

CHERISHED

CORRUPTED AND CHERISHED DUET, BOOK 2

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Being tucked away in seclusion with a self-appointed bodyguard is way more fun than it has a right to be. I should resist, but I don't, and after years of trying not to fall for anyone, I tumble hard for Kase Donovan.

We still don't know who's after me, but with Kase's help, I'm working to keep my business afloat. Until my father tracks me down and retrieves me for that pesky marriage contract he had drawn up years ago. I'm forced to return to the ivory tower I grew up in and stay locked up while my life dissolves.

Locked doors have never stopped Kase, but even if he can rescue me from a fairy tale gone wrong, there's still someone waiting to kill me. And we might not learn who it is until it's too late and we've lost everything, including each other. Even if we track down my would-be killer, I've fallen hard for my bodyguard with the dark past, and the life I would have with Kase isn't different from the prison I grew up in. How much am I willing to sacrifice for total freedom?

Cherished is the second book in the Corrupted and Cherished duet and the completion of Kase and Holland's story.

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CHAPTER 1



*K*ase

HOLLAND WAS TAKEN over a week ago, and I thought I could move on. I thought I could forget it. She has a life that doesn't include me, no matter how unfair, and I have mine. But I can't escape the guilt. Could I have done more? Could I have covered our tracks better? I've hardly slept since she left. The only thing helping me through is remembering the desperation in her eyes to let her go.

I pace Jacobi's office like a caged tiger. The wall of windows leading to the deck outside is tempting to just crash through. The pain might give me something else to think about.

The way her father broke into our house with armed fucking guards . . .

Not our house. The rental. A place I continue to sleep at. On the damn couch with fabric piled everywhere. I left the outfits she assembled hanging in the corner, her half-cut-out pattern on the table, and the partially sewn dress by the sewing machine.

I fixed the door. Connor Gray's armed guards had no finesse. If they were good enough to find us, they should've been able to get in without breaking the damn door down. All they'd done was kill the security system.

“Do you want to take this outside?” Jacobi asks from his office chair.

“No,” I growl while I stalk through the room. Cannon’s watching me from his position on the floor, an arm draped over a knee, looking vastly different than he has for most of the time I’ve known him.

The old Cannon wore loose Hawaiian shirts and cargo shorts—all wrinkled—and his hair had been more shaggy than stylishly long. The new Cannon wears fitted sweatpants and snug T-shirts since he is in Penni’s dance studio all the time as one of the most in-demand dance instructors. His hair hadn’t been more than trimmed, but he brushed it back. The guy looks like he walked off the pages of an elite dance magazine.

“Why aren’t you going after her?” Cannon asks for the tenth time.

“I told you.” I can’t not growl this morning.

“Yeah, you told us,” he says, “yet here you are. Prowling like we captured you and put you under house arrest. You don’t agree with how she was taken, you don’t want her to be forced to get married because you want her instead, and you haven’t stopped pacing since she left.”

“I told you why I can’t have her.” I told them everything. In a rare moment of weakness and desperation, I shared my life with my friends. All of it. They already knew what I did. They had known it was a family business, but they didn’t know how deeply I was entrenched. They didn’t know that not only couldn’t I get out, but I could cost my family everything if I tried. And now they know it’s my destiny.

Jacobi kicks back in his office chair and crosses an ankle over a knee. He’s sitting like a CEO, but he’s dressed in board shorts with a loose white T-shirt. “You’re in a room with two guys who thought they had no shot with the women they were obsessed with.” Yeah, I told them that part, too, and it burned in my throat as I announced my humiliation to the world. “Yet London and I are married, and Cannon and Penni might get married once Penni gets over the whole husband-taking-out-a-hit-on-her thing.”

“I can’t push Holland’s dad off a cliff.” No matter what’s happened, she loves him.

Cannon lifts a finger. “Penni did not push that asshole—he lost his balance when he was trying to attack her.”

“I wasn’t saying she pushed him.” She would’ve been justified. “But Holland’s problems are a little more complex. Connor Gray is loaded, and the Masons have something on him.”

“And you don’t know what?” Jacobi asks.

I shake my head. “Her father’s a rich man building casinos in Vegas, and he’s been doing it for decades. I’m sure he’s got secrets. The Masons own property in Chicago, and with their other side hustle, there is as little information available on them as Holland’s dad.”

“So find them, find what Mason has on him, then do what you do best.”

We’ve had this form of conversation before. They’ve both offered to help, and I’ve put them off. But it’s been over a week. I haven’t heard from Holland. Neither have London and Penni, and Holland knows how they’d worry. She knows she can’t walk away from the career she loves, from the biggest show of her life and her friends, and not have anyone worry. She’s letting go of her life here, and it breaks my damn heart. “I need to find out who told Connor Gray about the hit.”

Jacobi snorts. “London almost killed me when she learned about that. She barely accepted that you didn’t fucking tell us.”

I point at each of them. “You both know what it’s like.”

Cannon just shrugs. “Is this you finally giving us permission to help?”

Was it? I’m not used to being so hindered. I’ve done as much as I can looking into Connor Gray and MacDonald Mason. I’ve hit roadblocks, seemingly innocuous flags that would ordinarily announce I was trying to get into a rich man’s records. He can afford stellar cybersecurity.

I'm seasoned enough to know a red flag when I see it. I've tracked down rich folks before. I've hunted them and gotten into their homes. I've intimidated them and covered my tracks so they couldn't hunt me in return.

The walls Connor Gray erected were at once flimsy as hell and as secure as Area 51. Like a mirage that's a real oasis. Fitting for a man making his living in Vegas.

Then there's Mac Mason. He's Mafia, and that's the real reason I'm hesitating. I can make things worse for Holland and put myself at risk trying to help her.

In the end, someone tipped Connor Gray off. Unless Josef rose from his grave, found his phone, and repaired it, I don't know who it could be other than the person who wants Holland dead. Maybe removing her from L.A. is enough. She's gone. Could it be a competitor? We'd ruled them out, but that doesn't mean we didn't miss someone. I might never know, but if she's no longer facing that danger, then maybe that's enough. For Holland.

It'll never be enough for me. But I'm a man who's learned to live without what I really want. "Yes, but be fucking careful. There's something about this situation that's putting me on edge."

"Maybe it's not getting laid." Cannon's tone is a direct challenge. He's not giving me shit for my fling with Holland—he wants to dig deeper. He knows I'm climbing the walls like I'm going to rip the mansion apart board by board because I fucking miss Holland. I care about her, dammit. More than I ever should've.

It's not me not getting laid that's an issue. It's her being forced to be with someone she doesn't want. I put my fingers behind my head and interlace them as if I'm walking off a side stitch after a sprint. "It's that Connor Gray has all the standard sites. All the social media pages for Gray Towers. CG Enterprises and Connor Gray have a good PR team. On the outside, it looks like you can find out everything about him—where he went to school, what he got his degree in, which casino he opened first, yada, yada, yada."

As I'm talking, Jacobi has spun to his computer and he's clicking away. Connor Gray's details are coming up on the screens attached to the wall. An image of his diploma from the University of Nevada. His wedding photo to a starry-eyed Gloria. Almost every picture of them after had an increasingly despondent Gloria. It was a time line of their marriage dissolving.

What if Holland slowly fades from the life she can't escape? That beautiful sunny-yellow shirt she wore to my parents' house wouldn't light an empty shell.

The screen on the desk in front of Jacobi flashes with code as he clicks away. Finally he stops. "I see what you're seeing. It's all been curated by a team. Her father's hired the best to scour the internet. Nothing is visible that he doesn't want people to see. With his businesses, there are all the standard safety measures with his employees. On the outside, it's all run-of-the-mill encryption for payroll, employee records, financial records."

He got into those records that fast? Another thought occurs to me that makes more sense. I should've known better. "You've already checked on all of this?"

There's no guilt in his expression. "Of course."

Thank fuck. But if I can't uncover any information, then I'm shit out of luck. "And you can't get deeper?"

Jacobi's fingers fly over the keyboard, and I move next to him, dropping my hands from my head.

The white of the screen flashes in his eyes and shows nothing but code. He opens another box—code. Another screen—code. He knows exactly where to go because he's been waiting for me to open the door. This is why we're friends.

"Not without setting off serious alarms on his end and exposing myself," he says, closing down the windows. "Cybersecurity is an ever-changing field, but I'd bet he has several people paid on books no one sees. This isn't from some stand-up, organized company. I know them all. This is

work that I'd do if I was hired personally for a job no one wanted to know was done. And I'd charge in the millions because it's gotta be constantly updated."

"Do you think he tasked his people with finding out who hired Josef?"

"It's possible, but he'd also risk people wondering why there's no digital trail of Josef and exposing Holland."

Shit. It's a risk I wouldn't take. I've done what I can to check into it, any more and it's my parents on the line. Connor Gray is a big question mark, but I'd never put my friend and my parents at odds. "What about MacDonald Mason?"

"He's almost as hard to crack, but that's because he's old school and shuns technology." Jacobi smirks. "He probably has a flip phone if he uses a cell phone at all. His son is a different story, and now that you've given me his name, I'll know everything that's online about Patrick Mason by the end of the day."

"I'll pay you," I say.

"Nah, man. I consider this continuing education. I can't be at the top if I'm not learning about what's out there and how to get around it."

I prop my hands on my hips. This isn't enough. I can't sit back and wait for information. I want to do something. I need to act.

As if Cannon hears my thoughts, he rolls his neck. "Tell me about these guards and what you know of the security at Gray Towers."

Cannon used to do contracted security and protection before he became the world's most underestimated and unlicensed private detective. He's not asking out of curiosity.

"I can't break into Gray Towers." I've gotten into some impossible places, but Connor Gray's penthouse might as well be Rapunzel's tower.

He rolls a shoulder. "Can't or won't?"

"I can't do a damn thing from jail."

He grins. “They can’t throw you behind bars if they don’t know you’re there.”

Well . . . when he puts it that way.



Holland

OPULENCE SURROUNDS ME. Floor-to-ceiling windows, tinted to see out of but not in. We’re on the sixtieth floor, so it’s not like anyone’s peering inside. I crunch my toes into the plush rug in front of Father’s desk. This is new. How much did it cost and what country did Father have it shipped from?

I’m standing in front of him like I’m facing a firing squad. My heart’s beating just the same. Father was never the type to bounce me on his knee as a kid. I don’t think he’s ever read a bedtime story in his life, and he’s only gotten more serious in the time we’ve been apart. More gray touches his temples, and the lines winging from his eyes have increased.

“It doesn’t make sense. Why can’t I call my friends?” I fold my hands in front of me and force myself not to fidget. I’m wearing the clothing he’s provided for me, sans shoes. A dour suit that fits like a glove, doesn’t itch, and is more expensive than my house—the one he’s claimed to have cleaned out and put on the market.

My house.

I’m livid, but I’m not showing it. I’m not going to fidget, but I refuse to be nothing but a prisoner in a metal tower, even though I haven’t been outside in the Vegas heat since I arrived four days ago.

Father finishes signing a document with his feather pen. Gloria, my mother, used to say he was born in the wrong decade. He would’ve opened Gray Towers and given Bugsy Siegel and Meyer Lansky’s Flamingo a run for their money. She said he also would’ve dominated the Mafia rings.

But I disagree. Father's too subtle. He's a businessman at heart, a hit man out of necessity. He would've been the same in Boston or New York or Chicago. He'll succeed at all costs. The price just happened to be becoming the thing that makes mafiosos quiver in bed, worrying the bogeyman's going to find them.

Father's hired people like Kase's parents, but he got his reputation by being the guy wielding the knife or gun or whatever and making problems disappear. His biggest talent was keeping his identity hidden. I wonder how worried he is about Lake Mead's water level?

Kase once said people like his parents don't get a retirement. If they're successful, they can quietly disappear like The Shadow instead of suddenly vanishing like many of those connected with the mob.

No. Father doesn't have skeletons in his closet. He has them all over this big city, and no one messes with him.

He puts the pen in its holder. No mundane cap for him. "Do you think I'm stupid, Holland?"

I chafe at his tone. It's a quiet question, the exact volume and timbre he'd use on someone who wronged him. But I'm his daughter. I'm a Gray, and I'm going to start acting like it. "No, you know better. They're my friends, and I think I should be able to tell them goodbye."

Thanks to what Jacobi did to London, they'll understand marriage contracts. I won't need to give them the details. I just want them to know it's my choice as much as it isn't.

"That lover of yours is also in the friend group, little bee, is he not?" Of course, Father knows all about London and Penni and who their spouses are.

"He is, but things were never serious between me and Kase." More serious than I'd ever experienced, but we both knew the end was near. "He was helping me, and I'd appreciate it if you had more respect for me than to think I'll call London and Penni and ask them to send some sort of

message. If I wanted to get a message to Kase, I'd do it and I'd do it myself."

Father sits back, his chin lifted as if seeing me for the first time. It's the only moment I'm grateful for the drab suit. If I was wearing the same clothes I wore to meet Kase's parents, he wouldn't take me seriously.

Or maybe he would. Father was born and raised in Las Vegas. He's been surrounded by showgirls and performers. He knows when to look beyond the costume.

"What are you going to tell your friends?" He talks about them as if they're still teenagers. As if Gloria and I are still frolicking in L.A. and I'm playing at some private school when I'm only destined to be someone's wife. I've never dwelled on my circumstances for long. How could I when I grew up with everything? But it's disgusting how my worth is determined by who I'm sold to.

"As much of the truth as I can. But they're people who care about me. People who know how much BommGirl meant to me—and will also know that I wouldn't leave for no reason, not weeks before the biggest event of my life."

Displeasure ripples across his face. "The biggest event of your life will now be your wedding after your birthday."

My marriage to Patrick Mason. The thought makes me want to heave, to hurl my eggs Benedict breakfast all over Father's Persian rug. I'd only met Patrick once. He's handsome, I'll give him that. Older than us, he's also unambitious, a player, and not serious about anything. His father is one of the most brutal and dangerous men to cross, a man my father is willing to sell his daughter to. MacDonald Mason learned who Father really is, and I'm the cost of his silence. Someone forced to endure MacDonald's son and bear babies who'll carry on the family tradition Patrick would fail at.

This time, I lift my chin in an attempt to look down my nose at Father. "I'm not going to be happy about being coerced to marry a man I don't love and who is unworthy of me."

“You think you’re better than Patrick Mason?” He doesn’t sound haughty. Just curious.

“Very much so, yes.”

“What if he’s changed, as you have?”

So, Father acknowledges that I’m different. Is he impressed? Or is this a complication? I’m not the scared little girl who’s afraid of her father’s empire collapsing and taking her with it. I’ll be blatant about how much I think a guy like Patrick’s changed. “Sure. Patrick—who’s never worked for a thing in his life, who grew up watching his father get everything he deems his by force, and who couldn’t stand the idea of monogamy, could be a stand-up guy.” Patrick’s promiscuousness was the only reason I wasn’t married before I could legally drink. He wanted more time to fuck around and used my age as an excuse.

“Says the girl I caught playing house with a man who sneaks into people’s offices and homes to bully them into doing whatever someone has paid him handsomely for.”

“Kase is different.”

A gotcha glint enters his eyes. “Please. Enlighten me.”

I could run like a mouse caught in the cheese drawer, or I could keep this conversation going. I have nothing to hide. I’ll play Father’s game. My odds of winning are low. Father has more experience at both gaming and deceiving people. Yet, I recognize the danger of spilling Kase’s secrets. He shared his feelings and emotions with me. No one else. I can’t have Father deciding Kase might be an obstacle for me and do something drastic. A girl without hope is more compliant.

“Maybe I’m just projecting. I didn’t want to be born into this life, Father. Yes, on the outside, so many people are envious of it. I didn’t go without—unless you count freedom, attention, and parental love and support. I grew up thinking I had the opportunity to be whatever I wanted, only to have it ripped away when I was too young and naive to know better.”

Father works his jaw. My heart slams against my ribs, pounding until I’m short of breath. I’ve spoken so frankly to

him. Has he ever heard me be sarcastic?

He tilts his head, inspecting me. “Kase Donovan doesn’t want the life he has?”

“You’d have to ask him. Like I said, I’m probably projecting. What I do know is that I don’t want to live a life intertwined with violence. I don’t want to have to watch my back. I don’t want to give birth to children who’ll wonder why their father is either never around or doesn’t want anything to do with them. We both know how this lifestyle turns out for the family members.”

My pulse is racing. Father abruptly sits forward. I flinch at his sudden movement.

“I heard a lot of couched statements in what you said. If you’re so brave, tell a person what you really think, Holland. To be anything less is childish.” His tone is harsh but chiding.

I almost retract what I said. But that would be too much like a younger Holland. I imagine talking to Monsieur Green. I don’t mince words with him.

I didn’t. I don’t have business with him anymore. Grief is welled behind a dam that’s dangerously close to breaking. I would love to have my biggest problem of the day being Monsieur Green putting his shoes on my assistant’s desk. “Father, I know you’re smart enough to hear what I’m saying. I didn’t come in here to sling accusations or tell you all the ways I feel like you failed as a father.”

His cheek tics. Father hasn’t failed at anything in his life—except when it comes to abiding by the law and being a parent. The reminder must upset him.

I didn’t come here to unearth all the issues of our past. I only want closure for a life I had to abruptly leave. “I want to talk to my friends. That’s all.”

“That’s not all, Holland.” He folds his hands on top of the desk, oblivious to his keyboard. It’s probably for show. He likely has a million assistants to uncap his pens and transcribe what he dictates. “You were born into this life. As much as I

tried to prevent Gloria from getting pregnant, she was determined. Successful where others weren't."

Ouch. An ache ignites deep in my chest. I didn't have parents who wanted me, and I wouldn't know what it's like to be with a partner who does.

"But here you are," he continues. "My child. A Gray. You're not interested in taking over CG Enterprises. You're not interested in casinos or real estate. You're like your mother in that way. You want what you want, and you want to use my money to get it."

I stuff my irritation down. Father always knows his targets' weaknesses. "You offered."

"You begged."

My memories were much different. I signed the contract promising that I'd marry Patrick Mason, and Father had been unusually quiet in that he didn't lock himself inside his office for the day. I went into the kitchen to cry into a bowl of mint chip ice cream and he followed. So unlike him. Then we'd talked. A night I recorded as our second real conversation. The first night was when I saw him kill someone in this office. Someone hired to take him out. Someone like Kase or his mom or dad. A simple job to that man. A job that ended in death.

The second talk was the morning after I signed the contract, when Father proposed the business arrangement. He spent the night planning a legitimate out for me while I sobbed into my pillow. When I was a kid, he let me out of the obligation Kase is faced with. Then with the contract marriage, he helped me again.

Yet here I am. "I was desperate, I won't deny that. But begging paints a false picture, and you know it."

He's going to refuse to allow me to call my friends. He doesn't trust me and maybe he's right not to. Maybe I would tell London and Penni about my marriage contract. It isn't nearly as scintillating as London's was. It's not a way to get me close enough to the perfect man until he can get over

himself. But at least Patrick won't try to kill me like Penni's late husband. That'd be too much effort for a kid who grew up with it easy, being able to do anything he wanted. His older brother was supposed to take over the empire before he was killed.

“Holland—”

“I'm done, Father.” The disapproval in his tone isn't something I am going to tolerate a second longer than I need to. He gave me a window into a free future, then he slammed it shut before the countdown was done. “I'll be in my room if anything changes.”

I walk out, my head held high. Before my time with Kase, I would've never talked to Father like that. I'll never forget the man who rushed into my house at the worst moment, and I'll be forever grateful, even while I descend into hell.

CHAPTER 2



Holland

THERE'S a solid knock on my door. Tommy. His knock hasn't changed over the years. I'm at the mahogany desk in my old bedroom that Father had redecorated to look like the powder room of a very old, very wealthy octogenarian.

There's a fireplace, complete with stonework. An arched ceiling, floor-to-ceiling windows I was never comfortable undressing in front of, a thick rug like the one in Father's office, and furniture so dark I almost wish for another light to brighten the place up.

If I draped a red scarf at the corner of the bed, it'd look like it was bleeding onto the floor. But I'd have just as much luck finding a feathered boa as a red scarf in this damn place. This room is Father's style, unchanging for decades, just like him. Not at all mine.

I push away from the plain notebook I'm sketching in. I can't help taking pencil to paper to whip out designs, but I cried for forty-eight hours straight when I penciled my first bombshell skirt after I arrived two weeks ago.

The notebook is filling up with staid suits and A-line skirts I labeled Bodyguard Chic. Absolutely useless other than to give me a few giggles at the tongue-in-cheek fashion.

Female versions of Tommy and Hanson are my inspiration. Thick necks, thick thighs, and a roomy coat to hide at least one

revolver in. The model inspired by clean-cut Tommy has a topknot, and I gave Hanson's sketched doppelgänger long dark hair with an '80s tease.

I open the door as Tommy's about to knock again. "Yeah?"

I've been a little brat to the two bodyguards who used to give me suckers and gum as a kid. I even caught Hanson tucking a stick of gum back into his suit coat when I told Tommy he should've been able to get into the rental without busting the hinges. *Isn't that Henchman 101?* I feel bad for that, but not enough to quit pouting and apologize.

"Your father needs you in the office." His gaze takes in my appearance and his lips tighten. I tied one of the boring ivory blouses at my hip and ripped one of the skirts so I could fold my legs under me when working on the bed or in the leather recliner in the corner. "You need to change, Holland."

He says it like an uncle who doesn't want to see me get an ass chewing by the principal. I almost close the door to find another option to ease his worry, but I square my shoulders. "Then he can ask what I find comfortable before he buys me an entire damn wardrobe and leaves me with no way to purchase my own essentials."

I try to step around him, but Tommy's a wall and Hanson's fretting behind him. I can only tell because his eyes are darting from me to the office down the long hallway.

Tommy puts his hand up. "It's the Masons. They're in his office."

My throat closes off, and I want to flounder like I'm drowning. I suck in a breath through my constricted airway. The Masons. Not just old Mac, but Patrick too.

In the years since I'd last seen them, I'd convinced myself I could make it so I never saw them again. And they're here. Patrick would've been bad enough, but MacDonald is the brainiac behind the marriage contract. This mess was his idea, and I'm too worn to be utterly compliant today.

"Well, then I'm really not changing." I gesture for Tommy to move it or lose it. A healthy dose of fear and what I want to

think is respect flickers in his eyes.

Hanson's neatly trimmed brows lift as he steps back for us to pass. I like both of them, always have. They treated Gloria with more respect than any of Father's other employees, and they've been good to me. If I genuinely thought Father would take his anger out on them, I would change. Father won't allow others to think he can't control his bodyguards. He views me as a direct reflection of himself, not his staff.

I march to the ornate mahogany office door that matches the desk in my room. All the woodwork in this place matches. No pops of color. No personality. Dreary.

I knock and stroll in like I have all the time in the world. "You wanted to see me?"

Father's jaw hardens, and the muscles in the corners stay at full flex. "Holland." He takes in my appearance, but I keep all challenge off my face and adopt a neutral expression. Apparently mollified that I at least won't make a scene, his jaw loosens. "Have a seat."

I give a pleasant nod to a scowling MacDonald Mason. His round face is usually beet red, but today it's redder than the polo shirt he's wearing with his white slacks. The guy looks like he should be strolling around a Florida retirement community, not marrying off his son to control a man he wants to work with.

As for Patrick, he's lounging in his chair, his arm hanging over the side like he's a petulant teen and not a forty-five-year-old rake. His coppery hair's flopped over his forehead and the style of his linen, navy-blue shorts and white polo match his dad's.

He's aged since I've last seen him. Before, he looked like a man-child with a Peter Pan complex, but today he could blend into the PTA crowd picking up their kids from school. Has he been trying to figure out how to get out of this? Or is he grateful for the contract?

Patrick lets his gaze drift down my body, a reddish-brown brow ticking up. "Holland. Nice to see you again."

Relief hovers at the fringes of my mind. He sounds bored. Is that my opening? Does he hold any sway over his old-fashioned father?

“Christ, she dresses like a whore.” MacDonald’s words are overflowing with disgust.

I suppress my gasp at the last second and struggle not to release the sarcastic retort on my tongue. *You mean the contract I signed comes with money? Because whores get paid, and so far, I’m getting nothing out of this deal.*

Father’s face flushes a few shades lighter than MacDonald’s shirt. “You won’t speak about my daughter like that.”

“Or what?” MacDonald boasts, and Patrick sits up as if he’s getting ready to sprint to the door. I might race him.

“Or we can settle this dispute right now. It won’t matter if my secret gets out if I’m dead, and you can’t insult my only child if you have no pulse. What’s going on between us is business. If you want to make it personal, Mac, go ahead and repeat what you just said.”

I’ve never heard Father speak in such a chilling tone. Goose bumps spread over my skin. I hope MacDonald knows he’s serious. My father will only be pushed so far, and I don’t want to find out he’s not flexing and is willing to burn his empire to the ground over an insult toward me. But I soak in the thought he might really be concerned about this marriage.

MacDonald’s laughter surprises me. Patrick sags in his seat, almost running his hands over his face but instead pressing them onto his thighs. He exchanges a relieved look with me, and I catch a slight shake of his head, like he’s asking if I believe what just happened. I lift my shoulder only slightly to answer him.

Patrick and I might’ve been friends in another life, but I can’t afford to soften toward him. I want to, but he was raised by MacDonald. I might seem harmless, but I was raised by Father. I’ve killed a man. Patrick’s not high profile, but he

shares his exploits on social media. I haven't seen a high regard for anyone but himself.

“Connor, you've still got it,” MacDonald wheezes. “I thought you'd gone soft in your old age.”

Father doesn't qualify for retirement. Not that he'll ever quit working. Gray Towers is going to be his tombstone one day. I doubt I'll get anything from his estate after the way I rejected his way of life, and I don't want it. I'd rather have my freedom.

“Sit, Holland.” Father inclines his head toward the empty chair next to Patrick. I obey like the obedient dog I am. The three of us are arranged in a half-moon in front of Father's desk. A subtle power move, what Father's known for.

I cross my legs, aware the corner of my skirt has hitched up. Patrick eyes my bare skin as I try to hold the edges together. I should've listened to Tommy. My skin's crawling.

Patrick might not want to marry me, but he fucks anything that'll spread for him. I don't care if he's promiscuous. I don't want to be one of his partners.

“We're moving the wedding up,” Father announces evenly.

“What?” I don't temper my volume. It's a startled shout.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Patrick cringe. So, the news wasn't good for him either.

“In light of your recent indiscretion, it's for the best,” MacDonald adds as if that makes it right.

“I've honored the conditions of my contract,” I say rigidly.

“Fashion week?” he spits out. “Magazines? That's not keeping a low profile.”

Oh, crap. He's not upset about Kase. He figured out what I was trying to do.

I keep my gaze off Father. MacDonald's likely figured out who my benefactor is, but I won't confirm it. I come from a rich family. It shouldn't be a surprise I had money to play with. I wish I had more. I could've progressed faster. I

could've bought my way into more magazines and fashion shows and elite parties.

"Is it unreasonable to pursue my passion? The contract's only requirement is marriage." I ask as if I don't know damn well why notoriety is an issue in the Mason world and that my world will be Patrick after we're married. Guys like MacDonald don't care for independent women.

"Yes," he says hotly. "If your father hadn't put a stop to it, I would've taken a torch to that rinky-dink little warehouse of yours."

This time I can't hold my gasp back. "*No.*"

"Yes." MacDonald sits forward. "You stay under the radar like me. Like my boy here. Your only job is to raise my grandchildren."

My stomach turns. I wish I could read Father's face, but he's a master at concealing himself. "I'm contracted to marry your son. You want kids? Fine, I want kids." But not Patrick's. I don't want his dick anywhere near me. "But there's nothing that says I have to be a compliant wife. That we have to conceive the old-fashioned way." I waggle my finger between me and Patrick. "We can get married, and he can give me his samples and a turkey baster." Stomach acid swells into my throat. I want no part of this, but it's by far the better option.

The color of MacDonald's face deepens. "We'll see about that, girl. Three months. The house in The Ridges will be finished, and you can move in as newlyweds." He rises. "I'll give you and Patrick time to talk. Connor?"

Father bristles. He doesn't like being told what to do, not in his office of all places, but he spears me with a look that orders me to behave. "Five minutes."

MacDonald turns as if to argue, but Father's quelling look makes him shut his mouth. And I'm alone with Patrick.

I've been trying to figure out how to get closure. How to keep my friends from worrying and my employees from getting financially hurt when BommGirl goes under. Now the marriage that was looming over me is right around the corner.

It's too much. I want to go to my bedroom and cry, but I tried that years ago and it didn't help. Still, my inhale makes a choking sound in my throat.

“Looking forward to it as much as me, huh?” he asks in a lazy drawl.

Less so. “Basically. Can we get out of this?”

Patrick sits forward, his turquoise gaze scraping over my skin. His obvious perusal leaves an oily residue. Would it be just as bad if I hadn't experienced what true appreciation with Kase is like? “Nope. But don't worry. A turkey baster is just fine. I'm not into forcing my partners. We'll say our vows, and you can do your own thing as long as it doesn't piss Daddy off.”

“Why?” Pure frustration's going to ignite the powder keg in my chest. I'll have a screaming fit to relieve the pressure. MacDonald knows who Father is, but there has to be more. “Why is a marriage between us so damn critical? And why does he seem upset that we aren't going to be happy together if we're forced?”

Patrick's expression is more serious than I've ever seen, and he was there, signing the same contract as me. “You heard about my brother?”

A sad story. He was caught in the cross fire outside of a club in Miami fifteen years ago. “I'm so sorry.”

“Yeah, so is Daddy. Junior was just like him. I'm not. So this is his way of ensuring I'm taken care of and the Mason line keeps going.”

I sympathize with his bitterness. “Are you running things when he's gone?”

Patrick snorts. “When he's gone, we're going to be figuring out how to stay alive. People have their eye on Daddy's power.” He stands and puts a too friendly hand on my shoulder. “I'm figuring an escape plan for us for when I get the news the old man's croaked. But until then, we have to play his game. He'll protect us. I'm not ending up like Junior.” The last sentence is said like a vow.

He pivots on his boat shoes and leaves the office. Do I dare let my hopes rise? I tried to get out of the contract myself. Will Patrick have more success?

Voices murmur outside and then Father walks in. The door closes with a click.

I sigh. Father's going to be upset with how I dressed and behaved. "Father, I—"

"Quiet, Holland." He tugs the chair Patrick vacated to face me and sits. "That was your big mistake." He stuffs a finger toward the door. "That man doesn't think like us. He would've never thought of the type of marriage you described. He thought you two were going to say 'I do' and be madly in love. He thought you were going to lovingly birth his babies, but now he knows better, and he's going to be planning." Father clamps his hands on the arms of my chair. "Hell, he may even give you his own sample in a turkey baster."

My stomach heaves, and I cover my mouth with my fingers. "Gross."

"Yes," he hisses. "Next time, dress like a professional and shut the hell up." He pushes away and goes behind his desk. "Now go to your room."

I'm too shaken to be bothered by the way he worded telling me to leave. I gladly leave his office and ignore Tommy's sympathetic look. Hanson must be seeing the men out—or making sure they don't come back.

I go straight to my bedroom and shut the door. Then I lie facedown on the bed and sob, wishing Kase could appear and help me figure out what to do. He's so good at that.

What's he doing now? Has he asked his friends to aid in helping me, or does he feel as hopeless as I am? Is he still in the rental or did he clear out and stuff all my things in the new storage unit?

Or has he accepted facts, and I'm the one who needs to realize he has his own hopelessly complicated life? I should've quit dreaming long ago.



I WAKE and look at the time on the wooden alarm clock that's as elegant and boring as the rest of the room. Just after midnight.

It's not like I have to abide by a clock during the day. The only time I have to worry about is when I'm supposed to marry Patrick. But I was having the best dream before I woke. It's like I can still smell Kase and his woodsy, sage scent.

I close my eyes, and his scent grows stronger just as a hand wraps over my mouth. A hard body is behind me, and a scream gathers in my throat. I clamp onto the wrist, ready to dig my nails in and roll my body the opposite direction.

A voice whispers, "It's me. You've gotta be quiet."

Kase? I go still, afraid to breathe and wake up from an even better dream where I can feel him on my skin.

"Do you understand?" he whispers.

It's real. Relief, gratitude, and desperation war in my chest. I curl my hand around his neck and pull him toward me. He releases my mouth to put his lips where his fingers had been.

Oh God, it's him. This kiss is real and so is he. I don't care how he did it, only that he's here. I wrap my arms around him and pull him down on top of me. He keeps his weight off me, like he's prepared to run.

He should be ready to leave. But where?

Only curiosity and the fear that he'll get busted make me pull away. "What— How?" I give up and drag him back to my mouth for another kiss.

We spend several minutes lost in each other. My body fires up, ready to strip out of the silk pajamas I was provided.

But he breaks the kiss this time. "I had to come talk to you."

“How—*the hell*—did you get in?” Gray Towers is no slouch with security, and this living space is amped up more than the vault level.

He kneels on the floor next to me. I roll on my side to face him, like a sunflower looking for her sun.

“There are people coming and going every day,” he says. “It was easier than I expected. I’ve been hiding in your closet for the last five hours.”

Five hours ago would’ve been when the supper staff was in the place. He’s right about the activity coming and going. Most people know Tommy and Hanson, but they’re the only mainstays. Names and faces change.

He’s been in the same room as me for hours? “How did I not see you?”

I have only half the nightshades drawn. His smile is visible in the ambient light. “The tall closet you never go in that contains the suits. The ones you use are hanging up along the wall or piled on the built-in dresser. You hate closets.”

I do hate closets.

“How are you going to get out?” I search for his hand in the dark. “But I don’t want you to leave.” Both are impossible, but so is his presence.

“Tomorrow’s laundry day. They won’t notice me hiding in the bottom of the laundry cart when they exchange it for a fresh one.” He makes it sound easy when the logistics and the physicality have to be nearly impossible.

He knows their schedule. It’s probably typed up somewhere, an innocuous schedule someone saved to their device that Jacobi probably hacked. I don’t want our friends in danger, but I have to trust them to be careful enough.

“Cannon has a lot of experience with rich and powerful household schedules. They don’t vary from place to place as much as they should.”

I love this man. This smart, resourceful man who has every reason to forget me. I can’t bring myself to say the words. I

don't know what his being here means other than he can't resist me as much as I can't resist him.

"I don't want anything to happen to you," I say and I squeeze his fingers. Father won't tolerate his interference. Not only will Father lose his business if MacDonald tells everyone who he is, but he'll be a target. So will I and everyone else around us. But he needs to know what I'm up against. "The wedding's been moved up. I don't know what to do."

He's whispering, but his tone reminds me of Father's deadly chill. "How soon?"

"Three months. I'm basically a prisoner here. I can't even call Gloria."

"If I can get you out, what'll happen?"

If he can get me out. As if moving up the date has changed anything. "What do you mean?"

He leans closer. "If your father opened the door and said you could leave, what would you think? Why would you be worried about him?"

He's not accusing me of being a willing participant, but he knows all about family obligation and coercion. "MacDonald Mason knows Father's real identity. He'll use it against him and it'll cost Father everything, then it'll spill onto Gloria and me and anyone who's close to us."

"Who's your father, Holland? Who else is he besides Connor Gray, casino magnate?"

I bite my lower lip. I've never told a soul, but Kase is in the viper's den. He could get struck any minute, and he's here for me. He has to know what he's up against.

"Father got his start much the same way you did. And he was really good at it. He's The Shadow."

CHAPTER 3



*K*ase

WHAT THE EVER-LOVING fuck am I hearing?

The Shadow?

The bogeyman of people like me?

I'm in his house? I was sleeping with his daughter?

No wonder she knew how to kill a guy and clean up the mess.

And she didn't tell me.

No fucking wonder. My parents have enemies, but Holland's father went after members of the Mafia no one could get to. His enemies are numerous and some of the most powerful in the country, perhaps the world. His anonymity is half his power.

"Fuck, Holland."

"Yeah." She sounds regretful, but damn. I pride myself on not landing in tough positions. I'm careful, even more so than my parents, and they are the best—aside from The Shadow. "I know it's a little on the nose, but I think that's also why no one expects a guy like him to be a killer. And he hasn't done that type of work for years, just when I was younger and he had to protect his companies."

“And he brought you with him?” My parents even buffered me until it was unavoidable.

“Someone was sent for him, someone like you. And I . . . walked in.”

“Shit, and you saw it?”

“Yes.” Her answer’s ragged. “And since I didn’t run and hide or shut down, he thought he’d take me under his wing that day. Show me his world—the life that would be mine.”

“But he realized it wasn’t right?”

I wish. “He realized I didn’t have it in me to do what he did. What he does to survive in a cutthroat world, but also with the casinos. I only care about Gray Towers because Father lives here. If I was in charge, I would sell CG Enterprises in a heartbeat.”

Her father did what my parents are unwilling to. He tried to allow his daughter to walk away, but his past haunts her, not him.

Fuck. This is a bigger mess than I thought. “Why did the wedding get moved up?”

“I was being naughty with my business.” Bitterness drips from her tone. “Not only that, I made comments that made me sound like too much of an independent woman.”

Men like MacDonald Mason don’t like independent women. Best to lock her down quickly and snuff that life from her. If only I could do the same to him. He’d deserve it for dimming her sun.

“If I can get you out, Jacobi can buy you a new identity. He can get you somewhere your father can’t find you.” Only it’ll be ten times harder now that I know who her dad really is. Connor Gray has connections I can’t anticipate. He’s knowledgeable in the legitimate business world and in the underworld.

What a fucking mess.

“I need some time to think about this,” I say mostly to myself. I don’t quit holding her. We’ve had enough space

between each other.

“I have three months.” She rolls closer. Our faces are inches away. I want to strip her down and taste her instead of talking about marriages and hit men. My dick can’t ruin this mission I’ve made for myself. “But, Kase, if you’re only trying to free me so I can go live alone somewhere without you and without my friends, I don’t know if it’s worth it.”

She’s willing to be unhappy and free me from risk if she can’t be with me? Humbled, I can only utter the obvious. “My situation hasn’t changed.”

She touches her forehead to mine. “You’re sacrificing yourself for your family. I’m doing the same for mine. If you get me out of here and I become Hailey Morales again or something, then what about Gloria? She’s a crappy mother, but she doesn’t deserve to suffer for my father’s misdeeds.”

“Holland, I can’t . . .” I can’t see her married to someone else. I can’t chance that she’ll fall in love with Patrick fucking Mason.

Then why the hell am I here?

Because I didn’t have all the information. I underestimated Holland. She wouldn’t be going through with this if it wasn’t dire. And if I fuck up—at all—it’s my parents on the line. It’s Jacobi and Cannon. Holland’s friends.

“I can’t either.” She sighs. “I don’t see a way out, but there has to be something.” She places a kiss at the corner of my mouth. “Can you stay with me? Before you dig yourself into dirty linens, can you be with me?”

She barely finishes the question, and my mouth is on hers. I’m risking a lot being here, but I can’t leave without touching her more than we are now.

The pajamas she has on are silky but nothing like her skin. I work the buttons one by one until her breasts are bared to me. Kissing my way down her neck, I palm one side while wrestling with the pajama pants.

She had no say in these clothes. They aren’t her. They aren’t the boy shorts and tight T-shirts she prefers to wear to

bed. I finally win the battle with her pants. There's nothing blocking me from her.

I can't afford to get undressed, but I miss feeling her skin against mine, and I can use my mouth as much as possible.

Taking one nipple between my lips, I slide a hand down her belly. She arches into me and she's wet. My erection's painful, demanding. When I was sneaking out of the closet, she made a little whimper that went straight to my dick. I know those sounds. She was dreaming, and I hoped it was about me.

The way she melted as soon as she realized it was me next to her—a guy could get used to that. Especially someone like me. I didn't break into people's homes and get welcomed. As much as I want to curl my lips around her clit and suck just the way she likes it, I kiss my way back to her mouth to swallow the delicious sounds she's making. She greedily takes my tongue into her mouth, and I work her with my fingers. Her legs are around me, and this is where I could stay for eternity. Just us, in a dark bedroom, with all the problems left at the door. It isn't that way, but until she climaxes, I can pretend.

A small whimper leaves her, but she cuts it off, as aware as I am how dangerous this is. Those two bodyguards won't hesitate to fire on a guy smothering Holland in the middle of the night.

She tightens her hold around me, her hips grinding against my hand with increasing urgency.

It's only seconds before she explodes. I swallow any sound that escapes. She's struggling to keep her breathing from being loud, her moans from leaving her chest.

When she stills, I'm tempted to yank my zipper down and plunge inside of her. She's spread open under me; it'd be so easy. But I can't risk her or myself because I'm horny. I can survive another week twisting and turning in my sheets dreaming of being buried deep in her body. I got to be close to her and twenty-four hours ago, I wasn't sure it was possible.

“Kase?” She must be wondering why I’m not making a move.

“This has to be good for now.” I lift myself enough to cover her with the blankets and protect her from my demanding hard-on and stretch out next to her with her head on my shoulder. “Tell me everything that’s happened. You never know what could help us.”

She snuggles into me, and damn, I missed this. “I’m going to talk until I fall asleep, and then when I wake up, you’re going to be gone, aren’t you?”

“There’s no way I can stay.” It guts me to think about leaving, but I made it in once. I’ll do it again.

“I won’t look for you, but I’m going to be watching for you in all the shadows.”

This woman is perfect. I don’t deserve her, and I know it. It’s why my life is the way it is.

She tells me about MacDonald and Patrick Mason, what she remembers about the contract, and how MacDonald learned about her father’s secret during an attempt to do what the Mafia does best—scare Connor Gray into making a decision they wanted. But MacDonald didn’t know who he was up against, and he’d paid dearly in henchmen. But he also figured out a secret that was under everyone’s noses.

I just have to figure out how to make sure MacDonald Mason will never tell another soul what he knows, keep Holland’s father in the casino business, and extract Holland from this life.



Holland

I KNEW when I woke Kase wouldn’t be here, but the devastation settles deep in my chest regardless. The spot where he had lain is no longer warm.

I stretch my arms high above my chest, and my boobs pop out from under the covers. A flush covers my body as the sensations of last night roll through my memories. For a moment, I'm transported to the rental. I'd wake up alone in my glow after a passionate night. It seems selfish to want to wake up next to him when he'd held me for so long, but I haven't gotten to experience that yet.

Kase did what no one else was able to. He entered Connor Gray's home without being noticed. I grab my phone and glance at the time. Ten in the morning. Laundry gets picked up and dropped off before eight. Father wants much of the staff to work in the off-hours before he's sequestered in his office doing business. He's disturbed enough with regular duties and doesn't want people adding to his headaches. Kase should've been unknowingly rolled out hours ago, and since I was allowed to slumber without interruption, I can assume he made it safely out.

Before I fell asleep, I asked about London and Penni. He said they were the reason he finally talked to Jacobi and Cannon. I smile at the arched ceiling. My friends are worried about me. I hate to bother them, but knowing I'm more to someone than chattel means something. I can drop off the radar, no one hearing from me for months, and Gloria wouldn't know anything was wrong. If she sensed something was the matter, she wouldn't follow through on her concerns.

No, I don't want to give up my life. I don't want to give up my friends. My work. And definitely not Kase. While he's working to rescue me from my modern-day Rapunzel tower, will he realize he's worth having his own life and disappointing his parents? If he's able to save me from this metal-and-glass prison, he should be able to mollify his parents and do what he wants in the future.

But I'm simplifying his life too much. There's the danger to his parents, and neither of us has a way around that.

There's a knock at the door. I bolt upright. There are no locks on any doors, but the rooms Father uses. "I'm getting dressed."

“Your father wants to see you,” Tommy calls from the other side.

“Got it.” Dragging the blanket off the bed with me, I rush to the closet. It’s as large as the living room and kitchen in my house—in my old house. Hopeful, I peek into the armoire. Nothing but shades of gray fabric. No Kase. Feeling foolish, I finish getting ready to face Father.

In case the Masons are back, I pick one of the outfits. A pantsuit. I take the pants and choose a baby pink button-up shirt next to it. After I get into a bra and underwear, I step into the pants and leave the shirt untucked. Barefoot, I plod to Father’s office, unable to suppress my inner rebel, but at least I’m covered.

It’s just Father behind his foreboding desk. No Masons. “Holland.” I’m shutting the door when he says, “Were you able to get some sleep?”

Alarm zings through my body, leaving singed blood in its path. Does he know? Father’s good, but is Kase better? “I was restless much of the night, but then I finally fell asleep.” In Kase’s arms. I study Father to monitor his reaction.

He only nods and kicks back in his chair, tenting his fingers. “Are you going to try to get out of it?”

Hell yes. “Wouldn’t you?” My question spurs another, one I wouldn’t have known to ask if it wasn’t for the last couple months of my life. “But what I really want to know is, why haven’t you?”

He arches a brow. “Excuse me?”

“You’ve gone your entire adult life doing things few men have done before. You’ve achieved major financial success but also with . . . your other things.” Not many people can wipe someone’s existence from the earth and then show up early for a board meeting. “Yet with MacDonald Mason, you’re letting him run the show. You’re letting him do what he wants.” An awful realization sets in. “Is it because I’m the one paying the price? Is it because you view me as nothing but worthless

otherwise, so I might as well spread my legs? I can't become as powerful as you, so this is what I deserve?"

He aims his gaze out the window. "Holland, I've been asking myself the same thing."

Whoa. That's not the resounding no I was hoping to hear. Not the "*Of course not, little bee. You mean everything to me, and I can't stand thinking of you unhappy*" answer I wanted. My question was like looking in my closet this morning. Don't go looking to be disappointed. I take a seat across from the desk and wait for him to speak.

"What happened the night of your attack?" he asks, and I'm not prepared to go so far back in time to something I wish I could forget. Why is he changing the subject? "Did your boyfriend kill that man?"

"I . . ." I'm confessing a murder out loud. He's my father, but I haven't been sure what that's meant my whole life. "It wasn't an accident, more like impulsive self-defense. I instinctively thrust my scissors out, but I didn't expect him to . . ." Run right into the blades.

"But you held on tight enough to stab him?" Is that pride I hear? How would I feel if it was?

I try to be clinical. I don't need to prove myself to Father, but I need to prove myself to me. Josef wanted me to be his victim. I wasn't then, and I won't be now. "Then he came at me again. That time was intentional. One of us wasn't leaving the room alive. Kase saw that Josef had taken the job, but he didn't know who ordered the hit. He says his parents weren't a part of it. They didn't input the assignment, and Kase wiped the record before they could know about it."

Father props his elbows on the desk, his hands folded. "He dumped the body, and you cleaned up the evidence."

Why are we revisiting this? Father's been more interested in marrying me off than finding who tried to kill me. "Are you wearing a wire?" I ask in a lame attempt at a joke. He'd never get that far with law enforcement. Father won't turn on

himself or anyone else. If he was the type, he wouldn't have been The Shadow. So, what's with him this morning?

His smile is faint but self-satisfied. "Good question to ask, little bee. I like that you thought of it."

The nickname is always as disconcerting as it is warming. Does he really care, or is it a trick to make me think he does? "What's going on?"

He taps his fingertips together. "I know I said you weren't planned."

I nod, biting back the hurt his plain statement causes. He waves around the office. "But when you were younger, I thought you'd carry all this on."

I nod again. "Gray Enterprises and the side hustle."

"For a long time, that side hustle was my main income. And then I bought my first piece of real estate and then another. And then I thought I could get out altogether. But . . ." His tone says he needed his old skills more than ever. "When you came into my office that night, I thought it was best you knew what your legacy was. So when you took over, you were prepared for all sides."

I don't mention that people can do business at high levels without a trail of blackmail and murder, but I've never done business at those heights. Maybe it's exactly what Father's describing.

"You didn't take to it," he says. "And I had to find something else for you or watch you get destroyed. I let your mother take you to L.A. I thought you were free of this life and then Mac came for a visit." His expression hardens a moment. "Maybe I thought it was for the best. You'll be protected under the Mason empire."

"I'll be a target with him as much as I would be if I go back to L.A." The only difference is Patrick will be a shield—except he'll be in other women's beds.

"You've always been a target." Father's gaze goes back out the window. "Your boyfriend—have you talked to him since you've been here?"

I can't get a sense of what he knows. "How would I?" I ask carefully, filling my voice with a believable amount of confusion. "I don't even have access to a phone."

"Hmm." His gaze travels back to me. "We're stuck in this, Holland. I don't like being stuck, but Mac has fail-safes. If something happens to him, my secrets will be spilled and blood will be shed. You and I will be first. Then your mother."

"I know that."

"Make sure your boyfriend does too."

His tone rubs me the wrong way. I'm watching the date for New York Fashion Week approach with no way to tell my company that I'm out. That for them, it's business as usual until I marry Patrick and get the freedom to use a damn phone—that'll likely be tapped by MacDonald. How much will the Masons have a say over my life?

I stand and smooth the creases out of my slacks. Father might look harder for signs that I'm talking to Kase, and I don't want to learn how he'll handle Kase if he learns he can get so close to me. I have to try to put his concerns to rest. "The situation between Kase and me is like when you met Gloria. He doesn't want a family. He doesn't want kids. He doesn't want to drag people he cares about into a dark, dismal life that could one day lead him to selling his daughter off."

I stomp out of the office before I'm dismissed, wishing my words rang truer than they sounded to my ears. Because if Kase showed up at the door, I'd go with him. And if I got pregnant, he'd stand by me, for better or worse.

I never thought the life Gloria lived would look favorable compared to the future I'm facing.

Congratulations, Holland. You're your mother.

CHAPTER 4



Holland

ANOTHER WEEK HAS GONE BY. I haven't gotten a surprise night visit from Kase again. Father has left me alone. No more odd office visits where he simultaneously acts like he's a concerned parental figure and also a heartless man who's okay with trading his daughter for privacy.

I've spent my days sketching looks. They're getting less sunny as the days wear on. I don't hate the outcome. I'm using old sketches and giving them an edge. For a crochet lace mesh jumpsuit a few shades darker than my trademark bombshell red, I added bracelets. Leather cuffs. Another design I'm riffing on is a belted tunic, only the belt is thick, like a shackle. And there're the plaid, wide-legged trousers reminiscent of those worn in the 1940s—only the plaid pattern is really metal bars, like a jail cell.

My taste has taken a darker turn, but the ideas are keeping me busy. Yet after days of angry drawing, I'm reaching the pinnacle of boredom.

It's only nine in the morning. I push away from the desk with a sigh. Father's started letting me take walks with one of the guards. I can take a few laps around the first-level casino. It's Hanson's turn to accompany me today. Before I reach the door, the scent of woodsy sage curls around me.

I gasp, delight coursing through me, but his hand covers my mouth, only this time it's a provocative stroke, his

fingertip tracing my lips. I flick my tongue out, and he groans in my ear. He spins me around. He's dressed in dark clothing and there are circles under his eyes, but he's still as handsome as he's ever been.

"How long have you been in here?" I whisper.

He drags me to the closet. I shut the door behind me.

"For a few hours. Laundry was early today. I almost missed the bucket."

This apartment takes up the whole floor, and the laundry room is on the other side. I don't care about the logistics. I throw my arms around him and slam my mouth against his.

He backs me against the door, invading my mouth with his tongue. I can't get close enough to him. The slacks and shirt I'm wearing feel more like a suit of armor than Armani.

But all too soon, he's pulling away. "I came here to talk." He pulls a phone out of his pocket and dangles it between two fingers.

I blink, then realize he's giving me a lifeline to the outside world. "Kase, this is the best gift." I hug the phone to my chest.

A dark cloud covers his expression and he glowers at the phone. "I should've left one the last time I was here. I should've known how cut off you were." He pries it from my fingers. "I have all the numbers programmed in here. Your employees are rather worried. They've bombarded your inbox. Go ahead. Call them."

"But you're here." I can call later. This is our time.

"I'm not going anywhere. Go on, call your people."

The next two hours pass in a blur. Kase and I sit side by side on the floor, as close as possible, and I call London and Penni first. Speaking quietly in case one of the guards happens to enter without knocking, which they haven't done yet, I'm thrilled to hear their voices. Those conversations are shorter. And easier. They know Kase can get to me, and they're confident he'll help me figure out a solution. I pretend to be

hopeful. Then I tackle work. Sahara answers with her typical chippiness that likely isn't reflected in her expression.

“Sahara, it's me.”

“Shit, girl. You've left us in the lurch.”

“I know. Listen, I've got a story, but I can't tell you everything.” I give the abridged version of what's happened, leaving out the hits, the Mafia, and my imprisonment. “So, yeah, like an arranged marriage.”

“That you have to cancel fashion week for?” Sahara's skeptical on a good day. She doesn't sound like she's buying any of it.

“Trust that I can't tell you everything for a good reason. And you can't act like you heard from me.” Fucking MacDonald might be watching the warehouse.

She sighs. “All right. I'm not canceling until the last minute. It's right around the corner, and if there's any way you can pull a miracle out of your ass, I'm not giving your slot away. So we keep trying to hold our heads above water?”

Apparently, I can't ditch the optimism. If not for me, then for them. “Yes. I'm working on looks, and I can try to get the pieces I made over the last month to you.” Kase can drop them off. MacDonald or Father won't think anything of Kase getting rid of my stuff.

“Holland, I gotta say—Anna looks like she's crying at least once a day. The financials are sounding a death knell.”

I wince, and Kase puts his hand on my thigh. Finances were dire when the year started. The business is doing okay, but it's not thriving, and without fashion week, after all the resources we've pumped into it, I fear it'll be an axe to the accounts.

While I'm locked in a tower, I can't work on new contracts or explore ways to optimize spending. I trust Anna's doing what she can, but I'm the owner. I'm not a cog in the wheel; I'm a wheel. “I know. I'll keep working on what to do. Hold the course. We'll be fine.” I don't feel my confidence. I don't

know what my future holds, but my fingertips tingle as if I can tangibly feel all my hard work slipping out of my hands.

I hang up and let the back of my head hit the wall. “It’s all going to crumble.”

“No, it won’t.”

“How do you know?” I don’t have the heart for false optimism. I’d never known how powerless I was until the last two weeks.

“Because we’re going to talk to your father.”

I twist to my side. I can’t have heard him correctly. That’s a death wish. Father respects straightforwardness, not stupidity. “What?”

“We’re going to walk to his office and make him talk to us.” His confidence isn’t reassuring.

“Kase.” I imagine the scenario in my mind. I walk out the door with Kase, and Tommy and Hanson shoot him. Or we make it to Father’s office and then what? Father shoots him? Does Kase even have a gun on him? A knife? “No, I’m not risking you.”

“Your dad is the type of man to respect me walking through his office door rather than sneaking into his daughter’s bedroom to defile her.”

I can’t help my smile. “We’re in the closet, and you have yet to defile me.”

“We can change that.” He slips the phone out of my hand and sets it next to him, then drags me onto his lap.

I straddle him and rest my hands on his shoulders. The best seat in the house. “You have a plan?”

“An idea is all. A plan is useless unless I have your dad’s buy-in.”

“What if he doesn’t go for it?”

“He’ll have to.”

“But, Kase—”

He presses a thumb to my lips. “He’ll have to. That’s all there is to it. But just in case, I need to have you.” He unbuttons my shirt, but I get impatient and drag it over my head. I don’t think we’ll get caught, but the extra hint of danger fuels my lust.

I stand and step out of my pants. He undoes the clasp of his black tactical pants. His charcoal-gray T-shirt softens the look and makes him oh so touchable. I sink back down to my knees. He’s already hard, and I take him in my hand to position him. There’s no other foreplay. The last week has been a waiting game, thinking we’d never get another moment like this.

Meeting his hot gaze, I lower myself onto him, letting him fill me. I’ve been empty since the last time we were together. I swirl my hips to get him positioned just right.

“Fuck, Holland, it’s been forever.”

“I’m yours, Kase,” I say as I rise and lower to coat him completely. I tip my head back and moan, grateful the closet gives us more privacy than the main area of the bedroom. “No matter what, I’m yours.”

And that’s a problem. Facing this marriage was awful before I was with him. Now? It’s impossible to say vows with a guy I feel nothing for. A man I don’t want touching me and who likely won’t have a fraction of the respect for me Kase has. I don’t know what I’m going to do, but Kase came back. His idea is preposterous, but maybe that’s what we need. A straightforward admission of all the issues to the people involved who can do something about it.

At least Kase has been thinking while I’ve been hiding in my sketchbook.

I ride him faster, grateful he’s here, needing to prove to myself he’s real. His grip on my hips tightens, and he takes over the pace. There’s nothing but the sound of our heavy breathing mingling in the closet. My focus is on him and what he’s doing to me. I’ve been without him too long.

“I’m so close.” I feel like I have to warn him. The explosion’s going to be big, but I can’t do it without him. I have to think this moment means as much to him. A silent promise that if we get out of this, we can face his circumstances too.

Instead of backing off, he slides his hand down my belly and rests a finger on my clit and it’s like an instant lightning strike. My movements do the rest of the work. My moans are getting louder despite my best efforts to be quiet, and he wraps a hand around the back of my neck to drag me to him. Just like the other night, he catches the noise, swallowing me as completely as he does when his face is between my legs.

I hit the top of my climax and so does he. His heels are pressed into the floor and he bends his knees, tipping me into him. We’re a tight bundle as we writhe together, riding out our orgasms as one.

Sagging against him, I can feel him twitch inside of me. I break our lingering kiss to rest my head on his shoulder. As good as my afterglow is, sadness seeps in. “I don’t want this to end.”

“I know.”

Not exactly a promise. Like he’s accepted that it will eventually end. Like he’s thinking it’d be best if we didn’t touch so it’d hurt less when he had to walk away. We’re trying to get my life back, not his.

There I go, forgetting what it’s really like for us. I push off, untangling myself from him. “I’ll use the bathroom and change.”

He nods. “Then I’ll clean up.”

It wouldn’t do to march into Father’s office smelling like sex. I open the closet door and peer into the bedroom. No one’s entered, but I never know when Father will call me to his office. I scurry to the bathroom and clean up. There’s nothing I can do about the flush in my cheeks, but I’m sure blood will drain from my face as soon as Tommy spots Kase.

Back in the closet, I choose another outfit while Kase cleans up. When he's back, he sweeps his gaze down my pin-striped pants and black silk shirt. I've twisted my hair into a chignon and even put on a pair of flats. We need all the advantages we can get.

The heat from earlier hasn't left his eyes. "I miss the booty shorts." We share a smile before he nods. "It's time."

I can't think too far into our future. One problem at a time, and it begins now.



Kase

HOLLAND and I face the bedroom door as a united front. As soon as it opens, I could have a life expectancy of seconds, or I could get Connor Gray to listen to me.

Is this the wrong idea?

No. Each time I sneak in, I risk getting caught. This morning, my timing was off, and it was only because I hadn't been sleeping well and arrived early that I wasn't busted crawling into a cart full of dry cleaning and food supplies. The chef had some sort of schedule change. Shit I can't predict and will get me tossed in a barrel and sunk to the bottom of Lake Mead or slammed behind bars.

But I can't leave this alone.

I haven't talked to my parents yet. I don't know how it's going to work with them. My idea could come to fruition, I could have Connor's full approval, and then what? I tell Mama and Poppa that they're out of luck? That it's Holland for me, and I can't drag her into that kind of life?

I don't know. All I know is that Holland needs to be free of her father and the Masons. MacDonald couldn't protect his oldest son, the guy who was supposed to take over the empire. If she's left with only Patrick, she's as good as dead.

It doesn't matter that I don't want another man touching her. It doesn't matter that she's not interested. Her safety is the priority right now.

She interlaces her fingers with mine, and we walk out of the bedroom.

Tommy glances up from his post at the corner of the hallway at the junction of Connor's office and the main living area. His eyes widen when they land on me, and the color drains from his face. He slowly reaches into his suit coat. I tug on Holland's hand to silently order her behind me.

"No, Tommy." Holland isn't the startled girl from when the guys broke into our rental. "He's only here to talk."

I untangle my fingers from hers, missing her warmth and raise my hands in the air, not quite like I'm getting held up, but enough to let Tommy know I'm not interested in violence. He's not an impulsive man, or he wouldn't be working for Connor Gray. "Hey, man. If I can get in here without being detected, I could probably get her out without you knowing. We just need to talk to Mr. Gray."

Tommy pauses with his hand at his chest, like he's not sure what to do, like his years of service haven't prepared him for a guy walking out of the bedroom of his boss's daughter. He clears his throat. "I'll go talk to Mr. Gray."

"No, we're just going in," Holland says.

Tommy's walking backward to keep us from storming her father's office. "Holland—"

"Tommy," she says more firmly. "I know what I'm doing. Father will get over his anger when he hears what Kase has to say."

"I'm only here to help," I add.

Tommy lifts a brow like he doesn't believe me. "I have to at least warn him."

His beseeching tone doesn't slow Holland. "You can go in first, but we'll be right behind."

My pulse is steady, thanks to my experience. My plan could go wrong a thousand ways, but Holland's worth trying. We reach a big door that's the office. I know the layout of the apartment in my mind, but this tall, ornate panel of wood with giant metal handles would announce the very serious work being done in the room if I didn't have the dimensions of the floor memorized.

Tommy pushes the door open and tries to stand in the middle of the doorway. "Mr. Gray—"

Holland ducks under his arm. If I muscle Tommy out of the way, he could take it as aggression. I can't afford an altercation, so I wait.

"Father, Kase came to talk. Don't blame the guys for not knowing he got into the penthouse. No one knows."

Connor goes dangerously still sitting behind his desk. His hands aren't visible and are probably wrapped around a hidden gun. I didn't see him when Tommy opened the door, but the change in routine and his bodyguard's behavior would've alerted him that things weren't normal. I can assume Connor has a weapon, and I have little more than some lock-picking tools and small knives holstered above my boots. Anything else would only get me into trouble.

As Holland speaks, Connor's grim gaze rests on me. I hold the contact. I have nothing to hide, but I make sure I don't twitch. No sudden movements.

"He has an idea, and he wants to help me. Can you at least listen to him?" she asks.

"And if I don't like what he has to say?" Connor doesn't take his eyes off me. He's not asking Holland.

"You'll let him leave," Holland answers.

He won't. I'm risking everything standing in his doorway. He won't let a man who knows how to break into his home without being noticed walk around freely. I know this because I know men like Connor Gray, and that's why I'm here.

Men like him don't want some Mafia asshole holding their secrets. Men like him don't want to be controlled. They detest

feeling like a puppet. If they didn't, they wouldn't have gotten into the line of work they did. They wouldn't have learned how to kill and not get caught. The skills had been formed out of necessity and maybe he thinks he's stopping the cycle, but he's not. I have to make him see it.

“Tommy, wait outside,” he says.

That's progress.

Tommy might've tried to suppress his disapproving grunt, but he moves. I ignore him and his glare. I don't blame him. I'm like the kid in school who tattles to the teacher. He might be in trouble with his boss because of me. But this is likely a first, and I'll prove that there was nothing Tommy could've done to prevent this moment. Holland wouldn't forgive herself if Tommy was punished—however Connor Gray dealt with his guards.

Holland reaches back for my hand, and we approach the desk linked together. Her father's eyes narrow further, and I don't mind him seeing how close we are. I care about his daughter and it's not a secret. I take the seat directly across from him, putting his daughter to his left and most likely out of range of any under-the-desk firearms Connor's packing.

Her father's only movements are shifting his gaze back and forth. I wasn't confident walking into the office, but I'm surprisingly mellow. He's stalling to unsettle me and recognizing his tactic is oddly calming. We're alike, and we both care about Holland. This has to work.

“What's this about?” he asks flatly.

“I can take care of MacDonald Mason for you,” I say.

Displeasure ripples across Connor's face. “If I thought killing him would work, I wouldn't be in this predicament. Besides, as my daughter knows, I can't have him just disappear.”

“I'm not the one who needs to kill him. That's on you to send a message that no one fucks with you or your family and gets away with it. I'm the one who can find the dirt he has on

you and make it disappear. That way, when you do settle the score with him, nothing leaks.”

Connor stares at me, but the sharpness in his eyes intensifies. His mind is working. “And what do you expect out of it?”

“Holland’s freedom.”

He rolls his eyes. “You want my daughter. How does that make you better than Mac?”

Fair question. “One, I want her freedom. She should get to choose who she’s with or if she wants to grow old with only cats and piles of fabric around her house. And two, even if I did barter for her, I’ll never be like a Mason.”

“The only difference between you and Mac and his people is that you’re a freelance killer. You don’t have one specific boss. I know your history, and while you’re much more discreet than Patrick, you’re not exactly that much different.” He sits forward, folding his hands on the desktop. Relief makes me relax even though he’s not buying what I’m selling. At least I’m no longer in danger of being shot any second.

I didn’t expect this to be easy. He wouldn’t own a building like this if he could be easily swayed or intimidated. He wouldn’t have two other casinos under his empire or guys like MacDonald threatening him.

“Otherwise, you seem a lot like Patrick.” His tone is challenging. He’s trying to get a rise out of me. “You don’t want to take over the family business.” His smile turns smug. “I’m guessing it’s too messy for you. You take the easy jobs.”

I would get upset, but he’s baiting me and it’s not true. The easy jobs are killing someone. Hiding evidence and a body is easier when the problem has bled out already. When no one else is attacking you, you can think a lot clearer.

Keeping someone alive and scaring them enough to obey your commands adds levels of complication no one understands unless they’re watching their back as they ditch a house with a terrified and enraged rich asshole who thinks he can kill them and his problems will be gone.

But I don't respond. Holland's eyes are wide, and she's looking at me as if she's willing me to say something, anything, to defend myself.

I don't. This is Connor's power play.

He continues as I expected he would, only this time his tone oozes with insult. "I'm not just talking about the illegal business your parents run. You don't exactly want to assemble burritos for the rest of your life either."

"Father."

He doesn't spare her a look. "Yet you're not exactly building another life. You don't have any other skills but the ones your parents gave you, and even those you're choosy with. Your parents sacrificed for you, and you're telling them, nah, I'm not going to do that. You fuck around, and now the boy who's been given everything and has gotten to do what he wants can't have my daughter. Now you think you'll swoop in here like some hit man with a golden heart and save her?" He scoffs. "Then what? You freeload off her and the Gray name?"

Shit. Everything he said rings true and tries to worm its way into my psyche. Arguments crowd on my tongue—the one that'd just been down his daughter's throat—but I take my time. Just like I didn't rush to storm his office as soon as he returned to Las Vegas after barging into our L.A. rental, I'm not speeding through this conversation. I'm not falling for the same tactics I've used on others.

He's waiting for me to respond. I don't until I'm ready. A subtle power play but a necessary one. "The thing is, it doesn't matter how much like Patrick you think I am. Maybe if I sat down with him, I'd find out we have a lot in common. Would he trade everything he was born with for a life without violence? For a life where he doesn't have to hurt people for money? For a life where he can change careers without putting his life at risk? Maybe. Like me, Patrick might fuck around because he doesn't want a wife or kids or to be sucked into a soul-killing job. I do know that if I could change things, I'd pick Holland to spend my life with. I'd choose to be with her and only her. I know that if I can't be with her and promise her

a safe life, I'm not going to be with anyone else either. It'll be me jacking off in the shower.”

I can't bring myself to look at Holland. Her gaze bores into my flesh, and fuck, I've missed being around her. I've missed waking up and talking to her. I miss just fucking hanging out.

No. There'll be no one else for me.

CHAPTER 5



Holland

I'M LOSING the battle to keep from fidgeting. I cross one leg over the other, but I have to put both feet back on the floor or my leg will bob uncontrollably. My hands are folded, and my fingers are white from how tightly I'm clenching them together.

Father looks like he always does, but it's the feeling in the office. It's like the air has been sucked out, and we're only allowed to breathe what he allows.

Kase just referenced masturbating in the shower. Icicles filled my lungs as soon as he said it, but I had the strongest urge to giggle at the absurdity. I don't want to have Patrick's kids. I want a family, but having Kase risk his life for me altered the desire. I want a family on *my* terms. I'm not a product. I'm a person.

I'm Holland Gray. Fashion designer.

"As impassioned as your speech is," Father says after a long pause and my heart sinks, "I'm struggling to see how wiping out any record of my secrets in Mac's possession would solve my problem when he can just speak it. Others know that Holland and Patrick are supposed to marry. If Mac ends up dead, I'll have a whole lot of people looking in my direction, and I don't need that scrutiny at this point in my life."

“Don’t need it or don’t want it?” Kase counters. I shouldn’t have doubted him. Few people can face Father like he’s done. “You’re getting complacent, and everyone will know it.”

We’re at an impasse. Father is like Kase. He wants The Shadow to be put to rest. He wanted to be legitimate and his side work was a necessity to get there. But like Kase, he can’t get out. If he’s unwilling to face the backlash of dealing with the Masons for himself, he won’t do it for me. I accepted the notion when I signed the contract.

“What do you think Mason will do once the contract’s fulfilled?” Kase asks. “He’s holding it over your head. Some bullshit about waiting until Holland’s twenty-six? So you think that was true? Or more years to pull your strings? And when they do marry, then what? My parents have a nice retirement because of guys like him. They get the results they want from force, and they keep doing it.”

Father’s expression doesn’t change. He isn’t swayed. “Mac and I aren’t like the men your parents take work from. We handle business ourselves.”

“You used to,” Kase says. “MacDonald sure as hell isn’t storming through front doors. His heart medication isn’t that strong.”

Father’s gaze sharpens. “He’s on heart medication?”

My pulse stammers. Are we making progress?

“MacDonald has congestive heart failure. Everyone thinks it’s a masseuse that comes to his house, but it’s a cardiologist wearing leggings and athletic tops instead of a white lab coat.” Kase reclines in his seat as if he’s chitchatting with an old friend. No one’s relaxed in this office. I’m impressed. “Things aren’t looking good. I’m guessing that’s the real reason for moving the wedding date up. And . . . maybe MacDonald thinks his only surviving son isn’t cut out for the Mafia. He’s more of a corner office guy.” Kase deliberately scans Father’s office.

I suck in a breath. “MacDonald wants to take over Father’s empire?”

Father's expression has turned to stone. His lips are pursed, and his clenched fingers are white like mine. I would be upset he's more worried about losing his work than me, but I'll take whatever gets me out of Mac Mason's control.

"He's building a house out here for his son, isn't he?" Kase asks. "A nice place in Henderson. Some rich neighborhood? Nice and close, right?"

Father crosses his arms and reclines in his chair. "Tommy," he barks.

The door flings open, and I don't have to look to know Tommy's filling the doorway. Hanson's probably hovering behind him. Those two have some weird telepathy.

"Prepare one of the spare rooms." Father's voice is a razor's edge. I can't tell what's going through his head. "Our guest is going to be staying for a few days."

Triumphant, I struggle to maintain a passive expression instead of letting out a whoop.

"Sir?" Tommy clears his throat as if he remembers he shouldn't question his boss in front of people. "Of course."

Father lifts his chin, and the door shuts. I sneak a peek at Kase, but he's studying Father, his features tight. Is he struggling to keep from looking confused like me?

"I need to think. You've presented new information." He leans across the desk, his attention on Kase.

I should be chagrined that I've barely had a role in what's taken place, but I can't bring myself to summon enough pride. A window has opened in the bubble that was slowly closing around me. I can breathe easier, enough to know what it could be like to be free.

He punches a beefy finger toward Kase. "You're going to do two things. You're going to keep from being seen with your hands on my daughter. I don't need word to get back to Mac. And two, you're going to tell me what your price is."

"I'm not doing this for money," Kase says.

“Everyone has a price, and it’s more than Holland’s fucking freedom.” Father almost sounds disgusted that Kase could be rescuing me for the principle of it.

Kase rolls a shoulder. “Fine. Tell me who sold us out.”

Father’s eyes momentarily narrow. “And if I tell you I don’t know?”

Oh crap. Father doesn’t know. It’s the change in his tone. The natural curiosity. How could he not know? He would’ve checked on the true anonymity of the mysterious call.

“After I deal with MacDonald, I’ll track them down.” Kase sits forward, suddenly tense. “Someone tried to kill your daughter, Mr. Gray. I don’t know if that bothers you, but it bugs the fuck out of me. I’m going to find them, and I’m going to kill them.”

A thrill goes through my belly, but it’s the last thing I want to happen. I want freedom, not to worry about Kase diving into the life he’s been avoiding for me.

“What if it’s someone close to you?” Father asks. “Don’t your friendship circles overlap?”

I gasp. What’s he saying? Does he actually know? Maybe I can’t read him like I thought. I’m so far over my head. I’ve never felt so unqualified for Father’s line of work than now.

“I’ll deal with it,” Kase answers.

I can’t tell what he’s thinking. Is this just some big talk between the two of them?

Father apparently can’t either. It takes him a moment to respond. “We’ll talk again tomorrow. Don’t let anyone see you touch my daughter. If anyone sees you, you’re a security consultant I’m working with. You’ll have to dress the part. Tommy will get it taken care of.” Father finally looks at me, and my heart sinks at what I read in his eyes.

All the regret. All the disappointment. Because of me. If I hadn’t been born, he wouldn’t have to worry about putting everything he worked for in jeopardy. He would’ve dealt with

MacDonald the hard way, and he would've weathered that risk better. But he's hindered. Because of me.

I'm not a kid anymore. I'm not trying to get into my father's good graces. I'm not interested in following along with what he says because he says it. I'm here. I'm not apologizing for myself.

But it still hurts. And that's why I'm so drawn to Kase. He's been through hell with me. He hid a body for me. He left L.A. to break into a sixty-floor casino to be with me, and he's never looked at me like I'm a burden.

He's always looked at me like he can't believe I'm real.

Kase is the strength I'm leaning on. I'm not marrying another man. I'm not going to be imprisoned in anyone's home. And when the Masons are taken care of, I'm going to make sure Kase has the same freedom as me.



Kase

I RECLINE in Holland's closet with an arm draped over a knee, sitting where I can watch her work. She's at her desk sketching. I can sit and watch her all day.

When we returned to her bedroom, she showed me all her drawings. They're different than her normal stuff. Edgier. My first thought was that they weren't her. But they are. They're the Holland who saw too much, things she's been trying to shut out since she was a teenager. The girl who signed the contract to help her father and can't escape the darkness of her family. She can't stitch over it and expect the color to remain as bright.

"Mama, I don't know when I'll be home." I called my parents before they sent out a search party. I let them know I was leaving town, but I didn't know how long I'd be gone. I

didn't know if I'd be bleeding out on Mr. Gray's office floor. That would've been an easy out. Now the hard part begins.

I have to think of him as Mr. Gray. Anything else would be too familiar or too unfamiliar. As his supposed new security consultant, I have to act the part.

“What are you out of town for? At least tell us where you are.”

Mama doesn't worry about me. Not in the safety sense. She helped Poppa train me. But she hates not knowing. She works against being unprepared. I didn't tell her that Holland left town and definitely not why. Mama will have questions.

I have my own. Mr. Gray's question rings in my head. What if it's someone close to you? I don't think he knows who made the call, but he might sense they know of my involvement in protecting Holland, and that's the motivation behind the anonymous call. The call that got Holland out of L.A. and almost out of my life.

So, yeah. I had my own questions and I was afraid to ask. If Mama had tampered with Holland's security, what would I do? My parents couldn't know about Holland's marriage contract. They don't know who her father really is. But they might've tried to interfere regardless, and the thought already made betrayal burn in my veins. I have to ask. “Did you contact Connor Gray about me and Holland?”

There's a moment of silence. With anyone else, it'd be a sign of guilt. But Mama would've had an excuse prepared. She's genuinely surprised. “No. Why would I, Kase?”

The relief drops like a five-gallon pail full of water. I'm grateful for her answer, but that leaves one more thing. Who was it? “Someone told him, and he wants Holland married to someone in his network. He whisked her away.” Truthful enough.

“You're in Las Vegas? You aren't messing with that man, are you?” She tsks. “There's something about him that puts me on edge.” She didn't have to tell me she checked him out. She'd likely done it as soon as I told her about Holland. And

she picked up on the same things I did, only she doesn't have someone as good as Jacobi at her disposal.

“Yes. Listen, Mama. Holland's in danger, and it's better for her to be here right now.” I hope that's enough information for her, and I hate the ring of truth. But Holland is safer in the penthouse. “I'm going to be here for a bit to see what I can do.”

“And you're not giving up until you put a stop to what or who's threatening her.” She says it plainly, like she knows it's hopeless to dissuade me. “How can I help?”

I appreciate her help as much as I wish I could take her up on it. “You have to trust me that it's best if you stay out of all of it.” I infuse as much gravity in my voice as I can.

“Kase.”

“I know, Mama. You have to trust me, or the problem will grow like a cancer.”

“Do Poppa and I need to go to Vegas? Does that father of hers have an issue with you? Is that what you're not telling me?”

She won't let it go. I have to give her something to distract her from Connor Gray, and it's something I should've told her anyway. “Josef accepted a contract on Holland on his own. I found out and erased it, but he manually entered it like one of us would've done.”

“What?” The chill of her tone could freeze my eardrum.

“I'm sure he planned to erase it after the job was done, just a little insurance that if things went south, it'd point back to you and Poppa.”

“Where's Josef?”

If he wasn't dead already, he would be. “Where do you think?”

Her sharp inhale was enough of an answer. “You had no luck identifying who ordered the hit on her?”

Not me, not Jacobi. “I think Josef talked about it directly with someone.” I don’t have time to hunt every person in Josef’s life, and if I started poking around after he’s been missing for weeks, it’s going to point back to me. “Trust me, Mama. I can’t have you and Poppa interfering right now. You don’t have all the facts.” And neither do I.

She is quiet a moment. “He tampered with our system?”

“Somehow. He logged it in.”

She tsks. “We got complacent. Fine. I don’t like this.”

“I know.” Just as I hang up with her, there’s a knock at the bedroom door.

Holland pops her head up and looks over her shoulder at me, concerned. She rushes to the door. I stay where I am since I’m not supposed to be in her room anyway. We’re not doing anything—we’ve done it—and I can’t imagine Mr. Gray would allow someone like Patrick close to her room.

Tommy’s voice filters in. “Just letting you know Mr. Donovan’s suits will arrive by the end of the day. I’ll put those in his room. But he’s not there, so I’m passing the message along . . . in case you see him before me.”

The corner of my mouth tips up. I can’t hold a grudge against the bodyguard for bursting into the rental after this display of nudge-nudge wink-wink.

“Sure. If I think of it,” Holland says, humor in her tone.

“And Mr. Gray would like Mr. Donovan to accompany him in the morning for a casino tour.”

He either wants to take our ruse seriously, or he needs me to tell him all the ways I busted in. I figured he would, and I had several options. I don’t have to share them all, but I could describe a few flaws in his otherwise secure building. Burrow into his good graces.

The door shuts, and Holland leans an arm against the closet door frame. “I’m supposed to tell you that you’re getting a new wardrobe tonight and that you’re following Father tomorrow.”

“Sounds like fun.”

She chews on the inside of her cheek. Her feet are bare and the bottom of her pants pool at her heels. She’s the most adorable business sexy I’ve ever seen. “He’s not going to try to hurt you, is he?”

“I don’t know. But I have some advice for him. Maybe he’ll spare my life if I’m useful outside of crushing MacDonald Mason’s secrets.” Her father won’t kill me. He’s been too careful not to incite my parents’ retaliation.

“You’re more than useful. Want me to show you?”

She kneels and prowls over the plush closet carpet toward me. I was buried inside of her in this closet hours ago, but it wasn’t enough. I didn’t know if I’d see her again. I thought I’d be hauled out of the building if things went well. Dead for a worst-case scenario. But I’m set up in a guest room, getting a closetful of clothes nicer than I’ve worn in my life, and tomorrow I have a job. A pretend job I plan to knock out of the damn park.

But that’s tomorrow. Today, I have a sexy woman close enough to taste, and that’s what I plan to do.

CHAPTER 6



*K*ase

I ADJUST the lapels of the suit I'm wearing. I'd look like a mini Mr. Gray if I wasn't four inches taller than him with black hair instead of sandy blond. Flaring my elbows, I inspect my appearance from every angle. A guy's gotta know what he's working with.

If my parents could see me now. I've never seen Poppa in a suit. He owns a couple—the standard black, gray, and navy options—but he prefers to be underestimated and wears his apron and sweat-stained clothing to meetings with clients.

They'd know I'm playing a part, but I can't argue that silk feels better on the skin than department-store threads. I'm dressed in dark hues like I normally am, but the feel of the suit—it's like my future's spread open for me. I can be anything I want. Like an honest man in an honest profession.

A fucking fantasy.

At my base, I'm a killer. I'll never crawl up from that rock bottom.

I walk out of my bedroom with a question banging around my head. Isn't that what Mr. Gray is? He's killed to get what he wants.

No, that's not correct. He's killed to keep what's his. My family has killed so others can keep what's theirs.

I roll my head from side to side like the tie is a noose around my neck. I'm ready to off MacDonald with one word from Mr. Gray. I'll get rid of Patrick if I need to, and I won't need one shiny penny as payment.

Holland's door is open. She pops her head out and her gaze flares as it travels down my body to the wingtips on my feet. "Wow."

"Clean up well, huh?" I ask gruffly. I like how she's looking at me. A huge change from the confusion and trepidation when I barged into her house the night Josef attacked her. A nice difference from when she was tucked into my back seat and I was going on what I thought was a job but was really being baited by Lucia.

Clothing shouldn't make a difference in the person. But I'm also going on a respectable walk through the casino to give advice on how to keep the occupants of the sixty-floor building safe.

"You look so good." She peeks down the hall. Tommy is heading in our direction, his neck thicker and his elbows flared wider as if he suddenly finds me more intimidating. "I'll be waiting to hear how it goes."

She gives me another once-over, bites her lower lip, and darts back into her bedroom. I've seen that look before. If I had twenty more minutes, one of us would be orgasming.

Tommy waits at the corner of the hallway. "Mr. Gray is ready."

I nod and follow Tommy to the elevator doors—the technical front door and a door I've never gone through. Staff have their own entry points, and Mr. Gray has strict time lines about who can be where and when. The only issue is that he doesn't change it up as often as he should.

Holland's father's in the hallway chatting with Hanson. He flicks his gaze toward me and I expect disdain, but instead there's a glimmer of respect. I look like I fit into his world. I never will.

Mr. Gray doesn't punch the elevator button. He eyes me up and down, scowling. "You're not packing."

"No." Other than the knife holstered above an ankle.

"I respect you didn't break into my home armed, but I don't condone foolishness. You think you're going to be around my daughter without protection?"

I shake my head and tug on my suit jacket. The threads are starting to feel like a high-end straitjacket with the talk of guns. My past wants to roar back into my head and fog my thinking. "I've made it my job to avoid that level of trouble in the first place."

Mr. Gray continues to inspect me. "It can't always be avoided."

"No, it can't. Neither can a stray bullet hitting an innocent person." I clench my jaw before I say more.

A glint of respect shines in his gaze before he turns away. "You're going to need one if you're my consultant."

"With all due respect, sir, I don't. Your guards need to carry weapons. Vault security, yes. But not a consultant. I don't have to have a piece strapped on me, and if anyone outside of us notices, they'll wonder why. I'm an office jockey with an inflated sense of importance and skill to others."

At our side, Tommy and Hanson exchange a glance that says only I would be riding the elevator as Mr. Gray tosses me in with instructions to throw me out with the hotel garbage.

Finally, Mr. Gray punches the button. "Your family's always had a code. I respect that."

I don't express appreciation. My family's code benefited themselves, as did mine, but in the end, if I went down, I wanted it to only be me sinking. That was the part Mr. Gray respected.

The ride down wasn't as quick as I expected. Dozens of floors nonstop still took a minute. Mr. Gray updated me on his plans.

“I like to do a walk-through during the quieter hours so the dealers don’t fuck up from nerves when they see me. At night, I’ll visit the high-roller tables and check in with the pit bosses. I meet directly with my vice presidents, but I like to be visible. Keeps them transparent.” He rolls a shoulder. “At least ninety-five percent transparent. Any lower and they’re gone.”

I nod. If the other five percent isn’t covering for some minor fuckup with their employees, then they should go, but Mr. Gray probably knows that. He doesn’t strike me as a guy who doesn’t know the history of everyone and everything going on under the same roof he’s living under.

He nods to a man wearing a red shirt under his black suit. It’s simple enough to determine who’s who for casino employees. Since the dealers wear red shirts with black vests, he must be the floor supervisor. A woman veers toward us. She’s wearing a red shirt with a dark-gray suit. She appears to be in her thirties and ready to throw down if someone steps in her path. The pit manager.

“Ms. Salazar.” Mr. Gray’s greeting is heavy, like he expects she’s not rushing toward us to say hello.

“Mr. Gray.” She nods to Tommy before she steps close. Hanson’s been following us a few feet behind. “We have a guest at the blackjack tables who’s already wasted. When we tried to remove him a few minutes ago, he said he’s a personal friend of yours.”

“And you believe him?” Mr. Gray asks.

“He was here last week with another man, and I saw them being escorted to your place, sir.”

Mr. Gray’s cheek twitches. His bodyguards don’t react. If anything, they look unhappier.

Could the man be one of the Masons?

Hope surges in my chest. If he was, I might actually have Mr. Gray’s support in ruining MacDonald.

“Show me,” is all Mr. Gray says to his pit manager, and we follow her clipped walk through the casino to a corner full of tables. Only three are open with dealers. Two security guards,

dressed in black to resemble police garb, hover in the vicinity. And a very sloppy man a few years older than me hangs half-off one table. A man I wouldn't have known before Holland came to Vegas, but I've been researching thoroughly.

Patrick Mason. Fucking perfect.

His bleary gaze catches on us, and a wet grin spreads across his face. "Con! Shoo nish to shee you."

I haven't had to interpret drunk speak for ages. Mr. Gray doesn't say anything as he crosses to the man. Tommy sticks close to Mr. Gray, and I hang back to let the chips fall where they may. I'm in Vegas after all.

Patrick swivels on his stool, nearly falling off. Mr. Gray leans down and speaks in his ear.

"I'm not tired," Patrick says, not bothering with volume control.

Mr. Gray murmurs more words and nods at the guards. They sweep in and each takes a side.

"Ms. Salazar, notify the front desk I need a penthouse suite available immediately. Send Tommy the information."

"Con—" Patrick's hauled to his feet. The dealer steps back, her eyes wide. Tommy gets between the guards and Mr. Gray. Hanson stays in the back, motioning for me to go in front of him.

I'm delighted to. I refrain from chortling as Patrick makes a fucking nuisance of himself trying to peer over each shoulder to appeal to Mr. Gray. "My father—"

"Is going to hear about this, Mr. Mason," Mr. Gray replies calmly. "Don't worry."

The guards drag Patrick down a long, quiet corridor and a more concealed elevator. It's a part of the casino I've never been in, and Patrick quiets down.

"Are you going to kill me, Con?" Patrick whines.

"Con isn't my name."

Mr. Gray couldn't kill the man, but his lack of an answer sobers Patrick. The drunk fool stands a little straighter, not relying as much on the guards to hold him up. "Mr. Gray, about Hol—"

"When we get to the room, we'll talk." Mr. Gray's sharp tone sucks the rest of the sound out of the elevator.

Tommy checks his phone and nods to himself. I keep a grim expression to match the rest, but I want to toss my head back and laugh. Patrick is making my job so damn easy.

"I was up," Patrick whines just as the elevator chimes. "There was a good hand coming, I could feel it."

The doors ping open, and Mr. Gray nods to the casino security. "You two take him to the room. I need to speak with Mr. Donovan, and we'll be right in."

Patrick stares as if he finally sees me. "Who are you?"

The man who's going to get the woman you don't deserve, fucking prick. He's hauled away, stumbling over the maroon-and-yellow carpet plush enough to be in a castle.

Tommy and Hanson linger, but Mr. Gray lifts his chin in the direction Patrick's getting dragged. "Go on. I need to talk to Mr. Donovan in private."

They both scowl at me, but I keep an even expression. A drunk and sloppy Patrick in the middle of the day in Mr. Gray's casino is serious—for them. I'm elated. Finally, they stride after the security personnel.

Mr. Gray's cheek twitch is back. "There's no way I'm tying that man's name to CG Enterprises."

"Or your daughter?" I'm being snide, but I don't care. Someone has to put Holland first.

"Holland has nothing without this company," he snaps. The interaction with Patrick has him rattled.

Good. "She has nothing with it as far as I can see." Before I start an argument, I add, "That man will ruin everything at once."

A muscle jumps in his jaw. “You can find everything you need to know about MacDonald without being detected?”

If I could kiss the useless drunk, I would. I have Mr. Gray’s total buy-in because of him. “One hundred percent.” The man has more blood on his hands than a trauma surgeon. Leaves a lot of options for a guy like me.

Mr. Gray’s gaze lingers on the door at the end of the hall the other men disappeared into. “You find the evidence he’s holding against me. I’ll deal with MacDonald.”

It’s personal for him. I understand. “And Patrick?”

His lips pull back from his teeth. “He’s a fucking kid. He’s in his forties, but he never grew the hell up.”

I can respect not wanting to hurt someone who doesn’t deserve it. Should Patrick be tossed out to hit the sidewalk on his ass? Yes. But offed in a way so no one will remember his name? I don’t know. “You’re not sure what he knows.”

“He can’t keep a secret. Look at him.” Mr. Gray lets out a frustrated snarl. “But I have to know for sure. We have him in the hotel. Let’s find out.”

“What are you thinking?” My mind’s going to Jacobi and tapping the man’s suite, his phone, any other electronics—

“You’re now Holland’s bodyguard. She needs to date him.”

“Excuse me?”

“Patrick’s not known for being like this. It doesn’t take a genius to see the marriage bothers him too. I’ll suggest he get to know Holland. A couple of suppers. You’ll be there, and she can try to find out what he knows.”

For fuck’s sake. I don’t want to stand by while Holland dates another man—the one she’s supposed to marry. But if it works, I’ll try not to rip him apart with my bare hands if he touches her.



HOLLAND'S IN HER ROOM. She has on a loose satin blouse that's supposed to match a dress skirt or slacks, and she's sitting cross-legged in the middle of her bed. She glances up and sets the sketchpad aside. "You're back early." Her smile is worried but relieved. "And alive."

I hate to murder her relief. "Plans have changed."

Her eyes go round. "Just like that?" Concern knits into her features.

I close the door and sit on the edge of the bed. "Just like that when Patrick almost makes a drunken scene on the gaming floor."

"What?" Some of the concern ebbs and she leans forward. "Patrick was here?"

"He still is. And my role has changed from being a supposed security consultant to your bodyguard—per your father's orders." She's about to ask why but notices my expression. She won't like this next part, but I have to convince her of the plan. The words are bitter on my tongue. "He wants you to date him. Find out what he knows."

Her tone pitches high. "How?"

"Not like that," I say gently. "I won't allow it. Neither would your father or he wouldn't have told me to be your bodyguard. But it was the last straw. We're getting you out of the contract."

She stares at me for a moment, hope growing in the blue depths of her eyes. "Really?"

Even if it kills me, absolutely. "Yes, really."

She crawls over the bed and throws her arms around my neck. I laugh and tumble sideways with her. I kiss her, lingering for only a moment since we're in the middle of her bed in an unlocked bedroom. My restraint weakens the longer I have my hands on her.

She licks her lips and nearly obliterates my self-control. "Everything went okay?"

“Other than worrying your father would insist I carry a gun.”

Concern fills her eyes. “Will you have to as a bodyguard?”

“It’d be best.”

“I’m sorry.”

I’ll gladly do it for her, and nothing about this is her fault. I run my thumb over her plump lower lip. “It’s okay. We’ll be in more controlled environments than I’m used to, and when it comes to your safety, I’m not messing around.”

Her forehead furrows, and her gaze darts away. It’s like she doesn’t want to ask me something. “Go ahead,” I say, knowing her question.

“What happened?”

Sighing, I roll to my back. I’ve told this story once. To my parents. It bothered them almost as bad as the guy who broke into the restaurant and almost killed me. I never thought I’d revisit what went on again, but I like Holland knowing about me. I like being seen in a world where I work hard to be invisible.

“I’d been rethinking my role in the business. I was young.” So damn youthful. “I thought I could do it all. Go to college. Work at the restaurant like I was a normal college guy. And take contracts on the side. I was righteous. I was doing good in the world. It’s how I justified the work for so long.”

She flattens her hand over my heart and doesn’t say anything.

I open my mouth and shut it again. I need a moment to work through the panic of what might’ve been. “The guy I was sent after was supposed to be a pedophile. A real predator who stalks teen girls online and lures them to a secluded spot by pretending to be another teenager.” I have to close my eyes to tell the rest. To watch it all play out as I describe it. To remind myself of how easy it is to fuck up. “One of the girls’ parents hired me—or so I thought. And I lured the guy to a secluded spot he supposedly used before. I followed the evidence. I saw all the messages. But I’m not as good as Jacobi.”

“They were fake?”

“They were real, just not his. And when I showed up, I didn’t see a guy. I saw a teenager. I tried to tell myself he just looked young, but fuck, Holland. He was young.”

“Did you—” She cuts her teeth into her bottom lip, like she didn’t mean to interrupt, but she can’t stand the suspense. Like she can’t endure the heartbreak.

“No, but he got hurt.”

“I’m so sorry.”

It was my fault. “I got cocky and I got sloppy.” It was supposed to be a simple point blank. A clear warning to all other perverts that they could be next. A murder even the cops wouldn’t look into that hard. And I couldn’t convince myself he was the guy I was sent after. “While I was second-guessing myself, he lunged for me. Seventeen years old and braver than I had anticipated. The gun went off in the struggle. He’s an adult now, and his limp is gone, but he’s a dad with kids. And it wasn’t the parents of some abused girl who hired me. It was the girl he broke up with because she was stalking him.”

“How did she even know about contract killers?” Her stunned tone rivals how I felt when I heard who she was.

“Her dad is some top agent to the stars. Money and connections.” I blow out a hard breath. “I almost killed a kid. I still shot him.”

“Oh, Kase.” She rolls into me and buries her head in my chest. “That boy saved you, I’m sure of it. He saved himself, and he saved you.”

He went through hell, and who knows what mental repercussions he has. Because of me. “So after that, I was done, but I couldn’t be. Word got out there was a fuckup and contracts dwindled. Money became an issue, and we all had to work harder—and smarter. But my parents let me take the no-kill contracts. Nothing like a little blackmail and extortion to wash a person’s soul.” It was meant to be sarcasm, but it came out bitter. Resentful.

She brushes her hand down my stomach and back up. The suit is probably irrevocably wrinkled, but I don't care. I have a closetful of more tailored to me, and it doesn't matter. Death and violence come in all shades and fabrics. "I'm not trying to look on the bright side, but the fact is, those people—your clients—are going to hire someone no matter what. And your parents are diligent. You're creative and thoughtful. If someone has to do the work, your family is honestly . . . probably better than a lot of monsters out there." She falls quiet, and I know where her thoughts go.

We worked with Josef. Is she wondering how close to monsters my family might really be? "Josef was going to be dealt with. And the fact that he took a job and put it in the system highlighted a major flaw in the process. Monsters can still get through us—because the work we do is unconscionable. There is no bright side." I give her a halfhearted smile. "But I appreciate your outlook."

"Kase. What are we going to do?"

"Exactly what I said. I'm going to be your armed bodyguard. Patrick's not a seventeen-year-old kid and neither is his dad. If Patrick wants out, if he's harmless, I won't hurt him. His dad? Anyone who tries to hurt you deserves what they get."

"No. You're not going to be armed."

"Holland."

"Kase, even your parents supported you in this. I only met them once, but they aren't the types of people to coddle you. What could've happened disturbed you, and they saw it. I know enough to trust them. So, no. I'm going to trust you to get us out of a sticky situation. I know you're that good."

I mean it. I'll kill Patrick if he tries to hurt her. But her impassioned speech is another reason why I can't let this thing between us go.

CHAPTER 7



Holland

“I CAN’T BELIEVE we’re doing this,” I grumble in the elevator.

“I know.” Kase is in another suit similar to the one he wore the other day.

I’m growing used to seeing him wear designer business wear, and my inspiration is recharged. I’m picturing myself next to him, in the red dress I sketched with the collar and cuffs. Pearls. It needs pearls, but they should be sewn onto the garment from the neckline to the split hem at the thigh. It’s bombshell meets Agent 007. It’s hit man and high-end call girl. It can still work in the office setting. I hurt when I look at my drawing. Will I see the outfit come to fruition, or is it destined to be nothing more than a fantasy?

I’ve been keeping busy since laying eyes on him yesterday, but my muse got smothered when Kase and Father told me their plans. Date Patrick. Find out how much he knows.

It wouldn’t be an issue. But I’m pretending to date a man I’m supposed to marry. I’m supposed to get him talking about his dad’s business. Patrick isn’t the type of guy to waste a night on a platonic date. He’s either going to expect more or check out early. Since I don’t want Patrick to touch me and Kase will be hovering over us looking all growly, I’m confident this night won’t end with me and Patrick alone.

The elevator stops, and I suck in a breath. Kase stands close to me, and his hand drops off my lower back before the doors open.

And we're on.

I strut out. I don't have any more wardrobe options than I did before, so I chose an A-line skirt with a loose silk blouse and black leather kitten heels with a latch around the ankle. I'm a little short for those types of shoes. Nothing makes me feel like I have cankles more than this style, with a knee-length skirt no less, but I don't need to be sexy. It's not like I'm trying to seduce Patrick into telling me his dad's secrets.

We're on the third level of the casino. The hotel starts two floors above this. The fourth floor is offices to keep the noise from infiltrating the guest rooms. This level is reserved for a food court and the five-star seafood restaurant, Oasis. It's Father's pride and joy. His head chef hails from Japan, with sous-chefs that have all attended a Le Cordon Bleu institute. I've eaten here several times, and that's the only part of tonight I'm looking forward to.

Patrick is draped across the bar, his ass sticking out. Ugh. I'm embarrassed when it should be him who's ashamed of his behavior. He's flirting with the bartender, a woman around my age, who's smiling politely. Her grin broadens when she spots me heading in their direction. "Is this the party you're waiting for?"

Patrick swivels and scrunches his face. Kase is walking a few steps behind me, and the most serious I've seen Patrick is when his gaze lands on Kase. "We meet again. Sorry about yesterday. I'm not usually . . ." Instead of finishing, he pushes off the bar.

His appreciative gaze sweeps down my body. The clothes are fitted but not revealing. Still, my hips flare and my boobs push against the buttons.

"Nice to see you again, Holland." He holds out an elbow and gives me a charming smile, the gravity from earlier gone.

“Nice to see you too.” I curl my hand around his arm and resist jerking away. He’s not Kase. He’s scrawnier, and I don’t feel safe the closer I get to him. There’s no solid muscle under my fingers. I doubt Patrick does much in the way of workouts beyond drinking on a yacht.

He seats us at a table in the corner. Kase positions himself behind me in full view of Patrick, which I hope is a deterrent.

“So.” Patrick flips his napkin out from the tent fold it’s in and rests it on his lap. “What do you want to talk about?”

“What do you mean?”

“Just yesterday, I was stupid drunk in public—in your father’s casino—and suddenly you decide you want a date?”

Shocked, I almost look back at Kase, but I manage a serene smile. Did Patrick notice how off-kilter I seemed? He’s sharper than I gave him credit for.

The server appears in a tux that’s almost as expensive as the outfits we’re all wearing. I have more appreciation for the attire after being unable to support myself without Father’s money.

“Bring us the 2017 Château.” Patrick’s gaze flicks to Kase. Is he perched behind me like a robot? I hope so. I don’t want to be alone with Patrick. It’d feel too much like a date. When the server leaves, Patrick brings his attention back to me. “Are you saying you changed your mind and that we should marry?”

“Well . . .” I wasn’t prepared for his cynicism. I assumed Patrick was an unthinking playboy, but the man across from me at the table isn’t an idiot. I’m tempted to come out and ask him if he knows who Father really is, but it’s a question I can’t take back. He’ll have to offer up the information, and I need to make it happen.

“Let me guess—you’re like me and you don’t want to marry. But instead of drowning yourself in a bottle, you decide to appeal to my good senses and see if we can figure something out together.”

Not quite. But what if Patrick is baiting me? What if he's going to report to his dad how I'm trying to get around the contract? They could move the date up and maneuver ways to control me until I don't know my own name. "What would your father say if he heard you talk like that?"

"He'd have a stroke, and God, it wouldn't be too soon." Patrick laughs so loud I jump, already startled at what came out of his mouth. "Do you know how many times I think the people who shot Junior were really trying to punish me? I have no desire to be anything but the spoiled son."

There's the selfish, entitled Patrick I'd been expecting. The sommelier appears with the wine. He goes through the tasting and vetting process. I've seen Father do it a million times. Gloria used to say she'd rather wear her money in diamonds than drink it. She'd only order bottles that cost hundreds instead of thousands. She'd hate Patrick if she knew about him. Not enough to reenter my life, but on principle.

Once the server disappears, Patrick takes a hearty swig of his wine. "I don't know about you, but it's not as if I had any grounds to argue this marriage. I was happily spending his generous allowance when he told me what he planned. I don't want to lose it."

I signed to protect my parents. I was scared of living without money, but I had London and Penni. They'd grown up with money, but they were down to earth in a way no one else I'd grown up with was. My friends wouldn't have let me go homeless.

Patrick wanted free money.

"That's all he had on you? Money? You don't want to take over the empire?"

"Nope." He pops his lips on the *p* and pours more wine. I haven't had a drink from my glass yet, and since I don't know how much he drank before I arrived, I'll refrain for the night. He squints at me. "Do you know what he does?"

Am I supposed to? Marriage contracts aren't exactly mainstream, so it's safe for Patrick to assume I know his father

isn't a legit businessman. Still, I don't want to show my hand before him. "Isn't he in real estate?"

Patrick chortles and glances at Kase. "Hey, my dude, you've gotta give us some privacy."

Shit. I stiffen. "Father told him to stick to me like glue."

"He wants to stick you something all right." Patrick sweeps his hand around the dining room. There's no one closer to us than four tables. "I'm not asking you to abandon her, just go somewhere else."

I have to make a split-second decision. Patrick isn't going to accost me in public. If he keeps drinking that wine, he might drool on me, but we're here for information, and he seems to be in a communicative mood.

I twist in my seat. Kase is stone faced, and I hold back my apologetic smile. He's supposed to be an employee of Father's. "Can you give us five minutes, please?"

There's a tic in his right eye, but he inclines his head and walks toward the bar, shooting Patrick a warning glare.

"Intense fucker," Patrick whines as he drains his glass and pours another.

I blow it off as if the bodyguard is of no consequence when he's the center of my world. "Father's cautious."

"He should be. Daddy doesn't play around." He leans forward, and from the corner of my eye, I see Kase rise slightly from the stool he's perched on. He had already waved the bartender away. "Men who upset him end up dead."

My shocked expression isn't all fake. I expected more nuance tonight. More intrigue.

"What?" I hiss, playing along.

Patrick shrugs like it's no big deal. Has he picked up partners with this line? More likely he tries to impress them with the expensive wine purchase. "You're going to find out soon enough. You were raised in a gilded prison and sent off to learn business skills, as if making pretty dresses is the same as

running casinos.” He chuckles and swirls his wine. The last of the bottle. “Don’t worry. That part I’m not worried about.”

My jaw’s so tight my teeth start to ache. I shouldn’t be surprised Patrick is a patronizing asshole, but *ugh*. “You’re not worried I’ll do a good job running CG Enterprises?”

He scoffs. “It’ll be a while before your dad gives up the reins. Men like our fathers don’t know when to quit and just fucking retire.”

I still can’t tell why Patrick opened this conversation, but I can’t forget why I’m here. Does he know Father has a body count—and not in the same way Patrick thinks of it? Buried bodies, not bedded bodies. “So . . . I was young and dumb when I signed the contract. Father said his business was at risk. Your father must have powerful connections. But what would your dad do if we didn’t get married?”

I hold my breath, knowing damn well that if he doesn’t come out and say, “Well, Daddy would tell everyone that Connor Gray is The Shadow,” we won’t have answers. A lack of a statement doesn’t mean a lack of knowledge. But it does mean more cringy dates as we edge closer to our wedding date.

“He’ll ruin Gray Enterprises.”

“How?”

Patrick leans forward, a sardonic smirk twisting his lips. “By making him disappear.”

I suck in a gasp and clamp my lips together when a woman appears to take our order. Patrick eye-fucks her, and my stomach is too full of dread for an appetite. It’s not just Father’s company at risk—it’s his life.

Woodenly, I order a sushi plate and leave it at that. I don’t give her an apologetic smile for my date’s blatantly flirtatious behavior. Patrick might get offended and decide we’re not on the same team. When she leaves, I make the same conspiratorial move he did, lowering my voice. “You mean . . . kill him?”

A mysterious smile floats over Patrick's lips. "I didn't say that. There are many ways to disappear."

Dammit. Patrick's smart enough to be inconvenient. He beckons the sommelier over and orders more wine. Then he sits back, toying with his empty glass.

I finally take a sip of my drink lest he think I'm too little fun to work with. "What do you suggest we do?"

"That, my dear, is the question. We have three months to figure something out."

I liked the countdown to fashion week better. I take another drink and set the glass farther out of my reach. My frustration is growing, and it's tempting to get as shit-faced as Patrick's going to be in an hour. "We have to be smarter than our parents."

He snorts, and his gaze darkens. "We don't have to be smarter. We have to be greedier."

Father isn't into greed. He's into power. The kid who grew up getting the belt from his father and running through the city as his errand boy doesn't want to be under anyone's authority. "I'm greedy about my freedom."

"Same." His gaze drops to where my breasts round against my blouse. "Although, if we get married, we can have certain freedoms."

The wine I ingested threatens to come up. "I don't want to be a broodmare."

"Then you're out of luck." His eyes glint with his smirk. "Though I did like your insemination lecture. That worked Daddy into a tizzy. I wouldn't be surprised if he doesn't want to fill you with his Mason juice—turkey baster-style."

My face goes cold as the thought sinks in. Father had said as much but to hear it come from Patrick? What an incredible violation of my body. I haven't been able to think of how I'd handle the situation if Patrick wanted kids. Not after being treasured in and out of bed by Kase.

Patrick smacks his lips. “Hell, that’d be ideal for me, but I’ve never been into making women do what they don’t want to. With enough money, they’re up for whatever I want anyway.”

If Patrick could sober up and cure himself of his narcissism, he’d be a half-decent guy. But I don’t want to marry him. And I won’t.



Kase

HOLLAND MOTIONS for me to return once the food is delivered. She doesn’t look at me, and I can almost see her wince. She feels like a douche calling for me like I’m a pet. But if I was a real bodyguard, I’d be accustomed to it.

Gratefully, I return to my corner.

Annoyance tightens Patrick’s features. I want to shake his slender body like a saltshaker so all the information in his head drops out onto the floor. Then I’ll rip his eyes out for ogling Holland’s tits.

As for Holland, she’s handling herself like a pro. She’s barely touched her wine, and she’s ignoring Patrick’s lecherous personality. He wants to fuck her, that’s obvious from the way his gaze licks her all over. From Holland’s even expressions throughout the conversation, the fucker didn’t give anything up.

He may legitimately not know. Or he might be as ruthless as his dad, just in a different way.

Only time would tell, and we are running out of it.

“Have you seen the house yet?” Patrick asks around a mouthful of grilled freshwater eel.

The house is pointless. Holland isn’t going to be living in it.

“No, it’s my future home, and I’ve never seen it.”

When she said future home, I pictured us together. As if anything’s changed for me while I’ve been here.

He waves his fork around. “I’ll take you.” He points the tines of the utensil toward her. “Your daddy’s not letting you out?”

“I must seem like a flight risk,” she says in a light tone.

Other patrons are arriving for meals, some throwing cursory looks my way, but none linger too long. This clientele is accustomed to bodyguards.

“I’ll pick you up tomorrow. One o’clock.” His grimace is exaggerated, thanks to the bottle of wine. “Make that four. The later, the better.” His smirk turns predatory. “Unless you want to stay the night at my place.”

I don’t bother to get upset. Holland will make sure to stay out of his reach.

“I’m afraid I can’t let those kinds of activities mess with my head. You gave me a lot to think about.”

Good girl. She had a rebuff prepared, and it came off smoothly. Patrick only chuckles as if it’s a compliment. Like sleeping with him might be so transformative she couldn’t think straight. Hell, it could be, but I sure as fuck didn’t want Holland finding out.

“Four o’clock. I’ll arrange it with Con.” Said as if he and *Con* are pals.

The torturous meal was finally over. Holland wasn’t putting out, and Patrick didn’t seem to want to waste the night trying to find pussy.

Soon enough, I have Holland in the elevator. She sighs and opens her mouth, but I shake my head. She lifts a brow, and I direct my gaze upward to the little black 360 camera. Her father has more security than just Tommy and Hanson, and they’ll have access to the elevator’s security.

She lets out a frustrated huff. “Are you hungry?”

“I’m fine, Miss Gray.”

She rolls her eyes, more at my moniker than my answer. “Well, I’m hungry. I’ll put in an order with Hanson when we return. Callie’s on the third floor has wraps and desserts.”

A smile tugs at the corner of my mouth. She picked at her sushi. “I have to update him. I’ll ask about the order.”

When the elevator dings open, I let her go ahead while I put in her food request with Hanson.

He frowns. “Chef comes in twice a day and leaves behind plenty of options.”

I shrug, making it look like it isn’t a big deal—because it fucking shouldn’t be. My woman is hungry, and she’s stuck in a giant contained city. Can’t she have a chili chicken wrap and a blondie? “If you went out with Patrick, wouldn’t you want some comfort food?”

He grumbles, “Fucking Masons,” under his breath. “Fine, but I gotta clear it with Mr. Gray first. He doesn’t like people coming and going when they don’t have to.”

“Tell him the delivery is unplanned, you’ll put it under my name, and I’ll run down and get it.” Security-wise, it’s the better option.

He pulls out his phone, and I try not to think of Holland stripping down to change into pajamas in a closet that’s a good place for fucking while I’m talking to a burly guy in a suit. After several moments, he grunts, “Go ahead.”

I race down for the food, picking up a six-pack on the way back since there was no coffee that Holland would like. After that date, we both could use a drink.

When I return, Mr. Gray’s waiting outside of his office for me. His frown is carved deeper than the Grand Canyon. “Were you going to give me an update?”

His imperious tone grates on me, but his gaze flickers in the direction of Holland’s room and I see it—the deepening of the furrows in his brow and the slight clench of his fist. He’s

worried about himself, but he's also concerned for his daughter.

I heft the food in my grip. "I'll give a better summary after I meet with Holland. He asked for privacy for about fifteen minutes, and she didn't want to make a scene. But I don't think she learned much. He's going to contact you tomorrow and wants Holland to go with him to see the house."

"Why?"

"Maybe to talk more? He wouldn't say much around me, but he doesn't seem like a guy who wants to settle down." Or be controlled by his dad. He's had a lifetime of freedom, and he bargained for more. The man is up to something, and I need to know how it'll affect Holland.

"But she hasn't had time to tell you what they talked about?" When I nod, his gaze drops to the bundle in my arms, and he checks the gold watch on his wrist. "Come into my office at eight in the morning. I doubt Patrick knows what that hour looks like." He disappears into the kitchen.

Good. I want to hear what Holland says about the date first. Since Mr. Gray didn't expressly forbid me to stay out of Holland's room, I knock on her door.

"Come in," she calls.

Inside, she's sitting cross-legged in the middle of the bed with her sketchbook. When I walk in, she scrambles off. "Oh, thank goodness. I was regretting missing lunch."

"Hanson informed me that there's food in the kitchen."

She pulls a face. "Father has high blood pressure—big surprise—so all his food is bland. Chef's a good cook, but a girl's gotta have some sodium."

She goes into her closet, and we sit on the floor like we're having a picnic. It's sweet. Her closet feels homier than the rest of the place.

I hand her a wrap and a bag of chips. "You like the closet?"

"It's the fabric. It calms me. The bedroom is too empty."

“And here I thought it was because of what we’ve done in here.”

Her cheeks flush. “That too.”

We eat a few bites before I get to business. “I hate to be a downer, but what did Patrick say after he shooed me away like a dog?”

“I’m sorry about that.”

“Don’t be. Guys like that give me job security.”

Her smile is melancholy. My comment must be a reminder of what’s waiting for me after the Masons are taken care of. “It was informative, but it wasn’t.”

She recaps the conversation as we eat. Patrick isn’t ignorant of his father, but he’s likely not fully in the know. The question is—how much do we want to risk?

“Do you think he wants you as an ally?”

“Yes. That part I believe. But I also think that a kid raised like him will sacrifice me as soon as it’s convenient.”

The fuck he will.

His insistence on getting her to see the house doesn’t make sense. Does he feel safer talking to her in an environment that isn’t laced with security cameras and bodyguards?

She finishes her wrap and riffles through the bag. “Ooh, a blondie. They were my favorite as a kid. Did you know Callie’s was the first restaurant in Gray Towers? I think Father had a soft spot for the owner, but she moved to the Caymans after her husband died fifteen years ago.” She peels off the lid of her dessert container and licks at the whipped cream, her tongue curling against the white dollop. My dick jumps to attention, but she’s oblivious. “If you do the math, you’ll realize that overlaps with Gloria, but I don’t think my parents were ever in love. In fact, I think Father was drawn to Callie’s independence. He probably would’ve dropped Gloria much earlier if Callie had left her husband.” She flicks her tongue out for the whipped cream again.

My mind went from business to pleasure in a blink. “Fuck, Holland. If you keep doing that, we’re not going to get anywhere.”

“I’ve already filled you in on dinner. What else do we have to do?” Her tone is sexually innocent, but she smirks and takes out her disposable fork. She rolls to her knees and straddles my lap.

Even if I wasn’t done with my wrap, I would’ve let her crush it under that delectable ass of hers. “I got two brownies. You don’t have to share with me.”

“I know.” She hacks off a corner and covers it with cream before gliding the fork between my lips. I’m not a sweets guy, but the dichotomy of her and her warm thighs cradling mine and the rich sweet flavor on my tongue that isn’t hers is a pleasant mindfuck. I’d rather have her in my mouth. “I like to share with you.”

I can only give an appreciative “hmm.”

“Seeing you in this suit is reigniting my muse.” She coaxes my mouth open for another bite. I comply. “I’ve got so many ideas pinging around my head. I can’t wait to have a few moments to sketch them out. I wrote a few notes before you arrived.” She pauses, a line creasing her forehead. “What if I can still save my company? What if . . . what if fashion week is still possible? Sahara’s functioning as if it’s on.”

Her hopeful tone tears at my heart. When she has to officially cancel fashion week, the rest of the company’s money will go toward funding the cancellation fees. Then her dad will sell off BommGirl as easily as he sold her house.

She knows it, and she doesn’t need to hear it. “I don’t know. I really don’t.”

“A girl can dream, right?” She presents another bite, but I take the fork from her and flip her to her ass, propping her against the wall so she doesn’t choke when I hand-feed her.

I’m all about safety.

I slide the fork between her lips. My dick would rather I ditch my pants and put it in her mouth. Will her eyes go as

dreamy as they are now? Will she forget everything weighing her down and stealing her hope?

“Oh, God,” she moans, thinning my restraint on my lust. I was in her last night, but it wasn’t enough. Nothing will be enough with her.

My throat grows thick. Never enough.

She swallows, her lips curving into a sultry smile. I feed her another piece with extra whipped cream. A tiny dollop sticks to her lips, and before she can lick it off, I do. Her unique flavor combined with the richness of the cream is a new favorite flavor. I’ll never love it more than her special taste.

I can’t quit these thoughts. She’s special. My time with her isn’t enough, and I’m not just talking about in bed. I like being with her. I like watching her work. These moments when we’re sitting and talking and it’s just us—they shouldn’t be limited.

Do I need to sacrifice everything for a job I fucking hate? Chagrined, I put the real reason at the forefront. I’m not taking over just because Poppa’s sick. They can’t back out without being targets. I’ll lose them.

Holland’s in an impossible situation, and she’s figuring out how to extract herself without tossing her dad under the bus. She has help, and maybe . . . I could too.

If I let myself.

I feed her another piece. She’s watching me as she chews.

My entire life, I thought of what I have with Holland as forbidden. It’s a personal limit I set for myself. In doing so, I made it a reality, one I didn’t think was possible.

But what if it is?

When I present the next bite, she presses her fingertips to my wrist. “What are you thinking? You got quiet.”

“I was thinking about you.”

Her expression turns dubious, but she accepts the bite.

What if I told my parents I want nothing to do with this lifestyle anymore, and same with the restaurant since it comes with the assumption I'd continue hurting and scaring people, even killing them? What if I told them that I have friends who can help them disappear before anyone knows they're gone? Could I stay behind with Holland and keep us safe?

"You were still thinking about something," she presses.

I can't make myself tell her that I'll move heaven and earth to be with her. What if it doesn't work out? I'm a guy with eight different escape plans and a penchant for thinking I had a good run if shit went downhill fast. I'm not taking Holland down with me if I can't extract myself. "There's a lot going on in my head."

Disappointment glitters in her eyes. I take the final piece of brownie and hold it to her lips. When she opens, I zoom the fork around and steal the bite.

She draws in an incensed breath, but she's smiling. Mission accomplished.

"I can't believe you did that." She giggles.

I duck my head so my gaze is even with hers. "You want to know why?"

Her lips part. Energy sizzles between us. I want to strip her down and devour her, but I want to wipe away any worry that she'll ever be at the mercy of that asshole Patrick and his father.

"Why?" she asks.

Without breaking eye contact, I slide the bag with "Callie's" emblazoned across the front toward me. "Because we have a whole other brownie. How do you want me to feed that to you?"

The sexy smile is back and I concentrate on her, only it's different this time. I've opened the door to what if, but just like her—I'll lose everything if it doesn't work, and I'm not sure it's worth the risk. I'm not sure I'm worth the risk.

CHAPTER 8



Holland

I STARE at a half-constructed house surrounded by nothing but dirt. The walls are up and covered in plywood and rafters soar over the emptiness underneath. It's a giant structure. I can't imagine what it'll look like when it's done, but it'll be spacious and opulent.

The long driveway keeps this property isolated from the surrounding ones. Patrick comes to a stop next to me, his hands shoved into the pockets of his trousers. His suit jacket is wrinkled, and the smell of sour wine and expensive cologne emanates off him like a noxious cloud.

Kase and I had to sit in that haze for the drive out here. Patrick insisted we ride together, and as long as Kase was along, I acquiesced.

"Daddy's meeting us here," he says, sounding moodier than the previous evening. "He wants to check on the progress." Patrick shoves a hand through his halfheartedly combed hair. Hungover Patrick definitely lacks charm. He's broody, like a dark shadow settled over his face to rage for hours.

I want to grab Kase's hand, but he's standing a few feet behind me. His presence is enough, but I don't like being this close to a surly Patrick. The drive out here was full of awkward silence. I had tried making small talk, but he

glowered out the window. I couldn't chat with Kase since I'm not supposed to be fucking my bodyguard in my closet.

And now I have to face MacDonald. I imagine exchanging an eye roll with Kase about the update. It's almost just as good.

Patrick throws his arms up, and I press my lips together and breathe shallowly. Did he sleep with a whole troupe of showgirls? I can't imagine that many women have such bad taste.

"Picture this," he says as old wine fumes off him, "gray with black supports in the corners and going across the decks. Two stories, with stone retaining walls there"—he swings an arm to the left—"and here." His other arm goes in the opposite direction.

"Sounds lovely," is all I can think to say instead of *It sounds like it's unoriginal, uninspired, and not at all my preference. Did you know my little eighteen-hundred-square-foot bungalow had more character than one room in this place will ever have?* I also don't see Patrick in a house. Patrick's been living out of one of his father's hotels in Chicago with twenty-four-hour room service and housekeeping. That's more Patrick's style. This is his dad's build, just like my clothes were my dad's purchases—rather the work of the people they hired to do the purchasing and building.

"When will it be done?" I ask.

"Daddy's trying to move up the completion date to before we're supposed to get married." His level look says that we need to think of something before then.

I agree.

"We can walk around inside. I told the crew to knock off for the day."

As long as he's the one dealing with his dad, I don't care if the house is done by the bullshit wedding date. I squint at the house. The sun is blazing overhead, and it's too damn hot to be wandering around a pile of dirt. But the few walls that are up might give us some shade.

Patrick strides to the yawning opening I assume will be a door. Other than the distant drone of traffic, it's quiet. Gentle hills dotted with green bushes strong enough to survive a desert in the summer are the backdrop. I'm sure this place will be stunning in the standard way of The Ridges once the landscaping is done.

I hope I'm not around to find out. I toss a look at Kase before I follow Patrick inside. His impassive gaze gives away nothing about what he's thinking. My eye catches on the empty road.

"Where's the driver?" I ask Kase in a whisper.

"He drove off after dropping us off," he says grimly. His gaze sweeps the property and darkens when it lands on the opening Patrick disappeared through. "Don't get close to him in there—and no privacy no matter how much he nags."

I nod and face the house, swallowing hard. Kase is uneasy, and now I feel like I'm walking around with a target on my back. My mind wants to make excuses. Patrick wouldn't do anything, would he?

But then I remember sneaking into Father's office as a kid. *No, no, no. You can't do this. I have a family. I'm no one—*

I close my eyes as the memory of gunfire rings through my head. That man had truly seemed like no one in my thirteen-year-old eyes. Even Father thought he was harmless, or I wouldn't have been brought along.

So Patrick could be a snake, and this house is tall grass.

Inside the house, my heels thunk against the plywood floor. I walk through the shadows of the rafters and sun patches where windows will soon be and look around. It seems both huge and tiny at the same time.

"That's the kitchen," Patrick says behind me, coming from around a wall that's still partially two-by-fours. He passes me to enter a large open area. "This is the dining room, and this . . ." He wanders to a gap between two walls that's too small to be a room. A closet? "Is where the stairs will be.

Bedrooms are on the upper level. Any guest quarters will be far away from the living area.”

Kase stays within a three-foot radius of me the entire time. His attention and alertness is rubbing off on me. I’m jumpy and I don’t want to look around anymore.

“It’s quite nice.” I’ve given this house so many bland compliments, I’m running out. “I’m sure when it’s further along, it’ll get more and more gorgeous. Should I call a driver or is yours coming back?”

Patrick faces me. He’s twenty feet away, but I want to shiver despite the heat. His eyes are dead. He usually looks empty in the eyes, vapid at the most when he’s not putting on the charm, but today it’s unnerving. *He’s unnerving.*

An engine rumbles and wheels crunch. Someone’s pulled up. MacDonald. I fortify myself for his bluster.

Patrick’s mouth thins. “Daddy’s here.” He crosses to the doorway and stands in the opening.

I take a few steps to the side to peer over his shoulder. MacDonald drove himself. He probably has a driver in Chicago, but maybe it’s a power move in Vegas. He lumbers up the dirt path we took to the door, his face already red. I hope it’s from the heat.

Patrick stands aside to let him through. MacDonald’s gaze sweeps over me and down my bare legs. Patrick’s turkey baster comment runs through my head, and my stomach lurches. I should’ve chosen a pantsuit today. His eyes narrow on Kase, but he otherwise ignores him. “Well, Patty. How’s it turning out?”

Patrick’s mouth tightens. “Progress is good.” I’ve never heard MacDonald call him that. I’ve gone out of my way to have nothing to do with them. Patrick doesn’t like it, but then his father is nothing to him but his wallet.

I don’t care to know anything about this family actually.

I spin, roll my eyes at Kase where the others can’t see, and walk to the large open area off what must be one of the main living rooms. It’s an exterior wall, but there’s no regular

spacing of boards, just a few support beams. Feigning interest to keep MacDonald from eyeballing Kase too closely, I ask, “Is there a whole wall missing for a reason?”

“Ah, yes,” Patrick answers. “The wall of windows. It’s going to lead to the pool in the back. Two Olympic-sized pools with all the curves and waterfalls you’d find at an all-inclusive Mexican resort. It’ll be Sandals in your backyard.”

MacDonald’s scowl furrows his face. “They should be working ’round the clock. This house needs to be ready for your happy day.”

Ugh. I’d give the work crew the month off, but I won’t need to. Kase and I are going to figure something out.

“They will be.” Patrick’s tone is deceptively light. His whole demeanor has changed since his father showed up. The sour wine and expensive perfume probably still linger—I don’t plan to get close enough to find out—but he’s lost the charm. The dark expression from the car ride here has returned.

My uneasiness is growing. What’s going on? I’ve underestimated him before. Have I done it again?

Another false smile. “You need to see the showcase in the back. I know it’s only a vision at the moment, but the pool’s dug.”

“I don’t care about the pool,” MacDonald grumbles, pulling his phone out as if he’s going to call the workers right back, and it doesn’t matter if the temperature is well into the triple digits.

“It makes the house a resort,” Patrick argues. “It’ll be a welcoming escape for my new wife.”

“Fine.” MacDonald charges outside between the two supports that’ll be the wall of windows.

Patrick’s dark gaze lands on me. “After you.”

I struggle to breathe. The heat is like a flannel blanket over my face, and the last thing I want to do is walk out from the

slight shade the walls are giving me. I don't want Patrick at my back, and I can't explain why.

I carefully keep my gaze off Kase. I don't need Patrick knowing I'm seeking comfort from my supposed bodyguard, but I also don't want Kase to see how rattled I am. He needs to concentrate on whatever this visit is really about.

As I intentionally pick my way out of the house and over the bulldozed land, I wish for a pair of scissors in my hand. I don't want to hurt anyone, but Patrick's up to something.

Is he going to tell his father that he's not going through with the wedding? Then I should have an answer about what he knows. What would come after? Will MacDonald ruin Father if Patrick's the one to bail? He wouldn't hurt his own kid. Right?

"Can you picture it?" Patrick calls from behind me, and I can envision his arms out like when we first arrived. "A walking path around the property. Natural rocks flowing into a waterfall that'll keep the pool circulating—with all the normal pool shit. But no fake materials in this house. It's all real. Daddy, you guys need to see how deep the pool is."

MacDonald walks toward the edge of the pit dug in the middle of the yard. I do the same since there's nothing else to look at. I don't care to picture "the resort" like Patrick, and he's probably just putting on a show for his father anyway. The dirt's so hard my heels barely sink in. The final product is hard to imagine in the mounds of dirt with heavy equipment sitting idle.

Kase is closer than my shadow. We stop beside MacDonald and Kase puts himself between me and the other man. I stare into the pool. I like them as much as anyone else, but I have no need for one. This one is certainly deep enough, I experience a beat of vertigo standing so close to the edge. I take a step back. To keep from clinging to Kase, I clasp my hands together and wait. Patrick doesn't want to talk about a damn pool, but I'm afraid to know why he's brought us all here.



Kase

MacDonald grunts as he takes in the deep pit and the mountain of dirt on the other side. “You taking up diving, Patty?”

I hover closer to Holland. She’s pale at the edge of the gaping pool hole. When I glance at Patrick, my veins ice over. He’s got a gun trained on us.

“Fuck.” I should’ve been ready.

Holland told me he’s not all she thought. I should’ve gone against her wishes and borrowed a gun from Mr. Gray. I crowd in front of her, blocking her from the long, narrow nozzle. A silencer. Patrick plans well under the influence.

“What the hell are you doing, Patrick?” MacDonald bellows.

He’s on my right. The dug-out pool spans to either side. I can’t back up, or I’ll push Holland in. Her hands land on my back. My mind spins. How do I get us out of this?

“I’m taking control of my life.” Patrick shrugs, making the black finish of the gun gleam. “Unfortunately, there’s only one way to do it.”

“Which is?”

“Get rid of you.” He waves the weapon. “And her.” Holland’s gasp cuts through my calm. If I rush Patrick, he’ll shoot me, but Holland can get away. Except MacDonald’s between her and the house. I won’t sacrifice her, but he won’t hesitate to.

“Do you even know how to fire that thing?” MacDonald takes a step, but Patrick swings the barrel back to aim at him. MacDonald growls and puts his hands out to the sides. His face is beet red.

“I know a lot more than you think, Daddy. I know I’m not letting what happened to Junior happen to me. I know you

have something on Connor Gray, and you think you're helping me." His smile is grim. "But I also know how to take your money and retire in Bali."

"Patty—"

"Don't call me that." Spittle flies out of Patrick's mouth. "If you were a better father, I wouldn't do this."

"Let Holland go," I say. Her fingers dig into my suit coat like she won't let me go. "She doesn't care if you two kill yourselves or not. We sure as hell don't give a shit what island you waste away on."

Patrick's eyes narrow. "I knew you two were fucking. That's why she wasn't putting out."

I see MacDonald's arm move, and it's the distraction I need. I charge Patrick just as he squeezes off a round at his dad. His eyes widen, and he swings toward me. But I'm on him. I slap the gun down. The sound of another dull shot is lost in the crunch of dirt as I tackle Patrick.

"Kase!"

I can't stop until Holland's safe. She's all that matters.

Patrick's not as strong as me. I overpower him, pin him on his back, and twist his wrist. He cries out and his grip on the gun loosens. My fingers find the warm trigger. It's muscle memory. The muzzle's in him, and I pull the trigger without blinking.

He groans, his eyes wide, unbelieving, and he goes limp. Air ekes out of him as I twist to make sure Holland's okay.

MacDonald's dropped to a knee, one hand pressed to his side. His face is pale, his gaze glued to his son. "Patrick?" he wheezes. Outraged, he reaches into his suit coat and withdraws a gun faster than I expected an injured man to move.

Holland lunges for MacDonald.

Shit. "No!" I'm swinging my gun out, but a hole blows through the side of his head. I stop, stunned.

Holland's cry is cut off, her mouth gaping open. I suck in a breath and push away from Patrick's dead body. She could still be in danger, and I have to cover her. But before I get close to her, her father's voice rings out.

"Get away from him, Holland." He stalks out of the unfinished house and across the dirt. His arms are raised, and he's holding a black gun like Patrick's. "Kase?"

I know exactly what he's asking from his brusque tone. "Patrick's dead." I don't give myself time to be relieved. Holland's safe. Her father saved our asses. Today, we were able to take the worst of ourselves and use it to help someone we care about.

It's time to clean up the mess and get Holland out of here.

She rushes to my side. "Are you hit?" She runs her hands over me. The color in her face hasn't returned, and I don't have time to caress that worry from her face.

I grab her wrist and stroke the inside with my thumb before she can get more of Patrick's blood on her. "It's splatter."

"Oh." She stares at my fingers. Her gaze slides to Patrick, then to MacDonald. She withdraws, and it's like her past scrolls through her mind. When she walked into her dad's office and witnessed death. When Josef attacked her. And now.

"It's okay." My own memories threaten to resurface. The muffled shots. The metallic smell of blood. Death. But the men who died were abusers. Holland's innocent and she's safe and I'm grateful for all I've been through to make sure she stays that way. I'd do it again.

"I'm sorry." There's a quiver in her voice. "I'm so sorry I dragged you into this."

I hook an arm around her and hug her to me. She needs this more than she needs to avoid getting Patrick's blood on her. She buries her face in my shoulder, and I'm content to hold her for a moment.

"It's over?" she asks in a small voice.

“Is it?” I ask her dad.

She turns to face her father. “What are you doing here?” Awe and fear fill her words.

He’s not dressed like normal. His look is more like mine when I’m on the job. Dark shirt, black jeans, boots. Not his typical suit and I doubt it’s his leisure clothing.

He holsters his gun. “Kase said he thought Patrick was up to something with this house visit. When MacDonald passed on a meeting because he was meeting Patrick, I figured Patrick was doing what I would’ve done.”

Kill anyone in his way.

“Why Holland?” I ask, loosely holding Patrick’s gun at my side, wishing I could toss it away. It’ll get buried with its owner—after it’s thoroughly wiped. “He could’ve killed his father, buried him under where the pool’s being poured, and been free of Holland.”

Mr. Gray toes MacDonald as if testing how heavy the body actually is. “Without a body, I wouldn’t have known for sure if Mac was dead. Patrick might’ve worried I’d follow through on the contract anyway. He might’ve thought I would go after Mac’s real estate using her.”

“You wouldn’t have?” Holland asks, and I hear her unspoken question. *How free am I really?*

Her father inhales slowly as he studies us. “If I was another man—hell, maybe when I was younger, I would’ve been that cutthroat. But no. My marriage to Gloria taught me that I wouldn’t wish a needless relationship on anyone.”

Holland’s flinch is slight, and I hug her tighter. She needs comfort before we get to the dirty work. If I could, I’d drive her far from here as soon as possible. But I can’t, and I’m not willing to let her be alone.

Her father squats by MacDonald, glancing from the body to the pool. “I quit wanting to drag you into my way of life, Holland, but once this is done, you never have to come back.”

Can I say the same?



Kase

I'M in the shower in the guest room. By the time we dug a trench big enough and deep enough to hide two grown men, it was close to evening and finally starting to cool off. The three of us made quick work of covering up two murders. Connor—no longer Mr. Gray after killing together—is knowledgeable about jobsite security. Patrick had taken care of much before we arrived since he'd been planning to be the one doing the murdering. There wasn't security footage to hide, no drivers to pay off, and Patrick had the keys to the heavy equipment on-site.

When we left, there was no blood, no stray bullets, and no sign the area had been disturbed. The murder weapons were wiped clean and buried with their owners. If they're discovered, will there be questions? Absolutely, but very little tying the Masons to us. I've never had this much help doing a job, but then the only time I've had a job like this dropped in my lap with no warning was when I walked in on Holland.

We're at the penthouse, cleaning the last of the day off us. I'm in the bathroom in my guest room. Holland's using hers, and I doubt we'll see her dad for the night. He'll be cleaning himself, his weapon, and going back to business as usual. When the Masons' disappearance is noticed, I doubt anyone will go looking for them. MacDonald's empire will get bulldozed over just as completely as the yard in that new house.

Gazing down, I expect to see blood and dirt circling down the drain, but I wasn't that dirty. I only feel filthy. Another death on my conscience, but this time it's different. There's no contract agreed to. No money exchanged. Just a gross abuse of power with a young woman. Lifestyles like the one Patrick planned to steal from his dad only leave bodies in their wake. Finishing up, I shut the water off and listen to the last of it

trickle down the drain. I want to go hold Holland, to check on her, but I have to make sure my shit is straight first.

Am I good?

Yeah.

Patrick's gone. Holland has her father's support.

What are the odds it was Patrick who sent Josef after Holland? A fortuitous coincidence. Patrick proved smart enough to know how to mask his identity so well he couldn't be identified. Connor agrees, but neither of us believes this day can be wrapped up so easily. But maybe I'm just not used to the idea of a peaceful life with Holland. I towel off, throw on black shorts and a red shirt, and walk to her room without hiding my intentions. The pretending is done.

Tommy and Hanson are at their posts at the front door and Connor's office door. I don't know what Connor told them, and I don't care. If they've been with him since Holland was a baby, they know more about the man than I do. I have no choice but to trust them with secrets involving me and Holland.

In her room, she's sitting in the middle of the bed, her wet hair hanging over her shoulders. The sight is a hard tug at my heart. Her dirty clothing's piled by the door, and she's dressed in the silk pajama top she was wearing the first night I broke in. Tomorrow, we'll get rid of every stitch we were wearing. Tonight is for coping, and when the trash goes out, it'll be like today never happened.

Her thousand-yard stare bores into the duvet. Each one of us will remember, though.

"How are you doing?" I ask softly.

She blinks and sees me for the first time. "Do you think it's really over? Do you think Patrick was behind what happened at my house?"

"I don't know. If he was, we'll never know." And if he wasn't, I'm afraid we'll find out the hard way. But I don't want to scare her. I crawl into the middle of the bed with her and sit behind her. She reclines against me.

“I want to ask ‘now what?’ but I can’t bring myself to think logically. I feel like I’m on the edge of panic.”

Last time, she passed out on the couch. Holland was excellent at doing what needed to be done—and then collapsing.

“There’s no rush.” If anything, it’d look suspicious. Patrick and his dad disappear, never to be found buried deep beneath a pool that’s getting poured tomorrow, and Holland flees Vegas as if she’s holding the murder weapon. “We should wait a few days.”

“Fashion week is a little over a week away.” Her tone is hopeful.

I want to give her everything. She’s had so much taken away in such a short time. “And all you need is—”

“Five more looks.” She gestures to the desk. “And I have those sketched out. I just need to send my designs to Tanisha, and she’ll take care of the rest.”

She could still have her dreams. A self-sufficient company that isn’t beholden to her dad. The career she’s been fighting for is hers. But the circumstances aren’t something to celebrate. It’ll help her to dive into work. That means I can’t burden her with my desire to spend my life with her. I can show her my commitment by staying with her through fashion week, until after everyone sees her work and falls in love with her like I have. And then I’ll talk to her and my parents. We’ll be able to start our life together.

I roll off the bed. Now isn’t the time to bury myself deep inside of her. She needs a goal. She needs to be reminded that she’s an innocent in all this. I grab her sketchbook.

She scoots to the back of the bed. Her pajamas swallow her whole, but she’s only wearing the shirt. She crosses her bare legs at the ankles. I picture myself climbing on the bed, wrapping a hand around her ankle and massaging her calves as I work my way up her leg.

My dick is starting to tent my shorts. Thankfully, my shirt’s long enough to hide my growing erection.

I hand her the book as I sit next to her, my back against the headboard. “Show me what you’re going to include.”

Her sapphire eyes brighten, and she shyly pages to the pantsuit she showed me at the rental, the one I said was uninspired.

“I can’t just throw these in when my other looks don’t have the same theme. But with accessories”—she flips to the beginning of the book—“I think I can streamline it enough. And if I send the materials and colors I have in mind, Tanisha and Anna will make sure the rest is streamlined since they’ve worked on all the looks.” The grimness of the night pours off her as she talks about her designs.

“Sounds like a plan.”

She sets the book flat on her lap. “You’re going to be there?”

I smile, keeping my expression light and not like I want to buy a ring from the jewelry store on the second floor and propose tonight. Fashion week is enough pressure as it is. If Patrick was the one after her, then she’s safe and we’ll have more time. “I’m going to be. Since we both have no place to stay but the rental.”

“Oh, no,” she says with mock dismay. “We’re stuck together.”

“Yep.”

She laughs, but sadness lingers in her eyes.

I trail a finger down her cheek. “What?”

“Nothing.” She presses her lips together when she sees my raised brow. “For how long?”

Touched, I want to laugh. I’ve been worried about adding more pressure, about stealing her time for a dream she thought was gone. Yet, she’s worried about us, and by not saying anything, I’m only doing what I meant to avoid. I can tell her how I feel, what I’m thinking. “Forever, but fashion week first.”

“Kase—”

I put my finger on her lips. “Nothing gets in the way of fashion week. I’ll still be in love with you after, okay? And after, I’ll . . . I’ll talk to my parents. We’ll figure something out.”

Her eyes widen, and I remove my finger. “You’d do that?”

“I’ll do anything for you.” The honest truth.

“I love you too.”

She tosses the sketchbook onto the nightstand and rolls onto me. She plants her lips against mine, but it’s a clash of teeth. We’re both smiling. Out of so much ugliness came something beautiful.

With her straddling me and her taste in my mouth, I’m tempted to forget my earlier decision to keep this night light. But as she wedges her hand between us, I have to hold firm despite what my erection says. This is where my experience is critical.

I break the kiss. “Not tonight, Holland.”

A crease forms between her brows, and a frown touches her lips. It’s the sudden wateriness of her eyes that confirms I’m doing the right thing.

“Smothering a night like tonight with sex doesn’t help. Trust me.” I had plenty of years to test the theory. And there were too many months of misery with Lucia to know that the wrong relationship wasn’t the way either. Holland and I are different, and I’m determined to spend the rest of my life proving it.

Her swallow is audible, and she blinks back a flood of tears. “I’m such a mess.”

“Hey, I know.” I roll us both over and tuck us under the blankets.

“I don’t ever want to go through this again.”

“You won’t.” I press a kiss into her hair. “I promise.”

I only hope I can keep that promise. All I know is that I’m going to stay in this bed with her all damn night. I’m going to

wake up to the woman I love—and dare to dream the
nightmare's over. We have our whole life in front of us.

CHAPTER 9



*H*olland

KASE DRIVES THROUGH FAMILIAR NEIGHBORHOODS. I stare out the window, marveling that I feel like a different Holland than when I left with Tommy and Hanson to come back to Vegas. It feels like years ago when I was with Kase and he bought this CR-V.

We waited two days. Both nights, I went to sleep in Kase's arms, and both mornings, I woke up with him. A dream I didn't think I'd get to experience.

Father would've preferred we stayed longer. He and Kase worked on finding and destroying the evidence MacDonald had on him. Grainy pictures and notes on timelines tying Father to hits are now nothing but ash. MacDonald was thankfully not a fan of digital evidence and we're now free. Once Father learned I could still save fashion week, he relented. We're finally growing closer. He saved me, and twice he risked his empire to help me gain freedom.

I've been on the phone since with my employees. Tanisha would message me with questions about color, exact fabric, knowing I would be picky and advise on different dimensions to allow for greater flexibility with the models we hired. Over the last few years, I wondered if I really loved my work or if I saw it as the solution I hoped it would be. But diving back in and running the company without the marriage hanging over my head has shown me that I love what I do. I adore fashion,

and my other goals haven't changed. I want to make women feel good about their bodies and give them lots of choices to show them off.

Kase pulls into the carport outside the rental. "Home sweet home."

It's not my bungalow. The house's sale is pending and Father offered to let it go, but after Josef, I don't want to live there. I could be sad, but I have a new lease on life. All I need is a roof over my head and Kase by my side.

I check my phone again and smile. "Penni and London want to hang with me."

"We can go over there."

Do I have time? I want to see my friends so badly, to remind myself that life after a traumatic event can be normal. Happy even. With the work Tanisha and Anna are doing, I have time. "I'd love to."

"I think you need it."

His tone confirms what I'm thinking. I need to be myself. I need to be happy, driven Holland. The Holland from before a man broke into my house to strangle me. The Holland before she helped dig two graves in the hard Nevada dirt. The Holland who could pretend her life didn't include murder.

My fingers fly over my phone. "Mind if we relax for a bit after the drive and then go to Jacobi's? We can swing by the shop on the way back."

"Aren't you antsy to get to the warehouse?"

I have to think. Why am I not in a rush to get there? "It's a well-run machine right now. I need to tend to my other relationships."

The travel will suck up my time, but I can spare most of today. Then tomorrow, I'll work on the last looks like my life depends on it, even though, ironically, it doesn't anymore. But that doesn't change how antsy I am to prove myself—to only myself.

No more Patrick. A lump forms in my throat. The image of a crumpled Patrick curled in a bed of dirt flashes through my head. When Patrick demanded the pool and backyard get done before the exterior and interior of the house, he'd dug his own grave. I helped dig the hole. I helped cover the body. And I helped blend the extra dirt into the landscaping. A familiar wave of panic and, *Oh God, what did I do?* washes over me.

I push out of the car and rush to the door.

"Holland." Kase's gentle tone behind me breaks into the bad memories as if he knows exactly what I'm thinking and picturing the very image carved into my brain.

I give myself a mental shake. "Sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about." He's been there to comfort me each time the memories want to suffocate me.

I can't believe I'm lucky enough to be with a man who gets it. Not only does he get it, but it's his life. He knows. And that means I won't be alone with what I've done, with what I've been forced to do because of who I am. As long as I'm there for him. He was forced to kill again—for me. I don't take that lightly.

The new question has haunted me since that day, no matter how much I try to think positively. What if Patrick wasn't behind Josef? Because if it wasn't him, then I'm not safe yet. If it wasn't him, then someone hates me enough to want to kill me. Even worse, I have no idea who.

I pinch the bridge of my nose. "You know what? I should stop in at work first." Work centers me. The sense of chaos, lying waiting isn't going away. I need to be anchored.

I turn to rush back to the car, but Kase won't let me pass. I give him a small smile. "I'm being erratic."

He unlocks the door around me and pushes it open. "Wait here."

When he steps into the house, he holds his hand up, signaling me to stay where I'm at. After what I've been through, I still can't just walk into my home. All-too-familiar anxiety crowds in my gut. I shift from foot to foot, waiting in

the shade of the doorway. I don't have luggage, only the sketchbook I'm hugging to myself.

Will he always have to do this?

I haven't had a regular day with Kase. A day where we can walk into a place without looking for people who stand out, checking the security cameras, and sweeping a building that's supposed to have been empty while we were gone.

But then, this is regular to Kase. If I stay with him, it'll continue to be my life. Ever since things got serious between us, I've only wanted a chance with him. He told me he loved me. I love him. And now . . . what? I risk our kid walking in on what I saw when I was young? What happens if he can't get out of taking over for his parents? What if he keeps working and I'm too in love with him to leave? What if one time I'm out of town for work and . . . and we have kids?

He appears back at the doorway, wearing his impervious bodyguard expression, and I shake the worry off. I'm getting ahead of myself, worrying about a future I'm making up in my head.

Doesn't mean the concerns aren't valid.

"I'm going with you," he says.

"Where?" I reorient myself. I wanted to stop at work. "Oh, right. Sure."

A slight frown creases his handsome face. I know this man inside and out. I love every part of him. He loves me.

But . . . I don't love his lifestyle. Neither does he, but that's not stopping him. The fierce loyalty I adore might just be our breaking point.

"Are you okay?" A question he's asked a lot lately.

"I'm just trying to get my head back in the game." I can't lounge around the house with him with these thoughts banging around in my head. I spin and head back to the car I just got out of. "I'll text the girls on the way there. Tell them we'll be over in a couple of hours?"

"Holland—"

“Kase, I’m getting in my head again. I need to talk to my friends. Okay?”

He nods like no explanation is needed. And gah—could he be more perfect?

I don’t want to explain why I’m vibrating like I’m going to sprint down the street or why I can’t seem to look at him for long periods of time. I don’t wish to tell him that when I think of our future together, I want to throw up and hide in no particular order. He said he’d try to find a way, and I have to trust him to do just that.

But it’s not just his parents. When they disappear, will our roles be reversed? Will Kase be a giant target? For how long?

The drive to my warehouse goes quickly, but the questions gnaw at me the entire way. He’s quiet, as if he senses I can’t do idle chitchat or deep conversation right now. As soon as the savory smells from the restaurant next door infiltrate the car, tension leaves my body. Until the smells remind me of the place Kase’s parents run. Similar scents. The what-ifs return. No matter where I go, I can’t escape the problems his way of life causes.

We’re still listed on the rental as Kevin and Hailey Morales. Will that become me? Things could go wrong as his parents pull out and we become targets. I might have to give up BommGirl to keep him. Change my name. My location. My everything. Just like I’ve been faced with since I signed that contract. The only difference now is that I’m in love. I’m too far gone with him to go back to life before Kase.

I swallow bile and hop out of the car as soon as he stops.

“Holland, wait up.” His tone is full of warning, a reminder that I might not be as safe as I want to be. But this is my work. My haven. There’s nothing here to threaten me.

I fling open the door with my logo of a curvy woman and BommGirl engraved in the glass. I often go through the back, but Kase doesn’t want anything to do with back doors right now. Since the alley behind his parents’ place is made for the nonrestaurant side of the business, neither do I.

Sahara lifts her head from behind her desk. A blissfully ordinary sight. Her eyes blink owlshly behind her big-framed glasses. “What are you wearing?”

Belatedly, I remember I had wanted to change. I’m wearing a pale-purple silk blouse and gray, pin-striped slacks. The peep-toe heels are an older style Gloria wouldn’t even touch. “I was visiting my father and . . .”

She clicks her tongue. “Say no more. Parental units can be *a thing*.”

My laughter is the most carefree I’ve felt in weeks. “Right? Thanks for everything you’ve done.”

She shrugs, and her gaze scoots to Kase. A dark brow lifts. “I thought he holed you up and wouldn’t let you out.” Her tone is half-serious. She was legitimately worried.

“I wish, but fashion week.” I give her a quick smile, relaxing into the familiar bustle of the place. The bright fabric. Winks of sequins. Whirs of sewing machines. My panic from earlier fades, if only for a little while.

Kase’s stance is more relaxed than when he was pretending to be my bodyguard, but he’s still on alert, his gaze constantly sweeping the area. Every time someone walks past the front window, he’s studying them.

This is our life now. He told me forever, and at the time, I didn’t think about what it entailed. I don’t want to think about it now. Kase has stuck with me through thick and thin, and I want to do the same. I just need time to adjust, and for now, that includes business as usual. “I’m going to go over the looks we’ve got before I leave next week and then go home and sew my little heart out.”

Sahara nods. “Tanisha’s got the garments she worked on ready for you to look at. Anna’s working on the last skirt you sent instructions for.”

“Perfect.” I round Sahara’s desk. Her gaze stays on me, watching me a lot like Kase does. Am I that transparent? I’m shaken. I’m unsure. But my employees aren’t dependent on whether I’m happily coupled or single. I need to nail next

week and then I'll be able to face the tough truths about my personal life.

CHAPTER 10



*K*ase

I'M PERCHED on a stool in Jacobi's kitchen like I was so many weeks ago when I had to hide my infatuation with Holland. That day had been a turning point in my subtle stalking of the woman who captured my heart. I learned she was in danger and the rest has been our history.

While I'm sitting here with a protein shake from Penni's mom's nutrition line, I'm stuck wondering if our story is coming to an end.

Holland's been quiet since we returned. I should've anticipated her emotions. I should've found another place. But after our visit to her shop, I'm starting to suspect it's not returning to the rental. It's not the shock of what happened in Vegas. It's not wondering if Patrick was the one who hired a hit man. It's me.

She studiously avoided talking to me by poring over her designs and the notes Tanisha made in the margins of the instructions she had sent. I asked what the writing said. Holland muttered something about the way the fabric draped, adjustments Tanisha had made to the sizing and the cut, and a few color recommendations.

She didn't look at me all the way to Malibu. Boxes of T-shirts were in my back seat and the shirts, skirts, pants, and scarves Tanisha and Anna had worked on were hanging on the garment hooks in the back. If I had a bigger vehicle, I

might've had to load a few mannequins too. Which I would've done, but it'd be more items for Holland to hide behind.

Cannon tamps his smoothie down with his straw. "You gonna talk or cry into your smoothie? 'Cause we're here for you either way, but the suspense is killing me."

I've already filled them in on everything, minus specific details about Connor and the Masons. The less they know, the better. But I didn't tell them how the last couple of hours consisted of Holland acting like I didn't exist when just days ago, we'd admitted our love to each other.

"I dunno," I answer, not knowing what to say. "I thought things were going pretty well and then . . . they weren't."

"Just like that?" Jacobi asks from my other side.

"In a blink. We stopped at the rental. I had her wait at the door while I cleared the house, and when I was done, she had closed herself off from me. It's been all about work and designs and plans." It's not normal fashion week stress. I've seen her worrying over the designs and the time line. This goes deeper, and it doesn't go away when she looks at me.

Cannon sets his empty shaker bottle down. "You think it's being back and not knowing for sure if someone's still after her?"

"Maybe. She doesn't seem to want to talk." Has she tabled the conversation for after fashion week just like I've tabled talking to my parents until after?

Jacobi reaches for the blender canister and pours the rest of his peach-mango smoothie out. "You know what it is."

"What?" I ask.

"No. I mean, you know, but it's something you don't want to admit to yourself. That's why you're crying into your Berry Berry Delicious over it."

I frown into the reddish-purple remnants of my drink. "No, I . . ."

I'm afraid I know what's bothering her. As soon as we quit being a young couple coming back home and I went into

“make sure no one’s trying to kill us again” mode, she shut down. And I could see the question in her eyes.

Do I want this for the rest of my life?

We’re in the eye of the storm. We made it through hell, but until I talk to Mama and Poppa and find out what we’re facing, there’s the other half of the storm. My half.

I glance out the French doors that lead to the fireplace area in the *U* of Jacobi’s house. The girls aren’t stretched out on lawn chairs, letting the ocean breeze waft over them while they talk about nothing and everything. They’re sitting in a triangle, their heads dipped down. It’s not exactly a light conversation pose. Worry digs into my stomach lining.

She’s opening up to them when she didn’t feel like she could with me. Or she wasn’t ready to—which never means good news is waiting to be spilled.

“Fuck.” I push my cup away.

“So?” Jacobi asks. “Care to clue us in?”

They know enough about Holland’s dad that I don’t have to explain much. “When she was younger, her mom and dad didn’t get along.” Both guys give an understanding grunt. Their parents weren’t exactly model citizens. “And sometimes business has to be taken care of when it has to be taken care of.”

“Business,” Jacobi echoes.

“I can’t divulge, but . . . Holland wasn’t as isolated as she should’ve been. She saw some things and learned skills that prepared her for surviving Josef.”

“Shit,” Cannon breathes. He swivels on his stool like he wants to keep an eye on the girls, but their conversation is just as heavy. “What’d she see?”

“Enough.” She learned enough to know she never wanted to be a part of it. Neither do I, but for the near future, I’m still in. “She doesn’t want that for her life.”

“So you think that means she doesn’t want you?” Jacobi asks quietly.

I come with the life she was running from. It's with me. My parents. And if they agree to let me go and it gets ugly, it'll be my name on contracts as the hit. Maybe hers for doing nothing but falling in love with me. Holland could lose it all again. Because of me. "She might want me, but I'm not worth it. I know I'm not, and I shouldn't have asked her to be part of it. I knew better." I wish my smoothie was a whiskey neat. "I never wanted a wife and kids. I never wanted to drag anyone else into my life. I wanted it to end with me, but I fell in love with her. My parents . . ."

"Won't let you go?" Cannon asks.

I shake my head. They don't understand. "They need to get out. The business would roll over to me. If they up and leave?"

Jacobi's sharp inhale echoes in the silence. "And you don't take over? They are going to worry you're turning on them."

"The people who've hired them over the years are going to want to tie up loose ends," Cannon says. "Holland will be back to being a target, if she isn't still."

I'm not the only one who's too cautious to act like Patrick was the Big Bad. "Even if my parents agree to letting you two help wipe any trace of them or where they went, you'd also have to do that for me and Holland."

"Fuck." Jacobi pushes his smoothie away.

"Pretty much." I hang my head. I'm fucked, and Holland's right there with me. "I don't know. I don't know what to do."

Jacobi rests a hand on my shoulder. "We don't know what the future holds. But you're with two guys who've survived the shitstorms their parents created. And Holland's out there with the women we have no right to spend our lives with. We'll do what we always do and figure it out."

"I'm not strong enough to end things with her." I wasn't raised to be a bigger man. I hid in the shadows, and now I want to be in Holland's sunlight.

"Then don't," Cannon says. "Look, I can make us all gag and say some shit like 'you're stronger together' but . . . are you?"

I thought about charging in on her and Josef. She couldn't have hauled his body out and dumped it where it wouldn't be found. I couldn't have gotten to Patrick and MacDonald without her. She couldn't have taken on both Masons herself. We are better together. So when she's ready to talk, it'll be her decision. Is she willing to keep risking herself for me?



Holland

I RUB my hands over my face, hoping Kase isn't watching out the window. Is he talking about me with the guys? In the car, I buried myself in work, knowing eventually I'd have to tell him what was on my mind. Knowing that we can't keep putting the subject off. We've finally got a chance, a shot at us, but it doesn't change all my earlier reservations.

When we arrived, the girls swamped me with hugs and dragged me outside. I told them everything about Josef. Everything. And then after their shock and concern died down, I covered what happened in Vegas with the arranged marriage and that MacDonald and Patrick were taken care of. I didn't give specifics, and they knew better than to ask. I'm forever grateful to them.

London doesn't have blood on her hands. Neither does Penni, but the guilt from how her ex-husband perished weighs on her. Life-and-death circumstances don't seem to matter when it's someone else's life on your conscience.

"Not well?" London asks, answering the question she posed to me. *How are you and Kase?*

How long have I been silent? "We were better than ever. Until we got to the rental and I had to wait while he cleared the place."

"Cannon did that for a while after we moved in together," Penni says, giving me a sympathetic smile. "But he's a dancer now, not a private detective. Is Kase switching careers?"

I shake my head. “He’s in a ‘damned if he does, damned if he doesn’t’ position.” I shudder. I know exactly what that life is like, only it’ll be worse. Father is a businessman first, a killer by necessity. Kase isn’t a hit man, but it’s his job to secure the same outcome as one. “I swore that if I got out, things would be different.”

“And you’re wandering right back into the same life,” London murmurs. She scrapes her palms along her bare thighs like she’s trying to warm up despite the burning sun overhead. “I don’t know, Holland. I’ve never seen you into a guy this much. It’d be a shame to throw it all away.”

“He’s willing to walk away, but it’s complicated—and dangerous. So, I’m asking him to give it all up and endanger everyone he cares about. To let his parents down when his dad’s having health problems. And if he stays, then it’s constant worry about him. More looking over my shoulder just in case. None of it’s fair. What do I do?”

“Talk to him,” London says without hesitation. “Lay it out. He’s a smart guy. He has to know, and the longer you two don’t talk, the more miserable you’ll both be.”

I blink tears back. “I’ll be miserable if our chat ends in a breakup.” Do I trade safety for love? My company for Kase? Go back to working all day and going home alone to work more?

Penni dips her head to catch my gaze. “What if it doesn’t?”

“Ugh.” I lean onto my hands behind me. It’d be a perfect evening to lie in the sun like I don’t have a care in the world. Let the rays sink through my skin and into my bones until I’m a puddle without a brain. Then I can skirt along the edge of the water and let it lap at my feet until the big orb in the sky sinks below the horizon.

Talk to him.

I have to be an adult. Tomorrow I’m going to be buried in fashion week projects. If he doesn’t get fed up with my attitude and leave, he might want to help. It’d be shitty of me to block him out—and I’d miss the way we worked together,

with and around each other. And if he ditches me, I'll stare at the sewing machine with tears pouring down my cheeks.

I might do that anyway.

I push my hair behind my ears. The color needs to be touched up before my trip next week. Or maybe I'll leave it. The light-brown growth will add an edge that goes with the showstopper pieces. "I can't wait to get out of these clothes."

Penni snorts. "They're so not you." She feathers her fingers along the sleeve of the blouse. "Excellent material though ... if you were forty."

"The stylist Father hired has good taste, but she doesn't know me." I picture Kase in his suits. The cut across his shoulders and the way the trousers draped to his wingtips. The heat licking through my body isn't from the sun.

Another image writes itself into my brain. I'd take the tie he wore and make mini cuffs to go with a pantsuit for a woman. Sleeveless blouse. A tie as two mini cuffs. Sunglasses that bodyguards love to wear indoors and out so no one can tell where they're looking. Like a bombshell corporate bodyguard.

My fingers itch to sketch it out. To ponder the color scheme. Would the top be chiffon with ruffles covering the buttons? A pale-pink chiffon with pink-pin-striped gray for the slacks. Not exactly a ground-breaking design, but more versatile than my other stuff. Capping the look would be my spin on a Prada Monolith platform loafer—with ankle straps.

The first person I want to see the design is Kase. Will he think it's inspired?

It's like I'm straddling two worlds. I can forget all the problems in the world with Kase and my work. But it's there, waiting. I'm lost, and it feels like there's another clock ticking over my head.

But until I know what to do, I need to work. I stand up, and they instantly rise with me. London grabs me into a hug, and Penni embraces both of us.

"I love you guys," I murmur into London's shoulder.

Penni pulls away. “Let us know how it goes. I’ll try to keep from blowing up your phone until I hear from you first.”

London steps back. “Same.”

I smile and turn away. Kase meets my gaze through the glass of the door. My emotions are reflected in his eyes. He’s been having the same thoughts. Yes. We need to talk.

He pushes back from the island. It’s time to find out how fast the clock over my head can run out.

CHAPTER 11



*K*ase

WHEN WE LEFT JACOBI'S, I told Holland we'd talk when we returned home. We drive in silence. Pain ripples in my stomach like it's full of razor blades. She has to give me a chance. To give me time. To let others in and help us.

Putting my hand on her shoulder, I stop her at the door before she can enter the house. "I'm sorry."

Her eyes are fathomless. "I know."

I clear the place, hating that it's become a part of her everyday routine. When I come out, she's scanning the road. Whether deliberate or automatic, I hate that she's still watching her back. I let her in and then go back out to bring in all the items we picked up from the shop.

She kicks her shoes off and tosses her thick-rimmed sunglasses on the counter and sighs. "Kase, this sucks."

I don't mean to mimic her words. "I know."

She sinks onto the couch. I sit next to her, my jean-clad knee touching hers.

I don't wait for her to continue. "Listen, I'm going to tell my parents I can't take over and discuss what needs to happen to close the business with the least amount of risk."

Doubt lines her expression. "Do you really think it's possible?"

“We’ll make it possible.”

“But . . . Your family has taken contracts from awful people. They won’t want all three of you to walk away.”

People who deal in killing don’t like job turnover. They don’t trust it, and they don’t trust anyone. “We’re backed into a corner.”

Her answer comes out in a whisper. “Yes.”

If I could’ve foreseen this moment when I was a kid, I would’ve never picked up that gun. I would’ve run and taken my chances. Instead, I killed a man and changed my life for the worst. And just when I’ve seen what paradise can be like, I have to make a decision that could put me back in hell—alone, without Holland.

“Kase.” Tears well in her eyes. “I can’t lose you. Not after all we’ve been through.”

“Maybe . . .” My throat’s raw and my heart’s turning to dust. “Maybe it’s for the best. I can’t ask you to put yourself in more danger.”

“Then don’t.” She snuffles and her eyes are swimming with that optimism she’s never released because she’s fucking amazing. “I’m not willing to give up what we have.”

“You mean it?” I feel selfish asking, like I’m drowning, and I’m willing to sink us both on the life preserver she’s throwing me. If I leave, she’ll be alone, and there’s still the question of her safety. It’s a good enough excuse to justify staying by her side. Staying with her for a while longer.

“Our miracles have been messy and ugly, but we’re together. So yes, I mean it. I believe in us.” Her watery smile turns sheepish. “I might have the occasional panic attack though.”

“And I’ll be right there for you.”

She throws her arms around me, and I catch her and hug her to me. Sobs shake her body. “I’ve been trying not to cry for hours.”

“Let it all out.”

I hold her until the tremors subside, needing my own time to gather myself after the fear of losing her. She's on my lap, and after the emotional turmoil shredded my insides, my dick has decided it's time to be noticed. I shove all thoughts of stripping her down aside. The emotions she's releasing are staggering. She said she loved me, but the power of her breakdown sets in.

She cares for me. She would've been heartbroken. She would've missed me. No ultimatums. She would've left me behind with as little drama as possible, which only makes her more amazing.

Pulling back, she wipes her eyes. Her soft ass presses on my knees. "Sorry. I got wet spots all over your shirt."

"Black hides body fluids."

She half giggles, half sobs. "Too soon, Kase."

I rub her thighs. This suit she's wearing could just as well be a suit of armor, but it doesn't stop me from wanting to remove every piece.

"We've had a long day." I grip her under her ass and rise. She sinks into my chest like she belongs there, and she does. We're going to figure us out. I'll die trying, as long as she's safe.

In the bedroom, I lay her on the bed, but instead of taking my hands off her, I undo the clasp of her pants and tug them off. The moan she lets out nearly drives me to my knees.

"God, that feels good."

"Keep making sounds like that and you're not going to get dressed again for a long time."

She sits up to her elbows. "Promise?"

When my gaze tangles with hers, I pause, my hands spread on her thighs. She's asking for more than just sex. She wants a connection. She wants to know I'm serious.

She needs me as much as I need her.

I rip my shirt over my head and toss it to the floor. She scoots up the bed so I can crawl between her legs.

I could unbutton my jeans and shove them down far enough to sink into her wet heat, but I don't. I'm impatient, but I also want us both bare—as naked physically as I feel emotionally.

Giving in to my need, I tear her shirt open and earn another moan from her.

“Thank you. That thing is not made for this heat.”

I smile, but I'm focused on the plain black bra cupping her creamy breasts. If I do the caveman tear to that, I could hurt her.

“A front hook. Thank fuck.” The bra's gone in seconds and her giggles dissipate as I give her tits all my attention. My mouth's on them. My fingers. I can devour her.

She shoves her hands through my hair and arches into me. Pressure builds inside. I'm ready to explode but determined to take my time. My eyes fall shut. We weren't able to be noisy at her father's place. First, out of necessity, I couldn't get busted. And then out of respect—or embarrassment. It didn't matter. We were quiet.

I'm making it my mission to get her loud today.

Releasing her tits, I sit back on my heels. I still have my damn pants and shoes on, but I'll take care of those later. Right now, her underwear's in the way of paradise.

When I hook my fingers under the waistband, she says, “Rip them off.”

They're lacy black silk to match the bra, but they're also a mature style that isn't her. “As you wish.” I tear both sides at the hip and fling the scrap off the bed.

The sight of her sets a steady throb behind my zipper. My dick's miserable in its cage. I push down my pants and kick them off with my shoes. I plan to go down on her, to feast until she can't take it anymore and then push her a little further, but she holds her arms out to beckon me to her.

My erection is jutting out, demanding, but I spread myself on top of her and claim her mouth. I could come from the squeeze of our bodies on my shaft alone, but I won't. I'm going to be inside of her when I come. We're making a promise to each other.

I hitch my hips up to place myself at her entrance. She's already wet and ready, but I can't help but play a little while my hand's down there. I stroke through her slit and circle her clit.

The needy moans coming from her echo the lust pumping through my veins.

I've had her several times, but I have to claim her. I rise to my elbows and shove inside. Warm, wet heat surrounds me and I groan. "I want you to look at me when you come." Risking coming too quickly because she feels that damn good, I pull out and thrust. A gasp parts her lips, and ecstasy whips up my spine. "I want you to watch me take you so you know I'm not leaving. I'm not going anywhere." Another thrust. Another ragged moan.

Fuck, I'm not going to last long. I'll be all bravado seconds before I orgasm so hard I collapse on her.

I stare into her dark-blue eyes, my jaw clenched, afraid to move anything but my pistoning hips. She's tight around me, and she lifts her knees higher, opening herself. She won't need anything else from me to come. Her trust in me encompasses everything. We're both so attuned to each other, we need this so badly, and technique can go out the window. Rampant thrusting is all it's going to take.

We've fucked before. We've had sex pretending there'll never be anything more between us. We've been together after we've affirmed our love for each other, but I need this to be a promise. An act of my commitment.

She rolls her eyes as ripples travel through her body and right into me. She snaps her gaze back to mine. "Kase?"

"Yeah?"

“I love you.” And she comes hard, grabbing my face with both hands and rocking under me.

“Fuck, I love you.” My release hits just as hard and I kick my hips, riding out the peak with her. Together, like we have been from the fucking beginning.

I tip my forehead to hers. She cradles me to her, and we both fall still. Content to be together. To work at staying that way, one day at a time.

She turns her face into my neck. “My parents didn’t give up their lifestyles for me. I can’t tell you how much it means to me you’re willing to.”

I’ll always choose Holland. “We’re better together. And together, we’ll be better than our parents.”

She turns to capture my gaze. “No more killing.”

“None,” I promise, even if I have to die living up to it. I’m going to be that man for her.



I FACE THE RESTAURANT. The hacienda-style building taunts me. So familiar, yet the longer I stare at the place, the larger the resentment builds.

I could’ve loved this place. Memories crash into me. How I used to toddle behind Poppa. Working my ass off from middle school on busing tables and then in the kitchen. This place was my playground until it’d been my job. Then it became an obligation.

And the rest . . . We weren’t fixers. We were their tools. We were nothing but people who didn’t fit into the rest of society. Sick fucks who got paid to be heartless. Hard people like my parents who don’t know any other life—and don’t want to. And the rest of us who are stuck.

I don’t know what I’ll do with my life, but this is the start.

A silver flash in the corner catches my eye. A jolt of adrenaline hits my blood, but no. My ex doesn’t hang out in

this part of town. Too average. Too hardworking. She wants more out of life, and my middle-class parents in the well-lived-in neighborhood were not it.

Mama passes by the window and stands in the doorway. There are lines on her face that weren't there before. Is she having the same thoughts? Has she been second-guessing her desire to leave it all to me? It'd make our conversation easier.

I leave my car and head inside. The place only has a few customers. One couple I recognize from over the years. The woman's face crinkles when she sees me. I give them a wave.

"I need to talk to you and Poppa," I say to Mama, but she'd have guessed this by the timing. The afternoons are the best. I would've preferred waiting until the evening after the restaurant closes, but they both wake early to get started for the day, or they have a job afterward. There is no good time for this conversation—it just needs to be done.

Concern furrows her brow, but she ushers me in and follows me through the back. "Poppa's lying down, but he'll get up for this."

Alarm pulses through me, and I want to abort the mission. Poppa never naps. Never.

"The meds are kicking his ass," Mama says, sensing my alarm. "And he's extra irritated because of it."

I stop at the door to the apartment. I hate to bother Poppa when he's run down, but it makes our conversation more pertinent. "I should come back." I don't want to delay, but Poppa's health takes priority.

"He'll be extra upset if you treat him like he's soft." She cocks her head. "I hear him. He's up."

Poppa's shuffling around the kitchen, his permanent frown in place. He glances over and does a double take. "Something's wrong."

He's asking to keep the focus off him. He's a big man, but his shoulders are stooped and gray-and-black whiskers are sprinkled over his cheeks and chin. The stress he's been trying to hide from me and Mama can't be hidden.

Guilt chews at me. I'm resolved, but damn, I wish there was something I could do. "Yeah, actually, we need to talk."

"It's the girl," Mama says, exasperated, as she flops in a kitchen chair, the one she claimed was hers when Holland and I were over for supper.

"Yes, it's Holland."

Poppa's slippers scrape against the floor as he sits. He scrubs a hand over his face. "You told her. Couldn't you have explained Josef away?"

"She knew already." I slide out my chair and sit, the three of us, just like old times. When I was with Lucia, she insisted on going where I went. Then after the breakup, Mama kept pushing her on me so bad I avoided this place. It's weird being back, the three of us, and knowing this might be one of the last times.

"How?" Poppa asks, his brows lifted.

"That's her story," I say.

Mama's inhale is sharp. More guilt wells inside me. I've kept nothing from my parents other than my desire to leave the business.

"And no, she's not giving me an ultimatum. She'll just plain leave, and I don't want her to." I pause for a long, centering inhale. Mama opens her mouth, but I hold up a finger. Bold move for a kid who's gotten tasked with hours of dishes for less. But I'm not young anymore. I'm old enough to take control. "She's not enamored with this life. She wants no part of it, and truthfully . . . neither do I. I never did."

Another sharp gasp and I give Mama a regretful look. When I turn to Poppa, his brows are dropped low. He scratches the stubble along his jaw while staring at the top of the table. He has to have the grain patterns memorized.

"We have no one else, Kase," Mama says, her tone incredulous. "The business would crumble." She leans forward. "We'll be destroyed. The restaurant. Us. You know the people we've done deals with. You think they'll treat us differently than the people they sent us after?"

“You two are smarter than that,” I say.

Poppa snorts. “If we were smarter than that, we would’ve retired to a tropical island decades ago. Instead, we’ve been doing this for over forty years.” He lets out a noisy sigh.

“What about us?” Mama’s intense gaze digs through my skin and into my soul. “You go off with this girl, with this *designer*, and what? Frolic around the world while we have to tell our contracts that we’re out? We’ve protected you from the worst.”

My patience snaps. “You didn’t. No kid should have to kill before he can vote. I should’ve been the kid who was trying to figure out how to hide the beer he had with friends or sneaking a little bit of weed in my room. Instead, I was trying to figure out how to explain why I didn’t kill someone.” My pulse is hammering. Better late than never.

“We made sure they deserved it,” she says.

“That’s not my decision. It shouldn’t be yours. And it’s not. It’s the money doing the talking.” I glance at Poppa. He’s still scowling at the table. “Lucia was a mistake. I was lonely, but in the end, I never planned to marry. Definitely never wanted kids. The businesses you built that you’re so proud of would’ve died with me.” Silence blankets the kitchen. That’s the kicker for them. Not my happiness. Not how this job has shredded my soul. It’s their legacy. “So, if you want a chance to keep them going, you’ll have to find someone else.”

“Kase . . .” Mama’s mouth works. I’ve never seen her cry. I’ve seen her cut someone’s brake lines and spy on them until they crashed into a building. She’s put poison in drinks, in food, and even injected drugs until hearts have stopped. She’s never shed a tear. I don’t care how strong I tell myself someone is, that shit takes a toll. But it’s my admission that makes her eyes mist over.

“I’m not you, Mama,” I say, and Poppa still refuses to look at me. “I’m not you either, Poppa. I’m not saying I’m better. I’m just saying this isn’t for me. It never has been. And I know the danger. I do. I know what I’m asking. But I have resources you don’t.” Mama’s jaw hardens. “If you’re willing to get out

in a way that protects you and me and Holland, I'll help you. I'd prefer it. But no matter what, I'm done."

They need time, and maybe it's because I can't wait around to hear that they're done with me, I nod my head and walk out. To my new life.

CHAPTER 12



Holland

KASE FOLLOWED me into work today, but I don't mind. We're still cautious, and I don't know how much longer we'll have to be. I hope my problems died with Patrick, but only time will tell. Until then, I can stay busy enough.

"I've never seen you so deliriously happy," Sahara says in her bored tone, but she's sincere.

"Thanks. I am. He's a great guy." I worried he'd be listless and lost around the house. It's only been two days since he talked to his parents, but he's positive. They've been messaging. Dougal and Angela have found nothing about the person who ordered the hit on me. Since Father knew about the Donovans and what they do, it's possible Patrick did too. It's possible it's such a small world that he hired Josef to preemptively kill me so he wouldn't have to deal with his dad too.

Each hour that passes and we learn nothing, the knot between my shoulder blades loosens. My adrenaline's riding a wave to fashion week, and it's only a few days before we leave. Sahara has everything ready. Anna's packing equipment and fabric while Tanisha's finishing up the final few pieces after a couple of changes I decided on.

BommGirl is ready for its big fashion week debut. Pride soars through me. My little team pulled through some shitty times.

I go over to the mannequin Tanisha's working on. The bodyguard-chic look is almost done. She suggested switching the color up from a basic black or charcoal to a deep red. Like blood. Perfect.

I stand next to her while she's pinning a ruffle at the collar. "The big finale. I'm so excited."

"I have to say you outdid yourself with this," she says as she shakes out the collar. We both stand back and look the outfit over with a critical eye. "I think it'll be the first to go viral. Braid the model's hair in a crown to add more edge and you're golden."

It's important for me to love my work and have faith in it, but when my employees are as excited and confident, it means a lot.

"So, is Mr. Eagle Eye over there the inspiration?" she asks.

I glance at Kase. He's scrolling through his phone, but I doubt he's looking at anything important. After our first visit, he listed all the improvements I could make beyond the security cameras by the back door. I would go through them when we get back from New York. "He's definitely a boost for my muse."

She snorts. "He's a boost for something."

I chuckle and walk toward my office. I have a few things to pack.

Kase tucks his phone away and follows me. "Need help?" He leans close and nuzzles my neck. "I tried to help pack a few boxes, but Anna scares me."

I bark out a laugh. "She's militant about how the garments are folded and what they're packed with. I'm just going to do a final sweep through my office and then I'll load up the extra fabric we're going to bring."

Sahara gave me a list of what she called the "apocalypse supplies." We'll be ready for rips, tears, frays, and even missing models.

I push my fingers to my temples. The pressure in my head is welcome, but the circumstances are overwhelming—in a good way. “I can’t believe we fly out in two days. I can’t believe this is really happening.”

“You did it.” His pride is humbling. I’ve seen what he can do, and he’s proud of me.

I step into his arms. “We did it. I don’t know where I’d be without you.”

“You’ve got me.” He drops a kiss into my hair. “But if you keep hugging me like that, I might have to shut the door and stuff some tulle into your mouth while I take you over your desk.”

Electricity zings through my body. “Mm, I would take you up on that, but everyone’s working hard.” I pull away and smile at him. “I can’t wait. It means a lot that you’ll be there.”

“I wouldn’t miss it.”

Giddy, I finish packing what I need in my office. Fashion week is going to be a whirlwind, and I’ll have the bodyguard I love with me.



A FAINT BUZZING rouses me from a cozy sleep. I frown and burrow deeper into the hard body next to me. The sound stops.

And starts again. Kase carefully untangles himself from me and sits up. “Do you know where you put your phone?”

I shake my head and roll to the end of the bed. My body is deliciously sore, and I’m still loopy from the few rounds of incredible sex we had. I’ve never felt so cherished or been so close to someone.

“By the couch?” he asks.

Oh, the phone. “Um . . . maybe?”

The bed shifts as he gets up. The house is dark, with only the light posts creating shadows around the house, but he

doesn't turn on any lights. Isn't it close to morning?

The buzzing continues and I sit up, squinting at the windows. I worked until midnight, Kase kneaded all the tension out of my body with a couple of orgasms, and then I passed out. But we must've been asleep for only a couple of hours.

Kase rushes back in, my phone held out, the screen lit up. "It's Sahara."

I frown. Not only is Sahara calling, but I have several missed notifications from the security company that wired BommGirl. My heart claws into my throat when I answer. "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

"It's on fire." Panic clogs Sahara's voice.

"What's on fire?" My alarm is growing. It can't be good.

"The building, your office, our stock. I'm on my way, but dammit, Holland, even if it's still standing, the smoke is going to destroy everything."

. . . even if it's still standing . . .

I scramble out of bed. Kase is stepping into his jeans. I spin in a circle looking for something decent to wear to find out what the hell's going on with my business. "I'll be right there."

I toss the phone on the bed, not bothering to hang up, hoping Sahara has the wherewithal to disconnect for me. "Fire." I dive into the shorts and shirt I discarded before crawling into bed with Kase.

"I heard." Kase's tone is grim, his expression granite. He flips on the light, and I have an easier time seeing. I slide the shorts up my legs and grab a bra. He's already fully dressed in jeans and a T-shirt and is stepping into his boots.

"How bad do you think it is?" I ask, wanting him to give it to me straight but also lie to me.

He gives his head a quick shake and goes out to grab the keys. I snatch my tote bag and rush into the night after him.

I'm trying to tell myself it's nothing. Sahara hadn't seen the building for herself yet and maybe she misunderstood. BommGirl isn't on fire. Then I remember the missed messages. I bring up my phone to listen to voice mail on speaker, but it's only my security company telling me to call them back. It's an urgent matter.

My gulp is audible. Kase reaches for my hand, expertly maneuvering the turns one-handed.

I clutch his fingers. Trying to tell myself it's nothing but a misunderstanding, an overreaction at worst, isn't working. "What are the odds that this happens days before I have to leave for fashion week?"

He turns to me, the streetlights shining off his hair. We both know it. This is bad. Fires destroy, and that's what the flames are doing while I'm helpless. That's what they're meant to do.

Memories of Josef storming my bedroom assault me. "If my business gets burned down, that means someone's still after me."

His profile is grim. "Let's see what the authorities have to say."

I nod, not feeling any confidence I'm going to get good news. "Maybe the fire started in the restaurant. Or the Laundromat?" MacDonald said he'd burn my place to the ground, but he's gone.

"It's possible." But his tone says it's unlikely. He doesn't believe in coincidences either.

"God, Kase. What if . . . What if everything I've worked for . . ." Is nothing. I've been gunning for New York Fashion Week for years. I don't have my freedom on the line, but I still have employees counting on me. I have the urge not to fail. We've been working like our lives are at stake for days. Losing fashion week would be like training for a marathon and then watching all the runners start on TV while I'm couch-bound. Only it wouldn't just be me. It'd be Sahara, Tanisha,

Anna, the contractors we'd hired, the models—so many people. Out of money and recognition.

I want to bury my head in my hands, but Kase turns and it's there. Smoke rises in the air from blocks away. As we get closer, the orange glow becomes visible. Even if the fire originated in another business, it's encompassed mine.

"Goddammit," leaves my mouth on a moan. A shudder racks my body. "I've lost everything."

He pulls into a parking spot a block away. We can't get closer. The police have cordoned off the street in front of my company, and two fire trucks are putting the flames out of their gleeful misery. Red and yellow lights strobe from the vehicles. Police officers are talking to firemen in their bulky gear while others are running the hoses.

"Let's go talk to them." Kase gets out, and I watch him walk around the front of the vehicle. Fear keeps me in my seat. When he opens the door, I eye his hand like it's a serpent. He lifts a brow.

"It's the police." After all we've been through, I can't imagine walking up to someone in uniform. My sins crowd on my tongue, ready to spill out at some flinty-eyed look. What if their eyes ask what I did to deserve this? I have so many answers.

"This is your work. They're going to ask standard questions." He leans farther in. "You won't get information if you don't talk to them." He sticks his fingers under my jaw. "You have nothing to be worried about."

My nod is shaky, but I get out. He keeps an arm around me as he leads me toward the officers farthest away from the scene. Each step I take is on wobbly legs. Any guilt in my expression is going to be passed off as anxiety, but then I look at the smoking black hole in the line of buildings.

"It's gone." I didn't mean to speak out loud, but my words catch the officer's attention. My gaze hooks on his, and I want him to tell me I'm in the wrong place. That my business that

was standing a few hours ago isn't gone and I'm in the wrong place.

"I'm Holland Gray. Owner of BommGirl." I gesture to the smoldering pit and let my arm fall helplessly. The Laundromat and restaurant have both taken a hit. Observations that dent my heart for what they're going to go through but also help me feel a little less alone.

The regret that passes through the older officer's face tells me everything. I was right. This is no dream. I've lost it all.

CHAPTER 13



Holland

MY FACE IS BURIED in my hands. The stench of smoke lingers in my nostrils even though I showered and changed at London and Jacobi's place. Every other time I've been here the same time Kase is, we've broken off with our friends—the guys around the island or in Jacobi's office and the girls at the firepit. But the entire group is gathered in the main area flanked by the wall of windows and French doors that lead to the outdoor area where I usually sit with the girls.

Kase rubs circles on my back. It's the afternoon, and we haven't slept. I've been on the phone with my employees. Sahara met us at the site of the fire, but after we got all the updates we could from the authorities, I sent her home to get some rest. Then I called Tanisha and Anna before shooting a message to the part-time workers, telling them work has been suspended until we can find another place and replace enough stock to start filling orders. We'll lose some clients but save who we can. The only other choice is to shut down, and I'm frantic to keep that scenario from happening.

Fashion week is gone like it was never meant to be. All the boxes we'd packed. The looks. Accessories. Gone. Nothing but ideas, sketches, and stats backed up in the cloud. There's no rescuing it.

"What a mess," I say for the hundredth time. I feel foolish for thinking I'd actually make it to NYC. There's blood on my

hands. Is this my penance?

“I wish I could sew so I could help you,” London says.

I shake my head, keeping it placed firmly in my clammy hands. The image of the blistering building streams through my mind on repeat. “It wouldn’t help. There’s nothing to sew. No fabric left to cut. All my patterns gone. I have my laptop, but I’d need to replace everyone’s computers so they can access our accounts to get orders and patterns.” I close my eyes and let the air in my lungs leak out. “And we need a place to do that first.”

I can’t see Penni’s face, but she wrings her hands as she speaks. “I can see what we can rearrange in the building the studio is in.”

“No.” I appreciate her offer, but I can’t infringe on her dance studio. She almost lost everything to have the freedom she does. I know she and Cannon would suspend classes for however long I need, but I can’t break a bunch of kids’ hearts. “I’ll see what insurance has to say and look for a place since it may be a while until I can find a permanent spot. If I can afford it.” I press my lips together. I shouldn’t have said the last part. It’s not their problem.

“You can afford it with investors,” London replies, and Kase stops rubbing my back.

Her offer’s enough to rip my head out of my hands. “What?”

The four of them are staring at me. London’s perched next to Jacobi on the couch. Cannon’s next to him with Penni on his lap. Kase and I are on a love seat across from them.

“An investor,” London repeats. “You said your dad helped provide the capital to start the company, and you thought fashion week would propel you to being an independent, private company.”

“I can be an investor too,” Penni offers. “I have more life insurance money left and don’t you dare think about declining because you feel bad. I’m determined to use that money to benefit others, not me.”

The life insurance was from Penni's ex-husband, and she's been putting it to use for the dance studio, dance scholarships, and any other philanthropic pursuits she's interested in. She'll never use a dime to improve her personal life. She doesn't need atonement, but I can sympathize.

"Same," Cannon says, and Kase's hand flattens and lowers to the small of my back.

"I have more than enough to invest," Jacobi adds. "How much do you need?"

"You guys. I can't take your money." I look at Kase, but his steady gaze is on his friends. He's leaving it up to me. It's my company.

But he's a part of my life. Before Kase, there was work. It was my passion. Now Kase is a priority, and I depend on his insight. He knows me so well, and he knows how much this means. I put my hand on his strong thigh.

He finally meets my gaze and his eyes are saying, "It's up to you."

I barely shake my head, and he lifts a brow. The arch of a dark brow is telling me that this isn't just about me. It's about my employees. I could keep my doors open with nothing but a hitch in my time line. I'd have investors, and I could participate in more fashion weeks around the world. My building might've burned, but I haven't burned my bridges with New York Fashion Week. Because with investor money, I can afford to lose those deposits and even fulfill contracts to stay in the good graces of those I wanted to work with. Insurance money only goes so far.

"You aren't taking our money," London says gently. "I'm investing it because I believe in you and I believe in BommGirl."

The other three nod. Their faith is overwhelming.

"Honestly, Holland," Jacobi says. "I don't care if I don't see a dime back. I'm only investing because you won't take an outright handout."

He was right. Pride was a self-destructive obstacle. I don't care how much excess Jacobi has, he's worked hard for it and it's not my money.

"I have plenty to invest," Kase says, and my eyes widen.

"Really?" But his gaze is nothing but solemn. I look at each of my friends. The same expression. Determination. A little sympathy, but not enough to prompt them to hand over millions. This isn't a pity party. This is a meeting. An investor meeting.

But it's too good to be true. All of the positive times in my life have been punctuated by loss and sadness. Witnessing the true identity of my father. Getting cast out by him. Meeting awesome friends in school and then Gloria ditching me. Going to college with my future ahead of me and losing my grandparents while being contracted to marry a guy I didn't like. Landing fashion week and then killing Josef. Getting free of the marriage contract and then the fire.

"Going into business with friends isn't a good idea." My words sound empty, but the advice I've heard can't be ignored.

"Only if we care that we lose money," Penni answers. "I don't care. The life insurance policy was only to make Roman look less suspicious when he had me murdered and collected on mine."

Cannon tightens his hold on Penni like the memory makes him afraid for her life all over again. "Mine was from military contracts I hated but took because I had nothing better to do. It's not dirty money, but the work was nothing but a way to pass time and avoid my life. Besides, word on the street is my future wife is rich."

Penni giggles. I don't know when Penni will be ready to remarry, but Cannon's the only one for her.

"A lot of mine's dirty money," Jacobi announces, and a laugh sputters out of me. London grins. Her husband has done plenty of illegal hacking jobs before her. "Not all of it, but I won't invest the good stuff if that makes you feel better." His dark eyes twinkle.

London rolls her eyes, but she's grinning and cuddling into Jacobi. She might not want him to break the law anymore, but she finds it sexy when he does. Of course, she finds everything about him sexy. "Mine's not dirty money." She frowns and her gaze hooks on Jacobi's. She winces. "Okay, it is kinda. Which is why I'm trying to invest in more start-ups. Give people a hand up so they don't get taken advantage of."

Like London's father had done to Jacobi's parents. Her natural beauty line was his parents' brainchild.

"And you know where I got what's in my savings," Kase says quietly. "I'd like to invest too."

My throat grows thick, and the backs of my eyes burn. My friends are so generous. They want to wash the money they have by giving it a better purpose than how they earned it. But I'm not better. In fact, I'm worse. "I'm not a good option. My hands are dirty."

Jacobi rolls a heavy shoulder. "I don't care. You're not the only one in this room with a guilty conscience."

"We're all trying to be better than the worst people out there," Cannon says. "Killing in self-defense doesn't make a person bad. It just gives you doubts and nightmares."

I get it. I do. And it's not just me riding on this decision. My employees left other jobs because they trusted me. Because I lived up to my word. I treated them better and paid them more. I can't just quit on them because I have those doubts and nightmares Cannon mentioned. "Okay."

As soon as I agree, excitement swells inside me until I want to dance around. There was no way I was dancing around two professionals, but regardless. I can keep my doors open. I can pay people who are depending on me. And I can grow a company that will make me proud—of myself.

London claps, a grin lighting her face. "So, it's brainstorming time. We have the money. You need a space to work. You need supplies. You need—"

"Someone's still after her." Kase's statement is like a silent grenade, and the fear and anxiety pile back on my shoulders.

Will this ever end?

London sobers, and she looks around at the guys. “You need to do your thing.”

I shake my head, but they all shoot me the same quelling look. I hunch my shoulders. They’re right. I can’t accept their help, get everything lined up, and then put it all at risk. I haven’t heard if the fire was a result of arson, but I feel it. A dark cloud looms over me, waiting for me to be unsuspecting like I was in my bedroom that night or happy like I was yesterday.

“Let me talk to my parents first.” Kase’s tone is grave, making the air in the room heavy. “The hit on Holland was inputted into their system. The fire happened after I told them I no longer wanted to be part of the business.”

I don’t know a lot about his parents, but they’re better than Josef. They’re more skilled than a fire. If they wanted me gone, I’d be dead or missing. And I think they really care about Kase, and since he loves me, they won’t hurt me. They might not like me, but they won’t hurt me. I’m sure of it, and I hope it’s not my undoing.

“You think they’re behind it?” Jacobi asks.

Kase shrugs. There has to be a knot of emotions inside of him. I have a giant jumble of nerves in my stomach. If his parents tried to kill me and then destroyed my business, he’d be devastated. But he’s calm. Calculated. “I don’t know what’s in it for them. They know I’d quit anyway, and they have to know if something happened to Holland because of them, I’d be done. With it all. Including them.”

It’s my turn to rub his back. A small gesture, but I can’t let him sink alone in his thoughts. We’re all here for each other, but we’re not the ones who might lose family.

“How about this?” Cannon asks. “The girls can brainstorm the business aspect. Jacobi starts doing his thing. I’ll find out what I can about the fire.” He gives me a pointed look. “Things they won’t tell you if they suspect you were after an insurance payout.”

“That’s awful. I’d never do that.” Throwing away all that work would be spitting in the face of every employee, not just myself.

He nods. “And Kase will talk with his parents.”

Kase looks at me. Determination is centered in his dark eyes. His hand is still splayed on my back. His tension runs into me, and instead of amplifying the emotion, I take a few calming breaths to dissipate it.

“Sounds like we have a plan,” I say as a way of confirmation.



Kase

MAMA OPENS THE DOOR. She knows it’s me, but her dark brows are still lifted like I surprised her. “Kase. I didn’t think you’d be back so soon.”

“Why, Mama?” I hang on her words. I’m looking for any indication she may have tried to hurt Holland. An indication that she’s been two steps ahead of me for the last two months. Ice threatens to replace my heart, leaving a frigid cavity regarding my family if they tampered with my happiness. And that’s what Holland’s safety and well-being is. My happiness.

I’ve been struggling to think of a way out that’d protect us all. I can’t lose my parents to themselves after all this.

She draws herself up to her short height. All five foot two of her. A killer, but crafty. Clever. Very few of her victims knew her face before they died, their demises written off as accidents. She was proud of her skill. I was proud of her. Until I wasn’t.

She stares down her nose at me even though I tower over her. “Do you think you’re only important to us because of what you can do for us? You’re still my son, Kase.”

I blink, not expecting the shift in focus. She's not surprised I'm here to talk to her because she's after Holland. She's surprised I might think they want nothing to do with me after I quit.

“Mama?”

A line of confusion crosses her brow, and I notice how tired she is. She's been trying to keep too many plates in the air. They're not dishes that'll just shatter if they're dropped. They'll destroy her. Poppa. Perhaps even me.

She waves me in. I step into the house, and I'm surrounded by the savory smells leaking in from the restaurant on the other side of the wall. The faint clang of pans filters in. Home. The knot between my shoulders loosens. I'm not going to hear the answers I've been dreading.

Once the door shuts, she presses her hands on either side of my shoulders. “You're our son, Kase. After what happened when you were a kid, we thought you were a natural. That our line of work was best for you. And it was convenient. So damn convenient while your grandfather was still alive. So as you got older and I could see the toll it took on you, I lied to myself.”

“Same with me,” Poppa says, shuffling into the room, looking like he did the other day.

Poppa never admits to being wrong. And he's never home during the day. Worry sets in.

“What are you doing home?” I glance at the wall bordering the restaurant he's worked in every day of his life.

“More new meds. I'm tired, goddammit.” He scrubs a hand over the black-and-gray stubble dusting his jaw. “So damn tired of it all.”

Mama's breath hitches, and she's wringing her hands. “We're leaving, Kase.”

Her words don't register. “What do you mean?”

“The country.” She drops her voice despite this apartment being the safest place to spill secrets. “We're having someone

make us the documents. We'll find someone to handle the sale of the restaurant." She squeezes my biceps. "You should come with us. It won't be safe for you."

They're leaving? Just like that? I've been fraught with worry, but it's apparently only been one-sided. "I can't. My life is here. Holland's life is here."

Mama shoots Poppa an exasperated look. He shrugs. "I told you he'd be stubborn."

"It's not stubbornness." I make a disgusted noise. Betrayal scrapes me raw. "You're leaving knowing what might be left behind for me to deal with?"

"We always used code names."

"Not at the restaurant." I pace the kitchen. Is this how she's trying to control me? Is it a bluff, or are they really leaving? "It'll be easy enough to deduce that I took contracts." A little asking around and someone would find out I had no employment history. I hadn't even worked at the restaurant since I was a teen.

"You said you had friends to help you," Mama points out. "So have them help you."

"This is to get back at me. Because I chose Holland over this bullshit." I spin to face them.

"Kase, don't talk to your mother like that."

I'm about to snap at him, but the words fizzle on my tongue. The bags under Poppa's eyes are puffy and dark. His shoulders are hanging, and there's strain lining his face. Because of his condition or leaving?

Mama isn't faring much better. She's usually vibrating with energy, but today she sags like she's ready to drop out of her chair. The truth sinks in. They're tired. They need to get out of the country, and it's taking all their resources.

A more disturbing realization sinks into my gut like a ball of razors. They're going to draw the trouble to them. They're going to sacrifice themselves for me. "So help me, if you're doing this to get yourselves killed, thinking the people who

hired you will go after you instead, I'm going to write a contract especially for you."

The lines in Poppa's face deepen. He catches Mama's eyes. "I told you he'd figure it out."

They would've never admitted how worried they are. I have to make sure they don't need to be. I have friends who can help with this, and I don't know what fucking tidal wave will head in our direction, but I'll handle it and protect Holland from getting soaked in the process.

Mama rests her head in her hands. "Consider it a wedding gift since we won't be able to attend."

"No. No fucking way." I can't get what I want at the cost of two people I love. I know Holland would feel the same. She understands complicated familial relationships.

"Yes, Kase. Call your friends. Tell them what you need to, but know that when your dad and I leave, we're leaving a trail."

"Don't discount me yet," Poppa growls. "I've still got it, and your mama and I are putting all our resources and our combined years of this business to use. Let us do this for you." The last part wasn't a request.

"When?" I ask. Holland's making plans to rebuild her company in a new facility. I can't have her go through everything only to ask her to pull up stakes and do everything she feared having to do when we first had this discussion.

"Soon," Mama says.

There's that. I don't want to rush them, but I have to know what I'm facing.

Poppa grunts and clears his throat. He meets my gaze, looking steadier than I've seen him in a while. "I've gotta get on the best medicine regimen I can. Then when we get to where we're going, I don't have to start over from scratch. We're good with our decision, Kase." Poppa squares his shoulders, and I believe him—he still has it. "We'll go and live in peace until the devil comes for us."

“I’m not going to hell,” Mama says hotly. She stabs her chest with a finger. “I sent enough degenerates there to know I don’t deserve to go.” She lifts her chin and meets my gaze. “But you deserve happiness. This fire? We’ll look into it. Ask around to see if anyone knows anything about it. Holland Gray is a designer. She’s in the public enough to have upset people. We’ll find out who’s doing it.”

I cross to Mama and kiss the top of her head. “No. Plan your retirement. I’ll take care of my own issues.”

She tsks. “Kase, you were always the best of both of us.”

Not always. But I’m determined to be the best for Holland from now on. “I’ve gotta go.” There’s someone out there who wants to hurt Holland, and I have to find them.

I slap Poppa on his burly shoulder and turn to go, but Mama holds up a hand. “About Lucia . . . I’m sorry. I saw something of myself in her and thought she’d take to this way of life. She’s pretty, she’s smart, and she was crazy about you. I thought you were being stubborn—like your father.”

Poppa rises and swamps Mama when he puts his arms around her slim shoulders. “I was like you once. Chased by a woman.” He winks. “But I had no intention of actually getting away.”

She swats his abdomen. “Dougal. You were always naughty.” Her attention returns to me. “I’m still friendly with her, but I’ll make sure she understands. It’s over, and I support you and Holland.”

I hope that’s all it takes. “Holland wants what’s best for me. What’s right for me.”

Mama’s expression softens. “Then she’s right for you. I’m glad you could see it.”

Relieved by their acceptance and grateful for her apology and willingness to put Lucia firmly behind me, I leave. Holland and I were hoping to table much of these worries until after fashion week. I just hope when I talk to her, our plans together don’t go up in smoke like BommGirl.



Holland

“WHAT?” I can’t believe what Kase is telling me. They’re risking their lives for us? And maybe it’ll work? Neither option is a good one. Neither option is a guarantee. “They can’t.”

“They are.” He’s leaning against the kitchen counter. He’d gone over to make sure his mom didn’t torch my warehouse. At least some good news there. Even better, his parents support us and want to do what they can so Kase doesn’t live a life of killing. Do people have to die for them to be free?

I’m sick of death being the solution. Patrick and his father had to die so I could be released from the contract. Now Kase’s parents. When will it stop?

I perch on the kitchen table, my legs swinging. It’s been two days since the fire. Before Kase went to his parents, we learned that the fire was arson. A few sprinkles of gasoline with all my fabric and the original BommGirl building had flamed like a Roman candle. I’m in a mess that’s not of my making, and I want to forget it all and hide away in bed with the man I love.

He crosses to me. His solemn expression is heart-wrenching and he brushes a thumb under my lips. “I understand if you want to stop seeing me—”

Scowling, I grab his hand. “No one’s going anywhere. The bad people aren’t winning.”

His sadness doesn’t dissipate. “Holland, I can’t endanger you—”

I hop down, muscling him back. “I’m done with this conversation. I’m not Gloria—I’m not giving up when I don’t get what I want. You and I love each other. You have your experience, too, like your parents are relying on theirs. We’re

the good guys. We're going to come out on top, dammit." I fling my hand toward the living room that had been a sewing den and was now my office. "And we're going to look good doing it."

I plant my hands on my hips and let him accept my stance.

Disbelief plays over his face. A quiet chuckle leaves him. "I shouldn't be surprised by you anymore."

"No, you shouldn't."

"I fucking love you." He dips his head, and he backs me toward the table. My body's like an eternal flame around Kase—always lit and ready to rage.

"I love you too. Now hurry up and fuck me so I can call Father and tell him about the fire."

Kase pauses. "He probably already knows and he's going to want to check into it."

His tone is a warning, but I'd already considered the possibility. If Father knew, he was giving me space to come to him. "I'm counting on it. I'm done sitting around wondering what the fuckwit who's messing with me is going to do next."

"Me too. But right now, I know exactly what I'm going to do."

He swallows my grin with a smoldering kiss. I should be frantic, eaten up with despair. But with a guy like Kase cherishing me? We can handle anything.

CHAPTER 14



Holland

A FEW DAYS have passed since my friends also became my investors. I personally called all the contractors and models, explained the situation, got their information to comp them, and the devastation about missing fashion week is less staggering. Better, at least. My ultimate goal is success, and we're back on track.

I roll my neck and give my eyes and brain a break. My sewing table has temporarily become a desk. The AC's blowing on me, and I have a little Ella Fitzgerald streaming through my phone. It's been a long day. Fulfilling, but it's already dark. I spent the first part of it conference calling with Tanisha and Anna while Sahara made adjustments to fulfill orders and book another fashion show. I had my friends' encouragement to continue with the line I planned to debut at fashion week, but my employees supported me just as much.

We're moving ahead with the line, and today we nailed down patterns and colors.

I'd be thrilled—ecstatic, on cloud nine—if it wasn't for the dark fog following me around. My determination hasn't changed, but each day brings no answers.

I rise, done with work for a few moments. Kase is at the stove stirring a cheese sauce with a phone to his ear. He's got sweats on with a T-shirt, and I'm loving casual Kase as much

as deadly Kase. If only the constant tension wasn't rippling through his shoulders.

After a few minutes of his quiet rumble, I go into the kitchen and sit at the table.

“Burritos?” I ask. He's been making meals from his childhood, like he has to slowly say goodbye to almost everything he knew growing up.

“Yep. It's the same recipe Poppa made when you were over.”

I haven't seen his parents since that night. They might accept me more now than they did then, but I want them out of the country and safe before they pull the pin on their life in Pacoima. Anything less and Kase would be devastated. He's been on the phone with Jacobi and Cannon as much as with me, tracking the arson and making plans on top of plans for when shit goes down in the contract killer world.

I hate to ask the question, but it's the same after every call. One day, it won't be like this. “Any news?”

“Fine.” He gives me a knowing look. “Dead ends.”

One day that won't be his answer. “Nothing?”

He shakes his head. “The camera only caught a dark figure with a bulky tote bag.”

He's not talking about what the police have found but what he's gotten from Jacobi and Cannon. “Man? Woman?”

“Based on stature, probably a woman, but it's hard to say. I ruled Taylor Green out.” I wasn't worried about Monsieur Green. He's vindictive but not criminal, yet it was necessary to make sure it hadn't been him. “And that fashion critic.”

“Lorelei?”

“She was banging her married coworker the night of the fire.”

I cough out a laugh. “I'm not surprised.”

“You would be if you saw what else she's done.” He gives me a sly smile. “Don't worry—she'll have other things to

worry about instead of ripping you apart at your next show.”

“You didn’t.”

He lifts a shoulder. “I have nothing else to do.”

When I asked him a couple nights ago, he just said he was trying to figure out what he wanted to be when he grew up. Said with amusement but also a little frustration.

“What really calls to you?” I ask.

“Being between your legs.” He smirks, but it fades quickly. “Can’t make a living out of that.”

I get up and rub his arms. “You’ll figure it out. You’ve never gotten a choice, and now the world is your oyster, as they say.”

He takes the pan off the stove, sets it on a hot pad, and flicks the burner off. Then he grabs me by the hips. “You’ve heard what oysters can do?”

He’s lifting my skirt—I wear a lot of them these days. Easier access. I spread my legs so he can tug my underwear down. “You have to do more with oysters than hear the word for it to be an aphrodisiac.”

“Nah, not me.” He descends on my mouth, and I greedily return his kiss.

He’s done this before. When we talk about him, he turns to sex. I’ll let him get away with it for a little while yet.

He strokes my tongue with his and his fingers delve into my underwear. Just as the tip of his thumb flits across my clit, his phone buzzes. The sound is close. It must be on the table. He pauses, then continues the kiss. I grip the front of his shirt.

Another buzz. We break the kiss and look over. His phone is facedown on the surface by my wide-open thighs.

“You can see what it is.”

He circles his thumb and shivers course down my spine. “I’ve got better things to do.”

Another buzz. Are three people messaging him? Tension steals across my body as I remember my phone call the night BommGirl burned down. “See what’s going on.”

His brown eyes search mine. He places a wet kiss on my mouth and then backs up. His erection pushes at the front of his sweats and annoyance lines his expression. “I’m sure it’s nothing.” He snatches his phone up and frowns.

“What?”

He tilts the screen toward me. **Come to the restaurant. I want to see you and Holland before we go.** His brow furrows, but there’s nothing but a number.

“Your parents?” I ask. I had hoped for a longer period of stasis before they left the country.

“It’s from one of the burner phones they use.”

I sit up and tug my underwear back into place. “Then we need to go.”

“I didn’t think they were leaving this soon. Poppa has one more doctor’s appointment next week. They were going to fill a few months of meds before they took off.”

“Something happened?”

“Maybe. You don’t have to go if you’re not comfortable.” His mouth stays in a troubled line. Is he worried what their news is or about leaving me alone?

This might be the last time he gets to visit with them in person—the last time before . . . I can’t even think about death and violence right now, but I want to support him. “No, I’ll go.”

“All right.” He shuts the oven off. “All this can wait. The thing about my parents’ recipe is that it’s still good lukewarm. Ready to meet my parents again?”

No. But I will. For Kase.



Kase

SOMETHING about the message isn't making sense, and I can't put my finger on it. It's common for my parents to use burner phones. Unusual outside of work, and I'm not taking jobs like that anymore. Maybe they disconnected their lines already.

I park a block away from the restaurant like normal. The place is dark, but it's after ten. We get out and cross the quiet street. I keep watch all around us, putting my hand on Holland's back until I have to open the front door. I want to stay away from the alley. They might be working with clients, and I'd rather keep my distance.

Faint security lights glow from the kitchen area, but the place is silent other than the whirring of the dishwasher. I lead Holland through the place, watching the shadows in case Poppa steps out of them again like the last time Holland was here. A clatter from the rear of the restaurant stops me.

"Mama?" I call. I pull out my phone and text her to let her know we're here, but I use the number she's been using, not the one from tonight, in case they're still functional. Maybe I should've done it sooner, but I have no reason to worry. Just my gut tightening, telling me there's more here than I know.

There's no answer. Holland gazes up at me, her eyes luminous. "Is everything okay?"

"I'm going to check out the kitchen and make sure nothing's happened to Poppa." He's been having side effects. What if he's fallen or straight up passed out? "Wait here." I take a step and glance at the wall of windows. It's dark in the restaurant, but I don't want to spook Holland. "Never mind. But stay behind me."

I hold my arm back like a traffic gate, but it's not like she's trying to pass.

I curve around the counter and behind the drinks station. Everything's dark like it normally is after closing. "Poppa?"

Still no answer. My phone hasn't buzzed with a response from Mama. I lead Holland through the entrance to the kitchen. The stainless steel gleams with the dull security light, but the office light is on in the back.

My stomach clenches as the memory of the night when I was fifteen bombards my brain. Something was off that night, just like now. I'm about to reach for a butcher knife from the block on the counter we're passing when footsteps sound from the office. A shadow falls across the floor. Petite. Female.

I open my mouth to greet Mama and freeze. The person turning the corner with a dull black gun pointed toward us isn't my mom.

"Lucia."

She's dressed in a long-sleeved black shirt and black cargo pants, unlike the leggings and short shorts she usually wears. Her look is exactly like the figure sneaking into BommGirl to light it on fire. Same stature, same stealthy walk.

How didn't I recognize her?

All the pieces click into place. Shame hits me hard. I never would've connected Lucia to Holland. Lucia was jealous when I spent time with my friends, and I'd told her about London, Penni, and Holland. I had nothing to hide from her when London and Jacobi married. And when Penni and Cannon paired off. I hid my infatuation with Holland—it took me months to acknowledge it, but Lucia's smart. I'm not around a lot of people, and I have a tiny social network. She targeted Holland by the process of deduction. But there are still so many questions, along with the descending realization that all of Holland's problems are because of me. *Fuck.*

"How'd you do it?" I ask, keeping myself in front of Holland. Her hands press into my back, and her fear fills the small space between us.

Lucia's lips curl. "You thought you were so good at hiding everything. But I figured it out. The money in your account when you didn't work, and your parents own this dump." She

waves the gun around, much too comfortable with the weapon for my taste. Too disrespectful.

Holland fists her hands in my shirt, but Lucia continues like she needs to vent. “And the secrets. I got so tired of you thinking you were getting one over on me.”

“I didn’t want to drag anyone into this life.”

Rage contorts her face. “What about that bitch behind you?” she snarls.

Holland’s grip tightens, but I keep my gaze on Lucia. She lured us here, and it wasn’t to talk. “I didn’t do a thing with her while we were together. I saw the order on her for Josef.”

She makes a disgusted sound. “He insisted on using that stupid program.” She switches to a mimicking tone. “‘To hide the money trail.’ I had a plan, but all of you kept underestimating me.”

To a detrimental extent. I did the same with Patrick, and he almost killed us. And Lucia’s proven unpredictable. I’ve fucked it all up from the beginning, and Holland’s going to pay. “You’re right, I did underestimate you.”

“In *everything*.” Her volume rises. “I loved you, Kase. I did it all for you, for us. To prove that I can be a part of this life. I found your stash. I overheard your parents talking. I learned what they do—and your mom wanted me to be a part of it. She was dropping hints, and I knew she was testing me. I should’ve told you I knew.” Tears glitter in her eyes, and she swallows hard. “I dealt with your realtor so your house wouldn’t sell. *I did that*. It was meant to be. That night your mom helped me set you up was supposed to be a surprise. And you ruined it.”

“Luc—”

“Don’t.” She heaves out a breath. “Don’t make excuses. No matter what I do, it drives you closer to her. The little fucking blonde with big tits. I thought you were different. Smarter.”

“It was over before I met Holland. Don’t take it out on her.” I back up a step, hoping Holland doesn’t bump against

me. She scuttles backward. The shittiest night of my life is going to benefit me if I can make it work.

The light's on Lucia, and an unholy rage burns in her expression. She waves the tip of the gun. "Get out from behind him, whore."

"No," I say before Holland does what my ex asks.

"You don't get a say. And you don't like guns, so I guess you're going to have to listen to me." Her smirk is smug, telling me how far she's willing to take tonight. Lucia's angry. She knows I'm never going back to her. So I must pay, and Holland will bear the cost with me.

I stall for time. I need to figure out something. The exit behind Lucia isn't an option. I need to get Holland back to the dining area where she can make a break for the street. I'll stall Lucia until Holland's safe. "When did you learn how to use one?"

"I took lessons. It was going to be a surprise. You don't like them, and I figured one of us should have the balls for it."

"Target practice is different from killing someone, Lucia." I used to love target practice. The recoil vibrating down my arm. The way it activated my muscles. The satisfying blast. But I resisted the temptation. My life made the lure too dangerous.

"You don't think I can do it." Her betrayed expression morphs into an arrogant smile. "I took care of your real estate agent. She's still alive, but . . ." She shrugs. "No one could tie me to Josef. No one could track the call I made to her rich daddy. I'm better than you. Besides"—her smirk deepens to a dark grin—"I'm not killing anyone. You'll be identified as that bitch's murderer. Then in a rage, you'll set fire to the restaurant and kill yourself. The fire will be a nice connection to that tactless business of hers. Full circle murder-suicide."

She was going to frame me for all of it. That didn't upset me. The thought she put into tonight disturbs me. I take another step back, angling to get closer to the long prep table in the middle of the floor.

“Get out from behind him.” Lucia bites off each word.

“No.” Another step. Holland’s grip loosens like she’s going to comply. “Don’t.”

Lucia adjusts her aim to the side and fires a shot. Her arms fly up with the force. The blast makes my ears ring, and I duck as the bullet ricochets around the kitchen, pinging against hanging pans until it stops with a dull thud in the ceiling.

Holland screams, my heart’s hammering, but I back her up a couple more feet, using my ass to push her. I flare an arm out beside me to keep Holland from running around me. Lucia needs me to be alive after she kills Holland and starts the fire, otherwise forensics will never match her story.

“Put your hands up!” Lucia yells. She’s got both hands on the gun. Shit. She’s getting rattled. She might boast about wanting to be a part of this life, but as far as I know, she hasn’t actually carried out any jobs. She’s put her all into going after Holland and baiting me.

I shake my head like I can’t hear her, thanks to the loud gunfire. Even a rookie contract killer would’ve used a silencer. She’s not as infallible as she thinks—and she hasn’t considered my parents in all this. She waited until they were out, to keep from dealing with them and failing, and that was the extent of her planning.

“Up!” Her shout is high-pitched. She’s losing it. She’s panicking. I’ve stalled her long enough to throw her calm out the window.

But I don’t have the same issue. And for all the fear roiling off Holland, neither does she. I keep shaking my head like my ears aren’t coming back online after that blast. I swipe at my hair with one hand like I’m batting a fly away from my ear.

Lucia waves the gun toward that side. Using the distraction, I reach under the prep table. The gun’s exactly where it’s been my entire life. The only other time I’ve touched it was that night when I was fifteen. Another thug, upset he didn’t get his way, wanting to ruin us.

I slide the cool metal out of the holster taped under the table. Reaching behind me with my other hand, I grab on to Holland's shirt and drag her to the side with me.

I whip the gun up to aim.

Lucia gasps, but I squeeze the trigger. My aim's shitty and I miss, but I only need to get Holland to safety. Lucia's arms jerk upward, and I barely register her gunfire until my breath whooshes out of me like I've been punched.

Agony ignites in my side, but I keep moving Holland toward the dining area of the restaurant. I pull the trigger again. I'm nowhere close to Lucia, but I'm trying not to double over from the pain.

She screams, the sounds mingling with Holland's shouts. Adrenaline funnels through my veins, but I stumble.

"You're hit." Holland wraps herself under my arm, becoming my support.

"You bastard!" Lucia advances. She's got her gun trained on us, but she can't shoot through the racks of pans between us. It won't be long before she has a clear path.

"Run!" I try shoving Holland away, but she's wedged into my side like she's sewn on.

"Not without you." She's trying to drag me. I don't risk glancing down, but I can feel the wetness spreading across my front. The bleeding's bad, but I have to make my next bullet count.

I aim as we hobble to the doorway to the dining room. It's going to be a showdown between me and Lucia—whoever can shoot first. Both of us might be successful.

Fuck, I never wanted to hurt anyone. Ever. But it's fitting I'm going down in this kitchen where my fate was sealed all those years ago.

I take another step, block out the fire burning through my gut, and concentrate on the sights. Lucia's doing the same. The tip of her gun clears the racks first. This is it. Her or me, but either way, Holland will have time to get free.

Lucia takes a step and her head jerks. She goes still for a heartbeat and confusion overwrites the hate. Holland's gasp behind me registers just as blood trickles down the side of Lucia's head.

My ex topples over, and her gun clatters to the floor. I flinch. Holland yelps but hugs me tighter, dragging me to the exit. I can't formulate what happened. Are we safe? Are we in more danger?

Then Mama steps into view, a sidearm hanging from her hand, regret etched into her features. The relief that hits me dulls the pain.

"I got the security notification someone was in the restaurant right before you sent your message," she says.

"Fuck me," is all I can say as I sink to my knees.

"He needs help," Holland calls as she helps me to the floor. I roll to my back, and she's over me, the fine strands of her hair hanging in her face. She's pressing her hands into my side, and I clench my teeth through a groan. I don't know what organ's been hit, but it's bad.

It's fate.

Poppa lurches into view and dumps a bundle of dish towels on top of me. "Pressure," he orders, his phone to his ear. Poppa's been responsible for so many 911 calls, but this might be the first time he's actually called them.

The absurdity makes me chuckle, but it ends up a groan.

Everything sinks in. Mama killed Lucia. Holland's safe. I might die, but now I'm worried about my parents. "You have to go."

Mama squats by my head. "We'll take care of it. You worry about surviving." She looks at Poppa. "We have to get him out of here."

I swallow hard. It's getting hard to keep my eyelids open. I gaze into Holland's frantic eyes. She's holding pressure on my abdomen. "Love you."

"Tell me that after you get out of this."

I smile—at least I try before I succumb to darkness.

EPILOGUE



*O*ne year later . . .

Holland

I WALK DOWN the runway and take a bow, grinning like it's Christmas morning and I woke up to a pony, a new tea set, and a castle. The crowd erupts in applause, and I wave and blow kisses. The pantsuit and leather cuffs I'm wearing are an extension of the show my crew and I just presented.

I'm up to four full-time employees. Tanisha is down to part time. The *Sayings by T* line got too popular, while the line I was supposed to present at fashion week last year exploded. I couldn't give either side of the business the attention it needed, and Tanisha finally launched on her own. But she missed creating more than T-shirts and stayed on.

Strutting back down the runway, I wave until I veer into the wings, where the chaos is at a steady hum. Models are changing and scurrying to their next show. Sahara's barking out orders to get all our items packed and ready and cleared out.

After the last year, I needed this. I needed it so badly. I wasn't sure I'd end up here. That life could get back to normal—or that my normal was actually more typical of a designer. No countdown above my head. Gloria's still in Reno,

gambling and making poor decisions. Father's still in his penthouse with work as his life.

Strong arms wrap around me. "Congrats, babe. You did it."

I never thought I'd get this. A man in my life I'm crazy about. A security consultant who's been providing advice on all my shows and businesses. A man making an honest living and a killer meat-and-potatoes burrito.

"Thanks, hon." I spin in Kase's arms and plant my mouth on his. His embrace tightens, but I pull back. "Don't you dare try to lift me."

He frowns, but there's playfulness dancing in his eyes. "But I've been cleared."

He wasn't the one sitting by a hospital bed for days, hoping the love of his life pulled through. So many bags of blood went into him, I worried that if he did make it, he wouldn't be the man I knew anymore. He'd be a compilation of everyone who'd donated blood and saved his life.

The image of him bleeding out on the street while the restaurant blazed behind us is permanently imprinted on my brain. His dad and I had hauled him out of the restaurant while his mom removed as much evidence as she could and torched the place.

The police wrote off the scene as a jealous lover, which was true. They linked Lucia to the fire at BommGirl, and thanks to swapping out the weapons, Lucia's death was ruled a suicide. I don't know how Angela got away with it—the angle, ballistics, the other gunshots—but I assumed she called in a few favors. Dougal mentioned something about "knowing a guy." I didn't care. I was grateful I wasn't alone through this.

They left the country as soon as Kase's recovery was certain. His rehab was long and I hovered, but it was the lost guy I'd come home to that worried me almost as much as the dying man in the hospital bed.

Then Father had called.

He was planning another casino and wanted Kase's advice about the weak points from when Kase had broken in, and

he'd paid him for a security consultation. Then he'd told a friend. A business was organically built. Kase liked protecting people rather than planning their demise.

“Give me another year,” I say, tucking myself into his side. “Then maybe I'll let you lift more than a casserole dish.”

London bounces up to us, tugging Jacobi behind her. “That was so fun. Thank you!” She's in leggings and a loose pink Natural Glow shirt, her six-month-pregnant belly sticking out like it's a deliberate fashion choice.

Not only was she one of my models for a line of maternity wear, but I used all Natural Glow makeup for the show. “Thanks for doing it. You and Penni are both naturals.”

Penni floats toward us. Her hand is folded into Cannon's, but a simple gold band is around her ring finger. “That was so fun.”

“I told you that you could dance down the runway.” I wasn't kidding. I made looks especially for my friends. They didn't just help me as models. I wanted London to have something she could and would actually wear to the office. And I wanted Penni to have a dress she'd wear on the town with Cannon—if they ever peeled themselves off each other long enough to go out.

We were all homebodies these days, loving our work and being loved by the men who claimed our hearts.

London rubs her tummy. “So? See you in two weeks in Cabo?”

The trip is an annual one for London and Jacobi. But they had to change the time line with the baby, and this time, we're all going. After the last year, we all need a break.

Cannon holds Penni's hand. “It's as good of a place as any for some baby-making.”

It feels good to laugh with my friends. To move on in our lives and leave our dramatic pasts behind. London and Jacobi are married with a kid on the way. Both are at the top of their industries. Penni and Cannon are now married and hoping to

start a family. They still dance competitively, but they're concentrating more on the studio.

Jacobi's eyes twinkle, mischievous, but they look more joyful than when I first met him. "Since you two are getting married and love will be in the air."

"I finally talked her into it," Kase says.

Grinning, I revel in Kase's embrace. His strong arms around me. He was so weak after the surgeries and the recovery. At night, I stroke the scar, letting the ridges slide under my fingertips while I remind myself he's still alive.

He proposed while half out of it on pain meds. I was terrified he'd spill his secrets, but instead, he begged me to marry him. I wanted him to concentrate on himself, but now we're both in a great place, together.

"One thing I can be sure of, it'll be the most private and secure wedding in history," I say, barely able to contain my excitement. My bag's already packed, and I'm leaving work behind for the month we're away.

"Except for a certain couple celebrating their fortieth anniversary." Kase smiles and each time I marvel over how easy it is. How unguarded his eyes are. We still have our moments. Times when I have to hold him tight and cry over what we've both been through until I fall asleep in his arms and wake up to his kiss. "They might stop by."

"Can't wait." I hadn't seen his parents since the days after he was shot, but we had bonded. They won't step foot in the country again, but the uproar over the restaurant gave them the freedom to retire as themselves. None of their old clients wanted anything to do with the publicity around them during the investigation.

Our biggest concern had been solved by what Lucia had done. If I didn't have to sit by Kase's hospital bed, I would've been grateful for it.

His parents were still hard to find, but they contacted us when they needed to.

London braces her hand on her back. “Ugh. I need to pee again. Meet you guys at the hotel?”

“Absolutely,” I say.

Cannon and Penni leave with them.

I scan the hustle and bustle behind the scenes. Sahara has everything in hand.

I let a sigh escape. “This was awesome.”

“That’s because you are.” Kase releases me and drops a kiss on my head. “I have to go check on everything and then we can go celebrate.”

“I have to—”

Another kiss, but straight on my mouth this time. “Everyone’s going to be doing the same thing. I’m taking you all out. All our investors are coming too.”

Our friends. Their faith and unwavering support contributed to BommGirl’s success. “They didn’t mention anything.”

His smirk is sexy enough to make me pant. “I know.”

Emotion swells in my chest until I think I’m going to combust into a spray of various pink and white hearts like a love-logged cartoon character. Kase hasn’t done much with the money he’s saved over his life, but when he uses it, it’s on other people.

“I love you, Kase Donovan.”

“I love you too.” He gives me a longer kiss. “You’re my future, BommGirl.”

HAVE you read about Jacobi and London? Jacobi’s deception, and ultimate downfall, begins in [Ruined](#).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marie Johnston writes paranormal and contemporary romance and has collected several awards in both genres. Before she was a writer, she was a microbiologist. Depending on the situation, she can be oddly unconcerned about germs or weirdly phobic. She's also a licensed medical technician and has worked as a public health microbiologist and as a lab tech in hospital and clinic labs. Marie's been a volunteer EMT, a college instructor, a security guard, a phlebotomist, a hotel clerk, and a coffee pourer in a bingo hall. All fodder for a writer!! She has four kids and even more cats.

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