

CORRUPTED

CORRUPTED AND CHERISHED DUET, BOOK 1

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LE PUBLISHING

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 Created with Vellum

I thought I only had a stalker until someone tried to kill me. Now I have two problems. I don't know who wants me dead. And what do I do with the body?

As an up-and-coming designer in L.A., I've gotten used to upsetting people. That's where my father's money comes in handy. I can afford to ignore all the right people and focus—because I have a strict time line. But when I anger the wrong person, someone comes after me who isn't interested in cutting out patterns. Which is what I was doing with sharp scissors when the attack happened. I know how to wield a pair of shears.

Another intruder barrels through the door, but he doesn't want to hurt me, and he won't tell me how he knows there was a hit out on me. He says I have to leave. With him. I've always stood my ground, but Kase Donovan is bigger, stronger, and more determined. He drags me away from everything I've worked for, and I hate to admit—I don't put up much resistance. Staying could cost me my life, and I have to make my career a success or that money Father gave me won't save me from another man who wants me.

Corrupted is the first book in the *Corrupted and Cherished* duet. Holland and Kase's story will continue in *Cherished*.

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CHAPTER 1



Holland

I RUN the Baronet satin under my hands, close my eyes, and inhale. “This is better than sex.”

Tanisha snorts softly on my right. She’s threading her sewing machine, readying her Bernina to coax the lilac fabric into a luxurious blouse with an ample cleavage-flashing effect that’ll cost more than some people’s weekly paycheck. Whether anyone will buy that shirt . . . I won’t know for at least two months.

But if I don’t sew the expensive shit and sell it for even more, then I won’t be doing much other than keeping the doors open.

“You clearly haven’t had the right sex,” Tanisha mutters as she pokes at the digital screen on her machine, likely to adjust stitch type and length.

A wall of fabric rolls is to our left. The cutting table lies in the middle of the space, with another table nearby piled with scraps. *Waste not, want not* is a mantra in a struggling business, and if we can make accessories to sell along with our clothing pieces, we’ll do it. Scarves, ties, and belts are easy enough to make with a higher profit margin if you do it right. And we have no choice but to do it right.

“No. I certainly haven’t.” I let out a wistful sigh. I haven’t had the wrong sex either, and certainly none that makes me

want to pass up fondling an expensive satin. Smooth to the touch. A massage for the skin. I grew up with bedding made from material like this. Should I make a pillowcase for myself with the extra? I'll do it tonight. "Why do you think I'm behind my machine so much?"

"Other than using it as an excuse to keep from weeding through the rotten seeds to find the good fish?"

I smile at her off-kilter saying. "We need that line on a shirt." I cross to my desk, find a notebook, and jot it down. "Five percent?" They're her sayings; she earns some of the profits.

"You know I don't care." Tanisha rises from her chair and peers at me over her reading glasses. "Eight."

"Deal." Father would frown at my lack of negotiation abilities with friends and coworkers. Tanisha's both. She used to be an independent contractor, but she can get benefits through BommGirl, my plus-sized clothing brand.

We both know she can walk out the door and get snatched up by one of the thousand struggling designers in L.A. Her *Sayings by T* shirts are some of my best sellers. My line is built on bombshell fashion for the curvy girl, and curvy girls like snarky shit too.

She stuffs her reading glasses into her dark curls and goes to the cutting table with the satin. I've left everything satin to her. My other part-time employees passed on working with the Baronet, and since the padding in my company's savings account isn't as plush as the fabric, I didn't force them and turned to my three full-time employees. Anna and Sahara gladly left the Baronet to Tanisha.

We've dubbed Tanisha "seamstress and sayings." Anna Quan is "finance and fabrics." Sahara Mack is "customer service and solitude." That means we leave her the hell alone so she can save all her spoons for BommGirl's clientele. Her energy is limited and we respect that. Profits have risen by ten percent since Sahara came on three months ago, and I would dig her a cave and pump coffee into it twenty-four seven if she asked me to.

If fashion week doesn't pan out the way I need it to, then it won't matter.

Sahara steps into the room, her dark-framed glasses perched on the end of her nose. She drapes an arm around a mannequin wearing a pair of casual shorts and a tie-in-the-middle shirt I've made for fashion week. I want to make the shorts in a color other than red to go with the cream top. I need to branch out, like with the T-shirt sayings. I have to appeal to my niche but also give them options.

And I have to appeal to a plethora of influencers who'll talk about me far and wide. I need celebrity more than money—but the money would help. Just in case . . .

“Monsieur Taylor Green is here,” Sahara says.

Her flat tone speaks for all of us. I shamelessly poached Sahara from Taylor, offering her flexible hours and a less bitchy attitude.

I also recruited Tanisha from him. Anna has been with me since I grew too large to make all the orders myself. But she came to me from one of Taylor's longtime friends in the industry.

The fashion world should be collaborative. Instead, it is cutthroat, brutal, and conscienceless at times. Foolishly, I thought I could leave all that behind. I could at least wield scissors against cotton-polyester blends and not other designers.

Though with Monsieur Green, it was tempting to pack my scissors when I talked to him. “You can hang out here while I deal with him.”

Sahara is already walking to the shag fabric sofa I ordered last year. She plops down and stares at the wall of neatly organized fabric like I often do when I'm drawing on my muse.

She hasn't approached me about ideas, but I wouldn't be surprised if one day she propped up a thousand designs for me to peruse and they were all exemplary. Perhaps she'll strike

out on her own. Outsell me within nine months and hire a Sahara of her own.

She may need to.

I have more looks for fashion week to make, but I have to deal with Taylor so Sahara doesn't have to. Smoothing my hands down the cherry-red skirt of my dress, I'm grateful to be representing my brand. The clothes. The big curls in my platinum-dyed hair. I like the pinup look, and it works well with my body. Guys like Taylor hate my brand, but the style is the flagship of my business. It's what I'm banking my future on.

To complete the look, I kick off the fluffy slippers with memory foam I wear at work.

I step into my black kitten heels. Retro from head to toe. I peek into one of the five round vintage mirrors hung in various places on the walls. I look like I just walked out of a 1940s catalog. I'd gravitated toward this look since I graduated college—so unlike how I grew up, yet with a nod to where I came from and what my dad's real business is . . .

I know full well successful people fake it until they make it, and some just keep on faking. It was a hard lesson to learn, and I'm okay pretending to be something I'm not.

I strut to the lobby, leaving all of the insecurities from my upbringing behind. Taylor's behind the desk Sahara usually sits in. A power move, but more annoying than anything. He's got his fingers steepled and glares at the blank monitor.

"Monsieur Green. How nice of you to stop by." My voice is a purr. Taylor detests me. He despises how well I've done in fashion. To him, I should've been nothing but a spoiled rich girl who didn't know how to work for a living without being on her knees, and he resents that Sahara prefers my workplace over his.

Taylor's sew shop resembles the crowded rooms often depicted by Hollywood. Rows of machines with dour-faced women concentrating on designs lacking style or signature. He

hires teenagers and undocumented workers just so he can pay them basement wages.

I have part-time seamstresses, and I don't care who they are or where they come from as long as they do quality work for the quality wages I pay. Several of Taylor's employees have left the full-time grind with him to work part-time for me—and still get paid more.

Taylor rises like a swan unfolding from the water, only his suit isn't white feathers. He's wearing a mint-green jacket with a pink pocket square and pants that could've been sewn onto his lean legs. He isn't much taller than me, but he stares down his long patrician nose. "Ms. Gray."

"What can I do for you?"

He probably wants to tell me to fold up shop. Leave L.A., go back to my Vegas penthouse, and quit pretending to be a savvy bombshell designer for women of all sizes.

He looks around my building and his mouth puckers as if he finds the surroundings distasteful. My place is smaller, sandwiched between an eatery run by the Gonzalezes, who refuse to let me pay full price, and a Laundromat. I installed a state-of-the-art ventilation system to keep the savory smells from one side and the perfumy fabric softener smells from the other from infiltrating my fabric.

If someone stands on the street and stares at my place, they'd think I'm a struggling wannabe. I've had moderate success. Just not the kind I need.

Money was never an issue, but I didn't burst into the fashion world with a bang. Father gave me funding—with strings attached. Those strings may just as well be garrotes.

"Why aren't you participating in L.A. Fashion Week?" Taylor asks in his cultured, nasally tone. He's a theater kid from Wisconsin. How many hours did he put into losing the Midwestern accent?

And why is he asking about fashion week? "It'll be too tight of a turnaround after New York, and I don't want to show the same pieces."

He inhales sharply. Isn't he going to New York? His lips purse so hard color leaches from the thin skin. "Lorelei from *Fits* magazine is going, and she mentioned that you weren't on the guest list."

"I doubt she'll miss me." Lorelei shreds my designs. Her scathing reviews of my style, the garments' construction, and even what models I choose are hurtful. The things she said after a show two years ago were the one and only time I drank an entire bottle of wine in one night—paired with a pizza. The combination left my stomach with poor memories for years. Her reviews had hindered me in a way she couldn't possibly understand.

"She's . . ." He lifts his chin, peering down at me. A brow cocks as if he can't help himself when he takes in my outfit. "A tough critic."

Ah. So that's why he's here. Without me to dismantle seam by seam, Lorelei will attack Taylor. We aren't networked. That's the only thing I respect about the older man. He goes his own way and so do I, which makes us easy targets for people like Lorelei to stomp into the ground on her rise to fashion critic fame.

"Regardless," he says. "I didn't expect you to back down from a challenge."

The snide hint in his tone scratches over my body. He's goading me.

"I define success as being in a place to choose the challenges I take on. New York Fashion Week has a bigger footprint and a larger reach. My time is better used there."

He sniffs. "Not many bombshells roam the streets of New York."

Taylor's svelte style is perfect for the crowd in New York that lives off caffeine and cigarettes instead of food. He makes nothing above a size four, and the branding choice has niched him into a wealthy crowd. A status symbol reminiscent of what my mother calls the *Ally McBeal* days—when women were pressured to be as thin as their eyebrows.

“You’d be surprised,” I murmur.

He sniffs again. “Until next time.” Spinning on his custom-designed shoes that I’d admire if he didn’t choose questionable manufacturing practices, he gracefully sweeps out of the shop.

Well. That could’ve gone worse.

I glance down at the desk. By Sahara’s keyboard is an envelope addressed to me. No return address and no postage. Frowning, I pick it up and go in the back to find her still on the sofa. Her eyes are closed, but she’s talking.

“And how can we make this right, my dear?” She’s using her customer service voice. It earns the company money. “Of course, lovely. We’ll have another one right out.” She opens her dark-brown eyes, pinning me in place. She’s telling me the call isn’t a big deal. If I wasn’t so secure, I wouldn’t have hired her. The fact that Taylor did makes me respect him a little more.

A little.

“Oh, you found the letter.” And she’s back to her disinterested tone. “I haven’t opened it yet. It didn’t even go through the postal service. It’s shady as hell. Hope it’s not anthrax,” she says, her tone bored.

The thought didn’t occur to me until she said it. I pause midrip. My curiosity has always gotten me into trouble. I finish tearing the envelope open. A simple sheet of white paper with block letters in black ink slides out.

I WANT YOU SCARED BEFORE YOU DIE.

Shock ripples through me. The sheet slips from my fingers. Sahara gathers it from the floor. I don’t see her get up.

“What the hell?” It’s the most animated she’s ever sounded.

Tanisha’s footsteps approach. “Oh, shit,” she breathes.

Sahara pinches the corner of the paper, letting the rest hang. “Should we call the police?”

God no. No police. Besides, it could be a joke.

From who? Work is my life. I have two other friends outside of here. London and Penni. Their husbands maybe count. And the other guy who hangs with Jacobi and Cannon.

Kase Donovan.

My already hammering heart speeds up as I picture Kase's dark, hooded gaze. The way I feel his stare burn into me, but I never catch him watching me. It doesn't matter. I can't do relationships, and now's not the time to think of Kase.

Who could've done this?

Sahara shrugs. "It'll probably get brushed off anyway."

I wish I could dismiss it. I have one avenue to double-check before I write it off as a stupid prank. Not a road I want to take, but I have to know. I gently tug the threatening note from Sahara's fingers and stuff it into the envelope. "I have some designs to finish and then I'm heading home. If you need me, I'll be in my office."

I walk through the staggered sewing machines and piles of fabric to the back hallway. I'm tempted to go to the eatery next door. They sell beer, and a cold drink sounds good right now.

I don't usually close my office door, but today is an exception. The door clicks shut and I lock it just in case. We're an informal work environment, but I can't risk one of them walking in on me.

I sit behind my cluttered desk and pull out my phone. I call my mother. When she answers, I ask, "Who'd you piss off now, Gloria?"



Kase

THE GIRLS' laughter drifts into Jacobi's house. I'm sitting around the island with him and Cannon. Three guys in the house, three ladies around the firepit. You'd think we were neatly paired off.

Two of the guys are paired with two of the ladies. Jacobi and London. Cannon and Penni. All deliriously fucking happy.

I barely recognize them half the time. Jacobi isn't hounded by hate like the brooding guy I met in college. And Cannon hasn't worn a wrinkled shirt or shorts since he hooked up with Penni. The hacker with a grudge and the shady private investigator are no longer.

Jacobi is a stand-up business guy and prime husband material. He went from trying to take over London's company to stealing her heart. His not-so-low-grade obsession with taking over her company landed him her instead of jail time.

And Cannon. Fucking Cannon. He was my ex-military friend who couch-surfed, making us all think he was homeless. He omitted that he was a talented ballet dancer before he joined the Army. Or that his bank account was doing just fine.

His obsession with Penni positioned him as her bodyguard until he landed her. Now he helps teach at her dance studio, and the kids fucking love him.

Then there's me. Holland is the single female of the three, and she acts like I don't exist. If she had to describe me for a picture, would she know where to start? My hair is black as night, but I doubt she knows that.

I take a drink of my Smart Water. Jacobi has a Coke, claiming he feels a headache coming on, and Cannon is sucking down one of the Basic Bitch Nutrition smoothies Penni's mom makes.

I just finished mine. Mango coconut. Damn delicious, but my mood sours the longer I'm here. It's not like I can be anything to Holland. Messing around with her might screw up the dynamics of the group, which left me on the outs anyway, thanks to my happily coupled friends.

Jacobi must sense my mood, but he misinterprets the direction. "Finally quit hearing from Lucia?"

"No. She was waiting in my house last week."

His eyes widen. "*In* your house?"

He should be surprised. I sure as hell was.

I break into places for a living. A job that's getting harder with cameras on doorbells, phones, and in every corner of every house. A job I need to fucking quit, but I'm in so far I don't know which end is up. It's all I can do to limit my work to simple blackmail, general roughing up, and maybe a few threats.

"In my house," I repeat. "She's getting good, so I'll probably have to move."

Cannon raises his brows. "Just like that?"

"Yep." It's easier to pull up stakes than talk sense into my ex. In her mind, we're still going strong as a couple. We've been broken up for over a year.

It started with drive-bys and constant messages. I changed my number. Then I found her on my front steps. But she's escalating.

I don't even want to work for the family business.

I'm good at vanishing. So that's my next move. I'll put my house up for sale. Jacobi will cover my digital tracks. And Lucia will eventually move on. She has to. I have no intentions of settling down with anyone. Lucia will be better off putting distance between me and her family.

Cannon lifts a shoulder. "Tell us when, and we'll help you move."

Jacobi nods. "I'm ready when you are."

Holland's delighted laugh drifts into the house. The clack of her heeled sandals precedes her entrance. Too bad my smoothie's gone. I could suck it down and give myself a headache. Right behind my eye so I wouldn't have to look at her.

Holland dresses like a pinup girl. Her hair is blonder than it's been, downright platinum. She's curled it around her face and slapped on fire-engine-red lipstick. Her shorts stick to her flesh, showing off a round ass, and her shirt is tied neatly at the waist.

I scowl at my water. Her look absolutely and completely does it for me. Always has.

She's fucking gorgeous. Curvy and voluptuous. I first met her when Jacobi made London marry him, and I haven't been able to get her off my mind since. I've tracked every image adjustment, her clothing styles, and no one knows more about her business than I do.

My ex, Lucia, is too obvious in her stalking. I'm low-key, but at the same time, I know my obsessions aren't going anywhere. The last thing I want for Holland is to embroil her in the mess that's my life.

"See ya later, boys." Her voice goes straight to my cock, snaking around it with a firm, velvet grip. No one should have a rich voice when they look like her. It's not fair to a guy who wants her for himself when she wants nothing to do with him.

Holland doesn't know she was the downfall of my relationship. My parents liked Lucia. I recognized her overbearing tendencies and her controlling nature within months of dating. But sometimes loneliness wins. Sometimes a guy thinks with his dick when he shouldn't. It wasn't fair to Lucia or to me.

And once I laid eyes on Holland, every time I got hard, it was her face floating behind my eyes.

That definitely wasn't fair to Lucia, and I ended it. I've been living with the repercussions ever since. Of all my sins, leading Lucia on is the tamest, but it's the one I'm paying for.

"When's New York?" Jacobi asks Holland.

I study my water, but my focus is entirely on the Marilyn Monroe lookalike.

"Not for two months. It's in September." She bends a knee and it makes a hip stick out. Goddamn, she's fucking sexy. "But I'm sewing several of the pieces myself." She grimaces. "And I don't even have them all designed."

"Penelope said you invited her and London," Cannon says.

They needed to say yes. The guys would be stuck to their sides, and I could come up with an excuse to tag along.

“I told them to bring you both if they can’t live without you for that long.” She sighs wistfully. “But a girls’ weekend would be so fun.”

“London said she’ll arrange time off,” Jacobi says.

Cannon nods. “Penelope too. Pierre and Juan Pablo will take her classes. I can, too, if she doesn’t want me to go.” He tries to hide his sullenness, but he’s still in the stage of his relationship where he wants to be buried inside Penni all day and all night. I’ve never been there, and it’s one of those things I’ve accepted I’ll never get.

Holland laughs and I nearly groan. That imaginary velvet glove tightens around my dick. “I don’t mind if you guys come too. I’ll be busy working most of the week anyway.”

I’m not invited. No reason why I would be. But I’ll go. I’ll make sure I’m in whatever town Holland is in.

My buddies aren’t the only ones who can have an unhealthy obsession with a woman.

A buzz from the black-and-red bag slung around her shoulder sounds between us. “Oh, excuse me.” She wrenches the bag in front of her, concealing her fabulous tits and the way her shirt molds over them. An envelope tips out of the bag.

A gasp escapes her as she stoops to catch it before it hits the ground. She hastily stuffs the envelope back in her bag. I see enough before it disappears. There’s writing where the address would go and the rest is blank.

She ignores her phone and puffs a strand of blonde hair that fell loose from her curls when she bent. Her face is a few shades paler than before, and her phone is still buzzing. “Well, I’d better go. That’s probably Sahara.”

She scurries out, her round ass cheeks pumping under the fabric.

I ignore my raging libido and narrow my eyes. When I turn to the guys, they're watching the closed door.

"Was that suspicious to anyone else?" Jacobi asks.

"Suspicious as hell. Want me to check it out?" I offer before either of them takes the lead.

Jacobi studies me, but I remain impassive. He and Cannon are my best friends. There's a lot of me they don't know, but there's a lot they can tell. Yeah, I have a thing for Holland, but I don't need any fucking matchmakers.

It wouldn't matter if Holland strutted back in and did a striptease in front of me. I'm off-limits. No one deserves a guy like me.

"I'm sure it's nothing," Cannon says in a tone that suggests he doesn't think it's nothing either.

We all exchange glances. This is my chance. I can't have Holland—but I can watch out for her. "Say no more. You two are busy."

"Aren't you?" Jacobi asks.

"Trying not to be." But I've made my decision. I've strung Lucia along too long. I need to put as much distance between me and her as possible. I lift my water like I'm making a toast. "On that note, I've gotta go find a place so I can move."

Jacobi twirls his Coke. "Where are you staying?"

"I don't know yet." I have ideas, but I don't know where I'm safe from waking up to my ex leaning over me with a knife at my balls. That seems like the natural progression for her.

CHAPTER 2



Holland

I'M in my office when I should be creating my mood board for fashion week. I should be sitting on the couch in the work area with my sketchbook in hand, letting my muse—and desperation—carry me away. It's only been five days since I got the letter. I walk around wanting to shout to the world, "Am I scared enough yet?"

Gloria didn't have answers for me. She was more pissed than anything that I intruded on her gambling. After all, I am the girl who reminds her of a failed marriage that destroyed her self-esteem. The only good thing she did for me was move to L.A. and enroll me in the private school where I met London and Penni. But once Father didn't come running after us, she lost interest in being a parent, and I had to return to Vegas. To Father. To the trouble he was in that swirled me up in its wake.

Fashion week has got to make me a name. Editorials. Viral social media. Anything to get my name and face out in the world. Celebrity buys me freedom, and I'm so close. I'm a lot like Gloria. I'm gambling my future on a fickle industry.

Sahara pops her head into my office. "Want me to stay and lock up?"

"No, I'm leaving soon anyway."

She appraises me. "I can stay."

I shut my laptop lid after saving my latest notes. I transferred the few sketches I have to my digital program, caught up with the team all afternoon, and ate my supper over the computer while working on illustrations Tanisha and I would cut and sew next week.

I'm tempted to work through the night, but not at the cost of my team. I can take my computer home. "I'm done."

"Sure you are." She smirks and disappears from the doorway. I pack my laptop in my cherry-red BommGirl bag and breeze out of my office. Stopping, I look back and sigh. I don't usually lock my office, but the damn letter has me doing stuff I don't normally do.

Outside, the sun's setting. Sahara sets her own hours, and she came in later today. She parked next to me down the street. She got in her car and waited to pull out when I did—I'm not the only one the letter rattled. I wish it had come to me directly. The last thing I ever want is to drag those close to me into the darkness of my life, the places I've hidden from my friends and coworkers.

Who could it have been? And why drop it off at my work?

I drive to my house in Silverlake, a little bungalow that doesn't scream, "I came from money and could live in Beverly Hills if Father wished it." He would see it as a waste. If my design career doesn't pan out the way I need it to, I'll be out of money and out of time. I'll be packing my shit and moving home. Then . . . Ugh. I don't want to think about that. I'm going to succeed.

I pull into my long driveway to park on the little pad by the back of my house. The dying grass in my yard reminds me it needs water, but I can't bring myself to water plants that have no business surviving in California. I'll tackle renovating my yard after fashion week.

It's dark by the time I step into my house and bolt the door behind me. I set the alarm and sag against the door. It's just a stupid letter. Did whoever sent it know how I grew up? Did the sender know it'd rattle me because of what I've seen?

I put my laptop by the door. I'm too paranoid to concentrate. Cutting fabric always makes me feel better.

I go to the back room. Stacks of neatly folded fabric hang over the backs of two chairs and are spread out on the twin bed. This is my guest room, but I don't have guests. London always invited me and Penni to her place. An ocean mansion in Malibu? After the stifling penthouse I was raised in—yes, please.

I select a swatch of purple velvet. The color would wash me out, but those are the pieces I like working with the best. I have no personal investment, only my goal to create. Sometimes I have someone in mind when I work off nothing but sketches and free cuts, sometimes I just go where the vibe takes me, and if I end up with nothing but a trashed heap in the end, then I have a cleaning rag.

I'm not sure how good velvet is at scrubbing bathroom sinks, but I need a night to freestyle. Stretching the fabric over the long table against the wall, I ponder where I'll start. I run my hand over the top, flip a corner over to determine the best direction to cut, then dig out my favorite pair of scissors. They're almost too big for my hand, and they're so sharp I could do surgery with them.

Velvet. Soft. Luxurious. A fabric that feels good against the skin. I don't have enough for an evening gown, and a cocktail dress doesn't fit the rich purple.

Purple. Royalty. Wisdom. Precious.

A hat is too mundane for this fabric. I'm making a robe.

I set my phone in the corner and pump big band music through the Bluetooth speakers in the house. I don't know how much time has gone by when I finally straighten from cutting the sleeves. My next step is to pin the pieces together, but "In the Mood" just came on, and I can't resist the trumpets.

Dancing around the bedroom, I laugh. The scissors glint in the light. I was told not to run with scissors. No one said anything about dancing.

I wiggle my hips, pretending I'm in the middle of the dance floors Penni and Cannon compete on when the door bursts open. A man clad in black from his face mask to his shoes charges in.

I yelp, fear a vise grip around my throat. He's closing the distance between us, and I have nowhere to go. I stab out.

The attacker's eyes go wide, and my forward momentum doesn't stop. *Follow through. An attack is no good if you don't follow through. Keep your grip tight. You don't want to leave your blood behind.*

I'm shorter than the man in front of me, and the tip of the scissors sinks into his gut. Between the training I never planned to use and the way he was hurtling toward me, the scissors bury to the hilt. My hand almost slides off, but I reflexively grip the ends harder.

I suck in air, but my lungs seize until I think I'm going to suffocate. What just happened?

Father's words run through my head. *Never leave a blade in them to use against you.* I yank the scissors out. I want to dart backward and plaster myself against the wall, as far from this guy as possible, but I know better. He didn't come to talk, and he's not leaving as quietly as he came.

He coughs, weaves on his feet, and lunges, a shiny silver object hanging from his fingertips. His blue eyes narrow, and his mouth twists in a snarl. They're the only parts I can see of his face and they scream murder. My instincts kick in, and I impale him one more time. Shouldn't it be harder to stab someone? Shouldn't I have more doubts?

All I know is that it's me or him, and he came here to kill me.

He groans and reaches for me like he's intent on finishing what he started. "I'm . . . going to . . ." With a grunt, he jerks backward. His slick blood has reached the handle, making it slippery.

My hand slips off. Red smears each of my fingertips. "Who are you?" My voice shakes.

“... kill ... you.” A long moan bubbles from his lips. Blood-tinged foam leaks onto his chin, and he stumbles back. He smacks into the half-open door that had rebounded off the wall when he had charged in and collapses to his ass.

I watch, appalled, as he topples to the side, unmoving, a long squeak leaving him like he’s deflating. I have no other weapon to use unless I want to toss a cotton-rayon blend at him. I’m caught between wanting him to die and hoping he doesn’t leave me with figuring out what to do about his body. Never mind that I should be disturbed to have these thoughts in the first place and I’m not. Instead, all I can think is *Not again*.

“Oh, shit. Oh God, oh God, oh God.” I take a step toward him, then back up two. “Are you dead?”

Do I want him dead?

My gaze drops to the long silver object that has dropped from his hands. A wire with a two-inch-long post on each end.

“Who the hell still uses a garrote?” I almost slap a bloody hand over my mouth again.

The tool depends on the job, but you have to use it right. A garrote is intimate yet ruthless. Father never told me that, but I can figure it out. This man wanted to kill me, and he wanted me to struggle while he watched me die.

I creep toward him. My scissors are sticking out of his gut and his black clothing glistens. So much blood. I must’ve hit his liver the first time and maybe nicked his lungs the second. *Don’t just go for the soft tissue—aim for something that matters.*

The bastard bled out faster than a stuck pig. If he was shorter, I never would’ve made it through his ribs.

I draw in a shaky breath. Do I know him? Did this man send the letter? And what did I do to him?

A cold chill creeps over me. Did Father send him? What if things have changed and I’m getting too close to success?

No. Father runs his casinos with paranoid vigilance and he's a master at encapsulating his emotions, but he's also a man of pride. If he wanted me dead, he'd do it himself.

What do I do now? I'm wired. Adrenaline floods every cell of my body. I could run a marathon now if I thought it'd help me figure out what to do. I have a dead man in my house. This isn't my area. I worked really hard to stay out of this kind of bullshit.

A shadow appears in the doorway and I yell, flinging a pile of clothing from the bed toward the new intruder as if it's rocks. He knocks them away, concern etched over his roguishly handsome features. His wide shoulders and dark gaze register in my brain. Seeing him isn't enough to summon relief, but my tumultuous thoughts still.

"Kase?" The only other thing I can say is, "I think I killed him."

I point to the body oozing blood onto my cherry hardwood floors as if it isn't obvious. I'm grateful I'm not alone. I know Kase. I don't *know* him, but he's familiar. He's friends with my friends, and that's good enough for me right now.

Kase stares at the man for far too long. He's dressed in black jeans, black athletic shoes, and a long-sleeved black shirt. It's the middle of July. In L.A.

"Kase." Relief to not be enduring the second worst night of my life alone fades. My suspicion's rising. I've done my best to ignore men in my life, but Kase has made it hard. He's deliciously tall—I'd probably miss his rib cage if he ran into my scissors too. But they're buried in the body.

And even though Kase is the second man to rush into my bedroom, the only fear I'm feeling is from being attacked by the first man. Still, that doesn't explain Kase's arrival. He's not here to kill me, and I can't explain how I know. I just do.

"What are you doing here?"



Kase

I RACED HERE, terrified I was too late. And now I'm . . . stunned. I stare at the body, my mind wondering, well, *What the fuck now?*

Holland is clearly okay. Her hair is tousled and not in the sleek do I usually see her in. One of her hands is bloody, and from the scissors' handle sticking out of the body on the floor, I know why.

She stabbed him.

Stabbings are messy. They're both easy and incredibly hard. If you hit bone, maybe you'll get lucky and the blade will glance into nearby soft tissue. Best-case scenario, you don't slice your hand open. Soft tissue from the gut is different, but it still takes a pro, or adrenaline-fueled emotion and some luck, not to cut yourself.

Holland's not holding her hand like she hurt herself, but she could still be in fight mode.

"Are you all right?" I ask and tug off my thin black gloves and stuff them in my back pocket. I stoop to feel for a pulse under the man's balaclava. It's either too thready to feel or his heart's not beating, but I'm not calling 911. It's this asshole's life or hers. I know these guys.

I know this guy.

"He's . . . dead?" Her voice waffles for the first time since I entered.

I glance at her. "Yes." Or he will be soon enough. No one's coming back from that much blood loss without immediate help and double digits of transfusions. And I'm not calling an ambulance, so . . . "Do you know why he's here?"

"To kill me." Her voice is back to being steady. She can't hide the thread of fear, but I've broken into enough houses. Her steady reaction isn't typical.

She picks up a long, thin wire and dangles it from one of the end posts.

“Shit.” I knew what he was here for, but to see how he planned to snuff out her beautiful life enrages me while making my stomach churn. I should have a gut built from lead by now. He’s dressed for menace, but she knows what a garrote is? From TV? “Why?”

“Why what?” She blinks her dark-blue eyes and pockets the garrote.

Again, not the typical reaction. Most people wouldn’t have touched it or would’ve flung it across the room. “Why does he want you dead?”

Her expression shutters. “How do you know it wasn’t random?”

I cock my head and dig my gloves out. “Holland.”

She returns with a “Kase.”

We’re at an impasse over a dead or dying man.

Frustrated, I break eye contact first and squat. I peel his mask up so she can see his face. Dirty-blond hair sticks out around the fabric. His lifeless lips are pressed in an uneven line and his chin is recessed to look double, but I’m not propping him up so he can appear alive.

“Recognize him?”

“No. Is he dead?” She lets out a small gasp like she remembers something. “He hasn’t defecated.” She rushes to the small closet in the corner of the room.

“Excuse me?”

“Doesn’t everything, you know, *release* after a person dies? We need to put him on something.”

I just . . . For two weeks, I snooped through Holland’s life and came across more closed doors than I expected.

Her dad is Connor Gray. Las Vegas casino mogul and all-around uptight guy. His former model wife left him before Holland was done with school. There’s surprisingly not much on either parent, and there’s nothing more suspicious than a

lack of information on the internet. It isn't like either parent lives a low-profile life.

A couple of hours ago, I transitioned from digging into Holland's life to find out why an envelope scared her to searching through my parents' records to see what low-priority job I could take to keep from getting pressured to do the hard stuff. Unlike them, I have a conscience, and it bothers me to hurt people. Scaring them shitless is horrible enough, but I can live with it if they're still alive to fuck up. At least I would know I tried to set them on a path that would save their lives.

When I came across Holland's name linked to the code name Josef used, I broke every traffic law to get here.

Plastic crinkles as she takes a hot-pink bundle from the closet. "I dabbled in raincoats last year before writing them off as a pain in the ass. I still have this." She starts unfolding it, focused on her task. Different people react differently in all situations, and they often can't predict how they'll act ahead of time. I can't predict how they'd act, either, but I prepare for a variety of outcomes. Holland is something I didn't prepare for. But I didn't dwell on more than getting here.

A groan leaves Josef and I wince. He's an asshole, and I questioned whether he still had a soul, but I didn't expect to stand over him as the last of his life leaks from him.

"Help me get this under him." She spreads out the pink plastic sheet next to his body. There's not enough room before it's bumping into the bed.

"For fuck's sake, Holland. What the hell is going on?"

She peers at me and puffs strands of blonde hair out of her face. "Care to go first? Why are you here?"

I clench my teeth together. Another impasse. Holland has secrets, and I have mine. Which ones do I reveal? Is she wondering the same thing?

I have to give her something in order to get answers. My presence gave me away. I can't say I was walking by and heard a scuffle. "Josef is a piece of shit, and I just learned he was going to hurt you."

Her eyes narrow. So often, I see her at Jacobi's when she's wearing her horn-rimmed sunglasses. Sometimes she wears similar regular glasses. There's nothing blocking her gaze from me now. I can tell a lot from someone's eyes, but I can't tell shit about Holland other than she's scared and determined. There's a to-do list she should know nothing about clicking through her head.

"Why?" she asks. She waves her hands over Josef's body as a signal for me to help her.

Goddammit. She's right. It's better to get him on plastic than clean body fluids off the floor. We wrestle Josef's limp form on the plastic. Between scooting and lifting limbs, we get him on the plastic enough to keep any more of his bodily fluids from leaking onto the seams of the hardwood.

"That's a lot of blood." Her face blanches, but she recovers faster than anyone I've ever seen.

I can't get Josef completely wrapped in hot-pink plastic without stepping into the large pools and smears of blood. "We should clean the floor first. We don't want to track through it."

"Right." She goes to push her hand through her hair and sees it's still stained red. She holds it away from her.

"Okay . . . *okay*." She inhales, her expression determined. "You're not spilling your guts, and obviously you can tell there're some things I'm not sharing."

Succinct but accurate. "I've gathered that."

She gives a firm nod. "You weren't here to kill me, right?" Her direct stare is like a megawatt spotlight on me. How often have I dreamed of having her attention, only to know we have no chance and it's best she keeps ignoring me? Now that it's on me, I don't think I can pass up the chance to be her focus.

"No. But I know Josef and learned he was assigned you."

A dark brow kicks up. I've studied her from afar. I thought she was a natural blonde who dyed her hair platinum. But while her brows might be sculpted, their color is real. She's a brunette.

I rip my mind away from her looks. She's studying me. Shit. I gave her a detail. I'm not usually sloppy.

"You're a hit man," she says, her voice flat and unimpressed.

I prefer the term "fixer."

"I'm not like Josef," I say, defensiveness rising inside me.

"You kill people."

"I try not to." But it's happened. And it changes a person. With some people, like the dead guy at my feet, one murder dismantles a wall in the mind, making the unthinkable almost a hobby. Some people get a taste for more. My parents monitor those contractors closely. A willingness to kill is different from the drive to take a life. One is useful in my line of work, and the other is a detriment.

I knew long ago I didn't fit well into either category.

"You have though," she says. "Killed."

I keep my gaze steady. I'll admit nothing. I've accepted what I've done, and I don't wish to deal with others' reactions or judgment. They weren't there. Unfortunately, I was.

"Why are you here?" This time her question is different. She's not asking about how I came to be in her place. She's asking simply why.

"I was going to stop him. Someone like you shouldn't have been on the list." I can't know for sure. Holland's life is bland online. Still, she killed a man and is still standing and speaking calmly. Maybe she sells kids. Traffics women.

No. I have to go with my gut on this one and hope my intuition isn't broken after the life I've lived.

I rest an elbow on my knee, careful to keep my limbs off the floor. Evidence is a bitch these days. "Now, I've given you something. You've got to give me some answers in return."

When her expression wavers like she's going to close off, I add, "It'll make a difference how we deal with a dead hit man wrapped in hot-pink vinyl."

A long sigh leaves her, and she straightens only to sit on the edge of the bed. “I don’t know who wants me dead.”

I sense only honesty. The resignation in her eyes confirms it. Damn. I would rip apart anyone who wants to hurt her. “But you know of people who could?”

She nods. “My parents haven’t lived the most straitlaced lives, and that’s all I’ll say about that.”

“Your mom was a struggling model who got pregnant with you and got married. But your workaholic dad, who’s known to buy out anyone who pisses him off, didn’t give her the love and attention she deserved, so your mom left you in L.A. and is blowing her half of the divorce in Reno.”

“You’ve done your research.” Her features pinch. I regret being so blunt, but this situation isn’t going to get resolved with secrets. I still have no answers, only a suspicion about Holland’s upbringing—and what her parents are like.

“There’s not much to research.”

Her mouth tightens. She knows exactly what I mean. As if I needed to be more intrigued by her. “I got this letter that said they wanted me scared before I died.”

One mystery solved. The envelope she dropped at Jacobi’s. “When did you get the letter?”

“Less than a week ago. No idea who sent it. I called my mother. She swears she isn’t indebted to anyone any more than normal.” She snorts softly as if she realizes how fucked up it is to say that. “And my father . . . I will not ask him.”

“Why?”

She spreads the red-stained fingers of her right hand apart, her gaze going distant. Why isn’t she losing it over having some guy’s blood on her? “He’ll make me go back to Vegas. I’m on a long leash, but trust me—I’m on a leash. He *cannot* find out about this.” She bites her lower lip. “How do we hide the body?”

I’ve either found the perfect woman, or Holland is going to be the worst thing to have ever happened to me.

CHAPTER 3



*H*olland

KASE IS A HIT MAN. Maybe he no longer kills people, but the darkness that traveled over his expression told me enough about his past. He's exactly who I've tried to stay away from most of my life. He might seem like a thug with a golden heart, but that organ eventually shrivels under the pressure. You can only intimidate and haunt people for so long before you become the monster they fear.

Now I have my own personal monster. Sending me threatening notes is one thing, but to hire someone to kill me? Is this about my parents?

Did Father upset someone, and they were going to make an example of me? Gloria said she hasn't angered the wrong people, but she's also an alcoholic with a gambling problem. Yet it doesn't make sense. My death would ruin intimidation efforts.

So is it personal? Then who?

I don't mean for my foot to start tapping, but Kase has to get over his abject surprise soon. In his line of work, I can't be the first person to ask how to hide a body. And if we don't hurry, whoever hired Josef is going to check on his progress and find out my heart is very much pounding while Josef's has stopped. They'll send someone else, and I've had enough men crashing through my door.

“Kase,” I say impatiently. “This isn’t my area, but I know it can be done successfully.”

A divot forms between his dark brows. This is the wrong time to notice that he’s even better looking than I thought. He’s not sculpted like so many guys in L.A. The Hollywood wannabes who’ve been convinced to shred, wax, and peel their bodies to remove perceived flaws.

Kase is rugged. He’s tall and muscular. He moves like a panther with a prowl that you know is dangerous, but you still want to wrap your arms around him and shove your face in his chest. But he’s not a cat. He’s all man. It’s like every morning, his razor says *I tried*, and by five o’clock, his whiskers muscle through to ooze virility. I bet he even has chest hair.

Is it hot in here? I wave my hand at my face, and for the hundredth time, I remember it’s covered in blood. I need a shower hot enough to blister my skin off.

“I’m thinking.” His voice is terse, but he no longer seems perplexed by me. “All of your neighbors have cameras. I can have Jacobi—”

Panic almost stops my heart. “No.”

He sighs as if insisting that no one else gets involved is a *bother*. “We need help if we don’t know who this is.”

“I’m not getting him in trouble. London might forgive me, but I’ll never forgive myself.” I know what it does to people.

“It’s nothing for him to knock out a few webcams.”

I shake my head. Jacobi’s not untouchable. He might think he is, but I’ve seen Father gather information from enough people who thought they were an island no one could reach. “I wish you weren’t involved. No one else.”

He gives a reassuring smile at the regret in my voice. “This is my life, Holland. Let’s make sure it’s not yours. Here’s what we’ll do.”

“I can’t help you drag him out,” I blurt. My stomach churns as memories threaten to surface. Josef will be warm.

He'll be heavy. He'll make sounds, and I'll scare myself into an early grave instead. "I can't. I *can't*."

Oh, God. I killed someone. My adrenaline takes a dive, and a shuddering breath escapes. My gaze glues to Josef.

He tried to kill me. But that pales against the reality. I. Killed. Him.

Does he have a family? Does he have a little girl who thinks he's the world? Friends who'll miss him?

Kase lets out a soft curse. He sidesteps the blood patch to the plastic and jumps over Josef to land lightly next to me.

"Hey," he says softly and gathers me in his arms. "Hey. It'll be fine."

I hold my bloody hand away from him and sob into his hard chest. I inhale the woody sage smell of him instead of the metallic scent staining the air and the more undesirable stench escaping the body. "I . . . Did he . . . Does he have kids?"

"No. He didn't. Josef is the guy you call when you don't want him to question whether the world is better off with the target dead. He's in it for the thrill and the money. He's not the type of guy who can keep a girlfriend, much less a family."

I nod, but I can't stop the tears. "I killed him."

Kase strokes my back. "You chose your own life, and you didn't get time to decide."

I would've done things so differently. Isn't that why I got into fashion? Designed a line to make women feel better? I wouldn't have killed Josef if it hadn't been necessary to save myself. His words help. "He ran into the scissors. Like, literally, ran straight to me."

"On paper, you probably looked like an easy target. He didn't do his research."

I was research. Josef didn't know me. I was a job. A target—a supposedly easy one. I use big scissors, and he didn't know it. He'd also never know that I could handle a knife. He wouldn't have known I didn't grow up a normal kid. I didn't

run through sprinklers or play with Hula-Hoops. I'm a five-foot-three bleached blonde in booty shorts who was capable of gutting him.

All I've wanted to be was a designer. Why has it been so hard?

"Listen," he says almost hesitantly. "There's a place we bury people who work for us that die . . . suspiciously."

Us? Is he like the CEO of Hit Men R Us? I lift my head. Up close, his eyes really are as dark brown as I imagined. Fathomless. I want to lose myself in them. "Us?"

His jaw tightens. "The company I work for. All we have to do is get Josef into a trunk where we won't be seen. I can drive him to the private property and bury him while you clean."

Relief soaked up a bit of my adrenaline. A rational plan to get rid of a body. How did I go from making a robe to this?

Wasn't that the question of the night?

"Do you want your scissors back?"

His question lands right on my chest, stopping me midbreath. "N-no."

"I'll dispose of them in a different place. Same with his phone."

Oily relief snakes through me. Kase is describing how he's going to get rid of the guy I killed, and I'm grateful. I want to hug him.

I only nod. Figuring out how to clean the blood would be enough to distract me for a while.



Kase

I DON'T HAVE much darkness left before the sun gets close to the horizon. Light rays are beginning to stain the sky. I dump

the last shovelful of dirt on the fresh mound.

This area is a dead zone. No electronics. I had to leave my phone at the gate. My parents don't even record the premises. No evidence to use against themselves or us.

Josef's prints were wiped clean from his phone. I reset it while I had his face and fingerprints, and I'll toss the phone in the Pacific with the scissors.

I trudge through the trees to the little gardener's shed kept on the land to put the shovel and pick away. My parents own the property under a different name, and it's literally where secrets are buried.

One thing my parents had gotten right in raising me—teaching me there was always a bigger shark.

Always be professional, Kase. We don't want the bogeyman after us.

In the fixer world, the bogeyman has many names. The Faceless One. The Shadow. The Ghost. No one knows if he's one guy or a crew. No one wants to find out. That means we're on the wrong end of a gun.

It's not a place I want to be again. Which is why I'm hardly packing. It's not out of some sense of honor or an exaggerated opinion of my own talent. Nope. It's too easy for mistakes to happen. Too easy to get complacent thinking a hunk of metal with a tiny amount of explosives can take care of the job.

I brush myself off and slide behind the wheel of my SUV, grateful the cloud cover held out for so long. Holland's camera feed had already been shut off, thanks to Josef. I knocked out her neighbors', made sure they were tucked in tight, and loaded Josef up.

My phone rings. Angela flashes across the screen. I look forward to hearing from her as much as I dread it, but lately, the dread has won out. I hit Bluetooth. "Hey, Mama."

"Kase. Where are you?" Only with me does a hint of her accent come out. My grandparents were from Tijuana and had moved here intending to open a restaurant in Pacoima. The

restaurant had opened just fine, but local thugs interfered. And my grandfather was a lot like Holland. He found himself in a kill-or-be-killed situation.

He killed and he impressed.

Mama was raised in the life, and she met Poppa when he started working for her father. Mama couldn't resist the giant Irishman cut off from his family on the East Coast trying to earn a quick buck. Now there's me. If I can do nothing good in this life, I will go out leaving no next generation to continue the violence.

"I'm heading to the beach." The more truthful I can be, the better. Mama is a living lie detector.

"Were you in my office last night?"

The property might not be under surveillance, but their apartment is outfitted like Lockheed Martin. Her office doubles as the restaurant's office, so I can usually stop in without waking them. "Yes. I was looking for a job."

"Did you find one?"

Yes. And I deleted all signs of it. This is where I need to tread carefully. "No, but I have to take care of some things with the house, so it's fine. I'm moving."

Surprise laced her voice. "Why?"

Grateful for the subject change and to show her that the girl she wants me to get back together with is too much, but inwardly wincing that it's toward my private life, I answer, "Lucia was waiting for me the other night."

"You really need to rethink things with that girl."

"I know you like her, Mama, but she's toxic."

"She's a go-getter. She knows what she wants. You're not used to that."

I pinch the bridge of my nose. Arguing with her about Lucia is becoming a well-rehearsed dance. "She's a stalker and she's unhinged."

“I’m disappointed to hear you talk about a woman that way.”

I roll my eyes. Mama is adept at attacking people in several different ways. I’m not falling for it over Lucia. “I’m serious.”

“So am I.”

“It’s not your life.” It is mine, and I have one too many dreams of Lucia threatening me until I proposed.

“You’re my only child.”

I was an obligation. They basically needed an heir and here I am. They wanted me to marry Lucia and have her kick out a killer baby. Then another just to make sure. Probably two more in the name of expansion. I wouldn’t do that to a kid, no matter how much I wished I could have the happy family routine.

I grew up waiting in the back seat while Poppa unrolled a finger in a handkerchief to pack in an envelope he left on a client’s doorstep. I didn’t witness the finger taking or breaking until I was a teen. Maybe Poppa should’ve indoctrinated me earlier. By then, I knew my life was fucked up. And I knew I couldn’t get out.

If Lucia learned my family did more than run a restaurant, I’d have to deal with her. I no longer had feelings for her—none that were positive—but I didn’t want her hurt. I wouldn’t hurt her, but my parents are a different story.

“I’ve gotta go. Love you.” I hang up on her. I’ll pay for that later. Poppa didn’t tolerate disrespect to him or Mama. Whispers of The Irishman is enough to threaten people as much as The Shadow. But he won’t hurt me. He’ll make me suffer by incessant nagging. Telling me that how I treat a woman, especially my mother, defines me. Ignoring how they treat me.

It takes me another two hours to dispose of the damn phone and scissors and then I’m back at Holland’s. How did she do while I was gone? It couldn’t have been comfortable to

stay in the house she was attacked in, but the cleanup couldn't be ignored.

Her small bungalow was unexpected. I dug through her life, but seeing what she does and where she lives on paper is different than in person. Her mother's gambling habits explain why Gloria Horton-Gray lives the way she does in Reno. Connor Gray is loaded. He could buy the whole block my family's restaurant sits on with his pocket change. Does he control Holland with money? He could buy her an island, but the house is in her name.

Is that why she works day and night on her designs and growing her company?

I lightly jiggle the back door. It's locked like it's supposed to be. Holland's job was to clean and pack. She has to vacate her home before someone else is sent. I have to find a safe place for her to stay until we learn who wants her dead.

Instead of bypassing her security and picking the lock, I knock.

There's no answer. I'm parked behind her car, but I still check to make sure it hasn't moved. I knock again. Nothing. Anxiety starts to climb. Telling myself it's just another job does little to tamper it.

It's broad daylight, and breaking and entering while the sun is shining down on me is discouraged. I check her security system and frown. It's still off. Did she leave it off so I could let myself inside?

I pull my lockpick set out of my wallet. The pen and tumbler dead bolt takes me twenty seconds to flip and the door handle is almost negligible. I've done this so many times. I could pick run-of-the-mill locks before I was in third grade. The door chain is next. Holland doesn't even have an updated swing bar lock. Not that I can't get past those with a foot-long piece of yarn.

Inside, I carefully relock everything. I laughed once when Mama flipped the dead bolts and installed a swing bar lock,

but Poppa was quick to point out that locks delay an intrusion. That delay could save a life.

I don't call for Holland, but I bypass the bag of garbage by the back door and carefully tiptoe down the narrow hallway. I can't hear movement. Her car is here. Where is she? A lemon-fresh scent stains the air. She didn't use bleach like most people would on the blood. Odd choice, but then she has surprising skills. And I bet the garbage bag contains all her cleaning materials, soaking in something that would make DNA identification difficult.

When I pass the bathroom, the lemon scent grows stronger. It's not the cleaner scenting the air, it's her shampoo. I inhale. Citrus and vibrant, just like her. A traditional smell to go with her old-school appearance.

I stop at the room Josef was killed in. The floor is clean, and not just the area where the most blood was spilled. She scrubbed everything. Easier to explain. But no one's going to find Josef's body, and no one's going to guess this house is a crime scene.

Where is she?

I keep creeping toward the last door in the hallway. It's open. I peek inside and see a neatly made bed with a comforter that has a pinup sprawled over the covers with her legs wide open.

I almost groan. I'd love to see Holland positioned just like that on her bed.

Dammit, I can't cap off the last several hours with a shot of lust. I return to hoping she's still in the house and she didn't take off on foot. There's no way someone could know Josef failed. Right?

I didn't prepare for the possibility. What if I fucked up? I reach the living room. The small, square, two-bedroom house has an open living area with a cutout to the kitchen.

The kitchen's empty, but a fresh-faced Holland is on the vintage, flat-backed couch. I let out my relief in a long exhale. It looks like she sat down to think for a minute and passed out.

She's tipped to her side, one hand curled under her cheek and the other resting on her hip. Her hair isn't styled but is still drying and has spilled over her face. The soft smell of lemons grows stronger as I approach.

I crouch in front of her. A small breath puffs out.

She's fucking cute. Gone is the polished bombshell look. Her scrubbed face makes her approachable when her put-together look is intimidating to lesser men. Maybe it's more her expression. Her guard is constantly up. I can see that now. Her soft beauty reveals the vulnerability underneath the sexy curves and the fabric. Her loose hair gives her the California girl vibe, like I could find her on a beach with a surfboard tucked under her arm.

She's wearing a camisole shirt, and the position she's in has scrunched her tits together until her cleavage is a mile long. And the shorts. Her red-tipped toes give me fantasies of a deep tub piled with bubbles and her foot on my chest while I massage her soles . . . and then move higher.

Fuck. What am I doing?

Being creepy. Watching her while she sleeps.

My irritation with myself grows when my gaze lands on her pink right hand resting on her hip. She's scrubbed it within an inch of her skin's life. My hands twitch to clasp hers, to give her some comfort.

I don't. "Holland."

Her nose scrunches, but she doesn't wake up.

Louder, I say, "Holland."

She wakes with a gasp, punching out with that hand I was worried about. The blow glances off my cheekbone by my eye and I rock back, more from shock than pain, and land on my ass. Damn, her hit was solid.

She flips over the back of the couch and lands with a thud.

"Shit, it's me, Holland."

She's still for a moment. Then her head pops up. Her hair is a mess around her face, and her eyes are wide. "You scared me."

"You don't say."

She scowls but eyes the spot on my cheek I'm probing with my fingers. "Did I hurt you?"

All she's been through and she worried she hurt me? Sweet. Not what I'm used to. "I might bruise. It's my fault for assuming you'd be fine waking up to a guy in your face."

"I'll get some ice for you." She stands, her tits bouncing slightly in her top. I tear my gaze away.

"It's fine. Are you packed?"

She stops by the entrance to the kitchen. "I'm not leaving."

I swivel around, the sleek hardwood making it easy. My eye is forgotten. "What do you mean?"

Her determined gaze wavers. "My father will know something's up if I disappear off the map. I can't just leave."

I don't get desperate on the job, not anymore. But the familiar sensation is creeping back. If she stays, someone else will be sent. And they'll be ready. She has to know that. "I got inside in less than two minutes."

Her features tighten, and she fiddles with her fingers in front of her. She spreads her right hand out as if to check for bloodstains. "I know. I'll figure something out."

"Another attack might certainly alert him to trouble. Connor Gray isn't stupid. Whenever I see someone as squeaky clean as him online, it says a lot."

Her eyes widen. "He's . . . had to do some hard things to get to where he's at."

"Most powerful men like him do."

She sighs and goes into the kitchen. Her ice maker rattles. "He's an old-fashioned guy. BommGirl is how I'm supposed to prove myself. Otherwise, since I'm not casino exec material, then he needs to protect me."

“In Vegas?” Her father probably has bodyguards. Building security. But if she doesn’t know what she’s up against, she’ll just linger in isolation.

She nods. “And my friends are here. My company is here.”

I don’t want her to go to Vegas either. So I grab at the easiest idea to keep her with me. “Then move in with me.”

“What?” Her hair shakes as she cocks her head.

“It’s actually perfect.” Answers—valid excuses—rise in my mind. “I have to move. No one knows where I’m staying. I haven’t even found a place yet. I can make sure I do it quietly. Jacobi won’t question me if I ask him to cover my trail.”

“Does he know what you do?”

“Somewhat.”

“Cannon?”

I nod. My parents don’t like others knowing, and they don’t know the extent of what Jacobi and Cannon have learned about me, but I need people who aren’t connected with either of my parents’ businesses. I need some semblance of a life that’s mine.

She chews the inside of her cheek for a moment. “London and Penni?”

“They know I’m not an office jockey. I doubt they know the specifics.”

She lets out a slow exhale. “Because the guys won’t tell them anything that could get them hurt.” Her tone is wistful, as if she suspected those types of guys existed but not in her life.

“Sometimes it comes as a surprise that not everyone lives with the secrets we do,” I say.

She lifts her gaze to mine, and I see a kindred spirit. A girl whose heart breaks a little every time she realizes she can’t live a normal life. It’s something I want to protect her against, but I can’t until the person who wants her dead is buried next to Josef.

“We should go,” I say. The clock is ticking. Josef would’ve reported to whoever hired him by now. Holland needs to get out of the house.

She pushes her hair off her face. The strands are drying into waves. “I’m not giving up New York Fashion Week for this bullshit.”

“Pack your sewing machine and work remotely.” Is it that simple? If it’s not, will she resist me?

She hunches her shoulders and drops her head. “Do you think my employees are at risk? Can I call them and tell them I’ll be . . . elsewhere . . . for a while?”

She’s worried about others when a guy tried to kill her? I need her safe and now. “They shouldn’t be in danger if you’re not there. Jacobi can monitor the place.”

She’ll allow that. It’s nothing that’ll put the law on Jacobi’s ass. She nods.

“The other thing is . . .” I brace myself, unsure how she’ll take the next part of the plan. “We’ll have to pretend to be together. A couple in love.”

Her eyes flare and color leaches from her face. “Oh.” Her pink tongue darts out to wet her lips, and I nearly groan. “Um, I guess that makes sense. And in the grand scheme of things, it’s not a big deal.” Her gaze strays to the bedroom she killed Josef in.

“Agreed.” The conversation was easier than I thought. Now she’s all mine but only for safekeeping. A girl like her doesn’t need my shadow in her life. “Make the call and go pack.”

CHAPTER 4



Holland

KASE'S blue Acadia looks like he could roll up to soccer practice, drag out a bag of balls, and jump to coach his son's team. It blends into the suburbs. It'd be endearing if I didn't know the real reason why he drives it—less chance of the police getting called on a soccer dad.

It's loaded with my sewing machine, the bare minimum of supplies—a variety of thread, my backup scissors, elastic, zippers—and as much fabric as I could pile into his back seat.

Kase waits behind me as I cram tulle into all the nooks and crannies. Oh—my iron.

I spin to run into the house one last time—for the eighth time—and his gaze jerks up.

Was he staring at my ass? “I have to grab my iron.”

His expression remains impassive. This is his default, and I find it sexy as hell.

I grew up with parents who were secretive, and I should hate it. But I like knowing there's so much going on inside Kase Donovan's head, and he's dealing with it himself. He's not looking at me like I'm a nuisance—or worse, a tool. When I stand next to him, I don't feel like I'm going to get swept under by him.

“What have you packed for yourself?” he asks.

Um . . . “I’ll grab a few things.”

People look at me and think I can’t go anywhere without a full blowout, complete makeup, and my designer wardrobe. One, I am the designer of my wardrobe. Two, I can, but I don’t choose to. Being a girl doesn’t make me go “eek” when I’m seen without my bronzer.

I rush inside and throw my main makeup in a toiletry bag. I zip through my bedroom and toss shirts and shorts and a couple pairs of shoes into a bigger suitcase and dump my toiletry bag inside. I wedge the iron into the suitcase and roll outside with my luggage behind me. London and Penni won’t buy that I’ve gone away with Kase when I hardly know him outside my friend group, but I don’t talk to them every day. My coworkers are different. They know I don’t have relationships. I need to make them buy the story.

My heart drops when I see the older woman facing Kase over the fence.

His expression is like nothing I’ve seen. His eyes dance and the broodiness is gone. A smile lights his face and warmth infuses his features when he sees me. “Finally ready, hon?”

Hon?

The cutesy name ignites my insides like I’m the Central Park Christmas tree.

I force a smile before I lock the door and arm the security system. It doesn’t work after whatever Josef did, but I have to make a show of it. *Hon*.

We have to pretend to be a couple. Otherwise it looks like I’m leaving with a man Zora’s never seen around. What if she calls the police? Or worse, tracks down my father? I gave her his number in case there’s an emergency with the house if she can’t get a hold of me. It’s not unusual for me to keep my private life private, but I’ve seen Zora peeking out her window enough. She hasn’t seen Kase here before.

I take a deep breath before I turn around. It’s time to be on. Walking to Kase’s side, I grin. “I see you’ve met Zora.”

“He says you’re going on vacation?” Zora’s a naturally suspicious neighbor, and I usually love that about her. Her house is also dark when I’m up late working, and she’s mentioned she can sleep through anything. She’d have banged on the door if she had seen something last night.

“A staycation,” he amends.

“A workcation.” I have to justify the fabric pushing at his car windows. No matter what we say, the car full of my supplies will make this believable. Zora knows I often sew late into the night. “He wants to get me away for himself but . . .” I shrug. The more vague, the better.

“But fashion week,” she finishes.

A genuine smile graces my face. Zora has been my champion since we met. “Exactly.”

Zora’s sharp eyes laser up and down Kase’s body. He hasn’t changed. The black of his clothing hides the dirt and sweat from burying a body, but he looks like he’s worked all night.

Meanwhile, my body is about to implode. I’m standing by a guy who dug a grave for the man I killed and my clever neighbor is inspecting us. She’s never seen me with a guy. Since I finished college, I’ve been all in with my company, and none of my exploits in college made me think I was missing out on a whole lot.

Logically, I knew I was. But I was content with the toys in my nightstand.

Her natural distrust is kicking in. “You don’t look dressed for a workcation.”

Kase’s grin is easy. “Hollywood can do without a stuntman for a few weeks. I haven’t used any vacation days, and after working all night, I’m making sure I block their number until we’re back.”

Approval glinted in Zora’s brown eyes. “I have a nephew who works on set. It’s grueling.”

“It can be.” He lifts my suitcase from my hand. “I’ll load this. Finish talking.”

Worried I look as shaky as I feel, I run a hand through my loose strands and whisper conspiratorially to Zora, “I’ve never gone away with a guy before. I’m nervous.” True, but I’m also terrified. Someone wants me dead. What are they going to do next?

Kase is on the other side of the Acadia, finding a place to shove my suitcase into the mountain of fabric.

“You chose a looker, that’s for sure.” She taps her fingers on the white post of a fence. “If I was younger, I’d make a play for him.” Zora has to be thirty years older than Kase.

“I didn’t. He was too intimidating. But he won me over.”

“How’d you meet?” That shrewdness is back.

Kase set the story before we started loading the car. I was impressed with how quickly he came up with a buyable story, but that’s probably the easier part of his job, so . . . It was time for me to run with it.

I channel my mother—looking good in public while she’s a mess in private. “He came into the shop with a costume designer looking for help making a pair of leather chaps for a western role.”

Her lips quirk. She’s skeptical. “Don’t they have a costume department for that?”

“He was trying to get a non-stuntman role.”

She nods knowingly. Many people are trying to make it bigger than they are, so it’s not an unusual story.

I venture further into the made-up story now that I have her. “I haven’t told my parents about him. Not even work.” When she lifts a salt-and-pepper brow, I continue, “I don’t want Taylor Green to tell everyone I sleep with clients, and my parents can be . . .” I shrug and let her fill in the details.

What people make up for themselves is often better than any lie you can tell.

I've used Gloria's advice in work but never to go on the run.

"Did you tell anyone you're going away with a strange man?" Her expression says loud and clear that she only learned I was going away by being nosy.

"London and Penni know." They don't, but they don't usually come to my house. London's Malibu mansion has been a favorite place, and hopefully, I can take care of my killer before they find out.

I don't know what "take care of" entails, but I have too much to think about now.

She gives me a nod. "Good. You're a smart girl but be careful. The dangerous-looking and delicious ones can corrupt you."

My chuckle sounds exactly like I'm hiding something. "I'll keep that in mind. Thanks, Zora."

I round the Acadia and get into the passenger seat. Kase is at the opening before I close the door. "Your neighbor made it clear that she didn't know you were seeing someone and that she hadn't seen us together before now."

My stomach quivers as my brain conjures images it has no business thinking. *Together*. I haven't had a man's arms around me in a few years. And before that? I would call them boys. Barely experienced enough to know that you have to do more with a woman than thrust a few times. Part of the reason I created bombshell fashion is so women know they're sexual beings. Flagrant fashion that encourages the wearer to be unapologetic. Like, yeah, you're going to have to stroke my clit a few times. Sorry, not sorry.

"She's watching us," he murmurs, stooping low in the door frame. His gaze lifts in the direction of Zora's house.

He nods and momentarily brings our faces close together.

I need Zora, of all people, to buy it. Then I can confidently sell the lie to those closer to me. It's for their safety, and if I can keep telling myself that, maybe the guilt won't drown me.

I wrap a hand around Kase's neck, feel his muscles tense under my fingers, and press my mouth against his. I only have a moment to register how hot his lips are before he increases the pressure. Any resistance I had vanishes, and the back of my head smacks against the headrest.

A squeak leaves me, and it's embarrassingly needy. The subtle sign of power, of instant control, is more of a turn-on than I expected.

Kase doesn't need clothing to remind him I'm a woman with needs.

A single stroke of his tongue against my lips has me opening for him just as he pulls back. His eyes are hooded and glued to my parted lips. Just as quickly, he lifts his gaze toward Zora's.

Right. The kiss was for show. Feeling foolish, I follow his gaze.

"She's going back into her house." His hot breath wafts over me, a sweet coffee smell. I eye the cup in the holder.

"Gas station cappuccino?"

"Why pay eight dollars when a two-buck coffee will do the trick?" He's still leaning in the car, invading my personal space.

I want to invite him in all the way, but I also want nothing to do with him or the way he lives. It's only more of the same prison I grew up in. *Delicious ones can corrupt you.* "Where are we going?"

A shade slams over his expression. He's back to neutral as he stands, his hand on the door, ready to shut it. "I don't know yet. We'll drive for a bit, change license plates, and figure it out."

He closes the door and walks around the front. I miss his heat. I want more of his kiss. *Dangerous looking.* He's everything Zora warned me about.



Kase

THE WHIR of the sewing machine is oddly comforting while I'm on the couch arranging the sale of my house and getting my belongings into storage. The only steady sounds in my house growing up were the clink of metal on metal. Sharpening blades, cleaning guns, polishing brass knuckles, with a backdrop of the kitchen in the restaurant and banging pans, the whir of a dishwasher, and the cooks hollering instructions to each other.

Instead of mutterings about thread strength and stitch size, there were discussions about how to bypass the newest home security models. Nothing in my house was colorful except old family paintings and tapestries on the walls. Papers and charts littered the tables outlining the general reach and clarity of doorbell cameras and articles on how to hack into simple Wi-Fi surveillance systems.

At the furnished rental house Jacobi hooked me up with, fabric is spread around every flat surface. As far as the owner knows, Kevin and Hailey Morales are the renters. We're here for our fifth anniversary, but I slipped in a little TMI that we'd be working on our relationship so there're at least another five. The same company owns the houses around this one, too, and my "admission" should take care of any questions about how unfamiliarly we behave around each other in case the renters around us are also as nosy as Zora.

So when I look at Holland like she's a bomb ready to detonate and I can't wait to disarm her, no one will think twice. Same if I back away slowly because I can't control the way I'll blow apart if she kisses me like that again.

After Lucia—well, there's been no one after her. I don't have the time or the urge. I'd rather jack off in the shower three times a day before I make the mistake of opening the door of my life to that kind of person again.

But then, as soon as Holland gave me a hint of her taste, she was back to business. Less than two inches from me and she was all, *Where are we going?* while I was trying to fight an erection that would make it hard to sit behind the wheel.

I stopped to pick up a grab bag of supplies from a storage locker my parents didn't know about. After the first time Lucia broke into my house, I moved most of my gear to the unit. One glaring issue lingered. I rented it under a pseudonym that my family's familiar with, and if Lucia sees any of the documents, she'll go asking Mama, who'd gladly help her track me down.

I have issues with their lifestyle and their lack of awareness regarding the limits I set in my life, but I don't want Holland's drama blowing back on my family. Whoever put in the order for Holland's death will only know Josef's dropped off the radar and Holland isn't anywhere to be seen. My parents don't need to know about the situation or the job I erased.

My phone buzzes with a message from Jacobi.

I found a storage place not far from you. You'll be Kory Artiz. Contracts were virtually signed.

I should be uncomfortable that he can sign for me so easily, but it's a relief to be around someone I can trust. Holland said there are people better than Jacobi, but I'd challenge her.

The next message is the address and code to the unit.

Storage is done. My house is staged for sale. I've already showered and have the clothing I wore in a bag, ready to toss out with the garbage from Holland's place. Now, I need a new ride.

I hate having my buddy save my ass so many times. But I've prepaid in all the favors I've done for him. Like when he wanted to put a hit on London's father and I talked him out of it. Then when he blackmailed London into marrying him after her father passed away. And of course, when he needed help finding out who was trying to hurt London and her stepmother.

All I asked for in return was friendship, but I hated being on the receiving end of help. After all that, Jacobi promised London he'd be on the straight and narrow, but she was his strongest supporter when he was saving her friends. She'd been in on it when Cannon was protecting Penni from her ex-husband. She'll be in on it now. Jacobi won't keep the broad details of what he's doing for me secret from London, but Holland won't tell her. I'll leave London's extra questions to Holland.

"I have to run an errand."

The sewing machine stops. Holland looks up. Her blonde hair's hanging over her face, and she hasn't changed clothes since we arrived. Her suitcase isn't unpacked and sits at the foot of the bed, while the fabric is sorted and piled in various spots—the coffee table, half the couch, over the desk. I give it until the end of tomorrow before the kitchen table is commandeered.

This is the Holland the world doesn't see. Is the unkempt-in-private look how it is with most designers? They're the most pulled-together people in public, but they're an adorable mess in private?

"Where are you going?" she asks.

The fear in her question hits my gut hard. She had a nightmare of a night. "I need a new vehicle. Usually, I just switch plates, but that might not be enough this time." I didn't want to find out the hard way. Holland might be gone, but someone who wants her dead will want to make sure. "Then I need to move to a different storage unit."

"Is that what you were going back and forth with Jacobi about?"

"How do you know it was Jacobi?" She's observant. At this point, I shouldn't be surprised. But I am.

She runs her teeth across her lower lip as if she's unsure.

For fuck's sake. I can resist the blonde bombshell who struts around like she's untouchable by people and problems, but the sharp-minded Holland with eyes shining full of

vulnerability and trepidation kills me. She makes me want to be a controlling asshole and tell her exactly what she needs to do for me—starting with bending over.

“Whenever you look at your phone, your expression says, ‘Who the fuck is it now?’ And then when you see who it is, you immediately relax.” She lifts a shoulder. “Well, relaxed for you.”

Relaxed for me. Isn’t that the statement of the century? I don’t live a life where I can fully put my guard down. Has anyone bothered to notice but her? “I’ll be back in a few hours.”

Fear flashes in her eyes.

Is she scared to be alone? She stayed behind to clean the house. Though there wasn’t much choice, and she’d been running on adrenaline. “That’s okay, right? No one can trace us to this house.”

“I know you trust Jacobi, but I don’t trust that there’s not a digital trail.”

“I can leave you a . . .” What? A gun? Killing a guy almost accidentally with a pair of scissors in an unexpected, rushed attack is one thing. Guns are a new level, and if she needs a fucking gun, she shouldn’t be by herself. Besides, I don’t have one.

She’ll be alone with her fears in a new place. I can see how that bothers her. “Want to come with me?”

The relief that passes over her face leaves me feeling like a jackass. I should’ve checked with her before I made plans to leave.

“I’d be happy to, Kevin Morales.”

“At the storage place, I’m Kory Artiz.”

She blinks. “Oh. Who am I?”

I scratch the back of my neck. She couldn’t be Hailey Morales. My rental house name and my storage unit name shouldn’t be tied together; there’s no reason to make it easy on them, whoever they are.

“You’ll be my woman.”

She stares at me for a beat. “Like . . . a side chick.”

“I don’t think anyone we come across will go that far into our backstory.” Kory doesn’t have a backstory. All he has is a storage unit.

“I don’t have much girlfriend experience.” Those white teeth run across her lower lip again. She’s killing me. “Not what most girls admit, but I don’t have time for men and their BS. Sorry.”

“Don’t be. My experience with girlfriends is that they’re overly clingy and subversively controlling until they feel safe being outright controlling.”

“Don’t sugarcoat it.”

I flash a smile. “Like I said, my experience.”

She gives me an answering smile, and I feel more understood in this moment than I have in months of explaining to my parents why I’m not ready to settle down.

“Let me get ready,” she says.

I shake my head. I like casual Holland, but more importantly, no one knows this side of her. “You’re too unforgettable when you do your hair and makeup.”

Her eyes narrow. “Is that good or bad?”

“I’m trying to say both are good, but you’re still unforgettable with it on. Without it, you blend in like any other fresh-faced wannabe actress in L.A.”

She rolls her eyes, but her tone is wry. “Wow. That’s not any better.”

“What?” I laugh. She’s messing with me, and I’m enjoying it. Not like with my ex, where my words got so twisted around me I was a mummy by the end of the argument. “Those girls are still hot.”

She scrunches her nose. “Quit while you’re ahead, Kase.”

“Kory today. Kevin when we’re at the house.” It’s not a big deal, but hearing her say a fake name will help me remember we’re only pretending to play house and why. Someone’s after her, and I have to keep my guard up.

“How do you keep track of the identities?”

“They’re temporary. You’ll forget about Hailey as soon as we’re gone from this place.”

She shudders like a horrific memory is attacking her.

“There was a Hailey in high school who was brutal.”

Good. Then no one will guess Holland’s using that name.

“Ready?”

She swallows hard, her gaze straying to the door. “I guess. Kevin. Sorry, Kory.”

CHAPTER 5



*K*ase

THE SELF-STORAGE COMPANY is a square place lined with orange garage doors on each side and surrounded by a wrought iron fence. I punch in my code and the gate opens.

Before we reached the facility, I stopped at a dollar store to grab Holland a hat and sunglasses. The glasses aren't her usual cat-eye type but a round old-school hippie style. And the felt cap with a leather band isn't too gaudy, or people could think she was a celebrity in disguise.

Holland crushed the beige cap on her head and pushed her sunglasses on her nose. The girl riding next to me doesn't resemble the Holland Gray I know and lust after, but she can tie me in knots just as easily. Between the new purchases and her white camisole top and the simple sandals on her feet, she's the girl next door. She wasn't raised on the top floor of a Vegas casino.

But I don't look like a hired thug either in my blue Sea World T-shirt and black basketball shorts. We're just a regular couple getting shit from storage.

I back up to unit 104. "Wait in here."

I open the hatch door in the back. The seats are laid down from moving Holland. My storage doesn't have a lot I can't live without, but I load my clothing and gear. An extra laptop. My box of burner phones. Life's easier when one of those is

always accessible. I find the container with my extra camera equipment. I have to wipe my trail from this storage facility, but thanks to what's inside, I don't have to erase a purchase path leading directly to me. After I mentioned moving to Jacobi and Cannon, I cleared out a few dressers, some other furniture, and kitchen bowls and utensils.

Reaching up, I tug the door down and put my lock in place. The rest of it can wait until I have a new home and Holland is safe. I can keep paying on it for years. The fixer business is lucrative and basically tax-free.

By the time I return to the driver's side, there's a shout from the small office hut on the corner of the lot. "Before you go!"

I narrow my eyes and keep my attention on my surroundings. What the hell is this?

An older man half jogs, half limps from the office, the sun gleaming off his black hair. "I wanted to catch you before you left."

"You got me," I say warily.

He stops in front of my vehicle on Holland's side. I roll the window down and lean over to protect as much of Holland as I can. The name tag on his white uniform shirt reads Heraldo. "There was a girl here trying to get into your unit."

Fucking Lucia. How'd she track down my storage unit? First, she got into my house and now this?

Wait—if she could get into my house, the storage unit would be nothing.

"What'd she want?" I ask.

He shrugs. "Hell if I know. I was going to call you, but the number on your file isn't working." His tone said that doesn't surprise him. A lot of people put their shit in storage and forget it and the bill that comes with it. "But she was asking how long the contract is because she wants out. I felt like she was trying to make me think she was also on the account."

Smooth. Some guys would trip over themselves if a stunner like Lucia was asking for information. Not Heraldo.

As if he read my thoughts, he bobbed his head. “She probably thought I was just a security guard and not the owner.”

This place doesn’t have security guards. The office looks like a guard shack, and when he’s working, it looks like a security officer is on duty. Heraldo can set his own random schedule, and the unpredictable nature would scare off thieves and vandals who want an easy target. It’s why I chose this spot in the first place.

“Thanks for letting me know. Crazy exes, am I right?”

He shakes his head. “You have no idea the crap I deal with here. You got an updated number in case there are any more issues?”

I rattle off my new number. He takes a pen from his shirt pocket and scrawls the digits on his hand. “Got it, 1-0-4.”

I hop back into the driver’s seat. Holland’s got her head down like she’s scrolling through her phone, but she’s got a sketchpad in her lap. The outline of bibbed overalls on a curvy drawing makes me picture her in the same thing.

“Is that your next project?” I ask to distract myself from thinking about how I’d get her out of the overalls.

She glances up, those big blues capturing mine. “I don’t have any denim, and these need to be white denim. With red thread.”

I angle my head to picture the look, only the bibbed overalls cover the lush, quickly drawn body with nothing else underneath. The round globes of her tits play peek-a-boo on the sides, and her generous cleavage peeks out the top.

Holland drew that while I was working in the unit and talking to Heraldo? I know she’s talented, but I’m not prepared to witness it or how my respect sidesteps right to lust.

“That bad?” she asks.

That fucking good. “It’s fine.”

She shrugs like she's used to guys dismissing her creations and bends over the notepad. I pull away and into traffic, monitoring the mirrors for any tails. I even keep an eye out for Lucia's silver car, just in case she was staking out the storage unit or if she decided to up her stalking game. I can't believe she'd find me worth the time, but maybe it's as simple as a seemingly simple guy like me shouldn't have broken up with a classier girl like her.

My main phone rings. The Bluetooth is connected to the car and shows it's Mama. Shit. "Stay quiet while I take this."

Holland keeps her head bent, trying to sketch smooth lines while I drive.

"Mama."

Holland's gaze flicks over as if she's surprised I have a mom. Or is she shocked at the flat tone I use?

"I have a job for you," Mama says.

"I told you I needed time off to move."

"You can't move."

"The house is getting listed today."

"No, your real estate agent had an accident."

My blood chills. Holland whips her head up to stare at me. I try to shrug off the feeling of foreboding. The accident could mean anything. "What do you mean?" I ask carefully.

"Why are you asking like I know? I checked on her—to see if you're fucking her and that's who convinced you sweet Lucia isn't perfect for you. And it's right there on Facebook. All her friends and family sending her well-wishes for her recovery. They even set up a GoFundMe." She continues as if it's nothing, and hell, maybe it is and I'm too paranoid for my own good. "So now that you're not moving as soon as you wanted, you can do this job."

"I'm moving whether that house sells or not." I've moved out, so I'm halfway there. I'll have to do it without a real estate agent in case there are more "accidents."

“Because of a woman? You and Lucia belong together. She’s not getting younger, and I’d like grandbabies before I die.” In her line of work, that could happen anytime.

My chest gets tight. I’m often at odds with my parents, but I love them. I don’t want anything to happen to them, but they have their own moral code with grayer limits than mine. “Why do you believe her over me?”

Mama’s sigh resonates through the cab of the Acadia. “The men in my family can be a bit . . . dramatic.”

I resent being lumped into the category. I work hard to be even-keeled. Poppa was mellow until he wasn’t, but when he got upset, it wasn’t from the contract side of his work. It was servers ditching work and cooks who didn’t care about quality or electronics that refused to work correctly. He could kill a man and then lose his shit over a Windows update.

Grandpa had been a blustering man. He was angered easily, but he calmed down fast. For a guy who snuck into people’s houses for a living and was known to have drinks with those connected to the Mafia, he had an uneventful death. High cholesterol and high blood pressure caused a heart attack he couldn’t recover from. My grandmother followed soon after. He’d taken care of everything and she didn’t know how to live without him. She hadn’t wanted to.

Once my grandparents were gone, Mama leaned on me. She infiltrated more of my life. She said things that made me think she regretted having only one child, but her lifestyle wasn’t kid-friendly. Yet, she wanted grandbabies while I had that same lifestyle.

“Dramatic or not, it’s my decision.”

“You’re thirty-six, Kase. Lucia is still young enough to give you kids. Lots of kids. She comes from a good family.”

Lucia’s parents came from money. I met her parents once. Her dad was cold and clearly cheating on her mother, and her mother only cared about the labels you were wearing. Neither had liked me. That was half the lure for Lucia.

In the end, it doesn't matter. I'm not getting married or having kids. "Mama, I have to go. I've got a busy day."

"I sent information about the job. Take it, Kase. For me."

I hold in a groan. Family loyalty is my kryptonite. "I'll take a look at it."

"That's all I ask, baby."

That's never all she asks. I disconnect and sigh. Nothing like having my personal life waving in front of Holland, like laundry drying on a line.

She cautiously glances at me out of the corner of her eye. "Do your parents do what you do?"

Shit. Why didn't I consider what Holland would overhear when I put Mama on speaker?

It's like I want her to find out who I am. A killer from a killing family who's trying to scare her away. From what? She kissed me to sell the idea of going away with her boyfriend to Zora. Am I truly trying to scare her away or put feelers out? If she doesn't scare off, then maybe—

No. No fucking way am I dragging her into this life. She has enough issues, and I trust her with knowing who I really am, so I trust her with my parents' secrets.

And I'm tired of hiding. "Yeah. It's a family business, you could say."

"The family that contract kills together?" Her laugh is dry, but I grin. Her smile fades. "What happened to your agent?"

Fuck if I know, but I don't believe in coincidences. I hope Mama didn't interfere in the worst way. "Good question."

I pull off the street and find a parking lot in a strip mall to stop in. It takes me seconds to find what Mama was talking about.

Grier Allen fell down her stairs early this morning, causing a head injury that has left her in a coma. "Shit."

Holland peers over the console at the screen. "An accident?"

It doesn't feel like it. My parents wouldn't target an innocent woman. Would they? Mama didn't have the same compunctions as Poppa, but their rules were no kids, no collateral damage. *Make sure they deserve it.* We aren't cutting off some wife's finger because her husband's mistress wants her to file for divorce. We aren't putting a bullet in the back of some family guy because he refused to sell to the wrong people. Now, if the family guy called us to take care of the people hounding him? Sure.

Another reason why the order on Holland wasn't right. Mama would've checked it out. But it was like Josef took the deal on the side, inputted it so he could get a case number and use my parents' tech resources, then planned to wipe away the evidence after Holland was dead. Only I handled that part.

I want to drive back to his grave and bury him again. But we're onto a different problem with my real estate agent. As if Holland's issue isn't enough.

"No," I say quickly. "She was only doing her job."

"They thought you were sleeping with her. And it sounds like your mom wants you with your girlfriend."

"Lucia is not my girlfriend," I almost snarl. Clicking off the phone's screen, I toss it on the console. "I ended things months ago, but I'm getting older and my mom has this dream of a big family."

"You don't?"

"No wife. No kids. I'm not raising a third generation to live this life."

Sympathy fills her gaze. "Your mom and dad don't want to see Donovan's Hits 'R' Us die? Is it that important to them?"

"Donovan's Hits 'R' Us?" A smile ghosts over my lips. "Yes, it's important. It's everything. The restaurant is a front. It's where we do *business*."

"Regardless of the work you do, there's more to life than that." She's back to being serious.

“It’s not like they can invite friends over. Their contacts are in the biz. It’s not like they go play a few rounds of golf in between planning. It doesn’t work like that.”

“Do they really run a restaurant?”

“Yes.” Which helps launder the money flowing through the other side hustle. Enough about them. We’re in the middle of a public road. I’m half-afraid the shitty luck with the real estate agent will reach us where we’re parked and the very person who put the hit out on Holland will drive right by.

“Earlier, I found a listing for a new car. An SUV. A real family car. Ready to play my adoring girlfriend?”



Holland

MAYBE I SHOULD’VE BEEN an actress instead of a designer. I hang on Kase’s arm as he talks about the car with the seller. We’re at a cute little home outside of Pacoima. Kase parked his Acadia several blocks from his parents’ restaurant and smuggled me into an Uber to come here, hopefully to buy a car.

I would’ve remembered to call him Kevin in front of the Uber driver and the guy we’re buying a car from, but he’s using a different name than the one we rented the house with. And a different one from what’s on his new storage unit.

When was Kase actually Kase in the real world?

But we don’t live in the real world. My design business looks like a fantasy dream I built for myself with the help of Father’s money. And it is, to an extent. No one sees the countdown clock over my head. *Tick-tick-tick*. No one knows about it. Only Father and a couple of men I don’t care to think about until I have to.

Timothy, the car owner, toes a tire on the metallic-green Honda CR-V. “She’s a good ride, but we’ve outgrown her.”

I thought Kase would walk away as soon as the owner opened the door. The inside smells like sour milk and there are cracker crumbs in all the seams. I want kids, and I hope when I have them, I can afford to have someone get the smell out of the upholstery. If Kase buys this car, I hope he has some strong cleaner or that we're going straight for the detailing shop.

He slips his hand through mine and leads me around the car. Each lap we make, I wrap myself closer to him. It's for show.

But also . . . it's the hard body. The quiet strength emanating from him. It's been a long time since I've been this close and personal with a man, and Kase is way more of a man than I've ever experienced.

He captures my gaze with his. I practically beam up at him, and I'm not sure it's all for show. "What do you think, babe?" he asks.

The quiver in my belly isn't thinking about the car, and it's making it hard for me to focus. "I don't know . . . I mean, *green?*"

I witnessed Father do enough deals to know that I have to look like I can walk away at any time. I might not have wanted to negotiate property costs for the rest of my life, but I learned a few tactics. Kase already filled me in on the vehicle. Jacobi researched it. The dad we're talking to has a good job in marketing, his husband is a stay-at-home dad, and they've taken good care of the car—except for the interior, which is only superficial. Otherwise, the Honda's had all its oil changes and tire rotations. But the couple is adopting another kid and wants third-row seating. It's a good car and fairly priced.

Kase's lips twitch, but his stare turns determined as if he's playing ball when he's only going to haggle enough to not be memorable.

He rattles off a price two grand less than the man was asking for. He and Timothy toss numbers and reasons back and forth before they settle on five hundred less than asking price.

“Can I transfer money and get the keys?” Kase asks, withdrawing his phone from his pants.

Timothy nods, a hopeful smile spreading across his face. “Perfect.”

Timothy probably thinks he’s sending money, but Kase is messaging Jacobi, who will then send the cash. They had this all arranged and Jacobi’s been on standby.

I’m impressed, but after the trouble London and Penni were each in, I’m not surprised. I saunter to the car to make it look like I’m invested in this purchase when I couldn’t care less.

Timothy’s phone pings. “Wow. That was fast.”

“I’m prepared. I’d rather get all the paperwork over with.”

Jacobi would take care of that too. What name owns this car?

The guy hands over the fob and a certificate. His smile is sheepish. “I know it’s a mess, but life’s been crazy.” The small sheet of paper is for a free, one-hour detailing. “It’s a walk-in place.”

Saturday afternoon. I was supposed to sew all weekend, and instead I’ve been running around. Kase has been hiding bodies, and I’m helping him cover our tracks because I’m too scared to be alone. After all I’ve been through, I should’ve been able to be by myself, but Kase buffers the fear.

“I appreciate it,” Kase says. He crosses to me. “Here’s your new car, babe.”

He leans down to kiss me. Shocked, I sway back and he pauses.

Crap. I forgot about our ruse just long enough to fuck up. I never expected him to make the first move and I wasn’t ready. To cover my reaction, I giggle. “Next, it’ll be a house.” I meet him for a quick peck. Not the kiss Timothy might’ve expected from a couple like us. A guy buying his girl a new car.

Kase’s eyes briefly narrow on me, but he turns a grin to Timothy. “You know how to reach me if you need anything.”

He opens the door for me. I hop in and try not to flinch from the smell. It probably only takes a drop of milk to stink in this hot weather.

Kase gets in and pulls away, giving Timothy a wave. He doesn't say anything on the drive to the car detailing place. Is he upset? Insulted? He's done nothing but help me, and I acted like I didn't want him touching me.

I break the silence. "I almost ruined it."

He sighs. "You covered well. Timothy probably didn't realize you didn't want to kiss me."

I want to kiss him. That's not the problem. His kiss is powerful, and the issue is that it's just a kiss. I want to do more. I want to crawl his tall frame and ride him until sunset. Then sunrise. Then do it again. I want the kiss to be real. Our fake smooch was better than anything I've experienced.

God, it's been a long time.

"It's not that." I twist in my seat as he pulls into the parking lot of the car place. "I was surprised. At my house, the kiss was my idea, but really, I'm not used to having a boyfriend. I'm not used to PDA."

A guy wearing a red-and-black polo with khaki shorts jogs out to greet us. All the people running around the parking lot wear the same.

"We'll talk more about this later." Kase hops out to greet the employee. I crawl out and stand by him, wishing I could dissolve in the heat and forget confessing to a man who melted me with his lips that I had no dating life.

The guy's nose wrinkles when he catches a whiff of the interior. "Yeah, we can fit you right in. Have a seat in the waiting area and have a cup of coffee. Once we clean the inside, we'll hand over the keys, then you two can run it through the wash and be on your way."

I scan our surroundings. I thought I would be jumpy while I was alone, but being in public is almost as nerve racking. Were we followed? Has another hit man found me? Three

within twenty-four hours seems excessive, but Kase doesn't exactly count. He holds his hand out to me, his gaze neutral.

How does he feel about this? Pretending to be a couple was his idea, but he's probably used to doing things he doesn't like for his job. Holding hands is holding hands. He probably doesn't pay attention to how warm my skin is. But his heat is where my mind goes when I slip my hand into his firm grip and walk with him across the hot pavement into the cool waiting room. Slight calluses slide against my skin, and I like the rough side of him. His grip is strong. Confident. Two traits I avoided in the college guys I dated. Now, I just avoid men, but not because I don't like touching them or being touched.

I pick a seat in the empty waiting room and reluctantly let go of him. To cover the weak tremble in my hands, I dig in my tote bag for my sketchbook. While Kase wanders around the waiting area looking at the car photos on the walls, I draw.

In this environment, he looks so different. Tousled hair. Athletic shoes, basketball shorts, and a just-shy-of-baggy blue shirt. Another handsome California guy.

I cross one leg over the other and bob my foot as I sketch. The picture forming is absurd, like I'm adding another line in my company for female hit men. I sketch pants that have hidden pockets, more streamlined and less bulky than cargo pants, only I give them pinstripes. Hit man chic. The shirt ties at the waist but has a sewn-in shoulder holster. For all your knife-carrying needs.

A shadow falls over the picture and I gasp, slapping my hand over my drawings. I relax when I see it's Kase.

I meet his dark eyes, and all I see is an amused question glinting in their depths. "Fashion week?" he asks so quietly I barely hear him.

"Stress relief, I think." I flip the page. I'm unwilling to rip it up. I like the drawings. I like the new idea to riff off of, despite the reason behind it. The look isn't inspired by my recent trauma but by the dangerous man standing over me.

He flops in a seat next to me and sips from a recyclable plastic cup.

“How’s the coffee?” I ask.

“If I spill it in the car, it’ll kill anything that makes a smell.”

I stifle a gasp. “I love bad coffee.” I jump up and cross to the coffee machine. The liquid is dark brown like it deepens a shade every hour older it gets.

Pouring myself a cup, I inhale. Smells like it could take the paint off every car in the lot. Perfect.

Kase watches me as I walk back to my seat, blowing on the lava-pit-hot liquid.

I smile as memories pile into my brain. “I used to stay with my mom’s parents after . . .” After Gloria left Father. After she abandoned me in L.A. and I desperately didn’t want to return to Vegas. “They used to brew this pot of tar and sit around their lake house and drink all morning. Then they’d make another and let it sit all afternoon until supper. They ate late. My gran used to say they ran on sunshine and bitter caffeine.”

“Good memories?”

“The best.” My grandparents were the reason I turned out differently than Father wished. He wasn’t worried about my gender. Thought a girl could still follow in his footsteps. That girl just wasn’t going to be me. I’m grateful I got their influence when I did or my life might’ve been different. I might not have had the chance I do now. “They died of carbon monoxide poisoning when I was in college.”

“That sucks, Holland. I’m sorry.”

I give him a quick smile, but his sympathy helps with the pain their loss still causes. It’s better they don’t see me fail to reach my goals with my company and have to go home to what’s waiting for me. “So when I have shitty coffee, I think of them. I used to drink it, feeling all grown up, and then I got a taste for it. Now I can’t drink the fancy stuff. Too sweet.”

“Good ol’ Folgers, huh?”

The image of red cans lining my grandparents' cupboards flashes in my mind. "Gloria—my mother—used to buy them gourmet roasted coffee. One summer, I caught Gran regifting it to her friend for her birthday." I giggle-snort. "Her friend thought Gran bought the coffee just for her."

Kase chuckles. "A little lie doesn't hurt anyone."

I take another sip of the acid in my cup, my gran's gravelly voice running through my head. "You can be anything you want, Holly. Any damn thing. Don't look for an easy way. Build your own empire. One so powerful your father can't touch you."

They'd have been surprised to know Father funded BommGirl. Shocked at the reason. But when they died, so did the only sense of normalcy I've ever had.



Kase

THE WAY HOLLAND recoiled when I tried to kiss her sits in my brain like it pays rent. I can't figure out why it bothers me. She's not my girlfriend. She made the first move at her place. It was her choice.

If an expert got in my head, they'd probably tell me it's because her reaction is what I think I deserve. She's too perfect. A girl who knows all about me and still wants me? I don't trust perfect.

The employee who greeted us when we arrived pops into the waiting room. "Hey, you're all done. No more sour milk smell." He flashes a quick smile. "We can run it through the wash, or you can."

I exchange a look with Holland. She shrugs. I don't care either, but I'd rather sit in a private vehicle with her than in a boring waiting room. "We'll take it."

I grab the fob and hold my hand out for Holland, hoping she doesn't reject that. She packs her notebook and pencil away, sucks down the rest of her nasty coffee, and slips her hand in mine.

Her grip is slight, and her skin is cool from the air-conditioned building. I run my thumb along the back of her hand. I hate to let her go to open the car door, but I do. She doesn't meet my eyes but slides into the seat, her shorts climbing up to show even more of her leg. I rip my gaze away before I try to kiss her in public again.

Less than a minute later, we're rolling into the automatic wash. I have to put the car into neutral so the vehicle is drawn into the large red brushes ready to scrub the sides down.

I twist in my seat and lean an arm on the console. I hate sitting for so long.

She hugs the passenger door. Is she scared of me? Did I push the fake relationship story for my own benefit?

"Sorry." I center myself in my seat.

"No. It's . . ." She presses her fingertips to her forehead. "I'm jumpy after the attack."

Damn, I should've thought of that. This girl had a guy break into her home and try to kill her. "What can I do to help you be more comfortable around me? Pretending to be my girlfriend won't work if it looks like I beat you. That'll make us stand out, and that's the last thing we want." I didn't know how anyone could forget her. But whoever's after her might have resources that can track her down with nothing more than a mention. I don't know, so it's best to play it as safe as possible.

"I'm not used to any guy getting close to me." She peers out the window. The edges of the brushes reach the hood. Machinery whirs around us and the splashes of water echo in the wash bay. She shakes her head. "Kiss me."

"What?" I lean toward her, not prepared to promptly follow her command, but my body is on board faster than my brain.

“Let’s, you know, make out while we’re in here.”

The shot of lust hitting me means I should say no. Absolutely not. I can’t make out with her and get on with my day. Holland’s been the center of too many fantasies that were supposed to stay just that. I can’t work distracted.

But . . . it’s not a bad idea. Exposure therapy. I have to remind myself that it means nothing. It’s to help our cause. We’re just a couple going about our day. Whoever is after her won’t expect to find her with a man.

I tip her chin with my fingers, loving how her heat seeps into me. It’s impossible not to wonder how the rest of her lush body will feel. “Scoot closer, Holland.”

I make her move toward me. It isn’t easy for her, and it isn’t just because of the attack. Guys haven’t gotten close to her for a reason, and it’s because she didn’t want them to. But that’s not my business, no matter how badly I want to know why.

Tentatively, she lifts her gaze to meet mine. This isn’t a quick, impromptu kiss. It’s deliberate. Her tongue flicks out to wet her lip, and I hold back a groan in case it scares her away.

Softly, I press my lips to hers until she starts to melt. She brings her hand to my cheek, and I drop mine to her hip. Our angle’s awkward, but that’s for the best. It’d be too easy to dominate her and take everything she’s not prepared to offer.

I deepen the kiss, adding more pressure. The coffee flavor isn’t bitter on her. It’s milder, sweeter. Addicting.

Flicking my tongue out once, twice, she finally opens and I’m in. I’ve never felt so euphoric over so little physical touch. I’m touching her. I’m tasting her. And for now, it’s enough. It’s more than I thought would happen between us.

My traitorous brain reminds me this is only so we can fake a relationship to help her hide. My body doesn’t give a shit. My pants are getting uncomfortable as an erection threatens to ruin the moment. I don’t know what made Holland jumpy, but she doesn’t need a bulge in her face.

She grows bolder, her tongue meeting mine, like she's shrugging off time and using skills she's long tucked away. Stroke for stroke, she explores as much as I do.

My fingers twitch to do more. To sweep across to the top of her camisole. To dip my thumb inside. Her bra couldn't be more than a couple of scraps. It wasn't noticeable with her top, and I want to get my hands on her tits. But this isn't the place.

The car lurches, and she breaks away with a startled gasp. My gaze drops to her lips. Wet. Swollen. Her chest is heaving, but she's looking out the windshield. The cab is still dim, but a spear of light breaks through as we're carried to the end of the tracks.

"We're done."

The sense of loss is undeniable. Does she mean the car wash or us?

I straighten in my seat and buckle up. She does the same.

"Is that better?" I can't help but ask. I resist offering to go through the car wash ten more times.

A pink tint dusts her cheeks. "Yes. Better."

I'll take better.

"Are we going back yet?" she asks.

"We can order in whatever we need. What we've done today should help you hide for a few more days. Jacobi will keep searching online, and tonight I'll see what job Mama needs done."

"Will I need to go with you?"

The blush hasn't left her cheeks. I put that there, but it's fading as fear infuses her blue eyes. If only I could bury her fear as thoroughly as Josef. "How do you feel about staying alone?"

She stares out the windshield. I have my answer. Not enough time has passed. She needs to heal, to learn to deal with what happened. Her progress is stunted because someone's still after her.

No one will know where I am other than Mama and the client. Mama knows I'm on the job, but the client never knows who carries out the contract.

“You can come with me. Just stay in the car.”

Do I imagine her face paling? A scornful chuckle leaves her. “And here I thought I'd come so far.” She switches her gaze to look out the passenger window. I don't think she'll elaborate, so I don't ask.

CHAPTER 6



Holland

THE SUN HAS SET. The last oranges of the sky are fading. I catch myself staring at the needle on my sewing machine. I jump to finish the hem and zoom to the side. Red thread veers to the edge of the fabric.

“Dammit.” I flip the foot up, slide the piece out, cut the thread, and grab my seam ripper. My mind is everywhere but my work today.

I pause and close my eyes. My mind isn’t everywhere. It’s on one thing. One instance.

The car wash.

His kiss was branded onto my lips. I can still feel him, taste him. I’ll never be able to have coffee again and not think about how it doesn’t hold up without the special flavor of him mingled in.

Ugh. I have it bad.

I finish ripping the seam and wedge the end of the sleeve in place for an attempt at seam number two.

Kase is moving around behind me. I haven’t looked, but he’s getting ready for a job. One that I’m accompanying him to, where I’ll just . . . wait. Wait until it’s over, hiding in the car like a child. A world I’ve been trying to run from is sucking me back in.

He claims he doesn't do the really bad stuff. I'd like to believe him. I'd like to think I'm not lusting after a man like my father. Or worse—the guy who successfully blackmailed my father.

“I'm going to leave in ten minutes,” Kase says, and it's hard to bring myself to face him, to have him look so much like he did when he charged into my bedroom. But I do.

He's changed. The casual clothing is gone. He's no longer an average guy but a dangerous man. He's dressed in a black shirt and black slacks. The athletic shoes are gone. Black boots are in their place. At a quick glance, he looks like he could be a limo driver or something. Not the movie stunt guy we convinced my neighbor he was.

I glance down at the camisole top and shorts I've worn all day. “I need to get changed?”

Saying it brings back memories. Shivers trace down my spine. *Guess you're in it now. Wear something dark, Holland. We have to finish this business.*

Kase's gaze journeys down my body, taking his time and chasing away the chill that descended with the memories. Sometimes, this doesn't feel like pretend. It feels like it could be real. But it can't be. He's a dangerous man—and that's not supposed to be my type. “It would be best.”

Wear something dark, Holland. I let my attention bounce from fabric pile to fabric pile. The fluffy bundle of tulle in the corner. The solid print, polyester-cotton blend stacked on the table beside the floral print. The vinyl and the satins draped over the couch. All vibrant or deep, sultry colors. The theme of my fashion week show is “Sultry Autumns of the Past.” Post World War II but with less wool. I was bringing back the rayon and nylon. I don't expect it to be a big hit, but it's mine. Conception to follow-through. All mine, with striking reds, rich purples, and stark white. I even have some yellows. The darkest I go is gray.

I didn't see the reasons for my color scheme at the time I was mood boarding, but I do now. I'm going back in time a

different way, and part of me is afraid I won't get the chance to escape again. My window is shutting.

But it's better than being alone and jumping at every sound and shadow.

"I don't have much black," I admit. I should stay behind, but after the attack when Kase had left to deal with the body—Josef—it'd been torture to clean myself and my spare room all alone. Every creak in the house spiked my heart rate, and when I was in the shower, I kept tossing back the curtain like I was going to get shanked mid-shampoo rinse.

"Anything not sunny and vibrant."

I might have some workout leggings and an athletic shirt for the few times I venture out for a jog. The house has one bedroom. Kase said he'd sleep on the couch, but I haven't given much thought to the arrangement. He's done so much for me. Making him sleep on the couch seems callous, but it's not like we have to continue our pretend status within these walls. I wouldn't get any work done if I thought he was crawling in bed next to me.

But there are more pressing matters.

I quickly find a cropped, black workout top I haven't used and a pair of navy-blue leggings I forgot I owned but haphazardly tossed into my bag. These items are clearly from my never-used drawers, but I wasn't thinking clearly when I packed.

When I emerge, Kase is leaning against the island and scrolling through his phone. He looks up, his gaze riveted on the glimpse of skin between my waistband and the bottom of my shirt.

Heat flares in his eyes, and this thing between us becomes too tempting. I have to distract myself from it. Even if he is interested, I want a normal life. As normal as a bombshell fashion designer can get. I might want the name recognition, to be highlighted on red carpets and shouted out by the biggest influencers, but that doesn't erase my dream of a husband and

kids. An open life full of love and affection instead of secrets and lies.

I'm fighting for the dream on my terms. That part's critical. As attracted as I am to Kase, the life that comes with him doesn't fit. It doesn't work with me and hit men don't usually like famous spouses.

"I look like I've time-traveled to the eighties to work out," I say with a nervous giggle.

His gaze rakes down my body as if this outfit does it for him. "It'll work better than the white top. Put on the cap to cover your light hair." His tone is neutral.

I gladly smash on the hat. I like my platinum hair, but my style can be a lot of upkeep. It's an image. It's for work, but it's also for fun. Yet it's nice to just . . . be.

I can't let myself sink into this false reality for long. I might forget what I'm trying to get away from, and it'll only lead me right back.



KASE SCROLLS through the instructions his mother messaged him. It's all I can do to keep from peeking over the console to find out what's going on. His business is not mine. I should keep myself far removed from what he's planning to do tonight. I shouldn't be here.

I'm afraid of being alone, yes, but I'll get over it. I could get over it sooner than later. It's being with Kase I enjoy. I'm not just relieved to be in the new car next to him. I'm . . . excited. He's doing a job, and my belly's swirling like we're on a hot date.

It's messed up. But he's easy to be with. He hasn't revealed his opinions about my sketching. He acts interested when I explain my designs. And he moves through life competently and confidently. He's blissfully normal when he needs to be, and I find comfort in that. I find comfort in him.

His kiss holds a lot more. Promise. Desire. An electric charge that made me think we were going to steam up the entire wash bay instead of the cab of his newly detailed car. Before we'd left, he changed license plates. I don't know how he gets the stash of plates he has, but it's best I stay out of that too.

We're parked at the edge of a strip mall lot a couple blocks from a small neighborhood.

He tucks his phone away and gives me a regretful look. "Get in the back seat and keep your head down."

An empty car is an unremarkable car.

The happy swirls in my stomach turn to cramps. Ugh. Not this again. I crawl between the driver and passenger seat, aware that my ass slides incredibly close to his face for a few seconds until I drop into the back and lie across the floor. If anyone looks in, they'll only see bulky shadows.

My pulse is already increasing. This is almost worse than being by myself in a new house. Kase won't be miles away, and it's too late to go back.

"You good?" he asks, his voice unusually gruff.

"Yeah." No, but I've been through worse.

He reaches behind the passenger seat and taps the pocket on the back. "There's a buck knife there. If you need it."

My lungs freeze. Josef's stunned sneer flashes in my brain. "I hope not." I don't need more images to add to my nightmare library.

"You have my number programmed into your phone."

I stuff my hand into my leggings pocket. He set me up with a burner phone. He doesn't trust mine, but I refuse to give up my work contacts. I can't be submerged into hiding as completely as he wants me to be. I have to get to fashion week. Too much is riding on it.

"O-okay." I wince. I don't want him to think I can't hide for a couple hours. This would be a disconcerting situation if I

grew up in a normal suburban life. But it wasn't nerves; it was flashbacks. "I'll be fine."

"Holland."

I bite into my lower lip and meet his gaze. He parked in a darkened corner of the lot by a pizza place that had just closed. The sun has long set, but the streetlights gleam along the brim of his ball cap. This lot has shitty security, and according to Kase, the footage is as grainy as peering through a snowstorm.

"I'm good," I say. "Really."

His jaw clenches and that ripe muscle on the side of his face flexes. I want to trace my fingertips over it. "I can do this some other time."

"Then your mom would ask questions." I know only what I overheard. He's their baby. His parents depend on him to the point of wanting to control him. My situation isn't that different. My freedom is an illusion, and I've gotten good at forgetting that.

"I can handle my parents." His tone is flat, like he shouldn't have to point something so inane out. But I disagree.

I'm a grown woman, and I jump exactly how high my father tells me. "And I can handle this."

The door shuts and the locks bang down with a thud. I jump and cover the motion by rearranging myself.

I listen for his footsteps to fade, but with the doors and windows secured, I can't hear a thing.

Letting out a weary sigh, I close my eyes and keep my breathing even.

Close your eyes, little bee, if you're not brave enough. My father's words flow through my head, and the fear that had rattled me as a thirteen-year-old reignites, complete with the utter disappointment. The finality of his tone ends the years he has given me before he yanks the chain to bring me back home.

I thought I had time, but the flashbacks accosting me speed up the ticking clock.

CHAPTER 7



*K*ase

I PULL my hat down low and swagger down the sidewalk. The little house I'm aiming for is the second house to the end.

I've done a few jobs in neighborhoods like this, but I'm usually in the less everyday portions of the city and its surrounding locales. The houses around me aren't in gated communities. There are bars on the windows and maybe a doorbell cam now that they're more affordable and can be installed by anyone.

I keep my face covered, but everything else is open, even though my parents pounded in the risk of identifying tattoos long ago. Sometimes, I'll give myself a Sharpie image to throw off law enforcement's ability to identify me should any of my targets defy my orders and go to the police. Usually, they don't or they'd have to fess up to their misdeeds, making me look like a Boy Scout.

Underneath the brim of my hat, I glance around before I veer off the sidewalk and jump the wrought iron fence around the yard. Without changing my pace, I go around the back of the house.

All I want to do is go back to Holland. To drive us to the rental until she relaxes and the lines of tension smooth out of her pretty face. This job is a nuisance, but I'll get it the hell over with. Otherwise, Mama would ask too many questions and probably encourage Lucia to pursue me harder.

There's a simple security system that has already been bypassed. The house is quiet and the owner should be oblivious to their unprotected place.

It takes me as long to pick the locks of this house as it did Holland's place. I use my tiny spray can to quiet the hinges, and seconds later, I'm inside. I pause, listening. According to Mama, only the owner's supposed to be home. An entitled prick who sexually harasses his youngest female employees. The parent of one of those workers knows Mama and Poppa and hired them to scare their boss straight.

An honorable enough reason. A way to use my skills for good, if I want to sugarcoat what I do.

I drag a rope through my fingers. I can tie ten different knots. My plan is to suffocate him a little, leave a red mark across his neck as a reminder I'll be back if he doesn't shape up, and tie him loosely enough that he can free himself minutes after I've gone.

I've mastered the tactic over the years. My adrenaline no longer spikes.

Slowly and silently, I move through the kitchen, sticking close to the cabinets where the floor is less likely to creak. Down the hallway leading away from the kitchen, a dim glow lights the walls. The bedroom door is cracked open. I stop to listen. No water running. No footsteps. The guy is probably in bed, and if my luck holds out, he's fallen asleep. This works so much better when they don't see me coming.

Creeping down the hallway, pressed to the wall, I keep listening. As I get closer to the door, I don't see the bed. Dammit. It's behind the door, making it risky to enter when I don't know who's inside and where they're positioned. Swaying out, I try to look through the hinges.

Inch by inch, I get closer until I stop to peer through the crack, taking a risk and sticking my head in as much as I can.

The quick view I get shocks my veins with ice. I punch the door open. "What the fuck, Lucia?"

Without the door obstructing my view, I see it all. My ex-girlfriend on the bed, naked, with her legs splayed.

She's biting her lower lip in a way that used to make my blood sizzle but only makes me want to throw a blanket over her.

"Kase, I've been waiting," she says in her sultriest voice and slides her hand down her belly.

Briefly, I follow the path. Her nails used to be long, a bright color, and were often decorated with jewels. She had enjoyed admiring her manicure while her fingers were wrapped around my dick. I didn't mind the view until she'd raked the tips over the sensitive flesh and asked me who London was when she overheard me talking to Jacobi.

The manicure isn't gone, but her nails barely reach the tops of her fingers and the color is subdued, almost nude, like her.

Unfortunately, she mistakes my deliberation over the state of her nails as interest and spreads her labia. She thrums a circle over herself and undulates her hips. My cock twitches only because I'm imagining another woman doing the same thing, with her plain nails and fingertips roughened from hours of running over fabric.

"I've been waiting for you," Lucia purrs.

A hundred puzzle pieces fall into place in my brain. The first realization is that there is no job. I was sent on a wild-goose chase— No. I was sent into a trap.

And Mama was in on it.

Betrayal burns through my veins. My parents should know the risk of bringing someone into the fold who isn't one of us. Now Lucia knows that Mama—hell, *Was Poppa in on this too?*—can get me to break into a house. What else does she know? Is this Mama's way of forcing us together? Lucia knows we're not just restaurant owners, and now I have to marry her?

A vise closes around my chest. I won't fall for it. It's outdated thinking.

“What the hell is this? Why are you here? Did you lure me to this place?” I want to sprint out of the house. To hit rewind on this entire night and turn down this assignment. Holland’s hiding in the back of the car, terrified. She valiantly tried to cover her distress, but those blue eyes wavered in the dark. Her voice shook, and I’d put this silly job first.

Shit. I should’ve known. But how? I trust my parents more than anyone in the world. They lie to the world, not to me. Is there any trust left?

Mama’s single-minded determination to bind me to Lucia is perplexing. It’s my life, not hers. She wants me to have kids, and for what? To carry on a lifetime of hiding and violence?

No. No fucking way.

Lucia swirls her fingers through her wet seam, trying to entice me to the bed. My feet stay rooted in place. If I run, Lucia will think I’m not confident in my decision to end things.

She widens her legs. “It’s been so long, Kase. Come here.”

“We’re done.”

She adopts a sexy pout. “We aren’t finished. You know how good we can be together.”

Were we good in bed? Yes. Was the chemistry between us anything I couldn’t walk away from? No. “Good sex doesn’t make a good relationship. You wanted to control me. You’re jealous, you have a short temper, and you don’t mind taking it out on me.”

Her pout deepens to a frown and she sits up, planting the hand she’s been using to fiddle with herself on the bedspread. *Whose house is this?* I wonder. She’s getting her bodily fluids all over the blankets.

“I’ve changed. I understand you better. I know what you do for a living now.”

Dread curls inside my gut. “And what exactly do I do for a living?”

She shifts into a mermaid pose. “I had a long talk with your mother.”

Cold shock washes away the dread. “You did not.”

She leans forward, earnest, her tits swaying free. “We had a long talk. Mama thinks I’m good for you and that you’re just being stubborn. Your dad agrees.”

She’s calling her Mama too? After the shit she said about them? The way she criticized what looked like a simple life? I could hear Mama’s encouragement and feel Poppa’s silent pressure on the subject. They both want me to settle down. “She doesn’t decide who I’m with. I do, and I broke up with you.”

She scrambles off the bed and starts toward me, but I hold my hand up. With an indignant gasp, she stops, her eyes wide, disbelieving.

“Whose house is this?” I can’t leave without knowing my tracks will be covered. I wouldn’t put it past my parents to up the ante and set me up in a stranger’s house. *Those who break the law together, stay together.* It worked for them, so why not me?

She pushes her hands through her long, dark locks. “My aunt and uncle. They’re out of town for the week.”

Thank fuck for that. “I’m outa here.”

She rushes to me and clamps her fingers around my arm, her nails digging through the fabric. “Can’t you just stay and talk? That’s all I’m asking.”

“If that’s all you’re asking, then why are you naked?” I wrench my arm out of her grip, holding back a hiss at the cut of her nails. “I’m done, Lucia. You need to stop. I’m not interested in you anymore, and I’m not getting back together with you.”

I give her one last look to make sure she understands how serious I am, but I don’t see acceptance in her expression, only hurt and rage.

Her pretty features twist. “Who is it? Is it one of those rich bitches your friends hang out with?”

Hating how closely she targets my obsession, I shake my head. “We were over long before any of those girls entered my life. I just kept hoping you’d finally get the picture.”

“Every time we argued, you’d fuck me, and we’d be fine.” She squares her shoulders, and it was like her tits punctuated her sentence. “We were working on our relationship, we were working on *us*. And then all of a sudden you throw me away?” Her eyes mist over.

I wince. I had given her the wrong impression. Instead of doing the right thing and cutting ties immediately, I dragged her along. I kept letting her think there was a future between us when I had no intention of carrying our relationship further than the bed we’d had makeup sex in. Guilty, I wish I could go back in time and realize we weren’t on the same wavelength.

“I’m sorry for how I behaved. I take responsibility for how I made you feel, and I should’ve ended it when I knew there was no hope.” I hold her devastated gaze. Can she see how serious I am? “I’m sorry. But we’re over.”

With that, I spin on my heel and march through the house to the back door I broke into. Staying would only mean more arguing. I don’t know how else to get Lucia to accept that we’re done. She needs to move on. She needs to find a healthier relationship, one that will fill her with confidence and not desperation. Sometime in the near future, she needs to realize that luring a man into a dark house and surprising him with sex isn’t the way to repair a broken relationship.

I keep my hat pulled down over my face and shove my hands in my pockets as I walk back to the vehicle. My mood sours with each step. This won’t be the end of it. Lucia might leave me alone and decide to move on, but I have to deal with my parents, and I have to decide what all that’ll mean.

I’m not exactly cut out for any other line of work. What résumé do I have to show for the last fifteen years of adulthood? Breaking and entering, interrogation, persuasion, inflicting blunt force trauma, and an amateur hacking ability—

all on top of murder. Not exactly the kind of guy companies are lining up to hire.

People don't get out of the contract-killing business. The job decides it's done with you, and if you're still alive at the end, it's a fucking miracle. I don't know what my parents will do when I talk to them, but I can't take another assignment, wondering if my ex will be flashing her vagina on the other side. It's not fair to me or her.

I hit the unlock button and open the driver's door. "Stay down," I tell Holland. I sound cranky as hell, and I am.

I fire up the engine and peel away. We're well past the point of surveillance. There's no reason Holland still needs to lie in the back seat, but I glower at the road, not ready to face what tonight meant. Mama let Lucia in on what our family really does.

"Can I sit up yet?" she asks tentatively from the back.

I squeeze my eyes closed for a heartbeat, then glue my gaze back on the quiet road. She sounds so tiny. I shouldn't have let her come. Hiding in the back seat on a warm night wasn't the better option. I should've asked Jacobi or Cannon for help and dropped Holland off at one of their places despite her protests to keep our friends out of it. "Yeah, you can sit up."

There's a rustle of fabric as she settles in the rear passenger seat and buckles herself in. From the corner of my eye, I catch the movement of her brushing hair out of her face.

"How'd it go?" she asks, cautious like she's afraid to hear the actual results.

I don't have it in me to lie. Maybe it's because I'm coming fresh off the reality of how leading Lucia on hurt both of us in the long run. I don't know. But the truth spills out. "It was a setup. My parents helped my ex surprise me. She was waiting for me, naked in bed." I continue to stare at the road as I maneuver through a couple of turns.

Holland's silence fills the cab. "Oh. That's unexpected."

"In so many ways."

She doesn't reply, and I'm not sure what to say until it dawns on me she might think I had a quick fuck before I came back to the car. And that bothers me.

"I didn't touch her." I wish I could see her expression.

"I bet she was disappointed." There's no judgment.

"I don't get it, Holland. I was a shitty boyfriend. I mean, I didn't insult her, I didn't abuse her, but I also didn't go out of my way for her. I did nothing to make her feel special. If I was Lucia, I wouldn't want another me, much less be going out of my way to win me back." The words rush out, but I don't regret them. I honestly don't understand. "Lucia can do so much better."

There's more rustling and I glance back. She's crossed one leg over the other. It's a good thing she's not sitting next to me. Those fucking leggings hide everything while teasing me with each curve. I don't need to cap off the crappy night by driving with an erection.

"I wish I had an answer for you. I grew up watching my mother get treated like she was less than nothing by my dad. But compared to all the other things I witnessed as a kid, it didn't seem so bad. It's amazing how we can justify horrible treatment."

I don't know how she grew up, but her parents likely had to fend off people like me. Maybe even people like my parents. That part of our lives sucked. But as far as family? I'm the opposite. I grew up watching my parents treat each other with nothing but love and respect. It's more normal than many might think. Compartmentalizing emotions is a tricky bitch, but relationships are hard for those in my line of work. We have to lie to the people we're supposed to be the most honest with. My way of life is everything, it has to be, and if I can't be honest about myself, then there is no point to a relationship. I might not have acknowledged that with Lucia, but I won't make that mistake again.



Holland

KASE IS quiet the rest of the way back to the rental. I think about what he said. His ex sounds a lot like my mom. She used to do outrageous things to get my father's attention. The older I got, the more embarrassed I was for her. Lucia's stunt tonight brings those emotions back.

I am determined not to end up like Gloria, married to a man who has a limited capacity for caring for others. I don't want that life, and I've been working so hard to pedal away from it. Unfortunately, that mountain has proved steep, and I'm slowly rolling backward.

Kase parks in the carport and ushers me into the house. I should go straight to the bedroom, but I'm wired from a night stuffed full of adrenaline with no outlet. My hands need to be busy. "How much will my sewing bother you?"

He flops on the couch. "It's not like I'll be able to sleep for a while. Go for it."

"Are you going to watch TV?"

His head rests on the back of the couch, his sooty eyelashes softening his edges. "You mind?"

I shake my head. "I like having the background noise when I work." But I'm not used to a person being in that background noise.

"I'm going to change," he says and disappears into the bedroom.

I stand for several minutes. I don't need to get out of my clothes. I wasn't in the same room as a naked ex, and it's not like I can crowd into the bedroom while he's getting dressed. He needs a moment. He's unbalanced. I don't like an unbalanced Kase, but this is a subject he needs to work through, something that involves more than him. I wish I could help, offer some advice.

Odd how my experience encompasses his, or rather Lucia's. She's a lot like Gloria. My mother got pregnant with

me to finally land Father, only to realize a life with Connor Gray is cold and empty. Is that what life with Kase would be like?

He's not cold, and he brims with emotions at times. I hold my breath waiting for them to spill out. But they don't. He's controlled, but not like my father. A trait that makes him infinitely more attractive.

As for the other side of his problem, I can certainly empathize with being pushed toward an unwanted marriage. It's not a fate I'd wish on anyone.

I finally shrug out of my sweater, dropping it on the couch where Kase had been sitting. My gaze touches the bedroom door.

Our clothes are mingled in that bedroom. And he's changing.

This whole situation feels . . . cozy. Kase is upset, and I want to help him feel better. I want to curl up on the couch with him and talk. Then I want to scoot closer until I'm on his lap. Because after the car wash, I'm not flinching at his touch—I'm craving it.

I fan myself with a hand and turn to my sewing machine and the pinned top I left half-finished to leave with Kase. Gently removing the Swiss cotton and taking it to the dining room table that's become my measuring, cutting, and pinning table, I dive into my work. As I'm putting my third pin in the hem, Kase comes into the living room wearing a white, muscle-hugging tee and basketball shorts. I shove the pin under my nail.

"Motherfucker." I clamp my finger between my lips.

He rushes to me. "Shit, what happened?"

What happened? I was admiring his muscles and picturing climbing over his body to see if it felt as hard as it looks. I've gotten a taste—of him and the planes of his abs—in the awkward confinement of his car, but that shirt . . .

"I stuck myself," I say around my finger.

He nimbly takes my hand from my mouth to inspect my wet fingertip.

How can this guy be so . . . so . . . jumbling? My senses are on fire. He's close. He's touching me. But he's had a shitty night, and all I want to do is strip down and have him position me the way his ex was waiting for him. I'm a horrible person. What happened tonight really bothered him and here I am fantasizing about it as my finger throbs.

He inspects my finger in the light that's way too dim to sew decently, but I can make a straight hem in my sleep. "It's starting to bleed. Have we got Band-Aids anywhere?"

"In my toiletry bag."

"I'll be right back." He releases me, and I'm tempted to shove my hand back into his. What, am I fourteen, wanting to hold a guy's hand?

"It's all right." I stick my finger back in my mouth and mumble around it. "It'll quit."

"You don't want to get blood on your work." He disappears into the bathroom and returns with a bandage. He opens it and beckons me to give him my hand again. More than happy to touch him, I present my extremely minor injury. He barely brushes my skin putting the bandage on.

"Maybe you should go into emergency services." My joke falls flat between us.

His brows draw together and my hand is my own once more. Is he going to tell me what a dumbass I am? He's often the guy responsible for emergency services. But he isn't like Josef. He's not a killer.

The corners of his jaw flex. "I wanted to join the Army when I graduated. To be a medic."

To go from one rigid existence to another? "I thought with the family business—"

The lost expression on his face tells me everything. He knew, but he hadn't *known* until he was stopped from following through on his dreams. "Too much investigation into

my life, for one. And then . . . I couldn't just leave." He gave a humorless chuckle. "Contract killing paid better. The benefits are shit, but to an eighteen-year-old who's been told he can't do anything for the rest of his life, it's addicting."

"I'm sorry," I whisper. I grew up with money, so all I saw was the danger in how my family lived. The restrictions. The isolation.

"It is what it is. I should've known it wasn't meant to be after . . ." Clouds darken his face, and sorrow lingers in his eyes.

"After what?" I ask softly, knowing he might end the conversation. I like being this close to him, learning about him. His world can be cold, but he burns like a hot poker. It's not a good fit. One spark and it's over for him.

He's mentioned enough in our time together—he doesn't want to be a hit man. He doesn't want to be a fixer. He wants his own life, and it's almost like he's tried pedaling his bike away from it all, but his mountain is as insurmountable as mine.

"My first kill was when I was fifteen." His tone is bleak. "I knew what my parents did, but the gravity of it hadn't sunk into my immature brain."

"That's not your fault."

"No. But the killing is. Poppa says it was self-defense, but that's little consolation."

I know exactly how that feels. Hard to argue self-defense when so many things shouldn't have happened to put him in that position. "Why were you so young?"

He huffs out a breath and sinks onto the couch. "They came into the restaurant one night after closing. This big-shot fixer got pissed my parents raised their prices and came to scare them. But my parents were out on a job. I was finishing the dishes."

His lost look told the rest of the story. A fifteen-year-old fought for his life and called on any training he had. I sit beside him and rest my hand on his forearm. His muscles

twitch under my hand. “It’s a terrifying position to be in.” He’d be surprised how well I know.

The way he looks through me tells me he sees more than I’m saying. He gives a final nod, like he’s decided not to ask. What would I tell him? I’m relieved I don’t have to decide. He already knows our worlds have some overlap, and he’s been content not to ask for specifics. I need him to continue being that way. I don’t want anyone dragged into my mess more than they are.

He sags into the couch. “I wish I could say that was when I realized my life was fucked up, but I was all in after that. Until . . .” He shakes his head. “There’s this guy we call a lot of different names. He’s the guy we use to scare people like us. I wanted to be like him. Be as good as him. Have a cool name like him.”

My breathing’s shallow. I can’t imagine a kid idolizing a man like that. Maybe Kase would think differently if he’d seen who he was talking about in action. The death, the destruction. “You were just a kid. You didn’t know any better.”

“A fifteen-year-old Donovan is hardly a kid. I was over six feet tall with the ego of a first-pick NBA draft.”

I smile, mostly to wipe out the anxiety this conversation is causing. “I know nothing about sports. I kept away from the gambling in my father’s casinos.” My hand’s still on him, his skin warm under mine. After the way he shared his past with me, I want to be closer to him. I stroke up his arm, enjoying the bulge of muscles under my fingers with the added sensation from the tickling of the dusting of hair on his arms. “But I’m glad you came to your senses.”

“Me too. It hasn’t been easy, but what happened was . . .” Those muscles in his jaw jump again and I can’t resist brushing my fingers over the spot.

“Bad?” I whisper.

“Yeah.” His voice is just as ragged as mine. He turns his head into my touch. “What’d you go through, Holland?”

I still, my fingertips still on his skin. What do I tell him? I lived a privileged life, but there was a cost I wish I'd been ignorant about. It was the truth. Kase opened up to me, and I couldn't slam the metaphorical door in his face. "When you're doing well in business, there are those who'd like to see you fail."

"They came after your dad?" He sounds surprised, but like he should've known, it was a given.

"Yes," I say, hating that I can't be fully transparent. He's not wrong, but there's more to the story. Only, it's not just my story. There's more than me involved.

"Who taught you to handle yourself?"

What he's asking is, *How could I have killed a man like Josef with nothing but a pair of scissors?* "Father thought I'd take over the business. I guess he still expects me to, in a way." I bite the inside of my cheek before I say too much. Kase is watching me with those hooded, dark eyes. My hand's now on his shoulder, and at some point, I migrated over the space between us and I'm pressed to his side. "That's why fashion week is so important."

"To succeed in your own right?"

I nod. "Something like that." I lick my bottom lip, and his gaze drops to my mouth. A kindling of heat ignites in my belly. It'd be easy to roll onto his lap, but I force myself to keep talking. "But that kind of life has a way of never letting you go."

His exhale is a scornful sigh. "Yeah. You don't leave this world. It kills everyone you love if you try. Do you think an industry full of people who know how to brutally intimidate for a living will let me just walk away? For no good reason? Even if I had my parents' support, it'd never happen. Too many people know their son does the same work. It's too late."

I usually like his confident authority, but right now, it's heartbreaking. He truly believes it's too late. Sad for him, I lay my head on his shoulder, longing to do more to make him feel better. To make him feel less alone. "I wish there was

something I could do for you. Suffice it to say, I owe you. For what it's worth, I respect the distance you're trying to put between you and your ex to keep her out of the life." My life would be different if someone had done that for me. My grandparents would've, but they'd been clueless, and that's what had made spending time with them a blissful escape.

"Fuck, Holland." He rests his head on the back of the couch once again. I let my eyes drift closed as he says, "I've never been able to talk to anyone about this. I wish you weren't a part of it, but . . . thank you. For listening."

"Mmm," is the only sound I make. My adrenaline has tanked, and sleepiness is taking over, thanks to the strong man I'm curled up against.

CHAPTER 8



*H*olland

I DON'T KNOW how long I dozed off, but the place is dark when I rouse. I'm still cozy warm. There's a big hand on my leg burning a brand through my leggings, and I don't want it to move.

Kase's breathing is even, and I can't tell if he's asleep or not. Before I lift my head, he says, "You can keep sleeping. If you're comfortable."

"I'm in your spot." I didn't move.

"No. I can't sleep," he says quietly. "Did you mean what you said? That you owe me?"

I lift my head, missing his hard shoulder under my cheek. It's an understatement. He hid a body for me. He's protecting me while I'm practically draped over him. I probably owe this man my life. "Yeah."

His throat works. "I could use your help."

It takes me a moment to realize he's serious. He's not talking about menial help, like moving a couch or reprogramming the remote for the TV. He's going to ask me for something he's not sure I'm willing to give.

"Okay?" What can a fashion designer do for a hit man with an obsessive ex?

“Mama thinks she’s helping me with Lucia, but if she thinks I’ve moved on . . .” When he rakes his gaze down my body, my lungs freeze. He’s not asking me for names of single friends who are into tall, dark, and mysterious men with a penchant for saving ladies in distress. Honestly, I don’t have many friends who’d fit the bill, and London and Penni are already taken by that exact description.

“Me?” The word comes out in a squeak. The rest leaves my lips in a sputter. “I know we’re pretending to be married for this place and when we’re in public, but in front of your *parents*?” Won’t they smell the lie before they meet me? Would they decide I’m in the way and send someone like Josef after me? How far would they go to handle Kase?

“Lucia already accused me of moving on with someone else.” Strain lines his expression. “She’ll tell Mama, and Mama will demand answers. She wants me to marry, and I need to stall her efforts. I don’t have to worry about whoever’s after you messing with my parents. It’s their funeral if they try. Just a dinner or two?”

“A dinner or two,” I echo. I’m willing to help him, but I had no idea how I’d be useful. Sidling up close to him and pretending I’m the woman who wants his future assassin babies in front of his killer parents isn’t on my list. Pretending for the sake of hiding is different than fooling people who are important in his life. I want to live an open, honest life, and this feels like a step backward.

“We’ll have to make it believable.” Heat darkens his eyes until I think he’s going to swallow me whole, and everything in me says *yes*. “That little kiss in the car wash isn’t going to cut it. If Mama doesn’t see right through it, Poppa will.”

“Little kiss?” It was the hottest kiss of my life. A kiss I could come from again and again while alone in the dark with my toys.

I have to push aside every reason why I want an excuse to put my lips on him again. If word gets back to Gray Towers and my father hears I’m serious about someone, he might come for me sooner than later. It would put everything I’ve

worked for at a greater risk than it already is. I don't want Kase caught in the cross fire.

He blinks like he snaps himself out of a trance. "Never mind."

"No," I say against my better judgment. It's hard to be reasonable and responsible when I might get to experience the heat from inside that car wash again—or more. My neglected libido betrays me. Sleeping while smashed against him is messing with my head. "What are you thinking? Do we have to, um . . ."

I almost said *Do we get to . . .* I want more than his lips. I want his body, his touch, and his . . .

I make the mistake of dropping my gaze to his crotch. The basketball shorts are as effective as air at holding back the steel rod forming. That's because of me. What we're talking about. The little kiss didn't feel so insignificant to him either. I don't tear my gaze away until he speaks.

"We don't have to," he says gruffly. "But you still need to be comfortable with my touch. When we're with them, you need to look at me like you're looking at me now."

"How's that?" Warmth steals up my cheeks. I have to be as red as a stoplight.

"Like you want to devour what you just had your eyes on." His voice drops lower, curling around my body like French silk. "Do you, Holland? Have you been fantasizing about me as much as I have been about you?"

"You have?" Another squeak. I'm more refined than this. I went to private school. I've seen things. But nothing has prepared me for a rough man like Kase telling me he desires me.

"Goddamn, Holland. You don't want to know what I've imagined."

My body burns. I've ignored men for too long, but they've all been easy to pass over. And this one has been too potent to even contemplate. "I want to know." I blink and shake my head. I can't afford to be entranced. "I can't . . ." He's done so

much for me. I can pretend to be his girlfriend, but the problem is that I don't want to stop there. We can't be a couple. Bad timing is an understatement. "I want to help you, but I can't have us be in a real relationship. I have my business and fashion week and I can't afford . . ."

He strokes his thumb against my lower lip, and I tingle like his finger packs a few watts. "I don't want a relationship, Holland. I want to lick over your curves and see if you're as sweet and hot as you look. Whatever we do"—he strokes his gaze down my body—"for practice, is purely physical. You don't want the shit I come with, and I don't want a relationship."

God, it's tempting. After last night, after my time on the floor of the car, I want to feel good. I don't want to be scared, and being with someone so strong and capable will wipe those emotions out. "Purely physical?"

He nods, solemn.

I run my lower lip through my teeth, and he tracks each millimeter.

Purely physical. That sounds . . . almost perfect. Risky, but worth it—if Kase is as good as that kiss promised. "So, I've never had a rock-my-world orgasm."

His body jolts like I'm the electrified one.

"I've given myself some good ones," I continue while my cheeks are hot enough to spontaneously combust. "But I really want to know what a *good* one is like. Like 'turn me inside out and slingshot me to the moon' good."

"Fuck, Holland," he utters, like my description is painful for him.

I hold a hand up. "I'm not sure about sex yet. I need to know I can keep this"—I wiggle my finger between us—"separate. I need to know I can keep good sex separate from feelings."

I wait for him to answer as the air's getting sucked out of the room. How did we go from "scared little me" and "him

doing a job” to talking about getting one another off to pretend we’re everything to each other in front of his parents?

I don’t have an answer, but he does. “Take your clothes off and get on the bed.”



Kase

CAN I keep the blooming chemistry between us separate from feelings? Holland’s concerns are more than valid, but I know myself. I’m obsessed with her. I want to know how she tastes. I want to know the sounds she makes when she’s about to come. I want to feel her body clamp around me when she climaxes.

Does it mean I’ll ever want to settle down and have kids?

No.

So, I’m good. She’s made it clear she’s not looking for more, at least not with me. We’ll take this at her pace. If she starts to fall, she’ll come to her own conclusion that I’m not the guy for her. I’m not a guy to settle down with. I have too many skeletons in my closet, and I have parents who might hate her because she’s not Lucia. They opened the door to our world to Lucia, trusting her more than I do.

It’ll all be pretend—and we can add to that legitimacy by doing exactly what I plan to do to her. I want to strip her down, but the less I have my hands on her, the easier it will be to tell myself she isn’t mine to keep. Undressing a woman can be incredibly intimate. Getting someone off can be clinical. It can be hot, earth shattering like she wants, but still clinical.

Hearing her breathy moans in my ear as I take off her underwear? Intimate. Then I’ll start noticing the styles she likes, the fabrics. I’ll ask her about them and she’ll tell me and it’ll lead to deeper conversations. Intimate.

I can't have it be like laying her head on my shoulder after I shared one of the worst things that had happened to me. I can convince myself what's growing between us is friendship. An understanding. That's harder to do when I'm taking her clothes off.

"Holland," I say, desperate for her to keep this generic. Because I think I could sleep next to her all night with her spooned into me, and she'd be a perfect fit. "Go to the bedroom."

Her lips part and her pupils dilate. "Oh. Okay."

She thought we'd get started here. It makes sense. The bedroom is where couples sleep together. But we're not a couple, and I'm taking the couch. I can't have the faint smell of lemons and sex where I'm supposed to get rest and convince myself there's no reality where Holland's mine.

She stands, her hand on my lap like she's seeking support. Are her legs wobbly? Because of us?

Does she need a hard release like she said, or has she been imagining the sordid things I have since I first saw her? I'm disillusioning myself.

I follow her, stalking her like I can't wait to sink my teeth into her flesh, and well, that's the truth.

She stops at the edge of the bed and faces me, taking a deep breath.

I block all the need from my face and issue the order for something I want to do so badly. "Undress."

Her sharp exhale echoes in the room. She rips her top off, and my breath whooshes out. I've seen her in swimsuits at Jacobi's. I've tracked every detail about her. The muscles and curves in her thighs and her ass, the dip of her waist and the flare of her bust. She's an hourglass, and without the constraints of her clothing, her curves are tangible. They're real.

Seeing her is like a blast of heat from head to toe, circling and concentrating like a fist around my cock. I struggle to be clinical. Detached, at least somewhat.

Seeing her this undressed only proves what a good designer she is. She doesn't fabricate styles to hide the body but to showcase it. She's not holding herself together with shapewear, ribbing, or corsets. She's allowing women to be themselves and to wear nice clothing without having to conform to what society dictates is beautiful.

Her drive is humbling—and sexy. But when women notice how her clothing only enhances what they love about themselves, she'll be a star.

And if I can keep thinking about Holland, the designer, maybe I can get her to orgasm without blowing against the sheets. I've never come when I haven't meant to. I grew up learning and demonstrating self-control.

“Now the bra.” How I don't croak like a frog, I don't know. My guts are crawling into my throat. I want to jump around like a teen getting his first car.

She runs that plump lip through her teeth again, and my erection pounds against the flimsy fabric of my shorts. Finally, she reaches back and unhooks the bra cradling her tits, like I want to, in the palms of my hands.

I hold my breath. Her boobs bounce free like they're rejoicing at being unencumbered. My legs twitch to close the short distance between us.

Later. When I get myself under control.

She dips her fingers under the waistband of her leggings, and my restraint cracks. I drop to my knees and drag her damn clothing down to her feet with the fire-engine-red painted toenails.

“Kase.” My need echoes in her voice.

I look up, past the dips and swells around her thighs and the junction that's waiting for me. But I don't want to take her like this. I want her spread out for me like a feast. “Get on the bed.”

She backs up, and I nearly grab her to bring her closer. To bury my face between her legs, the heat coming off her only making it harder to retain the tight hold I have on myself.

Carefully, she sits on the bed and scoots herself back.

Christ. The sight that greets me is all pink, ripe flesh, and it's emblazoned into my brain, ready to snap the hold I have on myself. I swallow hard, clutching my conviction tightly. I can do this. It's only my dream come true, but I've given up dreams before.

I just . . . I just need one thing. I'm going to be selfish for a moment. "Spread your legs."

She does, leaning on her elbows.

There it is. The image that's haunted me all night.

"Is this how you saw . . . her?"

Thinking about Lucia beats some of the blood out of my erection. "When I saw her, all I could picture was you. Exactly like this."

Her brows lift, and the pink in her cheeks deepens. "What else did she do?"

She might sound timid, but that's one thing I'm learning about Holland. All that soft packaging hides a woman who doesn't let fear rule her. "She touched herself."

Holland trails her hand over her hip to her clit. Her body trembles as she brushes her fingers over her clit, and a soft moan escapes her.

"Fuck." Seeing her in real life obliterates my fantasy. I dive onto the bed and between her legs. "Move your hand," I growl as if I'm jealous of how she can touch herself anytime she wants.

As soon as my tongue touches her hot skin, I'm gone. Generic isn't a word when it comes to Holland. Maybe I can remain detached. I lap against her clit. She gasps and falls backward, her fingers twining into my hair.

Fuck detached. She's everything I'd hoped for. Sweet and salty and wet and it's for me. This girl I've low-key stalked since I met her is dripping for me, her legs wrapped around my ears and her grip tugging at my head.

I devour every inch of her before settling on a steady pace that keeps her riding my tongue. I wait to add fingers until I can tell she's ready to explode, then I back off with my tongue and thread one inside.

"Fuck, Holland. *Fuck.*" None of the fabric she works with can be as soft as her.

Her hips ratchet off the bed. I hold her to my face with my free hand, using my other to thrust a finger in and out of her.

When she comes against my face, it's glorious. The reaction every guy wants out of the woman he's doing this to. Pure, unadulterated ecstasy, all because of my tongue and one finger. The way my name rips from her lips and echoes off the walls strokes my male ego. It is like all the experiences in my life were for this moment, for her.

I ease away as she comes down from her peak, loving every quiver of her body. What will her reaction be? We wanted purely physical, and her orgasm nailed it, but I'm having a hard time keeping my mind out of this moment, from thinking about how I could get used to having her in my bed for the rest of my life.

She's panting, still catching her breath. Her lazy gaze is on the ceiling, and she trails the fingers of one hand over her chest. Her legs are limp on either side of my shoulders.

I can't bring myself to push off the mattress. I'm still dressed, but pinning my erection between me and the bedding gives me some sense of control.

Her left leg twitches. "I knew it could be like that."

I didn't. Sure, I had gotten my girlfriends off. I've perfected my technique over the years. But my insides never felt like they got torn apart and tossed into space like they did with her. My mind would always be calm, thinking about the next move, if we were going to have sex or planning my next job. But my mind is as much of a mess as my body.

I struggle for a light tone. "So I did good?"

"You know you did."

This time I push back and my dick juts out like an angry telephone pole. Her gaze touches on the tenting of my shorts, and it's as if she took that red tongue of hers and licked straight up the shaft.

“What about you?” she asks.

“I'll be fine.” I'm not fine.

If she sucks that lower lip between her teeth one more time, I'm going to have the most painful ejaculation of my life. And I haven't had an early release since I made it through puberty.

“Lie down,” she says and pats the bedding next to her as she slides to the side.

Suddenly my brain realigns itself and comprehends exactly what she's suggesting. Getting her comfortable enough to act like she's been intimate with me because we've been intimate doesn't include her getting me off. I've acted my entire life. If she touches me, it's going to be more painful to remind myself this is temporary. “I . . . can't.”

She frowns. “Why not?”

If honesty doesn't scare her off, then I'm a doomed man. But I don't want her to think what we just did was a turnoff. I can go the rest of my life without touching a woman and use this night as a way to get myself off. “Because if you wrap your hand or your mouth around my dick, I'm going to want to bury my head between your legs again.”

Instead of trepidation, intrigue flits through her expression. “You can make me come again?”

This girl is going to kill me. The hopeful note in her tone is as good as a challenge, and I don't come from a family that ignores those.

I need to. Tasting her changed my life. My mind churns for a solution—*how do I let her down and preserve myself?* She should be comfortable enough with me after that.

But . . . she isn't professing her love. She wants to mess around. I do too. So why am I holding back? This is my life. I

can go through the motions, knowing this isn't going to end the way I want.



Holland

I'VE NEVER BEEN in this position before. I've heard enough about it. One time, a guy I dated in college wanted to try it, but I barely knew him and wasn't comfortable.

I barely know Kase, but that seems like an argument for another day. I cling to the necessity of our actions. If his parents are going to buy that I'm Kase's "one and only" and "happily ever after," then they have to buy we've been sleeping together.

Sitting on his face while my mouth is wrapped around his cock should do the trick. What we've done tonight is going to keep me melted to him until the ruse is no longer useful. I don't want to think about what happens then.

I'm good at pretending until a deadline hits. And Kase's talented tongue is making it easy. I'm not sure I can come again, but Kase seems to sense I need to be slowly warmed up. He doesn't attack me like he did earlier, which was delicious, but I'm sensitive and not used to such an experienced partner.

I didn't think guys could keep going either, but Kase is proving that preconception wrong. He warned me it wouldn't take long once I started handling his erection, and he was right. I could've won an award for fastest blow job and been ridiculously excited about the recognition. But it's the second round for each of us, and we're taking our time, exploring. I love the way his powerful body is under me, his hips lazily undulating as I pump the base of his shaft and roll my tongue around his tip. It's a new experience. This isn't a race for the finish. We're enjoying ourselves.

Kase is making me feel good. Like myself. Like I have control when the rest of my life is being decided by someone

else. I wouldn't think I'd have those emotions since Kase is the one causing the pleasure, but it's empowering in a primal sort of way. A piece of the puzzle that has been missing from my identity. I can be myself, and I can be free around someone else. Wouldn't it be nice if that was my future?

But I only have him for now.

The thought adds urgency to my experience, like I have to fit it in before we have to go our separate ways. The ride to my crest shortens, and I'm nearing another peak.

Ripples of tension roll through his body and into me. He's getting close again too. I wiggle my hips, loving the way he answers with his tongue. I continue bobbing, sliding my mouth up and down the shaft, enjoying how he coils tighter and tighter until I can't tell where I stop and he begins.

Electricity swirls down my spine, and even with my ass in the air, heat blooms from where he's touching me, from where he's pumping his fingers in and out, and definitely from where his tongue strokes my clit.

A long groan rumbles through him and his ball sac tightens. He's close. Empowered, I ride his face faster. I'm about to explode too. Nothing can convince me I've gone too far with him.

We come together, our cries muffled by each other. Another sexual tale I thought was untrue obliterated. I can orgasm more than once a night, and I can come at the same time as my partner.

I swallow him down as he licks up my release, and then we both roll to our sides. He helps me flip around and tucks me into his chest. Spooning. I've never really cuddled with a guy after sex. Would it have felt as right as this? It was my college years, and there was always somewhere else to be or a place I shouldn't be, like the dorm rooms. And I never wanted to foster a deeper relationship, knowing what was in store for me.

But I'm giving myself this moment. It'll only help our image with his parents.

The first round would've done that, but I push the thought from my mind. Kase's mom and dad have to be extremely attuned to lying and deception. What if Kase and I need to reach a point where we almost believe we're a real thing?

It's only temporary. As long as I keep reminding myself about the end goal and picture my father's stern gaze boring into me as I sign the contract, then I'll be fine. My heart will permanently remain locked in my chest. And if for some reason that doesn't work, then I'll remind myself about how Kase and his family are too close to what I grew up with. Too close to the last thing I would ever want my life to look like again.

Now that I've reiterated all the reasons why Kase and I are nothing more than pretend, I close my eyes and relax into his embrace. Just for a little while.

CHAPTER 9



Holland

I WOKE up alone this morning, and I was still fighting off the feeling of being let down. Kase respected a boundary. If he crossed it, things would be more complicated than they already were. We're getting comfortable with each other on an intimate level, but waking up together is a new level of intimacy. After being so . . . sexual last night, I'm glad he took the couch before he fell asleep. I'm also sad, and that's messed up.

I accept that things are going to be complicated between us no matter what—look at who we are—and the rest of the day has been about work and catching up. Kase is acting the same, like he didn't turn my world upside down and sideways all night. I struggle to behave the same. We're making our calls. Me to my work, and him to his mom.

I'm listening to Sahara's updates while I'm sitting at the table with my sketchbook open in front of me. I fight the temptation to grab Kase's keys and rush out the door. Things have been going fine, but talking with her has only highlighted how behind I've gotten.

"You have your opening piece and the showstopper completed?" she asks.

My stomach knots itself into a pretzel. "I have . . . So, the showstopper . . ." I squeeze my eyes shut and drop my shoulders. Sahara can sniff out bullshit fifty miles away. She'll

know if I'm bluffing, and I owe the truth to the crew that's holding up the rest of my business while I'm supposed to be creating looks for a fashion week collection that'll catapult all of us into a lucrative space. "No. I'm still working on both of those, and I'm reconsidering the designs."

"Why?" Normally I love Sahara's bluntness, but today, it's like a knife shredding my designs.

"I'm not feeling it." Technically true. But I've also killed a guy, scrubbed any trace of him out of my house, and I've been in hiding for days. Making a killer look has taken on a new meaning.

And this morning I've done fuck all other than cutting out a couple pairs of shorts—for Kase. He normally wears black pants and a dark shirt because he's usually working. But he can't take any more jobs while he's protecting me, and I have ten more outfits to pull together in less than two months for a pivotal moment in my career. I should've been so much further ahead by now.

"Okay," Sahara says with utter confidence I'll pull through. "Well, Tanisha is working on the beading on the two wrap dresses. You should see the purple one on the mannequin. Va-va-voom."

A big compliment from Sahara. She doesn't throw them out without sincerity, and she has a good idea of what looks good. "That's the goal."

"But she wants to know if she should go ahead and pair the accessories with the dresses or if you have an idea of what you want."

We're back to talking about regular business. My comfort zone. The place I'm going to miss the most when my father comes calling. "No. Tanisha can show me what she comes up with, and I'll let her know if I have any modifications."

"Got it," Sahara says in a singsong voice. Her expression is probably more "dead behind the eyes" than "sunny and cheerful." I've always marveled at her phone skills and how she can be two different people at the same time.

I should've taken notes during the time she's been with me. While I'm on the phone with work, Kase is telling his mom about his new girlfriend and how he thinks she's the one. I'm supposed to be that girl.

In a different life, I'd think Kase is the one.

Ripples flutter through my belly. I didn't mean to fall asleep in his arms, but he exhausted me. It's hard to admit how much I miss experiencing what it would be like to wake up with him in bed, and I wish there was more relief. He did the right thing, but dammit. I could fall so easily.

Sahara said something I missed while lost in thought. "What was that?"

There's a beat of silence. "Are you okay, Holland? You haven't been yourself for the whole conversation, and on top of this impromptu workcation, I'm not sure what to think. Click your tongue twice if you're in trouble."

I am in so much trouble. In a variety of different ways. I was born a Gray, and my last name rules me. I'm trying to keep my mind out of the business of Kase's orgasms and how nice it was to be curled up in his arms. I have skeletons in my closet, too close to the literal sense. And someone is still probably trying to kill me.

None of that is anything Sahara can help me with. "I'm fine. Really. I think it's all the pressure of fashion week. There's so much riding on how well we do. It's getting to me." Not a lie.

"I understand. If it wasn't for Lorelei and her lies, your debut at L.A. Fashion Week last year would've done what you needed it to do. That's when I knew I wanted to work with you. I was in awe of every piece on the runway but mostly with how relaxed and happy you were. So different than Monsieur Green. I thought for sure people would be saying your name on the red carpet during the Oscars."

It's rare for Sahara to open up as much as she has, and it heaps on piles of guilt. I have three full-time staff counting on me. Part-time staff who trust me to be better than their

previous employers. Contractors who are depending on payments. I can't mess this up. Someone might be trying to hurt me, but I can't let them hurt everyone around me. "I needed to hear that, Sahara. It's invigorating."

"I'm glad you didn't say inspiring. I would've heaved."

I chuckle. The lightness in our conversation feels good. "I'll be looking for Tanisha's photos, otherwise I'm going to put my head down and work all day. I'll send the measurements for Anna when I get some done."

"You got it, girl. Ten more looks and the collection is complete. We'll keep watch over your genius work here. Byyye."

I put the phone down and stare at the empty sketchbook in front of me. Inspiration is slow to come.

Kase comes out of the bedroom and saunters into the kitchen to lean against the counter. "Well, that's done."

I pop my head up and whoa. He's wearing gray sweats with no shirt. Delicious abs hint at what's under the sweats. And those cut shoulders. My body remembers everything he can do. Awareness sizzles under my skin. Is it too soon for another orgasm? No, no, no. I need to work all day. There is no time for play or pretend. My design and sewing work is normally an oasis, but it's a necessity today. There are more people than just me who will be affected.

"That bad?" I ask as I swivel around in my seat to face him.

"She was shocked. Poppa doesn't believe me." He rolls his shoulders like he's shaking off the stress of the phone call. "But I've convinced them to at least give you a chance."

"Did you tell them anything about me?" Other than someone tried to use their system to have me killed.

"They'll do their own research. And they probably won't like you based on principle. So, dinner on Sunday?" he asks as if I have a plethora of events to fit a dinner into.

I kick up a brow. "Dinner? So soon?"

“Yep. Like a normal family.” His tone said there was nothing normal about his family. There was nothing mundane about mine either. But growing up, we’d been known to sit down at the same table and talk as if we were in the suburbs instead of a twenty-million-dollar penthouse.

“Do we need to bring anything?” A slight tremble runs through my fingers, and I cross my arms to cover my anxiety. I’ve only met one set of parents, and that had been enough for a lifetime. In college, I never dated anyone long enough to meet the parents. It would’ve been detrimental for both of us.

“Just our happy selves.” His gaze shifts to the table behind me. “What are you working on?”

I push a hand through my hair. It’s been days since I’ve styled it. I miss getting glammed up, but it’s nice not to have to adopt a persona to walk out the door. I like my style, but I was using it like armor to go into battle every day. “I’m supposed to be working on ten more looks for fashion week. I should at least have all the designs prepared, but it’s a big show and it’s like my brain’s shutting down.” With the stress of everything that’s been happening, I’m not in an inspired state.

“Don’t these things have themes?”

“You follow fashion week?” I have learned not to underestimate people, but I am still human. It’s easy to write off the Kase-as-a-gentleman thug, but there’s a lot more to him than he lets on. And the longer I’m around, the more interested I am in finding out everything about him.

These are exactly the moments when I have to be careful.

“I don’t follow them, per se. But I’ve gone to one before. Mom was working on a job, and she had to figure out how to get close to a target.” He lifts a shoulder as if to acknowledge that of course it would deal with his line of work and include violence. Doesn’t he have anything that’s an escape?

He could’ve gone to fashion week and thought about what a waste of time and resources it is. That’s how many people outside of the industry view my line of work and the shows, but he’d paid attention to other aspects like the theme.

“I wanted my theme to be empowerment,” I say. I page through my sketchbook, irritation growing. Nailing my theme is critical. It’s symbolic, and if I don’t, then what if it parallels real life? What if I don’t nail my goals? “The pinup style is from almost a century ago but is loosely equated with the idea of a sexy but modern, independent woman. The idea that a girl can be curvaceous, in-your-face sexy, but also strong and capable, like Rosie the Riveter. I wanted to build on that, but . . .”

“It feels like low-hanging fruit?”

Stunned, I stare at him. He identified what I hadn’t been able to define in weeks. “Exactly. New York Fashion Week is supposed to propel me forward. It’s supposed to lift my business off the ground and get me international notice so I can create a sturdier foundation that’ll take care of the people relying on me. It needs to give me a name most of all. Sexy but modern independent woman is exactly what we are, but I just feel”—I flail my hands around—“that it’s not enough, that I need to go deeper. But when I think about it harder, I feel like I would have more luck banging my head against the wall.”

He crosses to the table and casually flips through the sketches. I can’t tell what he’s thinking, but I know what he sees. Hip-hugging skirts, bustier tops, garters, hairstyles ala rollers and curlers, but nothing truly inspired. His calm perusal of my roughest ideas leaves me more exposed than when I was lying with my legs wide open in front of him.

“I can come up with designs in my sleep. I can sketch a whole line in a day. But there’s nothing in my pieces that tells people they should pay five thousand dollars for just one item by BommGirl.” It’s not a recipe. I can’t add more garlic, some spice, and make my drawings instantly better. And I’m not a simple cook. I’m a classically trained chef working with empty cupboards and a knife at my throat.

“They’re good.”

His tone might be honest, but he nails the problem with one word. Good. “I need them to be phenomenal. This is *New York Fashion Week*. I can’t go in and be . . . *boring*. There’s so

much riding on this.” I haven’t let myself think of life after fashion week. It’s a void of nothingness, just as I’ll be if I fail.

“Doesn’t New York have a fashion week every year?”

I nod and press my palm to my forehead. “Yes, but then I’ll be twenty-six and . . . and then all—” I should tell Kase everything. I should tell him why there’s an invisible clock counting down over my head. But I’ve never told anyone. Not even Gloria knows. As always, she’s happily ignorant of what I’m going through. I was dragged into my own situation, a victim of birth and circumstance. I can’t risk doing the same with anyone else. “I have faith I can build a strong business. But I need more than that. I need to build a name. Recognition. A lot of it.”

He frowns as if he senses more in my words than what I’m actually saying.

“Why do you need the recognition, Holland? Is it about the money? Is your dad holding it over your head?” Anger’s pinching his words.

“Not like you think.” I chew on my lower lip, hating the words that are going to come out. Hating that I was born Holland Gray while at the same time utterly grateful I wasn’t the only son of Connor Gray. Had I been born a boy, I wouldn’t have been given this chance to establish my own independence. I’d be carrying on my father’s legacy.

“I am supposed to get married when I turn twenty-six. An arranged marriage type of thing.” It’s out. I’ve told someone. My mother doesn’t know, and she wouldn’t care. If she had given a damn about me, she wouldn’t have left. Will Kase care?

His dumbfounded expression is the first time the hard angles of his face soften. “You’re engaged?”

“No. I’m free to do what I want until then, as long as it doesn’t include any long-term relationships.” I look toward the bedroom. Messing around is all I’ve been allowed since that fateful day I was summoned to Father’s office at nineteen. “My father is a lot of things, a lot of things people don’t know

about, but at his core, he's a businessman. And he cares about me, but a man doesn't make billions by letting his heart get in the way of his decision-making." I'm an asset.

"So let me get this straight." He props a hand on his hip and his pose gets more distracting since he's closer. His body is a sin. "You don't want to get married, but he's forcing you to."

"I agreed to it." There had been a serious lack of other options.

"But you don't want it?" He seems to be struggling to understand the arrangement. Taking hits out on people makes more sense to him than forcing a daughter to marry someone she doesn't want to. And my situation becomes more pathetic.

"I was young. There was an issue in my father's business," I say carefully. Father's business is building casinos, but very few people know the real Connor Gray, and I've got to protect Kase by making sure he doesn't learn who my father really is. "One of his business partners has one living son, and they run a family business." Too much like Kase's family business for comfort. "And his son is a playboy who doesn't want to settle down and, therefore, isn't having children. So, the partner made my father a deal, but I was only nineteen. His son threw a fit about my age."

"At least there's that," Kase says, his tone hot.

He doesn't know how much of a window of opportunity the son's hesitation created. Patrick Mason would've gladly taken me to bed, but settling down was the equivalent of a daily root canal. The idea I might infringe on his evenings and dictate who he took to bed was unappealing.

Ugh. I've been trying not to think of Patrick. Fashion week is my golden ticket. "They formed a contract and set a deadline. Father tried to get me ten years before I had to marry, but . . ." I shudder. Patrick's father was worried about the state of my fertility. "They settled on twenty-six. Afterward, my father told me this is my only chance. I needed to make something of myself, basically become powerful enough to make me an undesirable match."

“I don’t get it. If that guy wants a baby, can’t he just knock someone up?”

“Patrick and his father don’t live in the same world we do.” That’s an understatement. The people in my father’s world are run by different morals. “I know it’s a long shot, but if I become a worldwide name, then there will be too much fame and publicity attached to me. I wouldn’t make a good wife for a guy like his son.” People in the Masons’ line of work don’t want paparazzi showing up on their doorstep. They don’t want names in articles, and they don’t want faces that can be recognized all over the world.

They don’t want reporters asking, *What happened to fashion ingenue Holland Gray?*

Kase’s gaze travels over the piles of fabric around the room. “Why fashion? Why not acting or . . .” He shakes his head. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad you didn’t—but porn?”

“Nineteen-year-old me would’ve been eaten alive by the porn industry.” No pun intended. I might’ve gotten chewed up and still had to marry a near stranger. “I wouldn’t have known enough to make a name for myself; I would’ve just gotten used. I suck at acting, but I like to sew. My grandma taught me, and when I was younger, my mom and I would come up with fashions for my dolls.” Before she got too jaded to have anything pure and innocent in her life.

“So you went to school, learned everything you could, and hit the ground running with your daddy’s money?”

“He didn’t give me the money out of some fatherly sense of protection. His public persona is secure enough to endure any overflow a spotlight shining on me would create. He wants me to earn my own freedom, so in turn he’ll be free from the contract and from the family I’m supposed to marry into.” He and I can’t back out of the deal without serious repercussions, but if the other party severed the deal, I’d be free. Father could handle what he needed to in order to keep his business secure.

“Shit.”

I pushed my hair back. “Yeah.”

“So is there anything I can help with?”

My chuckle’s weak. “Help me think of some looks to bookend my show that are so fantastic no one will be able to get my name out of their mind, and they’ll tell all their friends and colleagues, and then I’ll catapult to stardom, everyone saying my name on red carpets all over the world.”

Undaunted, he retrieves my sketchbook from the table and pages through the pictures again, slower this time, his long fingers nimble, making tingles spread over my body. He goes to the couch, and I get up and follow. I’ve been sitting in one place too long.

“I mean, these are good,” he says as he sinks down, “but I can see where they’re missing passion.”

My feelings might be hurt, but his insight is invaluable. Kase isn’t a regular guy. He was raised being trained to see what others don’t. He was trained to spot weaknesses in ways to physically and mentally get to his targets.

Passion is mental. Maybe he can help me. He knows me better than anyone now. I sit on the other side of the couch. “Pretend you got hired by Monsieur Green.”

“Who?”

“My biggest rival—in L.A. Our styles are different, but since our arcs are parallel, we’re often critiqued together. Say he hires you to get to me. Not to kill me, but to mess with my mind. To make me basically throw fashion week.”

One of his brows kicks up. “How’s this going to help?”

“You’d study me to try to get into my house and my head.” He’s done both so easily. Now I need him to branch out in my head. He knows what makes me ignite in bed, and he hasn’t even been inside me. Can he do the same with my inspiration? “What notes would you take?”

He tosses the sketchpad on a cushion between us and crosses his arms. Leaning against the side of the couch, he thinks for a moment. “Your looks are the first thing everyone

notices. You embody your bombshell fashion from head to toe, yet . . .” His gaze traces down my body, and I come alive, secretly hoping we’ll undress and jump back into bed. But I have work to do. “Since you were attacked, you’ve been all California girl.”

“I’m a Vegas girl.”

He rubs his chin between his thumb and forefinger, studying me. There’s a glimmer of heat in his eyes but nothing else sexual. He’s doing what I asked him to, and the thought sparks a warm glow deeper inside me than anyone’s been able to reach before.

“Vegas girl, showgirls, casinos, poker chips, Mafia, desert,” he rattles off.

My blood pressure spikes high, and I shake my head. “I don’t want any part of my old life in my work.”

“But it’s a part of you. You’re ignoring an entire side of yourself that could help you get to where you want to be. This is *the* show, Holland. You’re hanging all your hopes and dreams on New York Fashion Week, and if you’re only using half of what you are, how do you expect to hit your goal?”

I’ve been running from that half since I saw how dark Father’s business could be. “I can see where you’re coming from.” Doesn’t mean I want to delve into my shadows and pull out secrets.

He points to my sketchbook. “What I see on the pages, what you’ve already done, is everything we’ve seen before. There’s a little bit of you in those drawings, but not much. Holland, you’re gorgeous. When you open your mouth, it’s clear you’re intelligent, and it doesn’t take long to realize you’re strong. But there’s a vulnerability there. You hide a lot of yourself—from your friends, from your lovers, and probably from your coworkers. It comes naturally to you. Because you hid yourself from your parents.”

I blink back sudden tears. I didn’t need to hide from them. I was a tool for Gloria, and when I wasn’t useful, she walked. Father wanted to make me into an instrument like him and I

balked. If I could run from who I am, I would, but fleeing would be pointless. “I wanted to disappear. So many times. Between Gloria and then my father . . .” I almost say too much. There are more secrets that need to stay buried, and Kase makes it easy to talk. He makes it easy to be me. And then I’m only reminded of what it really means to be a Gray.

“Quit hiding, then maybe you’ll find your answer.” He pushes off the couch and wanders into the kitchen. “I’ll make us some lunch and put some coffee on so it can sit for hours until it’s old and just the way you like it.”

The urge to cry hasn’t left me yet. It doesn’t take long to figure out why. Kase is the first person to see me. He’s the first person to make me wonder what it would be like to have a relationship. To trust someone with everything. To have him as my protector, not just in the literal sense, but with my emotions, with my heart. Getting this close to Kase is only going to destroy me if my big fashion week gamble doesn’t pay off. I’ll go to an arranged marriage knowing exactly what I’m missing.

CHAPTER 10



*K*ase

TONIGHT'S GOING to either be such a resounding success that my next biggest problem will be figuring out how to orchestrate a legitimate breakup with Holland that my parents will buy or an utter failure that'll end with a knife to Holland's throat. If we fail, Mama and Poppa will figure out Holland knows everything. The biggest sin I can commit.

Lucia might know that my parents, or at least Mama, are willing to break and enter and maybe rough someone up. She doesn't know about the contracts. The hits. My family wouldn't bring her into the fold if she wasn't a sure thing. Holland knows, and I don't want to be in a position to choose between her and my parents. It's a losing scenario.

Holland and I seem to be involved in a few no-win situations. An arranged marriage. I'm able to avoid the one Mama would like to arrange with Lucia. Holland was young and backed into a corner. For a while, we can help each other out.

I open the door to the restaurant and let Holland walk in first. She looks like a farm girl pinup walked out of a calendar in a sunny-yellow top with lacy frills and jean shorts that show off her figure perfectly. The style doesn't fit her theme for fashion week, but it's a testament to her skill and talent.

Following her in, I put my hand on the small of her back and glance around. The restaurant will be closing soon, but a

few customers linger, chatting quietly. Savory smells engulf us, and I'm transported to my childhood. Doing homework in the corner while Mama served me Poppa's newest concoction. His Irish-Mexican blends have become a mainstay on the menu.

How much would I have given to have been raised as the sullen kid of workaholic restaurant owners who were only restaurant owners?

I steer Holland through the maze of tables to the side door by the kitchen. My tension hits a new, all-time high. If this was a normal night with a girl like Holland on my arm, one I was serious about spending the rest of my life with, I would've been elated. She's perfect. And getting between her legs again last night only proved how explosive we are together.

She draws the line at sex, and we did everything but. I could think of a thousand ways to make her come without using my dick, so that's fine. Each time I see her bare flesh, I don't question how far past the point of "being familiar with each other" we are. Each night, I hope I get my fill, but I'm afraid to admit that may never happen.

Since she's supposed to fucking marry someone, I'll have to figure out how to forget her and move on, alone. Whether she succeeds or fails, she's not mine, but I'll do what I can to make sure she survives long enough to try.

Mama waits at the end of the hall by the door to their apartment. Her black hair is pulled back into a tight bun, and she's wearing all black like usual. She's thinner than I remember, but it could be the shadows. Only the kitchen lights are on, as if to signal that we're here for a perfunctory meal and nothing else.

"Kase." Her voice is grave, as if I'm coming to tell her I'd messed up a job, and the target had seen my face, knew my name, and even my address.

Poppa's deep voice rumbles from behind us. "I'll be there in a few minutes."

Holland jumps, letting out a yelp. Annoyed at Poppa, I tuck her closer into my side. He intentionally lingered in the dark behind us.

Holland lets out a nervous chuckle. “Oh, my. You scared me.” She glances over her shoulder at Poppa, but he’s already gone. She frowns, and I’m tempted to smooth her frown lines away. It’s best to ignore her reaction in front of Mama, or Mama might see it as weakness and a sign Holland isn’t right for me.

Mama’s expression hardens as she takes in Holland’s appearance. True to herself, Holland curled her hair and pulled it back in a tight ponytail, the curls creating a cloudy bouffant. Then she donned tight jean shorts with bright-white stitching and her sunny-yellow top is a cross between a bustier and a camisole. She’s fucking sexy from her crown of curls down to her freshly painted “Hot Rod Red” toes.

“Mama, this is Holland.” I rub a circle on Holland’s back with my thumb to give her reassurance. “Holland, this is—”

“Angela,” Mama says in a flat tone.

As if she doesn’t notice Mama’s attitude, Holland gives a cheerful wave. “Hiya, Angela.”

Mama does a shit job hiding her eye roll and hip checks the apartment door open. “Might as well come in. We’re having the restaurant special tonight.”

I hold in a small grin. She makes it sound as if we’re making do with the restaurant’s leftovers, but she plans the menu based on what she feels like eating. She isn’t serving food she hates or that I’ll dislike—the best sign that she hasn’t completely written Holland off.

As I lead Holland into my parents’ place, the apartment I grew up in, I try to see it from her eyes. When I first brought Lucia here, she prattled on about it the entire night after we left. She lamented about Mama’s decorations, the smells infiltrating from the restaurant, and the age of the furniture. *You’d think after years of running a restaurant, they’d be able to afford something more than that old place.*

I didn't tell her how it's easier to clean dirty money with a legitimate business. Or how strangers coming and going get ignored in a restaurant but would garner the wrong kind of attention in a neighborhood, especially with the types of people my parents employed. I sure didn't tell her there are some things Hollywood movies get right, and business in the back of a restaurant is one of them.

Holland lightly trails her fingers over a woven silk tapestry on the wall. A variety of colored threads in the image make up an aerial view of a farmstead. She barely touches the material, and an appreciative murmur leaves her. "This has to be at least a hundred years old."

The defensive expression on Mama's face fades to surprise. "It was my great-grandmother's, passed on to my grandma, and then to my father. He said it was the first thing he packed when he moved here. It'll go to Kase next."

I'd rather that was all that got passed to me.

"A real treasure." Holland steps closer to inspect the work. "It's in excellent condition. This is a good place to keep it. Minimal sun for bleaching, but you can still enjoy a family heirloom."

Mama's gaze jumps from Holland to me, then back to Holland. "Kase says you're a designer."

Holland's nod is enthusiastic. "Yes, it's my passion. I love handling fabric of all kinds of textures, colors, and patterns, then creating even more beautiful and exciting designs from them."

I study Mama carefully. Holland's answering honestly. Will Mama soften toward her? Do I want her to? All she has to do is believe that I'm serious about Holland until she forgets about Lucia. Then my ex can move on and so can I. Hopefully, that'll coincide with finding out who's trying to kill Holland.

Mama flicks a hand toward Holland. "And what you're wearing? Is that something you made?"

Holland beams, thrilled to be talking about a safe subject she's passionate about. She strokes her hand over her top.

“Yes, I made this a couple of months ago. I bought two bolts of this Egyptian cotton. The yellow is just so vibrant, I can’t help but be cheered up when I’m working with it and when I’m wearing items I made out of it, like this top.” She tugs at the seams of her shorts, but not out of self-consciousness. She traces the white stitching with her thumbs. “I always loved the shorts called Daisy Dukes, and I combined that design with my bombshell style. I’m really pleased with how they turned out. I’m adding them to my line next summer.”

“I’ve never been one for short shorts,” Mama says, her tone hinting at judgment.

Mama’s style is practical, like mine. We dress like we’re ready to work at a moment’s notice, as if we’re surgeons on call but in a morbid way. Mama’s expression wavers, like she’s suddenly questioning the reason she dresses the way she does in dark colors and forgettable styles. Does she ever wish things were different?

Is that why she’s putting so much pressure on me with Lucia? Does she want out and knowing the family business is taken care of will give her the exit she needs? She could’ve been testing Lucia with the fake assignment she’d given me.

I can’t imagine my parents not being contract killers, but I recall telling Holland the story of how they met. Their career had been family business, and when I was born they didn’t know what else to do with me. My parents were more entrenched in this life than me.

“They’re not for everybody,” Holland says. “The concept that my style isn’t for everyone is sort of like a double-edged sword. I have to know my audience and design for them. But I need to market in a way that lets the audience know that it’s okay if I’m not for them. The last thing I want to do is make a person feel bad about themselves.”

“Hmph.” Mama disappears into the kitchen. I bite back a smile.

Holland edges closer to me. “Did I say something wrong?”

When Mama made that sound in the past, it usually meant I hit a nerve. I was right in an argument, and she didn't want to continue talking. She was fishing, trying to bait Holland into saying something insulting, but my pretend girlfriend came out the victor by being herself.

"No," I whisper, the lemon-sunshine scent from her hair tickling my nose. "It means she's trying not to like you."

"Is that good or bad?"

"I guess we'll find out." I lead her into the kitchen where there's a small wooden table set for four.

Holland grew up in a twenty-million-dollar home soaring above Las Vegas—and her dad owns the building the penthouse is in. Her house is a cute little cottage in a quiet neighborhood. The clanking of silverware and dishes being washed in the kitchen of the restaurant on the other side of the wall filters into the room. Noises I grew up hearing. They were almost comforting, but to Holland they might be annoying. I don't want to keep comparing Holland to Lucia, but the noise from the restaurant was at the top of Lucia's many critiques after her first visit.

"Go ahead and have a seat." I leave Holland's side only to pull out a chair at the table.

"That's Poppa's," Mama says as she clicks the oven off.

"Since when?" I ask.

Mama glances over her shoulder, her expression full of warning. "Since you moved out and don't need to question where he sits."

Chagrined, I pull Holland closer to me. We stand awkwardly as Mama jerks out an aluminum-covered casserole dish she was keeping warm from the restaurant. She sets it on a hot pad next to the counter and reaches in for another dish.

Poppa, looking thinner, shuffles into the room. Are he and Mama on a diet? They claimed the kitchen was enough of a gym for them, but I've been distanced from them for years, more so since the breakup with Lucia.

He gestures to the chair Mama chased Holland out of. “Sit, please. Sit.”

He takes a seat on the opposite side of the table.

Instead of giving me a side-eye or waiting for me to check with Mama, Holland slides onto the chair. “Thank you so much for having us over. Smells delicious.” Sincerity rings in her voice. If I can tell, Mama should hear it and soften toward Holland.

Poppa beams. His black hair streaked with gray is cut short like always. The black T-shirt he’s wearing has a sweat stain around the neck from running for hours in the restaurant, and the bottoms of his black jeans are spattered with dropped food and dirty dishwater stains. The apron he dons like a uniform to separate his cook life from his killer life is probably hanging on the other side of the door.

“Meat and potato burritos are the special today, so that’s what we’re having.” Poppa unfolds his white napkin and rests it on his knee.

I hate to leave Holland alone at the table with my formidable poppa, but I cross to the counter to help Mama. Jumping in is as ingrained in me as breathing. When Poppa’s not working on a job, he’s in the restaurant, but I’ve never seen him help in the kitchen at home. I don’t want to change my habits and give her a reason to resent Holland.

“Go sit,” Mama hisses as she bends over the food like she’s protecting the burritos from me. “Everything’s already put together.”

Her attitude tells me enough. She’s staunchly holding on to her intention of hating Holland. As long as the end result meets my goals, I don’t care.

Then why do I want her to like Holland so much?

I go back to the table and rub my hand along Holland’s bare shoulder. A pulse of electricity travels between us. Startled, she glances up at me, and I press a kiss to her temple. Our efforts the last two nights weren’t just the most erotic

experiences of my life, they have the desired effect. She tips her head toward me and smiles almost shyly.

I take the seat next to her, hoping Mama hasn't suddenly decided to sit here instead of across the table from me like she's done my entire life. I make small talk with Poppa as Mama plops the casserole dishes on the table. My show of affection upset her. Good. She wouldn't be upset if she suspected there was no real chance of a relationship between me and Holland.

The last thing I need is another excuse to touch Holland. Putting my hands on her is all I want to do, nearly all I can think about. And Mama just gave me the green light to go ahead and keep showing affection.



Holland

THE FOOD IS DELICIOUS. Kase's father talked about creating the menu at the restaurant and how he combined the food he ate growing up with the recipes Angela's dad made. Cooking is an art, and I was naturally enthralled. Kase's father, Dougal, could make a killing telling stories instead of . . . just killing.

Periodically, Kase reaches his hand under the table and gives my knee a squeeze. I start to crave his big, warm hand on my skin. But each time he does it, Angela slams something against the table—her cup, her fork, the serving spoon.

I hate that we're upsetting her. There's more going on than Kase realizes. He's attuned to people, to how they act, to secrets they're hiding, and maybe he's as good at reading women, but he's not reading his mother correctly.

Lines of strain brush the corners of her eyes, and there's a hunch in her shoulders that isn't in any of the pictures lining the hallway we entered in. My presence bothers her, but it's not merely because I'm not Lucia.

The next time Kase rubs my knee, I give his hand a reassuring squeeze. I'm not telling him to quit, but he can back off on the rain of affection. It's only distressing his mom.

I chew the last bite of burrito. "This is really delicious."

"It's the hash browns instead of regular potatoes," Dougal says proudly. "Gives a lot more flavor."

My stomach is full, and I doubt Angela has prepared dessert for us. She doesn't want me staying any longer than we have to. I take the risk that announcing our time is up will offend her, but I can't make her miserable. I just need her to buy the relationship; she doesn't have to like me. "Kase, we should probably get going."

Kase's quizzical look is brief. He likely thinks I want to get the hell out of here as fast as I can, but our talk will have to wait until we get back to the rental.

"Can I help clean up?" he asks his mother.

She purses her mouth like she's sucking on lemons. "Yes."

"I can run the dishes next door," Kase's father growls like he's upset Angela took Kase up on his offer.

"Kase offered." Her tone makes the decision final.

The lines of distress around Dougal's mouth mirror Angela's. "The washer's running the last of the night's load. You can set the dishes by the sink. Dane can load them in the morning when he comes in."

Dane must be an employee. Of one or both businesses, I don't know.

"The food was great," I say as I stand before Kase can rush to grab my chair. "I can see where he gets his talent from."

His mom pushes back. "He's been cooking for you?"

The surprise in her voice makes me look to Kase for the answer. He made meals while I worked. It gave me more brainpower to plan and undoubtedly, his meals were better than what I'd throw together. He ordered groceries in and made gourmet grilled cheese, stuffed French toast, and roasted

veggie omelets. Amazing flavors and he made it look easy, but I assumed it was normal. Isn't it?

"It's not a big deal, Mama," Kase says as he gathers dishes in his arms, but his mom's expression disagrees. His mom's face says, *Let's ask Lucia if it's a big deal.*

I load up with as many dishes as I can carry and follow Kase through the door his dad came through. The commercial kitchen is larger than I expected with a table in the back by an exit door. Silver pans hang on hooks above a gleaming stainless steel prep island. There are at least three ovens, a Blackstone grill, and an eight-burner cooktop.

Kase deposits his load by the sink and accepts what I have in my arms. He checks the countertop dishwasher, but it's still whirring. "That should be all."

My gaze lands on a small table in the back. It's hidden behind racks of bowls and baking pans and a giant bulletin board decorates the wall next to it. On the outside, it looks like a normal break area, but I remember what Kase said.

He answers my unspoken question. "No, that's not where a lot of business is done." Grabbing my hand, he leads me to the table and points to a door that could be mistaken for a pantry. "That's headquarters. Just a back office with a laptop and monitors."

We're alone, but I whisper, "Monitors for what?"

"The alley. Anything they're surveilling. Research."

"Oh." I have no more questions. It's a far cry from the high-tech surveillance of the casino world, but it's just as fraught with lying, cheating, and danger. I want to put space between me and this room—this entire kitchen that Kase had to kill in. My gaze jumps around the kitchen.

My expression must've screamed what was going through my head. "This space was remodeled five years ago. Before that, my grandpa hung the pans he never used over the bullet holes. The place was closed for a day while we cleaned up the mess." When his gaze takes the same path mine did, there are shadows in his eyes. "We should get going."

He leads me back into the apartment. Poppa's already standing. He's almost as tall as Kase, not as wide, but with a more sinister edge. If he was in a suit, he'd remind me of my father.

"We're going to head out. She has a lot of work to do." He gives his mom a quick hug and kiss. He and his dad exchange a nod.

"Maybe you can tell me where he's staying." Angela gives Kase a pointed look. "Because he won't."

I flounder. We were so worried about being a believable couple we didn't talk about the logistics. And then we'd been having fun pretending to be a real couple in the bedroom . . .

"It's better that way," Kase replies as if she asked about the weather.

Angela and Dougal exchange a look. "So you're living together already," Dougal says.

My brain kicks in and I step in for the save. "My place is getting fumigated, and since he's moving, we're doing a workcation and renting a place." I shrug, like maybe it's temporary, maybe it's not. I've never gotten to experience the young love stage and this moment should be harder to fake than it is. My adult life has been about figuring out how to be on my own by the time I'm twenty-six.

He slides an arm around my back. "When I'm settled for good, I'll let you know." He returns his mom's stare. "You understand why I want to keep to myself for a while."

I avoid his parents' gazes. I like them. Killers, but also caring parents. A lively couple with a history. Our lying weighs heavily on my shoulders.

"I'll give you a call later." As if Kase senses my discomfort, he leads me to the door.

"Thanks for the meal," I call over my shoulder, hoping they can tell I'm sincere. "It was delicious."

His parents stay behind at the kitchen table. I can picture a little Kase running around, with his serious eyes that light with

a touch of childhood mischief. Just like I can imagine him hanging around his parents' legs in the restaurant, watching and learning.

It's so easy to see, my heart aches. Growing up, I wished for a normal family. A family that hangs out on weekends and talks about their day over meals. Parents who helped me with my homework. Lessons to learn that had more to do with friends and boys instead of life and death and retribution.

The older I got, the more I realized normal families like in my dreams aren't typical. Life is messy and people are messier, and briefly, I thought I could strive for a change in my life. I could be the change I wanted to see in the world or whatever's on motivational memes.

Then I was faced with a contract, an ultimatum, and a future husband I barely knew.

Kase closes his hand around mine and leads me through a dim restaurant. The Donovans prefer to eat after the dinner rush, and it's late. We go out the back door this time.

"The restaurant is closed, and this way, we will be closer to the car."

The alley is empty of people. Dumpsters dot the sides, and he's charging through it like he's not concerned.

I've avoided alleys and their entrances for as long as I've been able to walk. I trot to keep up.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

Since I'm good at reaching for the low-hanging fruit like we'd talked about earlier, I do it again. "Aren't you worried about being in an alley in the evening?"

"If I was anyone else, I'd be worried about being in this alley, but my parents have it under surveillance. If there was anyone here, they would've been dealt with. My parents know everything with a heartbeat that enters this alley."

"Right."

We make it to his car, and I gladly scramble in and lock the door. When he gets in, he takes off right away.

I watch palm trees pass the windows. I was so scared about the dinner, but now that it's over, I can't quit thinking about how informative it was. Should I wait to talk to him about his mom? Despite the complicated relationship I have with my parents, I'd want to know if something was wrong with them. "I don't think your mom's motivation with Lucia is what you think it is."

"You don't think my mom helped my ex surprise me buck naked because she wants us back together?"

"I think her reasons are different than you're assuming. Something's bothering her."

"Yeah. Me being single in my thirties."

I rest my hand on his shoulder to help make my point. "You're usually better at reading people, but I think you're too close to this one. Gloria—my mother—was a mess. I thought it was my dad. I thought she lashed out because she felt like a spurned lover when she was his wife and the mother of his child."

"And that wasn't it?"

"Yes and no. Their relationship messed her up more. And when she couldn't twine my father around her finger, she tried to make it all his fault. Then she left. And for years, I thought it was all because of me."

Streetlights flash over his features. The sun had sunk below the horizon, but its rays lit enough of the sky to keep it from being dark. The kid I had imagined earlier had grown into a hard man. Yet, he is a considerate person.

No, parents who raised him to have compassion, to be better than them, wouldn't just want him to marry someone he doesn't love—unless they're not thinking rationally for another reason.

"I'm sorry you grew up with that," he says, "but what are you saying about my parents?"

"Your mom seems stressed. She moves like her mind is somewhere else, and when she's disturbed, her movements become more erratic. I think you should talk to her."

“I’ve tried to talk to her about Lucia, and it’s like having a discussion with a wall.”

“Leave Lucia out of it. Leave me out of it. I’m telling you, there’s something else going on, and I think it’s serious.” I fold my hands on my lap. The rest is up to him.

He doesn’t say anything until he pulls up in front of the rental and parks in the carport. When he kills the engine, he doesn’t move. His profile is carved from unreadable stone. Should I get out? Does he need privacy?

The fear from the attack is fading. Not much, but I feel safe enough to walk to the front door, yet I stay.

“Okay,” he finally says. “I’ll give her a few days and then I’ll talk with her.”

I can’t stop my smile. He’s taken me seriously in everything else, and it’s no different when it comes to his family. I don’t know why it’s important to me, but it is. Nothing about us has been superficial, but this is another level. I shouldn’t read so much into it. “Thank you for listening. Hopefully, it’s nothing.”

He nods and stares out the window for a few moments. Then he turns to me, his gaze warm. “You were amazing tonight.”

“Oh, uh, thanks. I’m sure they’re nice people.”

He laughs, all the tension draining from him. His eyes crinkle in the corners and his grin is wide. The way his throat works from the sound is sexy. How can a sound turn me on like I’m a sex robot? Suddenly I’m powered up, but a blanket of shyness keeps me from climbing onto his lap.

“They’re for certain tastes.” His smile wanes but doesn’t disappear. “She was trying hard not to like you. I don’t think Poppa put up a fight. Anyone who compliments his food gets an automatic like.”

I grin. “He’s a good chef.”

“He’s good with knives.” His smile starts to fade.

To keep from getting too serious, I add, “They have a cozy little place. Must be handy to be right next door to their business.” The even look he gives me wipes away the sexual awareness from earlier. “I mean, the dishes and stuff . . . handy . . .”

“It is,” he says in a flat tone.

How was he laughing one minute ago and acting offended the next? “I don’t know what I said to upset you—”

“It’s not you.” He sighs and leans his head on the headrest. We should go inside. A few cars have driven by, and I might not be in his line of work, but Gloria taught me never to linger in a parked vehicle. *Don’t make yourself a target, Holland.*

Her advice after I called her crying about my fate. No one could know or understand, and I can’t say Gloria understood. Would arguing with a spouse who doesn’t care about me until I abandon everything to get lost in gambling debt be my future?

“Understandably, I never brought dates home. But Lucia—she trashed everything about that place—the size, the style, the restaurant next door, everything.”

“She sounds wonderful,” I say sarcastically.

He chuckles. “What can I say? I was lonely. I won’t make that mistake again.”

“My home growing up was the pinnacle of luxury. We had staff. Father ran his business and that was all. Gloria grew bitter after leaving her career for him and gambled with his money. It was big and lonely and I would’ve killed for a playground I could walk to or friends on my level. You grew up in a community. Your parents could be about their careers and still be parents to you. I think you were lucky—minus the contract business—and their place is charming.” My father hasn’t moved since I left, and I dread ever having to step foot in my old home again.

Kase stares at me for a moment. “You’re pretty special, you know that?”

His dark gaze sends my belly into a tailspin. Could I fit between him and the steering wheel? Semipublic sex isn't the best idea, and we probably shouldn't be lingering too long anyway. Whoever is after me shouldn't have tracked me down to the rental, but I don't want to gamble on that. "Just tell that to the critics at fashion week."

My light tone breaks the spell. He smiles and gets out. I follow suit. He leads me into the house, peering around as we walk. When he lets me in, I kick out of my sandals, and he locks the door.

My work is facing me. Piles of fabric, half-finished projects, and my sketchbook is open to an empty page.

I let out a long, heavy exhale.

His hands slide around my waist, and he murmurs in my hair, "I've got something for that tension."

I groan. He's exactly what my tension needs. He's the perfect distraction. I can get lost in bed with him for hours and not have one worry about my work or the countdown. But we already played our parts in front of his parents. "We probably shouldn't . . ."

"We shouldn't." He places a hot kiss on the side of my neck, restarting the swirl in my stomach. "But we're still pretending, and you're too wound up to create."

So wound up. I spin and drop my hands to his waist. This isn't my best decision, but I can't bring myself to be responsible. We're still not talking about being serious. It's only messing around. I can keep the line fully visible in my head. "For the sake of my creations, we'd better do something about my tight muscles."

CHAPTER 11



Holland

I'M PASSED out in bed on my belly when Kase enters the room. The first thing that registers is that he was gone in the first place. We mess around. I fall asleep. He leaves. Repeat for the last three days.

“Hey,” he says quietly in a room way too light for me to still be in bed.

I roll up, holding the sheet to my breasts. It's an automatic movement, but from the way his gaze tracks me and rests on my cleavage, it's a prudent one. I've been in bed too long and need to get back to work.

I push my mass of tangled hair back. We were rambunctious last night, more than usual, almost as if we were doing acrobatics to keep from having actual sex.

God, what is the point? I know his body so well, would finally having his cock in me really be that different?

Yes. It's a line in my head as much as anything. I've managed to remain firm in my decision to keep this thing between us as casual as living together and burying ourselves in each other can be.

I'm not imagining little Kases running around. I'm not wondering how dark brown the hair of our kids would be. For one, those fantasies hurt. And two, I've been messing with designs when Sahara's not calling me about supply issues from

the factory. Tanisha's sending me mock-ups in different colors and fabrics, along with a few new and excellent sayings for shirts.

I have six weeks to become a world-renowned name. The first leap is fashion week, a couple of stellar articles, and then a celebrity wearing my look on a red carpet. The second miraculous hurdle is word of mouth—very rich, powerful, and influential mouths.

Sahara's working on finding social media influencers to wear my styles and post to their millions of followers during fashion week and after to keep the momentum going. She's got a plan to start the week ahead of time to build buzz and then I'll capture eyeballs and hearts during my show.

No big deal. Just a few small miracles to coalesce in one big media sensation. And if I could add the miracle that the person who wants me dead changes their mind or gives up, that'd be great. I don't want to get to fashion week only to have to hide again right after.

Kase tosses a phone on the bed. "London hasn't been able to reach you, and she's getting worried. And because she's concerned and hitting up Jacobi to find out why you haven't been at work, Penni's now upset and demanding Cannon tell her where you're at. They're both at London's, and I think my buddies are hiding in Jacobi's office."

The quick humor of picturing two strong, formidable men hiding from my scrappy friends dies as the rest of what he said sets in.

I swipe at the easiest question to answer. "What have you told them?"

"I haven't told Jacobi and Cannon the specifics of what happened with Josef. It's your business. I'm only helping. But they know enough about me to piece it all together. Same with London and Penni, especially after what they've each gone through." He sits on the edge of the bed. He's wearing a white polo and the blue cargo shorts I made him. He looks more ready for golf than bumming around the condo all day while I cut and sew a storm of useless shit. At least seeing him in the

shorts makes me feel like I did something productive in the last week.

“Did you tell them anything about us?”

He leans to his side. Even though I’m naked and he’s dressed, being together in the bed like this isn’t as intimate as waking up to him would be. Still, I like it way too much. “I said that in return for my help, you’re ridding my mother of her expectation that Lucia and I are perfect together.”

They’d read correctly into that. “No details?”

“Not without your approval.”

“And they’re okay with it?”

The corner of his mouth tips up. “*They* are. London and Penni, no.”

A small laugh escapes me. “I suppose they’ll understand.” My friends went through their own drama, and now they’re on the other side. They didn’t exactly keep me informed, but they didn’t leave me in complete darkness. “What should I say?”

“You can lie as much as you want or tell the truth. But be warned, if you reveal someone hired a guy to kill you, London will have Jacobi breaking all the laws to find out who.”

It’d be so easy to let Jacobi do what he does best, but I don’t want to risk him. He’s come a long way and runs a legitimate business. He’s the love of London’s life. But I’m selfish if I claim his legal status as the only reason I don’t want to tell London and Penni the truth. Hiding from a nameless, faceless entity is somehow easier than knowing who detests me so much they’d hire a guy who might enjoy killing me. “I’m scared to find out who it is.”

“Why?” he says like he knows the answer.

“What if it’s someone I’m close to? I’m not close with many people. London, Penni, my employees . . . my parents?”

“Are you asking or telling?”

“I don’t see Gloria or Father wanting to kill me.” My throat thickens saying it. “No. I have to believe that deep

inside I'm their daughter they'd never want to see hurt." Married off to a guy I don't know or love, yes. But not dead. "And if it's no one I know, then it's all so unfair. Why would someone upset my life this much? No, I'm not ready to spill the whole truth, not until I know more. They'll want to get their guys involved, and I just want them to live happily ever after."

He rolls to the side to press a kiss to my temple. A simple move, but it's become one of my favorites. It's becoming his signature move, one I know he makes when he's trying to support me. Each kiss is like a battering ram making a direct hit against my resistance. "Call them, and I'll call my mom. Deal?"

He's making the call for me. Only because I think something more is going on. Yes, that makes it easier to talk to my friends.

He rolls off the bed. He has another phone in the living room. I quit trying to track his electronics and burner phones.

London's number is waiting for me to hit send.

She answers with, "Whoever's on the other end better give me an answer."

I grin. "Spoken like a beauty product CEO."

"Holland, oh thank God." Relief washes through her tone. "Where have you been?"

Penni's voice filters over the line. "Yeah, what's wrong? What's going on?"

I'm on speaker. I cross my legs like I did years ago when we were all together during an overnight at London's house and her stepmom was making popcorn for us. "So, I ran into some trouble and can't tell you everything, but Kase is helping me."

"Can't or won't tell us?" London asks as if she didn't keep us in the dark when Jacobi made her marry him.

"I haven't been forced to marry anyone if that's what you're asking." That comes later if I don't get my business off

the ground.

“Okay, I get the point,” she says. “But you’re okay?”

“I’m fine, but I had to leave my house for a while. And I’m frantically trying to get ready for New York, so really I’m going to be designing and sewing all day.”

“Uh-huh.” Penni’s disbelief makes me wince. “So what are you doing at night?”

I sputter, my cheeks heating. “Penni.”

London gasps. “Oh my God. Is it serious? I always suspected he watched you when he thought no one was looking.”

My cheeks burn. My friends are too intuitive. There’s no saving it, and if things between Kase and I were real, I’d want to talk to them. But we’re pretending, and can never be anything more. “No, it’s nothing serious. I can’t be in a relationship, and he doesn’t want to be.”

“Why can’t you be in a relationship?” Penni asks.

“It’s work.” It would be so easy to tell them the truth. A lot like Kase. But I didn’t tell Kase everything, and I can’t reveal the complete truth to my friends. It’s not as if they can do anything about it. “The company needs all my attention right now.”

“Sure.” London’s a CEO. Of course she’s going to think I’m full of shit. “Is it your company that’s in trouble?”

“No, only if I get too distracted. I have people counting on me and this trouble is just . . .” I don’t know what it is or why it’s directed at me. “Infuriating. A nuisance I don’t need. But Kase is helping me get to the bottom of it.” We’re getting no answers, and I’m still in hiding. It hasn’t been long since I fled my house, but I’d like to go back to normal life. Or normal as I know it. Only if that happens, Kase and I will go our separate ways and that casts a shadow over earning my freedom.

“Okay,” London says. “But don’t hesitate to ask us for help. You know what Jacobi can do.”

Penni adds, “And Cannon earned a shady living before he took up with me. With Kase, those three can solve anything.”

They might be able to, but I’m not risking them or my friends’ happiness. It was too hard earned. I’m at risk, as is my company, and so is Kase, really. No one else needs to be in the target ring with me.



Kase

“HEY, MAMA.” I sit on the patio outside the sliding doors. We haven’t been using the outside. Between the heat and the need to stay hidden, we’ve been locked indoors. Holland hardly seems to notice, but I’m itching under the skin like a caged tiger.

Yet, I’m also more relaxed than I’ve been. I have enough money put away after a lifetime of taking jobs. I’d be richer if I took the ones that’d stain my soul black, but it was worth it not to. I can sit on the patio, talk to Mama, and be minimally haunted about what I’ve done in life.

“Kase.” The word is sharp on her tongue, and I can picture the hawklike gaze aimed my way. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s about the other night.”

She tsks. “What’s her problem? Was our food not up to her standards? Our home? The company?”

The disdain dripping from her voice makes me blurt the truth about Lucia I’ve been withholding to protect her feelings—and my ex’s life. Mama doesn’t take insults well. “That’s Lucia. She hated everything about your place and the restaurant. She thought she was better than all of it. She thinks she’s better than you and Poppa and probably me, or she would’ve treated me better.”

Dangerous silence fills the line. Shit, I should’ve kept my big mouth shut.

“How did she treat you?” Her voice balances on a razor’s edge of curious and deadly.

As much as I want to cut the tie Mama’s nurtured between her and Lucia, I don’t want my ex to get hurt when I’m not blameless in that area. “Not any worse than I treated her. I wasn’t into her like she wanted me to be, and I wasn’t exactly the guy she could bring home to her parents and gush about.” My stuntman cover could only go so far. I was never a stuntman for anyone famous—that’d only lead to questions I couldn’t answer. So she told her parents I’m a struggling actor.

“You’re a good man. She will be—she should’ve been proud to have you.” The subtle shift in Mama’s wording means everything. Maybe she’ll lay off Lucia now.

“Thanks, but we weren’t good for each other, and I should’ve kicked her to the curb as soon as she said your place smells like grease.”

Mama cuts through with a string of profanity that I only understand half of. My entire life, she meticulously used air fresheners and cleaners to keep the grease from the restaurant from permeating our home.

“Is that what you called about? To finally get me to quit talking to Lucia?”

I just upset her opinion of my ex, which was my goal, and I don’t want to jump into another topic that might be sensitive. But Mama doesn’t care for dancing around a subject, and for this, I’ll leave Holland out of it. Mama might talk easier. “After we left, I thought maybe you were acting the way you were because something’s wrong, that it’s not about me and Lucia. So I’m calling to ask if everything’s all right.”

We’re not a family that talks about our feelings. I pinch the bridge of my nose and lean an elbow on my thigh, ready for Mama to chide me for worrying about her. *Do you know what we do, Kase? We take the jobs you don’t take. Poppa can put dinner in the oven, go take care of some over-indulgent actor, and then be home in time for dessert. You don’t do the worrying, Kase. You do the jobs we leave for you.*

And like a weak son, I let them take the hard assignments. The kind that end in blood and death, hiding or staging bodies, and bribes or extortion. The things I did didn't feel simple, never easy, but compared to what my parents did, they were rainbows and lollipops.

But Mama didn't reply for several moments. I straighten in my chair. Shit. Holland was right. "Mama?"

"It's your poppa."

I rise and pace the five-by-ten-foot concrete square, my blood pressure rising to beat against my temples with each step. "What's wrong?"

"He's been hiding tremors. Then I noticed some other things and dragged him to the doctor." A heavy sigh echoes on the other end. "Parkinson's."

"What does that mean?" I've heard of it. I know people who have it experience tremors. But I never expected a loved one to be diagnosed with it, so I didn't pay attention beyond that.

"It's early yet. But he's . . . everything almost went to hell a few months ago, and he can't take the same type of work he used to."

Or he'd put us all at risk. Poppa would cut off his arm before he did that, and Mama would be there stitching it on. They're a team, and they try to keep the game from hurting everyone. "And that's why you were shoving Lucia in my face?"

"It's not like this job offers retirement, Kase. We ran the restaurant assuming we'd be working there until we die. That's still your poppa's plan. But . . ."

I wait for her to continue. She doesn't. "But?"

"I'm tired, Kase." Another gusty sigh. "I'd like to travel. The only places I get to go are rich assholes' houses, and the goal is not to be seen. It's not exactly sightseeing. I'd like to . . . I'd like to step outside the shadows and see how everyone else lives."

Shocked, I don't have a reply. My parents are formidable. Indestructible. I forget they're human. And now, they're tired. They're aging, and they can't prevent the toll the job naturally takes. They need to back off, and they can't do that without giving up both businesses. The two have become so interwoven my parents would break if torn apart. Former clients could come after them. Law enforcement would start receiving tips. The restaurant would become a target—for other fixers or for the SWAT. Even the IRS would raise their brows at the sudden drop in income and profit once money quit being cleaned with each meal served.

Fuck. "I got you guys. Don't worry. I'll take care of everything."

"How? Do you think that little sunny blonde will smile and nod her way through your explanation of what this family actually does?"

"She's different." If only Mama knew. I can't tell her, and it doesn't matter. If Holland's circumstances were different, I wouldn't drag her into this life.

"Holland Gray. Do you know who her father is?"

"Yes."

"At least you did your research," Mama grumbles. "She comes from a different world. You know her father gave her all the money to start that fashion company she runs, right?" She doesn't wait for me to answer. "She's not going to understand why you're going to be the manager of a little restaurant in Pacoima."

I think of my parents busting their asses in that restaurant. When I was younger, it was fun to set the tables, to bring drinks to customers, and to refill their coffee. By my teen years, I didn't want anything to do with taking orders or dealing with customer complaints. I didn't want to work for tips, and I didn't want to work in a blistering kitchen all day where the outside temps could be just as brutal.

My future was that damn restaurant. Maybe I could find a manager. But then I'd have to take the jobs Poppa couldn't. I'd

have more people's blood on my hands. I'd have their deaths on my conscience.

I've killed before. A hard lesson to show me that I'd better do a job fucking perfectly or I might be the one buried by Josef.

None of those thoughts are helping me now. Mama needs reassurance, and I'll figure the rest out later. "Look, just give me and Holland a chance. It's not like we're getting married or popping out babies."

A future that used to give me dry heaves now makes me picture Holland with a rounded belly, barefoot at the table, measuring some bright, cheerful fabric that she's going to whip into a sexy outfit that'd make me fall to my knees and kiss her—

Fuck, my mind can't go there. Never. It's not what I want. It's not what Holland wants. At least not with me. And if she doesn't hit her goals in the next year, that baby in her belly will be someone else's.

My grip tightens on the phone. I want to throttle it until the screen fades. Fling it across the yard and watch it shatter. Our futures are decided.

"I know you'll take care of things," Mama says, the fatigue in her voice apparent. Have I been intentionally ignoring how much her way of living has taken a toll on her? "But your poppa and I can't quit this life and stay in the country. I wanted to see you settled down and happy before we . . . disappeared."

Before they changed their identities and left the country. Before they covered their tracks so well no one could ever find them. Before I never saw them again.

This phone call's getting more dismal with each minute. "I understand."

"Maybe you do, maybe you don't, but this is— It's harder than I imagined. I didn't expect things to end this way."

"It's not over yet. I'll get Holland through her New York fashion stuff and then I'll sit down with you and Poppa and

talk. We'll plan."

"You're a good kid, Kase." Another hard breath. "I'll figure out Lucia. She's been so inquisitive after, well, after I helped her break into her uncle's place. I thought for sure it was a sign she'd be open to what we do. But I'll figure out how to let her down."

Lucia might listen to Mama better than me after the break-in, and Mama won't hurt Lucia. She's not a job. I end the call and stare at the fence around the yard. I'm a determined man, but inside is that kid who never wanted to let down his parents. My gaze catches on Holland wandering into the kitchen for a drink of water. Something so normal, so ordinary. Like we're a real couple.

Don't go there. My reflection overlays hers for a few steps, and I see the kid who'll never get the life he really wanted. A life he never dreamed of having. Because it isn't meant to be.

CHAPTER 12



Holland

THE SILENCE from Kase since his phone call is disconcerting. I inquired, but he said everything was fine. Still, it was said in an *I don't want to talk about it* tone. Hurt, I throw myself into my work and try not to be sad he isn't opening up to me.

“How about this?” I hold up my drawing. Pride oozes from me. I feel like I'm really onto something. On the page is a sketch that resembles a red version of the Marilyn Monroe city-grate dress with the white billowy skirt that got blown up in front of cameras. Only I made it a red pantsuit. A real power bombshell look.

Kase's gaze flicks over and then goes back to the TV. “It's good.”

“I need more than good.”

He rolls his head toward me without taking it off the back of the couch. “What can I say? I've seen it before.”

Scowling, I hold my sketchbook out and squint. I used to watch entertainment shows while growing up. They were my only company since Father forbid nannies in our home.

Pantsuits were a little 2019, but I made this one sexy. Bombshell pantsuits weren't really a thing. I close one eye and tilt my head. Maybe it's for a reason.

No. The outfit is gorgeous. It makes a statement, and it's on brand. Kase is cranky.

"I'm keeping it," I say.

"Good."

His I-don't-care tone does my patience in. Father used to sound like that whenever Gloria tried to talk to him about her life. Nothing she did could possibly be more important than his work. I slam my sketchbook down and stalk to the bedroom.

I slam the door shut. Now what?

I'm not my mother. I'm not going to storm around the house waiting for him to notice me. But am I going to sit and sulk behind a closed door? That's also very Gloria, though in this moment, I have a lot more empathy for her. It sucks to care about someone who won't let you in.

But Kase isn't supposed to let me in. We're casual. We're messing around. What started as a way to make us a believable couple turned into a pleasant pastime.

Pleasant is an understatement. Erotic to the point I crave his touch every second? I want to wake up smelling like him. I want to go to sleep burrowed into his side even when I know I'll wake up to him gone.

Have I been doing a good job of keeping myself distanced? He's going through something, and I'm pouting because he's not the typical, attentive Kase. I might be trying not to fall for him, but he's still a person. He came off that phone call different.

I'm not my mother, but I need to rethink what that means. I'm not starting a fight to feel important to Kase. I'm not hiding because I want him to chase me down. He was dismissive because something's bothering him.

Does he have anyone to talk to? He doesn't seem like the type to tell Jacobi and Cannon about his personal life. He hasn't mentioned other friends, and maybe he'd normally go to his family, but they're the origin.

Gloria couldn't get over her pride. She had an idea of what Father was, and she never considered the toll it took on him when she witnessed how his work affected the family. Taking a deep breath, I stride back into the living room. The TV's off, and he's sitting forward on the couch with his head in his hands.

I go to his side and drop to my knees. "What's wrong?"

He jerks his head up as if he didn't hear me approach. Something's really distressing him if I can sneak up on him. His dark eyes are fathomless and grief-stricken. I wedge myself between his knees and cup his face.

"Kase, talk to me."

He pulls me onto his lap. I straddle him, ignoring the way the hem of my shorts cuts into my thighs. He buries his head against my shoulder and just holds me.

I keep my arms wrapped around him and mumble against his soft hair. "Whatever it is, it'll be okay."

He spreads his hands out against my back. "My dad has Parkinson's."

No wonder he was silent. A sick parent is a shock. The ramifications of his father's illness set in. The family restaurant. Their darker profession. If his dad gets to a point where he can't handle one or both, Kase will have to discard his resolve from over the years and wade in. And eventually, his mother might be restricted, depending on the care Dougal needs. "Oh my God, I'm sorry."

His embrace tightens. I hold him for several minutes. Or is he holding me? We both need support.

I run my hands through his hair. He tips his face up to meet my gaze. His eyes are bleak. "I didn't want this for my life."

"I know."

He clenches his jaw. "It's selfish. A lot of people have it worse."

Letting his silky strands fall through my fingers, I think about how I had the same thoughts for so much of my life. I

was raised with an allowance that was more than what most people make in a year, and I had every material thing I could want. But I didn't have anybody, and I thought I'd trade all the money in the world for a friend.

All I want now is what I won't get. A partner. A true partner. I have no idea how Patrick will treat me, but I doubt we'll find that comfortable love a lot of couples achieve over time. I want a family. Kids. Closeness. Has Patrick changed his partying ways? Do I care if he has?

I want to take my kids to work with me. I want to teach them what I know. I want to have the talks about hopes and dreams my parents never had with me.

"It's not wrong to wish for more," I finally say. "You only get one life and it's yours."

He sighs and sinks back, his arm loosely linked around me. "It's not though, and I'm never putting anyone in this situation. So I guess that's the good I'll do in the world. I can't just disappear into the shadows. I only know of a few people who were able to do that, but I don't really know what happened."

"Could they have learned to blend into the real world with no one knowing their dark side?" I ask hopefully. "It's possible. I mean, it's gotta be."

The corner of his mouth kicks up. "We'll never know. There used to be a contract killer—no, he wasn't a contract killer, but he was legendary. A hit man for the hit man terrorizing good people. The Mafia would go after legit businessmen and if they couldn't corrupt them, they'd kill them. The Shadow would swoop in and take them out. He was like a hero that eventually you never heard about again. Just a slow disappearance."

A chill claws its way into my throat. I don't want to talk about The Shadow. "What about if you have to take your dad's job?"

"I don't know. A life of killing is . . ." For a second, I get a glimpse of the horror he's seen in his life. The fear of a little

boy who doesn't understand what his parents are doing to someone or why. The terror of a teenager forced to do the unthinkable to save himself. The dread of a man who sees a future he can't escape from. And the grim reality of what lies ahead.

“The people you get hired to kill, do they deserve it?” I shake my head. I'm trying to help him feel better, and it just sounds so morbid. “Never mind. Oh, God, it doesn't matter. Forget I said anything.”

“You get it.” Curiosity takes over his expression. “Normal people don't need a distinction. People like me do. The question is the only thing that separates me from a serial killer. I thought only those in my line of work understood.”

“A life is a life. You shouldn't be in a position to decide if it ends.”

“The decision has already been made. We're the tools. I think Poppa justifies his methods. He's not cruel unless that's what the job calls for. He doesn't make mistakes. I think that's what scares him the most. He'll underestimate how much he's changed and mess up, costing the person, costing himself, Mama, and the business.”

I stroke his chest. “I'm sorry.”

He brushes his hands down my thighs. “No, *I'm* sorry. That last sketch you did is more than good, but I think it needs something. Kind of like your shorts that show the stitches.”

I'm tempted to brush him off. He's trying to make me feel better, but I mentally paired the stitching on the shorts with the drawing. Sweet and sexy but with a little edge. “Kase, you're a genius.”

“No, I know you.” He runs his hand up my side, brushing my breast, before stopping around the back of my neck.

He does know me. And he cares—about me, about what I do. I tip my head down and press my lips to his. The heat. His strength under me and between my legs—I increase the pressure, taking the lead and sweeping my tongue inside.

He doesn't hesitate to open for me, licking his tongue along mine, and it's a straight connection to the juncture of my thighs. A steady, demanding throb sets in. I bunch his shirt in my hands and pull it out of his shorts. We break so I can slip it over his head, then we crash together again like two magnets.

We break again to get my shirt off, then tumble to the side and wiggle and kick out of our shorts. Then we're bare against each other and I just want to be covered by him, to have him spread over me like my very own blanket.

We adjust enough until I'm under him, right where I want to be. I wrap my legs around his hips and his cock imprints on my belly. He deepens the kiss, thrusting with his tongue like I want him to do inside me. I've never been closer to anyone, and I want to be as physically close as I feel to him emotionally. There should be alarm bells going off in my brain, but there aren't. I roll my hips, trying to get him right where I want him to be.

He holds back. "Make sure you want this, Holland. I've been fucking dying to drive inside of you for months." His dark eyes bore into me. I'm lost to him. We both need this. The support and the connection. It doesn't have to mean more than two people who are on their own little islands who need to be with someone for however long their life allows.

I widen my legs until his broad tip prods my entrance. "Wait—did you say months?"

His eyes are intense, unashamed. "I wasn't ignoring you when you were with London and Penni. I fucking studied you."

His confession should've been a warning. A clear sign this is too much. I was into him way more than circumstances called for, and he's been into me for almost as long. But it makes me want this more. I buck upward as he plunges in.

A long groan leaves us both. I'm full and nothing has ever felt so right. I stuff my hands back into his hair and rock my hips until I get used to his size. I'm filled with him, and he's over me. This is how it's supposed to have been all the other times. This powerful. This good—and we've barely begun.

“Fuck, Holland. I never dreamed you could feel so fucking amazing.” He hitches a knee to the side, widening my legs, and grinds in me. The sensations intensify. They’re focused, and my body thrums.

“Kase,” I breathe. “I’ve wanted this for so long.”

He pulls out and punches back in. My moan is needy, and I anchor a hand on the arm of the couch behind my head. Over and over, he thrusts in and out. Pleasure is all I can feel, the not-so-slow climb to euphoria.

He captures my mouth again and changes his angle, hitting all the right places. He knows me. And he’s been wanting me for months.

“Kase,” I gasp into his mouth, loving that he’s right there to catch my sound. I keep my hand braced and run my other one through his hair, down the flexing muscles of his back and digging into his ass.

“You’re heaven, Holland. Fucking heaven.” He continues to pump as he grabs under my butt to hold me closer to him. The angle is perfect, hitting all the right places so much more thoroughly than he can with his hands or his tongue, and I arch my back off the couch.

When I combust, he’s with me, keeping the pressure constant with short thrusts that balance me on the peak. Lights shatter behind my eyes, and I cry his name.

My name rips from his lips as he kicks his hips one last time and shudders against me. We come together, and it’s everything I didn’t dare hope it would be. We’re in sync. Sex with Kase is fulfilling. I wanted to feel physically closer to him, but the connection obliterated any walls I was using to fool myself that I wasn’t falling for this guy.

This isn’t just physical.

We’re in each other’s arms. I feel safe with him in so many ways. And having sex with him is more than my body’s response to a big dick or a guy who knows how to use it.

I’ve fallen for him.

I don't think I'll be all right.



Kase

SO MANY WRONG things happened without me giving my actions a second thought. If I could go back in time, I couldn't stop what happened between us. Sex with Holland is unlike anything I've experienced. She knows all my dark secrets, and she's right here with me. How can a guy be so fucking lucky and so damn cursed at the same time?

Then a sudden realization obliterates my orgasmic stupor.

"Fuck. We didn't use protection." I'm still buried inside of her, but my alarming realization isn't enough to get me to leave the heaven of her body.

Her eyes are dreamy without an ounce of alarm. "Father wouldn't cut me loose all fertile. I'm on birth control, and he'd come after me if I let my prescription slip."

The relief is chased by disappointment. *That dream isn't for you, asshole.* Her admission makes her contracted engagement feel a little too close to cheating. "I've always used a condom. Having a baby is the worst thing that can happen in my life."

Her postcoital glow flickers. She wants a family. The yearning is in her eyes, and it's something I can't give her. Maybe what's his name won't be an awful husband and he'll give her—

Tension radiates from head to toe, wiping away the best orgasm I've had. I don't want anyone else to touch what's fucking mine.

I push off, my dick pulling out of her body, and it's all I can do not to nestle back between her legs. Trying to cover my sudden territorial thoughts over a girl who's everything I would want if I was able to have it, I revisit our lack-of-

protection conversation as my knees hit the floor by the couch. “I, uh, don’t have anything. I’ve been good about making sure.”

She curls her legs to her side and scoots against the armrest of the couch. “I’m okay too. Don’t, um . . . don’t worry?”

The corner of my mouth tips up. “Are you asking?”

She isn’t experiencing the same humor as me. “I don’t know. It got really weird all of a sudden.”

I remain on the floor. There’s nowhere to run in this little rental other than the bathroom, and I can’t stay in there all night hiding from the way I want to haul her over my shoulder and keep her in bed for three full days—or forever. It’s not like she doesn’t know our reality, but I feel the need to caution her, if only to tell myself I tried to spare her the hurt we’ll experience when she returns to her life and I go back to mine.

I have to remember that someone’s after her. We might be holed up together and it’s magnifying all our wants and needs. We could be phenomenal together, but her life is going one direction and mine is going to hell. “I can’t give you what you want.”

“I’m not getting what I want anyway.” Her smile is serene and cuts straight through my sternum into my heart. I can’t give her what she ultimately wants, but I can help her achieve her dream of freedom.

One of us should be free to choose a life direction.

I prop one hand on the back of the couch and my other on the armrest, caging her in. “You will. We’ll get you to fashion week, and you’ll be such a household name no one who needs a moment of privacy will ever think of marrying you.”

“But until then . . .” Her gaze drops to my flagging dick, and my blood roars through my veins toward my groin. “We have time to kill.”

Her lower lip disappears between her teeth, and I almost go after it with my mouth.

Yeah, we have time to kill. I can fuck her all night long. The problem is the more I taste her, the more she's imprinted into every cell of my body. The more I crave her. And each day that goes by, I have to remind myself that she's not mine.

But . . . It can't be wrong to give us both what we temporarily desire. She'll either be on a shooting star of success or she'll be married to someone she barely knows. I'll be continuing both family businesses. We have now. No one but Jacobi knows we're here. She's safe.

I rise and gather her to me. She yelps and wraps her arms around me, then giggles.

She leans her head on my shoulder. "You scared me. I thought I lost you for a second."

"No, I'm going to be harder to shake than that." She wouldn't ever lose me. If I can't let her go, I'll be the shadow watching over her.

She's mine, whether we can be together or not.



Holland

WE'VE BEEN DROWNING in sex for a week. I've pounded out a million sketches, and Mr. Muse makes critiques and recommendations and keeps old coffee on hand. Most days, he gets me better than I get myself. He knows my style, my goals, and he's on the path with me to achieve them.

I've sewn five of the outfits. I have only five left and a month to go. Easy. Tanisha, Anna, and Sahara are taking care of securing the models. Anna's got our travel plans made. Sahara, the logistics queen, is on top of things and all I have to do is show up in New York in five weeks with the items I have in our rental.

It's going to happen. I'm going to blow up—because I'm more confident than I've ever been. Walking around mostly

naked for days on end with a chiseled, sexy man who's made me his sole focus does things to a girl.

For one, I don't feel like a child playing in the sandbox with the big kids. I can do this. I'm legitimate. I'll free my father to do what he needs to do. My mother won't care as usual, and I'll free myself from the contract. If I can do that, surely we can determine who's after me. I have a hard time caring when I need to be holed up and working as much as I need to be in hiding to stay alive to get that work done.

And if sex is inspiring and relieves stress? Even better.

"Mmm, just like that," I moan as he rocks gently into me. I want him to lose control, to pound away at my body and take me to a higher peak than I've ever known.

But he continues going slow, teasing me.

"God, Kase." I try to arch my back, but he's got me pinned to the mattress, carefully carrying me up a high peak—my third of the morning.

As Kase thrusts into me with long strokes, I sink into the pleasure but also marvel over the change inside of me. He's built me up from the inside out. A steady diet of sex and confidence has forged me into a strong woman who knows what she wants. A woman who's going to achieve her dream.

And if I do . . . will that change things between me and Kase?

As if he senses my mind landing on heavy thoughts, he changes his angle.

"Stay with me, Holland." He slides his hand between us. I'm so sensitive all he has to do is rest his finger on my clit.

I writhe and do the rest. I finally crest, his light touch on my clit the gentle shove I needed. I gasp and clamp around him, rocking through a slow roll of an orgasm. And when I'm done, he takes over—as if he wasn't in charge the whole time.

He rears onto his knees and cranks my legs wide to pound into me, giving me what I need. He was restraining himself the whole time to give me a new climactic experience. Lazily, I

reach behind me to press my hands against the headboard as he bucks into me, enjoying the hard planes of his face and the way he concentrates on fucking me just right. His name comes out as a whine. I'm still riding my peak, shudders racking my body.

"Fuck, Holland. I love seeing you like this. Tits bouncing and calling my name," he grunts and stiffens, grinding as he releases inside me. I ride through the rest of my climax, and we come down together. So perfect.

He lands on top of me, and we turn to our sides. The question from earlier resurfaces. If fashion week does everything I want, can we be more?

But he doesn't want kids. He doesn't want a family dragged into the darkness of his job.

What if . . .

"I need to shower." His grin is lazy. He's clearly not having the same thoughts I am, and I need to stop. Our fling is just what it is. Unforgettable, but temporary. "Want to join me?"

I latch on to his request to keep my heart from hoping. "Race you."

We both scramble out of the bed, and I'm giggling by the time I crowd into the small shower with his big body.

He flips on the water and takes the brunt of the cold water until it warms up. Then he splashes my limoncello-scented body wash onto a loofah and rubs me down, taking care not to be too rough. His swipes are deliberate as if he's cherishing the opportunity to care for me another way. I do the same for him, smiling and giggling as I hit the tender sides of his abdomen that are only ticklish in the shower. I enjoy the way his abs tighten as I stroke down them and continue all the way to his feet.

This would be sexual if we hadn't had a morning full of sex. Now, it's fun. It does more to attach my heart to the man who takes care of everyone he cares about. A man who's learned to sacrifice himself instead of other people.

Isn't that a big reason why I'm wildly attracted to him? Yes, his looks, obviously. All the things he says without speaking. The way his jaw hardens when he's thinking about a painful subject. The open way he talks with me—something I didn't see between my parents. How he sits in the middle of the bed or leans over the couch or reclines against the wall while I'm sketching or sewing. He makes me food when I'm in the middle of a project. He brainstorms with me.

He has so much more to offer the world than death and destruction. My heart breaks when I think about what he'll be faced with doing again if he can't figure out a way to get out of the family business. His father's illness can be managed, but regardless, it highlights a stark truth. Age comes for everyone, and Kase's parents can't do what they're doing forever.

There has to be another way.

He dabs the loofah on my chest. "Where's your head at?"

He reads me so easily. I tell him part of the truth while watching water trek down his neck and chest. "I've made a lot of progress, and I couldn't have done it without you."

"You would've been fine."

I reach around him and shut the water off. "I'm pretty sure I would've fled after killing a man." I would've had to give up everything right then and there. The only place I would've been able to go was Father's.

"You saved yourself. That's what you do. You don't talk much about your father. Does he truly support you trying to get out of the contract?"

"He supports me trying to make myself undesirable enough that Patrick won't want me."

His face clouds over as soon as I say Patrick's name. "He's a jackass for agreeing to a marriage contract, but he's a fool if he doesn't want you."

I smile to cover the sadness of talking about a man who's supposed to be my husband by this time next year. I get out and wrap a towel around myself, handing one to Kase. The

bathroom is small, so I go into the bedroom and shrug into a summer dress sans bra and underwear. Makes it easier with Kase around. I'm not searching for where we threw my underclothes.

Just as he steps into his shorts, there's a clatter outside the bedroom. My heart rams into my throat, and I'm transported back to the night Josef crashed into my house. Kase jumps over the bed and runs to the door. Two men in black business suits stride into the living room, guns raised. They spot us and train their weapons in our direction.

Kase is about to slam the door shut, but I recognize the intruders and put my hand on his rigid arm. "Wait." Running won't help. These aren't the people sent to kill me, and I need to explain before there's gunfire.

A third man in a heather-gray suit strides in behind them and faces us, his stern scowl on the piles of clothing.

"Father?" Shock catches up to what's happening, and I'm rooted into place. Oh, God.

Oh, God.

Father sees Kase first and the lines in his face deepen. He looks like he's aged twenty years since I last saw him almost four years ago.

Kase blocks the doorway, keeping me behind him, but he glances over his shoulder. His expression is unreadable, but his body says he'll throw down whether Father's guards are armed or not.

I tighten my grip on his arm, a silent plea to stay still. They might not kill, but he could be seriously hurt in a two-against-one fight. One command from Father and worse could happen to Kase.

Father frowns. "I heard you were playing house. You know the rules."

"We're not—" I look around. It looks like I'm living with Kase. My work is here and we're both in the bedroom getting dressed. "Who did you hear it from?"

Father tilts his head. “Get in the car.” He lifts his chin to Tommy, the shortest of the two guards and the man I had considered more like an uncle until I learned the truth about Father. Tommy beckons me to him.

“Wait.” Panic claws at my chest. He can’t take me away. I’m not ready. I’ll never be ready. “We’re just messing around. Kase is helping me with work. It’s just a fun thing.”

“And the man you killed?”

Ice pools in my vein. “H-how do you—”

“I didn’t.” Father looks down his nose at me even though I’m barely visible behind Kase, who won’t move from the door. “Not for certain. But you just confirmed it. Really, Holland? Did I have to hear from some anonymous robotic voice smart enough to use a random number from a phone that can’t be tracked?”

I recoil. He got an anonymous tip? The only people who know about my attack are me and Kase, and whoever ordered it in the first place.

“Get in the car.” His voice is cold. His enemies would be shaking in their boots, but I’m his daughter. He gave me money to help me out of my contract. He has to let me continue to try.

“But, Father, I have a year yet.”

“You and I had an agreement. You broke it. Get. In. The. Car.” He aims a “dad look” my way, his gaze stopping on Kase for a heartbeat. A warning. To me. If I delay, he’ll have Tommy and Hanson intervene, and it won’t end well for Kase if he tries to stop them.

Flashbacks of walking into Father’s office late at night, seeking comfort after a nightmare and finding out nightmares are real run through my mind. I can’t have Kase end up like what I saw.

“Kase,” I say softly and try to move his hand off the door frame so I can get through.

He doesn’t budge. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“Please, Kase,” I say, tears burning the backs of my eyes. “I have to. It’s over.”

He doesn’t take his gaze off Father. Their stare down wouldn’t happen if Kase knew who he really was. “You don’t have to go.”

“I do. Just like you have things you have to do in life.”

That gets him to break eye contact. He meets my gaze, and I just give a helpless shrug. The move is so casual for the moment my world implodes. I clawed my way to success. I’ve tried to fight. I survived someone trying to kill me, but it ends now, just like it always was meant to.

Father cuts in. “The only reason you’re still standing, son, is because I assume you’re the reason it took me over a week to find her. Possibly even the reason why there’s no body in her house. But whatever you two have going on is done. My daughter is no longer your business.”

Kase cuts his gaze back to Father. “One, I’m not your son. And two, Holland isn’t business. She’s a person, not a piece of art to buy and trade for a new casino.”

The warm glow Kase’s defense ignites is snuffed with Father’s humorless chuckle. “I’m giving you a pass because I respect your parents’ work, and I don’t want trouble from them.”

Kase jerks like Father’s words are a physical shock. I briefly close my eyes. Kase is smart enough to determine why Father would know of his family.

Father digs a baby-pink handkerchief out of his suit pocket and dabs at the sweat collecting on his forehead. He’s used to three-piece suits and has powerful AC in his office. Not like our little rental where I’ve been working almost naked for days.

He carefully refolds the cloth, speaking to Kase. “Yes, Kase Donovan, I know who you are. The problem is you don’t know who I am.” He shifts his stare to me, the telltale glint in his eye that he’s on his last nerve. He won’t hesitate to have

his guards haul me out, and that would only incite Kase.
“Come.”

He walks out as if my obedience is assumed. And it is, really. Tommy and Hanson step back.

“Can I pack?” My voice shakes as I take in my piles of fabric, my finished pieces hanging in the corner and half-constructed looks resting on the table and by the sewing machine. When Father gets me to my old home, I’ll figure out what to do with the company. How to close its doors with minimal impact on my employees.

“Mr. Gray will have everything you need,” Tommy says. He’s called Father Mr. Gray my entire life. No one knows more about Father than Tommy and Hanson.

I can’t leave with nothing but the summer dress I’m wearing. It’s too . . . pathetically ironic. Too tragic. A bright and sunny dress when I’m losing my freedom. Too much of a realization that I have nothing and am nothing unless Father says so. And after the last few weeks with Kase, that’s just devastating.

“Now, Ms. Gray,” Hanson says in his low rumble, wiping out any hope I could salvage something from this life I built for myself. These two men have been dedicated to Father longer than I’ve been alive.

“Please, let me go, Kase.” I press my frigid fingertips against Kase’s side and he finally moves. Whether it’s because of my father, or the guns Tommy and Hanson haven’t holstered yet, or because I asked, I don’t know.

He shifts enough that I can get out the door. I walk past Tommy and Hanson like they’re prison guards leading me to a death sentence. Before walking out the door, I glance over my shoulder, trying to communicate an apology in my eyes.

Behind Tommy, behind Hanson, Kase glowers, watching my every step. There had been a promise in his eyes, a need for retribution, then it was snuffed out, and now he disappears into the bedroom.

What is left of my heart sinks. He's done with me, as he should be. I knew better than to get my hopes up, and I did it anyway.

I couldn't leave with my belongings, but I could go with all the ways he built me up during our time together. This isn't the end. I am my own person, and I'll figure this the hell out. I'm not the same scared girl who signed the marriage contract.

I am The Shadow's daughter, after all.

TO FIND out how Holland can escape expectations without settling for the life she grew up with to be with Kase, get [Cherished](#).

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I'D LOVE to know what you thought! Please consider leaving a review of [Corrupted](#).

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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