis in a rhinestone jumpsuit comes running up to the altar. “Uh-huh, uh-huh, uh-huh. That would be me. Are you two lovebirds looking to get married?”

“Not if he doesn’t put this lovebird on her feet,” Simone growls, smacking my butt.

“Only if this lovebird agrees to wear my property patch,” I counter, slapping her rump back.

“Ow!” Simone smacks my backside again, and I return the favor. “Forget it.”

“You broke my heart.” I slap her peach. “Make it up to me.”

“This is mildly entertaining,” Candy muses.

Butch sniggers beside her, nodding in agreement.

After a couple rounds of Whac-A-Mole on each other’s asses, Simone finally relents. “Ugh! Okay, you win. I’ll wear your property patch. Just put me down. If my hair is wrecked, so help me God, I will whip your ass with my leather jacket.”

“Yeeeesss,” I hiss victoriously as I set her carefully on her stiletto-feet.

Simone mutters to herself, smoothing out her hair. Punk throws me the property-patch jacket we retrieved before picking up the women. I hold it out for her to slip her arms through, with the biggest fucking grin consuming my face.

She glowers at me a moment before she turns to don the coat. She turns back to face me, and I swear my heart stops. Simone looks like the most seductive bad-ass biker babe. She must see how damn happy I am. Her own vibrant smile takes over her lovely oval face.

“Are you happy now?”

“As soon as you say *I do*, I’ll be over the fucking moon.”

Our Elvis officiant clears his throat. He goes through the spiel about wedding packages, and I wave at him to stop. “Give us the whole shebang and get this show on the road.”

A photographer comes running out from the back room, along with another staff member shoving flowers everywhere. Music plays out of the speakers in the walls, and the lights dim for extra ambiance.

Elvis gives us a crooked smile. “Shall we begin with the vows?”

“Wait!” Punk yanks out his cell. “I have to FaceTime Jo. I already filled in the family. They’d kill us if they missed this.”

“Is it happening?” Jo asks excitedly on the other end of the speaker.

“Oh, it’s happening alright,” I holler enthusiastically, my chest puffed out proudly.

There’s a lot of loud cheering pouring from the phone. I regret not having the rest of my brothers and Simone’s family present. But as I look at my stunning bride, looking like the sexy goddess Venus herself, I wouldn’t change this outcome for nothing.

“The entire crew is here for the big moment,” Jo announces cheerfully.

Butch takes Punk’s cell, turning it to face us. We can see our family back at headquarters. Jo has our nephews in her lap, waving their chubby arms. Atlas sits beside her, with his arm slung around his family like a protective wall. Simone’s parents are both crying, yet they look pleased. The rest of the MC is scattered in the background, waving at us with wide smiles.

I turn back to Simone, finding her crying happy tears. Taking her face in my hands, I brush away those tears and kiss her.

Punk and Candy take their places as our witnesses as the show gets underway.

“Dearly beloved,” Elvis sings, “we are gathered here today to join this biker and old lady in holy matrimony.” Elvis does a few weird hip shimmies before looking pointedly at me. “Do you...” He motions for me to fill in the blank.

“Shawn ‘Chase’ Brighton.”

Elvis continues his song. “Take this Lover Doll to be your wife? To love her softly and tenderly, cherish and honor her from now until eternity?”

Jacked on endorphins, I stomp my foot excitedly. “Fuck yeah, I do. To all the above, plus some rough loving.”

Everyone laughs at my enthusiasm, even my bride.

Elvis sways his swinging hips toward Simone. The motion makes Elvis’s wig wobble on his head like a plate of Jell-O. “And do you...”

“Simone Eira Holland.”

“Take this hunk-a-hunk-a burning love to be your husband? To love him softly and tenderly, cherish and honor him from now until eternity?”

Simone gives me the most breathtaking smile. So much love and promise radiates from her, I can feel it on my skin like a warm sunray. “I do.”

Elvis does some weird air guitar movement with his arms. “The rings?”

I take the rings out of my cut, handing her the ring she’ll put on my finger to solidify us forever.

“Repeat after me,” Elvis says to Simone.

Simone recites the simple vow, then slips the ring onto my finger. I do the same when it’s my turn.

Simone’s eyes bulge when she looks at the rock I placed on her finger. “Jesus!”

“My name’s ‘Chase,’ Numbers,” I tease her, with a wink.

“By virtue of the authority vested in me under the laws of the State of Nevada, I now pronounce you old man and old

lady. You may kiss your lovely bride.”

“Mine,” I practically growl before I pounce on Simone, encasing her against my body with my arms and sealing our union with one hell of a kiss.

Simone wraps her arms around my neck, yanking us flush together. My wife doesn’t fight me, instead devouring my mouth the way I’m doing hers.

A camera flashes, confetti is thrown, and everyone claps and whistles. The music volume turns up, drowning out everything else around us.

I’m beyond the luckiest man alive, having this woman in my embrace, wearing my patch and sharing my last name.

CHAPTER FIFTY- EIGHT

Chase and I stumble into our room in the penthouse, a wild mess of wandering hands, clashing tongues and teeth, and feverish need. I'm sure the suite is amazing, considering Piero Bianchi owns it, but I'm solely focused on my husband—my hipster-dressing, caveman possessive, loving biker.

We went through all the wedding formalities—signing the marriage certificate, photos, and wining and dining with our family present until the sun came up. But the last few hours, we've been trying to escape to our room, desperate to connect on the most intimate of levels. We saw a moment to break from the group and ran for it, laughing like kids up to no good all the way to the penthouse.

"I fucking need you," Chase groans against my throat with his hot mouth, his tongue licking the entire length of my neck. His fingers find the zipper on my dress, and he slides it down in one swift movement. With a little tugging, the material parts down my body, exposing my naked breasts and bare bottom.

Clenching my waist and yanking me flush to his body, Chase growls, "You were commando this entire time? All those sleazy men in the casino were eye-fucking my woman while she was sporting no panties under her dress?!"

His hand cracks against my bottom, making me jump. My insides clench eagerly as I grow damp between my thighs, ready for whatever he plans to give me.

"Naughty wife."

A laugh bubbles in my throat as I shove his cut off his shoulders. "You love me this way."

“I love you every way,” he croons before grabbing his shirt behind his neck and yanking it over his head. “Bratty, obstinate, demanding, loving—all of it. Love it when you give yourself over to me. On your back or on your knees.”

My fingers fumble with his belt buckle, desperate to take his hard length out of his pants.

“Love the way you scream your release when I dip my tongue into your creamy center. Love the taste of your juices in my mouth as I suck you out.”

I can’t get him naked fast enough. His zipper hisses around the room with how hard I yank it down.

Chase shoves his jeans down his legs, stepping out of them. He prowls into my space, lifting me into his arms like I weigh nothing. I wrap my arms and legs around him, his rigid dick trapped between us, coating us both with his need.

Sucking on my bottom lip, he walks us to the bedroom window, where our room overlooks the entire city. The sun is shining in the early morning sky, not a cloud in sight.

“I need the whole world to witness this. Everyone needs to see you’re all mine.”

He presses my back against the cool glass of the window. I gasp, arching my back, pushing my chest against his. The rough friction of his coarse chest hair simulates my sensitive nipples, making them ache with need. He pushes my body firmly against the window with his, anchoring us to the spot.

“I love the way your cunt clutches my cock when I first enter you,” he says, readjusting our angle before driving himself inside of me.

I scream with pleasure, my body humming with delight. “Fuck, yes, more.”

He takes both my wrists in his hands, pinning them above my head against the glass before driving into me again.

My mouth falls open in a silent moan, the back of my head resting against the window as he plows into me over and over...

“More than anything,” he grunts between thrusts, “I love you loving me back.”

Drunk on his cock, I open my eyes with a smile. “You mean you love how I love you more.”

He pauses his hips, his eyes narrowed and face pinched. “Take. It. Back.”

“Never,” I tease, giggling at his peeved face.

“Take it back, Simone, or I take away my dick,” he warns.

I rotate my hips on his stiff cock, rubbing my clit against his pelvis. “No, you won’t.”

He stiffens, feeling how I’m stimulating both of us. “Simone...” he warns again weakly, his voice betraying him. He won’t pull away when I have him revved up and ready to blow.

My hips pick up the pace, my rotations more forceful. “See, I love you more, and you know it.”

“Fucking brat,” he groans, cocking his hips before slamming into me. “I’ll prove I love you more.”

“I’d like to see you try,” I quip, with a smile.

Chase does something foreign with his hip movements, making my toes curl and pussy spasm. “Oh, Chase. My God, yes. Right there...right there...don’t stop...don’t you dare fucking stop.”

“That’s right,” he says, with a sharp smile. “You know I love you more.”

“Shut up, Caveman, and fucking breed me.”

Caught off guard with my response, his movements falter. “You serious?”

“As serious as canceling my Depo shot appointment for next week. I may be fertile right—”

I don’t get to finish my sentence before he rails me with new vivacity against the window. The glass shakes in protest

with each of his hard thrusts. If the window cracks and we fall to our death, so be it. We'll go out happy.

“Fuck, Numbers. I'm going to fill you with my cum—your womb will be full of my babies.”

My lower abdomen tightens, my walls trembling with my imminent release. “Yes, fill me,” I mewl greedily. “I want a baby. Give me a baby!”

He drills into me, deeper than before. I swear I can feel him in my stomach. His apadravya piercing drags across my stimulated inside, throwing my nerve endings into overdrive. My body stiffens before my insides implode. Sparks of white light dance behind my eyelids as I scream Chase's name through my release, my pussy clenching and unclenching around his cock.

Chase shoves deep inside me, releasing the sexiest, most raw moan.

We stay connected, catching our breath and drugged out on euphoria. After a couple minutes, Chase releases my wrists. He slowly pulls out, letting me slide down his body back onto my wobbly legs. His come creeps down my leg. I clench my insides, attempting to hold it in. Babymaking is happening—gravity be damned.

My husband sinks to knees, his face level with my thoroughly fucked pussy. He takes two of his fingers, catching his release running down my thighs, and pushes it back into me.

“Gah!” I moan, my internal walls clamping down on his fingers.

Leaving his fingers inside me, he presses his lips to my lower abdomen. “Hello, baby. I can't wait for you to arrive.”

The man has me crying happy tears. I rub at my eyes, no longer caring about my makeup.

Chase carefully pulls his fingers from within me, standing to his full height. He takes my face in my hands and kisses me, deep and unhurried.

This world is full of surprises, good and bad. You never know what event will alter your course or how your decisions will impact your life until you're on the path.

A year ago, I came to Colorado madder than a hornets' nest knocked on the ground. Nothing prepared me for the likes of Chase—my caveman who traded in his loincloth for a biker's cut. He was never part of my equation until he input himself in it, hell-bent on making me his.

When I look back on the months I spent fighting my attraction to this man who's now my husband, I want to kick myself for delaying our happily ever after. Our differences were never the issue, only my pigheadedness for trying to make it an issue when it never was one at all.

Sometimes you just need to give in to temptation. You never know if it'll bring you to the spot you were fated for with the one who loves you with all the force in the world.

And that is the tale of how the Hipster Biker won the heart of his White-Collar Queen.

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

It's been forty-eight hours since I fled California. After running from the hotel where Simone screwed me over in the worst way imaginable, I busted my cell and smartwatch before tossing them into the Sacramento River. It was no longer safe to keep anything on me that could track my location. Everything of importance stored on the devices, I memorized long ago.

Thankfully, I was able to avoid the authorities and made my way to my personal bank, where I had a safe deposit box. Fake passports and other documentation, along with a burner phone and decent stack of cash, were all I needed for escaping the states.

Paying for a bus ticket in cash, I made my way to the border and crossed into Mexico. Using my counterfeit passport, I hopped a flight to Sao Paulo. I may be exhausted and ruffled, but I'm free.

Safely hidden among the masses in Brazil, I check into the Palácio Tangará, an urban oasis hotel in the southern region of Sao Paulo, surrounded by the dense woods of Burle Marx Park. The lack of recreation creates a peaceful environment—something I desperately need as I regroup before moving forward to whatever destination I choose next.

From my hotel suite, I access the funds I took from the Oldani account and move it to an offshore bank in Singapore. I have more money than I'll spend in a lifetime. I'll be able to live a luxurious life among some of the wealthiest people in the world. But sadly, I'm alone, more alone than I've ever

been in my lifetime. This affluent lifestyle is incomplete without the woman I love sharing it with me.

With nothing better to do, I wander the lush grounds of the resort, stopping to rest when I come to a vacant bistro table, isolated from all the rest on the veranda. Lost in my head, I stare across the manicured green lawns from where I sit, seeing nothing but the memory of gray storm-clouded eyes. My thoughts are thousands of miles away, where Simone carries on with her life.

As outraged as I was with her betrayal, I understand why she did it. She always was a rule follower, never stepped out of line in her work or personal life. It's just part of who she is.

Doesn't matter Cynthia was going to shoot her dead. Simone wanted justice for what happened to her ex-boss. And as much as I want to admit I shot my former lover to save Simone, I killed her to save myself as much.

My chest aches. I miss Simone, more than I should after her betrayal. But I did betray her first.

Perhaps I could still have a future with Simone. I have money. Grease the right palms, and you can find anyone willing to do anything, even abduction. It would take time to orchestrate, but time well worth the wait if I can have Simone in the end.

Lost in thought, I don't hear the footsteps approaching me from behind. The dark shadow cast over my table doesn't faze me either, as I dismiss it as cloud cover. It's not until a man takes a seat across the table from me and disrupts my view that I notice I'm not alone.

The stranger seated at my table looks sort of familiar. Oddly, I can't place him. His tall, lean frame is dressed in a fine Italian suit, accessorized with heirloom cufflinks in the shape of a monogrammed "B." His black hair is slicked back, his face razor-clean, and his dark eyes sharp. He has an imperial grace and commanding presence.

"*Ciao, Signor Grills,*" the stranger greets in fluid Italian. "*Finalmente ci incontriamo.*"

The face. The voice. But how? He's dead. It was all over the news, in every paper and talk show.

“Signor Lorenzo Bianchi?”

The man's lip lifts in one corner, his eyes full of dark amusement. “No. I am his cousin. The new Don of Denver, Piero Bianchi.” He slowly leans forward, his hands folding together on the table in front of him. “And I believe you possess something belonging to me.”

My throat constricts as I gulp down my nerves. I take a quick glance of my surroundings, noticing four large men in black suits surrounding our table. My eyes land on one man in Bianchi's entourage. The man smirks, pulling his suit jacket back far enough to rest his hand on the Glock holstered at his hip.

Outnumbered, unarmed, and with nowhere to run, dread rushes in my nerves as I turn my attention back to the man I stole millions from. “Signor Bianchi, I—I had no idea the money would be missed. After your cousin passed, no one came to retrieve the funds. Not one person called to claim it. The man who forced me to create the account never returned. It was just...sitting there.”

Piero raises a dark brow, his face stern. “And you thought you deserved it, although it wasn't yours to take?”

An involuntary shiver runs up my spine. “I have no excuse. I fell victim to my greed and took your money to escape the states. I can return what I owe to you with interest, if it helps. I'm an excellent investment banker. Perhaps I could help your organization make amends for my actions.”

The mobster turns up his nose, his first physical sign of contempt since sitting at my table. “I have no need for more bankers or accountants. I have enough on my payroll as is, and one who is more trouble than she's worth.”

“There must be some way I can atone for my sin,” I plead, my voice cracking.

Piero snaps his fingers. A server comes scurrying to their table with stemless crystal wine glasses and a bottle of red

wine. He shows the wine choice to Piero, who nods his approval. The server goes about opening the bottle, pouring a generous portion into each glass.

A small drop of wine runs down the outside of the glass in front of me. Using the linen draped over his forearm, the server takes the glass and wipes the spilled droplet from the rim. He then sets the glass in front of me and retreats from our table.

Piero picks up his wine, swirling it for a moment. He breathes in the rich aroma with a content sigh. “Come. Raise your glass, Signor Grill. We must toast.”

Toast? What for?

Afraid to ask, I hesitate before hurrying to pick up my wine. If I’m sharing a drink with the mobster, it must be a positive, right? Perhaps Piero has reconsidered my offer to use my services in a way to repay my debt.

“To new beginnings,” Piero says before taking a sip.

I hurry to drink from my own glass, mumbling cheers as I take a long pull. I’m going to need the liquid courage if I’m dealing with a mobster.

Piero watches with a smile, raising his glass again. “To vitality.”

Again, we drink.

“And to death,” Piero concludes, his glass raised in toast.

What? I halt mid-sip, my eyes frozen on the mobster in front of him. Alarm constricts my insides.

Piero finishes his wine, nodding at the empty glass in his hand before looking at me. “It’s good, *si*? Full bodied and sharp on the tongue, coats the throat and warms the chest.”

Unable to swallow, I stare in horror. My throat tightens harshly as I sense doom on the horizon.

Silently, Piero sets down his empty glass. He cocks his head at me, his dark eyes narrowing to slits. “You should’ve left Simone alone. When you fuck with Atlas or his men, you

fuck with me. Stealing from me is one thing. Messing with those I call family is another—one I don't forgive."

Oh, fuck!

Wheezing, I grab at my throat, trying to loosen the collar of my shirt. Air...I need air. Why is it getting harder to breathe? What was in the wine?

I open my mouth to ask, but nothing comes. It's like my lungs have stopped functioning, my other organs shutting down with the lack of oxygen needed to sustain them. My insides burn, screaming for relief that won't come.

Desperate, I pound on my chest, anything to stir life into my lungs. Nothing works as my world blinks out.

"Arrivederci, Trent," Piero purrs in the darkness. *"Di' al diavolo che ho salutato."*

EPILOGUE

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

Groaning, I reach for my cell. My hand fumbles over the contests piled on the nightstand, knocking things to the floor, before my fingers find my phone. Peeling open my tired eyes, I scan my text messages.

Chase **Rise and shine, assholes. Leaving in an hour.**

Punk **Fuck you, bro. I need more beauty sleep. I'm still hung over.**

Ziggy **I second Punk's request. We only went to sleep a few hours ago.**

Chase **Prez needs us home—ASAP. We have another case. PT can't man all the security for headquarters and do the tech for the new assignment.**

“Fuck,” I mutter, rubbing at my aching head.

We all hit the liquor a little hard last night. It's been a nonstop party the last three days, celebrating Chase's marriage to Simone. The lucky bastard claimed his forever woman, something I've been wanting for myself since joining the Mercy Ravens MC.

It once seemed unobtainable, but shit finally is going my way.

The pink-haired goddess with the prettiest cupid lips lying beside me is proof my luck has turned around. And it's about fucking time.

There's no denying it. My heart belonged to Candy the moment I joined the Mercy Ravens brotherhood, unable to have eyes for anyone else but her. The woman has had me on a leash—figuratively speaking, though I'm hoping to make that a reality soon as well—and she's completely oblivious to her hold on me.

She's the fire in my blood, bringing me to my knees. *My goddess.*

My cock stirs as I watch her chest rising and falling in her slumber, hypnotized by craving.

Shaking my lust fog from my head, I send a quick reply text to the group. **See you in an hour.**

Tossing my cell aside, I tug Candy flush with my body. Her brows pull together, protesting being moved, but a second later she's snuggling against me.

A smile as big as an ocean breaks across my face as I stare at the woman I intend to make mine.

Candy. My sinfully sweet Candy.

Memories from last night are a little fuzzy, but I recall sinking to my knees and begging Candy to do what she wanted with me. She didn't blink or hesitate before ordering me around and showing her exactly how much I worship the ground she walks on.

If I close my eyes, I can still hear her scream my name while she comes on my tongue. I can still feel her heavenly cunt squeeze around my dick while she holds my hands above my head and rides me like a stallion.

My dick hardens, ready to request Candy's permission to please her again. However, a quickie won't do. I need time to enjoy her, time for her to wield her power over me. My queen deserves more than a rushed fuck.

I bury my face into her cotton-candy colored hair, breathing in her bubble gum scent. She's delicious, and I want to taste every inch of her and see if my memory of last night is as sweet as I recall.

Resisting my sexual temptations, I kiss her forehead on her round face instead, smiling as her frown lines melt away under my touch. “Wake, my goddess.”

Her scowl returns with a vengeance. She rolls to her other side and places her pillow on her head. “Stop talking.”

My mouth instantly snaps shut, eager to obey her. Unfortunately, the crew is expecting us. She can order me around later, something I’m looking forward to.

I cautiously remove the pillow from her face. She grumbles but doesn’t fight me. “It’s rude to wake a woman before she’s ready to face the day.”

Grinning, I say, “I understand, Goddess. You can punish me later for my rudeness.”

As if the event from last night comes flooding back to Candy instantly, her body tenses. She peeks at me over her shoulder, a warm blush blooming on her cheeks.

Fuck me, she’s pretty. But not nearly as stunning as when she’s ordering me to my knees.

“Do you remember last night?” I ask as I roll her to her back to see more of her beautiful face.

With her deep brown eyes wide and alert, she studies my face. Her little pink tongue dips out to lick her bottom lip in a nervous gesture. I can’t help releasing a groan, tempted to ask if I can trace her lips with my tongue.

“You remember,” I chuckle, pleased as hell she recalls what we shared.

“Did we really do all those *things*?”

“Uh-huh. And I can’t wait for you to order me around again.”

Her deep brown eyes widen with my confession. “You liked me...being in control?”

“You have no idea how much I enjoy it, how badly I’ve been aching to worship you. I like you demanding things from me. I crave being at your mercy.”

Fuck if I don't sound like a simp, but I could not care less.

She frowns, scratching her head like she's trying to grasp what I'm saying. I get it. A submissive man isn't something she's had a lot of interaction with, if at all.

Sensing she has questions, I'd love nothing more than to answer them. But we have somewhere to be. There'll be plenty of time once we return home to talk at length.

“The team is heading out within the hour. We should get ready.”

Candy pulls away and heads to the bathroom. I hear the toilet flush before the shower turns on. My cock springs to new life, imagining Candy glistening with water and soapy suds.

Cursing, I cup my blue balls. How the hell am I going to ride home when my cock won't settle?

The click of the bathroom door opening has me turning to face it.

Candy cracks the door open enough for me to see her glorious body wrapped in a skimpy towel. A small smile dances on her lips. “Join me?”

It was a question, but in my mind I hear it like a command.

Excited, I scramble from the bed, tripping over my biker boots on the floor in my haste. My hands fly out to brace myself for my fall before I land on my hands and knees.

On all fours, I look up at Candy, my lips curling into a grin. “Permission to crawl, Goddess.”

She gives a dainty snort as she steps back into the bathroom. “Hurry, naughty boy.”

Naughty boy. She called me a naughty boy.

Being called a boy when I'm a grown-ass man would be the insult of the year coming from anyone else. But when she says it...

Fuck, that's hot. She may as well have given me a shot of testosterone straight into my dick.

Screw crawling. I need to get in the bathroom and inside Candy before my nuts burst.

Ready to jump to my feet and take flight, I see a thick piece of off-white paper on the floor in front of me. The words *Marriage License*, written in a big, fancy font are scrawled across the top.

Chase and Simone's wedding was a fevered event. I half-suspect Chase feared Simone would get cold feet on the way to the altar, spurring him into pushing things along in rapid succession.

A lot happened at once, but I don't recall being in charge of their marriage certificate.

Thinking nothing of it, I pick up the heavy paper as I rise to my feet. I set it down on the hotel dresser, glancing at it a moment before turning toward the bathroom.

Hold up! I do an about-face, snatching the paper to study the names.

This is to certify that the undersigned joined in lawful wedlock...

It's not the names I expected on a marriage certificate. My body vibrates as I read my and Candy's legal names on the certified document.

The goddess in the bathroom is my wife.

BONUS CHAPTER

DELETED CHAPTER BETWEEN CHAPTERS
FORTY-FOUR AND FORTY-FIVE—SIMONE

I spent the rest of Friday helping Chase and Butch double-check areas in the system that may have been compromised from the virus. A lot of what I did was pull client's files and cross-reference what was in the system. Luckily, what we were checking was easy enough without needing Cynthia's help. Trent opened the file room door for me and stationed himself in the hallway to assist both our teams. I appreciated his willingness to help us without getting Cynthia involved. He seemed as eager as us to discover who was behind stealing the funds and planting the bug.

Saturday was a repeat of Friday, with Chase and Butch successfully removing the virus. To ensure the system was safe, Chase had to remove his Trojan, with Butch ready at the computer to put another Trojan in its place in case the virus went live again. Thankfully, the system remained virus-free. Chase worked through most of the night, installing more barriers similar to what headquarters uses back home, making sure the software was military tight.

Sunday is the only day we're taking off and I plan on doing absolutely nothing related to the case. After the shit week I've had, I need a day to decompress.

Chase left to go work out in the hotel gym, saying he needed to pummel something to stay sane. Considering how tightly wound he's been around Trent and working upwards of twenty hours a day in a shoebox conference room, some physical activity will be good for him. It's not a bad idea for me either.

My dip in the pool turns into thirty-two hard laps. Seems I needed to let out some aggression as well.

When I go back to the suite to shower, I notice Chase hasn't returned. My shoulders sag. I was hoping he'd be back and we could do something fun together. Guess I'll need to entertain myself.

After a long shower, I throw on some lounge pants and a tank. I'm flipping through the hotel cable when there's a knock at the door.

Confused, I slip out of bed. For one horrifying second, I fear Trent is at the door. The guy isn't exactly surrendering to winning me back. He still blows up my phone each evening and Chase sees it all. My biker may demonstrate some control over his territorial behavior, but it's not something I want to be tested routinely.

Hesitantly, I creep toward the door and look through the peephole. Punk's sour face greets me on the other side of the lens.

Great. Chase must have sent him to babysit me since he's taking too long.

Suppressing a groan, I open the door with a hand on my hip. "What do you want, Moron? Did Chase assign you guard duty?"

He shakes his shaved head. "No."

Huh? "So why are you bugging me?"

Punk's face puckers. He stares at the ground. "It's Romcom Sunday."

Romcom Sunday is a tradition Punk and Jo started early in their friendship. It may be their special thing, but since I moved to Colorado, it's kind of become *our* special thing, too.

He holds up a Target shopping bag. "I brought snacks."

I'm such a bitch. Here Punk is choosing to spend his Sunday downtime with me—*willingly*—and I greeted him horribly.

Without saying a word, I usher him inside. Punk perks up some. He probably expected me to turn him away. I'll never admit it to him, but I enjoy our Romcom Sundays together, even though we have to share Jo.

Punk dumps the contents of the shopping bag on the end of the bed while I channel surf until I find something that has the potential to be a romance. I look through the candy options, spotting all of my favorites. It chokes me up how he remembers such minor details about me.

Instead of grabbing something I normally have, I reach for the bag of Twizzlers—Jo's favorite. I tear the bag open, taking a few before passing the rest to Punk. He smiles, probably guessing I'm doing it as a way of having her here in spirit.

We sit side by side on the bed watching the movie, chewing our candy. I glance at Punk. He stares at the TV with a glum expression. Normally, he'd be belly-laughing at all the funny scenes. I get it—it's not the same without my sister present.

"I miss Jo," I murmur.

Punk nods. "Me too."

"We should call her."

"Do you think she'd mind? The twins have been keeping her busy."

I roll my eyes. "Of course not. Stop being weird." I grab my cell and FaceTime Jo.

"It's about time," Jo snaps as her image appears on the screen, not bothering with hellos. "You made me wait a whole week before reaching out, Simone. Do you realize how worried I've been? And your text messages sucked. Yes and no responses. What the h. e. double hockey sticks?"

I snort. "I see you're still attempting not to swear in front of my nephews. How full is the swear jar? Are you able to pay for their college education yet?"

Jo flips me the bird. "Pound sand."

Unable to help myself, my head falls back on a laugh.

“HI, JO!” Punk hollers excitedly, waving at the phone.

My sister glowers at Punk, pointing an accusatory finger at him. “And you, why haven’t you called me? Simone is rubbing off on you.”

“Oh, don’t be mad, Sis. I know you’re busy breaking ground on Gauge and Opal’s house, and the twins were coming down with something before we left for California. You’ve had your hands full. I didn’t want to bother you. I wasn’t avoiding, I swear.”

“I don’t care how busy I am. I expect daily texts or calls from both of you.”

One baby makes fussy noises, triggering the other to join in. Jo props her cell upright on the coffee table in front of her. She bends over from her position on the couch, scooping the twins into her arms. “And the babies aren’t sick. I took them to the pediatrician. They’re teething.”

Punk and I make sad doe eyes as we look at our cherub-cheeked nephews. Both boys have fat tears spilling from their big, dark eyes. Easton notices his mom’s cell and stops crying. He spots us on the screen, bouncing excitedly in Jo’s lap.

“Hey, big guy,” Punk says in a goofy voice that all babies love. “How’s my namesake doing? Are you being good for your mama? And Crux, buddy, what’s wrong? Don’t be sad.”

Crux stops crying when he hears his uncle’s voice. He babbles happily, trying to reach for the phone.

Jo sighs. “They miss their play partner.”

“I promise to bring you boys something super cool when I come home,” Punk promises the twins.

My heart goes out to my sister as I take in her weary expression. She’s used to juggling multiple things at once. But raising twins, running a business, and managing her husband all while pregnant with another set of twins is a lot to handle. “You look tired, Jo. Are you getting enough rest?”

Jo waves me off. “I’ll rest when I die. If I look off, it’s because I’ve been worried about you, you brat.”

“Aww. Love you too.”

My sister cocks her head, scrutinizing us. “Why are you two together on a Sunday?”

As soon as the words are out of her mouth, Jo’s eyes go wide. Her face relaxes into a smug grin. “Are you two Romcom Sunday-ing together?”

Punk and I groan. She’s never going to let us live this down.

“You are, aren’t you?” Jo laughs a moment before she cries.

“Sis? What’s wrong?” Punk asks her, with worry.

“I’m just happy you two are getting along. I always knew you could be close friends.”

Punk and I give each other a weary look. Neither one of us is going to break the bad news to her when she’s super emotional...

...or so I thought.

“More like frenemies,” Punk blurts.

I smack him in the chest to shut him up. “He’s joking; ignore him.”

“Sorry. I’ve been overly emotional lately. My hormones are all over the place.”

She wipes at her eyes, struggling to hold her pudgy babies. “Anyway, enough about me. How has the assignment been going? And don’t candy-coat anything. Give it to me straight. If I hear differently from Maceo, I’ll beat your sorry butts.”

There’s no point in sheltering Jo from any of the ugly. I tell her everything that’s happened since we’ve arrived onsite.

Jo is quiet for a moment. She gently places the boys back on the floor to play before she looks back at us. A deep crimson hue sweeps over her face as her lips curl over her teeth.

“Oh, shit. Mama Jo Bear is coming out,” Punk mumbles beside me.

“Fucking fuck. Goddamn motherfucker. Cock-sucking douche canoes!”

“Whoa! Whoa! Whoa! Calm, Sis.”

“I. Am. Angry. Don’t tell me to calm down, Punk.”

“No shit,” I laugh.

“I want to knee junk that treacherous leech’s micropenis into next week right before I throat punch the cunt who is being extra cunt to my sister.”

Punk and I are full-on belly laughing. I’m visualizing Jo going all Cornish Pixie on Trent and Cynthia. Gauging by how hard Punk is giggling, he must imagine something equally amusing.

After losing her cool, Jo closes her eyes and rubs her temples. “I’m coming to Sacramento.”

I sober quickly. “No, Jo. I didn’t tell you all this to upset you. You can’t come. You have the twins and your work. I can manage.”

My sister opens her coastal eyes, narrowed with doubt. “And what? Are you just going to hold your bladder for eight-plus hours a day so you won’t get accosted in the ladies’ room again? You need a woman to run interference who isn’t afraid to be mean.”

“We’re handling it,” Punk pipes in quickly. Neither of us wants Jo upset, especially while she’s pregnant. “Don’t worry about a thing.”

Jo folds her arms over her chest, shaking her head. Displeasure is etched all over her stiff posture and grim expression. She’s not going to drop the matter.

There’s a commotion in Jo’s background. “Pixie? I’m home. Come, give your man some love.”

I use the moment to end the FaceTime conversation. “Tell Atlas we say, ‘hello’. We’ll talk soon.”

I hit the end button right as Jo hollers for Atlas to join her in the living room.

Punk rubs the back of his neck. “Maybe we shouldn’t have told her everything.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered if she found out from us or someone else. She was going to be irate, regardless.” I turn my attention back to the movie, but my nerves won’t settle.

“You don’t think she’d show up here, do you?” Punk asks me.

I shake my head, trying to convince us both. “No. She has too much on her plate.”

But the nagging feeling building inside of my head begs to differ. If there’s one thing I know about my sister, she doesn’t let anyone hurt her family without repaying them in kind.

PLAYLIST

Chase

1. Sam Hunt—Take Your Time
2. The Lumineers—Brightside
3. The Lumineers—Just Like Heaven (The Cure Cover)
4. LP—The One That You Love
5. Hozier—Talk
6. Bob Moses—Hanging On
7. Bruce Springsteen—I'm On Fire
8. Mumford & Sons—I Will Wait
9. Kings of Leon—Time In Disguise
10. PLVTINUM & Tarro—Champagne & Sunshine
11. Hugo—Rock 'N' Roll Delight
12. Tash Sultang—Pretty Lady
13. Lee Brice—One Of Them Girls
14. Night Traveler—Watching You
15. James Bay—Chew On My Heart
16. X-Ambassadors—Okay
17. Yelawolf—Like I Love You
18. Mr. Kitty—After Dark
19. Niko Moon—Good Times
20. Coldplay ft. BTS—My Universe

Simone

1. CARYS—Princesses Don't Cry
2. Bishop Briggs—Higher
3. Sia—Elastic Heart
4. Girl in Red—I'll Call You Mine
5. Twenty One Pilots—Shy Away
6. Harry Styles—Falling
7. The Mariás—Hush
8. Chris Stapleton—You Should Probably Leave
9. Tom Morello ft. X Ambassadors—You'll Get Yours
10. Daisy Gray—Wicked Games
11. Rosa Linn—SNAP
13. Cannons—Fire For You
14. Vance Joy—looking At Me Like That
15. Marble Sounds—Never Leave My Heart
16. Etta James—A Sunday Kind Of Love
17. Twenty One Pilots and Coldplay Mashup—Hometown Clocks
18. Disclosure ft. Sam Smith—Latch

Chase and Simone

1. Gone Wild—What Could've Been
2. Xavier Rudd—We Deserve To Dream
3. Old Dominion—One Man Band
4. Ryan Hurd—Every Other Memory
5. John Coggins—Crazy For You
6. Edward Sharpe & The Magnetic Zeros—Home
7. Ryan Hurd & Maren Morris—Chasing After You

Enjoy on YouTube.com, iTunes, Amazon Music, or Spotify.

KIND REMINDER TO LEAVE A REVIEW

Hello again, lovely readers!

I hope you enjoyed *Chasing Simone*, book 5 of the Mercy Ravens MC Series.

If you would like to share your thoughtful opinion of the novel, please feel free to leave a review with Amazon to help support your new *favorite* author.

Other sites where reviews are welcomed include Goodreads and BookBub.

Thank you again for reading my latest novel.

— M.J. Marino

COMING SOON

It's difficult being a male submissive when you're a member of the Mercy Ravens MC. Penn "Butch" Lawson isn't embarrassed by his bedroom preferences, but he doesn't broadcast it, especially amongst his alpha, domineering brothers. He keeps his lifestyle behind closed doors, leading many in the crew to suspect he lives a celibate life.

How wrong they are. Butch is about to show the brotherhood the strongest of men will kneel before their women. After all, the sweetest candies are the ones you beg for, not the ones handed out.

For all her life, Candy has lived in a man's world, obligated to submit. Unable to find happiness with any romantic partners, she worries her experiences make it impossible to find joy with a man.

Struggling to find her place within the MC, Candy finds an unlikely friend in the quiet Butch. He never pushes for more, listens to her woes, and treats her like a goddess. Despite all odds, Butch has earned her trust. If only she could confess her feelings for him, maybe she could have a shot at a happily ever after.

But Candy doesn't realize the lengths Butch would go to make her feel whole again, to be her everything. He sees her—the real her. Candy isn't meant to submit, but to demand her partner bend to her instead. And Butch is the man who would kneel before her for the rest of his days if she'll be his goddess.

A wild night in Las Vegas threatens to derail the promising couple when Butch finds a piece of paper legally binding them in wedded matrimony. Can the strong, silent Butch convince Candy he's hers to control as she pleases before she annuls the marriage? Is it possible for the insecure Candy to dominate an alpha biker?

ALSO BY M.J. MARINO

[Lips on my Heart—A Mercy Ravens MC Novel 1](#)

[Lips on my Soul—A Mercy Ravens MC Novel 2](#)

[Lips on my World—A Mercy Ravens MC Novel 3](#)

[Engaging Opal—A Mercy Ravens MC Novel 4](#)

Chasing Simone—A Mercy Ravens MC Novel 5

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Second, my three hearts—my boys. Geez, you guys are growing so fast. There's not a moment in my day where one of you, if not all of you, don't cross my mind. I'm so damn proud of you boys and the accomplishments you've done. Watching you guys reminds me I'm not too old to learn and grow. Thank you for educating me. Love you boys to the moon and back.

Third, my parents, Paul and Darrell. I love how you guys have come out of your shells and proudly tell others your youngest daughter is steamy romance writer—and that you're damn proud of it. Thank you for always having my back and stepping in to help where I need it. I struck the lottery with you as my parents. Love you always.

Fourth, my muse for *Chasing Simone*, my sister—Sam. Or more appropriately known as Sam-mone. There aren't many people who would be brave enough to let someone write a romance novel about them. You never scoffed at my idea of turning you into a character. You just smiled and said, "Go for it." Thank you for being a bottomless bucket of amazing book ideas for me to write, and for being the best damn sister anyone could ever have. Because of you, Simone exists. Love you, sis.

Fifth, my awesome grandma, Dorothy. Thank you for continually pimping my novels around your apartment complex and to all of your friends. You're my biggest book promoter, and I love you to pieces for it. I'm so damn lucky to have you as my grandma—you're the best.

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And finally, all of my lovely and loyal readers who took a risk on a new author who writes MC romance favoring the other 99% of biker culture. It's because of your support I can continue to write my novels. Thank you for following me on my website, interacting with my social media accounts, leaving reviews and ratings on Amazon, passing along my work to other readers, and sending me private messages about how much you enjoy my books. I love hearing from you and getting to know you on a personal level.

I'm raising a bourbon in a toast for you all. Here's to book five, and on to book six.

Cheers,

M.J. Marino

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

M.J. Marino—lover of steamy stories and putting pen to paper. This is her fifth self-published novel. She lives in Waukesha, Wisconsin with her husband, Matthew, and three sons. Walking away from her career as a chemist, she has plunged herself into writing, pursuing a lifelong dream, and has no regrets. She writes what she wants and makes no excuses for it. Aside from writing, M.J. loves to read, spend time with family and friends, garden, listen to music while singing along, organize her home, coffee, and bourbon—lots of bourbon.

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