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DECADENT SINS BOOK FOUR

THRILLS

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LINZI BASSET

DOMINANT THRILLS

Decadent Sins Series, Book 4



A Dark Mafia BDSM Suspense Novel

By
Linzi Basset



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DOMINANT THRILLS

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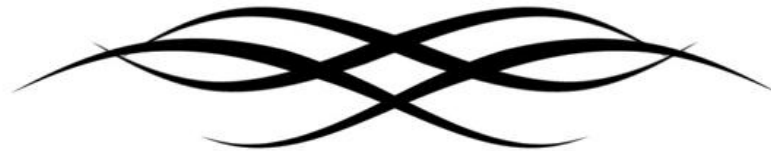
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Author's Note



Dear Reader,

The saga of the Decadent Sins Masters continues with the story of Snake, the newly appointed Assassin Leader of the Kings Inc.

They say I am Goliath.

They aren't wrong.

They say I am ruthless.

They aren't wrong...

I am the Shadow of Death.

Snake, aka, Ronan Scott

I'm feared by many. I'm a Mafioso, ruthless, fearless, and live my life without regrets. I stopped counting the deaths lining the path in my past a long time ago. As the Assassin Leader of Kings Inc. and the West Coast Mafia, I will continue to protect and keep my friends' secret safe, no matter who has to die.

I have no heart. I can't remember the last time I felt... anything. But there is one woman who has an effect on me every time we cross paths. As a man who lives in the shadows of death, she's off limits, too good for the likes of me. As Master Goliath, she awakens the dominant beast inside of me, who refuses to let her go.

Lee Powell

Time waits for no one. The clock on my baby monitor is running out. I'm a spinster who crossed that dateline a long time ago. I have one goal and the time has come to take action. I want a husband and a baby.

There's only one man who makes every nerve ending in my body tingle with anticipation. A virtuoso named Master Goliath, aka Snake, a veritable giant, and a friend of my boss, Torin Caruso.

The problem is that this muscled hunk completely ignores me. I'm invisible to him. Well, I am putting paid to that problem as of right now. There's one place I'll get his attention... Decadent Sins.

The day he accepts my sassy challenge, I quickly realize maybe he's much more than I'm capable of handling.

When Ronan uncovers the identity of the mole in their organization, everything changes. He realizes he has been a fool to believe they stand a chance at a life of happiness.

Will he be able to walk away?

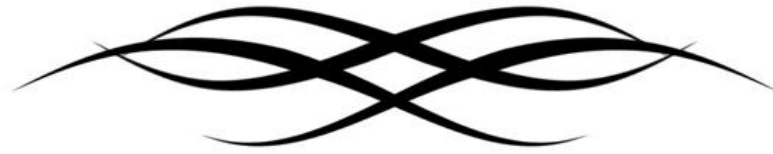
In his world, mercy isn't an option... not for betrayal.

I loved writing this story. I hope you'll enjoy reading it just as much!

Warm regards,

Linzi Basset

Chapter One



The Restaurant Wholesale Depot, Marginal Way S, Industrial District, Seattle WA...

“No, Mom. You really don’t need to come all the way here. It’s just another birthday, no biggie.”

“You’re my daughter. It’s my God-given right to celebrate the day you came into my life.”

With difficulty, Lee Powell suppressed the desire to roll her eyes at her mother’s indignant response. The way her mother kept harping on it, one would swear turning thirty-six was the end of the world.

“Besides, I have no other birthdays to celebrate... not even a little grandbaby to spoil.”

Bam! There it was. The punchline Lee knew was coming. Without fail, Sandy Powell delivered the unequivocal reminder that Lee was getting older and still had no man in her life. To date, she had always laughed it off.

This year, it hurt. Badly. She recognized, more than her mother would ever realize, the clock on her baby monitor was

running out. One thing she did know was that time waited for no one.

“Thirty-six and counting, my darling. You know the older you get, the more difficult, and dangerous, it is to fall pregnant.”

This time, Lee rolled her eyes. It was a sermon she knew word-for-word, and since Sandy was preaching to the converted, all she managed to do was raise her daughter’s hackles.

“Okay, Mom. Here’s the deal. I’ll fuck the first man who walks into my office while you pray he has strong swimmers and that my eggs won’t zap them to kingdom come upon entry. Who knows? Maybe by my next birthday, there might be the pitter-patter of little pink feet to make you happy.”

“I’m so glad you find the situation amusing, Lee. Making babies is nothing to joke about, least of all in reference to fucking. Shame on you.”

“You’re right. I apologize.” Lee was appropriately chastised. “Seriously, Mom. Do not waste the money on a trip. My birthday is mid-week and I’ll be working, even over the weekend, so there won’t be time for any celebration.”

“Blasphemy, young lady. Torin Caruso wouldn’t dare make you work on the weekend following your birthday. He never has and never will. Just say outright you don’t wish me to come, instead of painting the poor man as a villain.”

“Oh, good Lord,” Lee said sotto voce as she crumbled forward and banged her head softly against the desk.

“What was that?”

“Nothing, but there’s someone here. I really have to go.”

“I love you, you know,” Sandy said after a brief hesitation.

“I know, Mom. I love you too.” Sighing softly when Sandy didn’t say goodbye, Lee conceded. “Tell you what, why don’t I plan a two-week vacation and come for a visit when it’s your birthday in two months? That way, we can catch up properly.”

“That would be lovely. Very well, Leeandra. I’ll leave you be. I hope you’ll at least go out with your friends and celebrate your birthday. Life is too short to sit at home and mope about getting old.”

“I have never moped about getting old,” Lee protested. A lie, of course. Ever since she turned thirty, she bemoaned her spinsterhood, purely because she had failed to realize the one goal she had set for herself—finding a man, falling in love, getting married, having a baby, and living happily ever after. Well, technically, that was five goals, but they all flowed from one. Either way, it was time to stop moping about it and grab the proverbial bull by the horns.

This year, on her thirty-sixth birthday, Lee Powell was going to find that man—come hell or high water!

“I’ll fuck the first man who walks into my office...”



Ronan Scott, aka Snake, was known to everyone at Kings Inc. and the West Coast Mafia as the top hitman. He didn't register anything else after those words settled in his mind. Lust radiated through him and installed itself as a heavy throb in his loins.

As a man who lived in the shadows of death, the likes of Lee Powell were off limits, too good for a man of his making.

Yes, no need to debate the issue—it was an undisputed fact. His father was Scottish, a true gentleman, who lost his heart to the daughter of a Sicilian Mafia Boss. His father had been accepted into the Mafia family upon their marriage, which meant it was the kind of life he had grown up in.

Those who have been so fascinated as to study endlessly the emotional mechanism that is the source of power that drives their behavior say psychopaths are born and sociopaths are made. Ronan couldn't remember when or even how old he was when he realized that these exclusive traits also described the innate feelings that assuaged the unknowable parts of his essential being—the stuff that made him tick. There was no reason to change. There was nothing in it for him. Change was frightening. Memory was subjective. Why delete what felt normal?

Who, other than the bearer of such peculiar singularities could claim ownership of the uncommon behavior endowed upon them through either genetics or environmental factors, which, in effect, set themselves apart from the rest? Was it putting the cat in the dryer for a few spins, or was it the psychosexual thrill of watching a fly buzz

around helplessly after its wings were torn off? It was all a blur. Perhaps the time when a beloved pet was so badly abused because... well, he couldn't even remember what he was feeling at that ugly, incomprehensible moment. He did regret his hideous behavior back then. That he erred bothered him still. So, how was it these monstrous acts were allowed to happen? His love of animals was so profound as to exclude those of his own species.

So, after attempting to describe who and what Ronan was in so many words, too many probably, here he was. He followed the path of least resistance, one that legitimized and put to good use his particular skills. Who wouldn't do the same, right? And so, it came to pass.

Ronan Scott found his true calling. Like his parents, he became a Mafioso—more accurately, a hitman. Ruthless, fearless, efficient. Completely unencumbered by any feelings of remorse and uninhibited by a sense of morality.

I mean, ya gotta get on with it, right?

His grandfather once told him to find one thing he was good at and stick to it. Definitely beat working in a fuckin' car wash eight hours a day tryin' to make people appreciate the effort you made when they couldn't give a shit if you lived or died.

Fuckin' people. Ronan couldn't stand most of them. Well, except his new American crime family. Breaking away from his own family had been a necessity. He had become a vicious killer in Italy.

When Torin invited him to join his ranks in Seattle ten years ago, he hadn't hesitated. It was time to get away from

the muck of violence dragging him down. Perhaps in America, he might find some semblance of humanity. Thankfully, with the kind of life the Carusos had built, he did. He might even have redeemed himself for the bad things he had done in his life. Not all of them, not by a long shot, but perhaps he wasn't just all bad anymore.

Lee's husky voice yanked him back to the present.

"Oh, Lord, please help me," she bemoaned her fate as soon as she ended the call.

Despite the fact that he wasn't the kind of man for her, she had said the words as if they were a vow, so what kind of gentleman would he be not to offer her the opportunity to make good on it?

"The Lord is rather busy, and since I'm closer, why don't I just give you a hand?"

"Freaking ball busters! Darn it, you almost gave me a heart attack! You could've at least knocked, cleared your throat, or... something!" She ended with a flutter of fingers and one hand pressed over her heart.

"I've been standing here for five minutes," he deadpanned. "I thought you saw me."

"What you're doing isn't standing. Why don't you just straighten up, for heaven's sake? I can assure you the door frame won't collapse. You're always slouching." Again, hands fluttered in an explanatory wave. "If it's not the door, it's the wall or a car. Gmphf, I wouldn't be surprised if you lean against the loo when you have to... ehm, I mean..."

“Piss?” he said helpfully, doing his utter best to keep a smile from breaking across his face.

Lee Powell was adorable. She hardly ever cursed and tended to wear her heart on her sleeve. Proof of that presented itself on her cheeks, exploding in red blotches.

The Dom in him loved to watch the effect he had on her. Suddenly, he itched to see just how far he could push her boundaries.

Hold on, Snake. For all you know, she's pure vanilla and will have a stroke if you go all Dom on her.

“What do you want, Ronan?” Avoiding his eyes, she gathered the papers in front of her into a neat pile.

“I have a meeting with Torin.” One leg lazily crossed over the other as he slouched harder against the door. “You should know. You keep his diary.”

“Indeed, I do.” Her fingers rattled against the desk as she cast a sharp glare at him. “And you, Mr. Scott, are ten minutes late.”

“Not my fault,” he said, smiling broadly. “As I said, I’ve been standing here for quite some time, awaiting your attention.”

“Bah! Since when do you wait for my permission to go into Torin’s office?” This time, sparks of reproach flew in his direction.

“Since you promised to pull out our nutsack hairs with a tweezer if we dared bypass your vigil enroute to see him.” Snake Junior twitched excitedly at the patch of rosy annoyance mixed with embarrassment coating her cheeks.

“I never said that,” she protested, looking everywhere but at him.

He couldn't help but wonder if it was because his words brought a vision of him naked with her hands pushing his rowdy cock out of the way to get to those coarse nutsack hairs with her tweezers.

The tight nubs of her nipples confirmed that indeed, she had been having unsolicited thoughts.

“Well, perhaps you didn't use those exact words, but you most definitely alluded to—”

“Enough,” she cut him off as she jumped up to lean forward with her palms flat on the desk. “Go. Torin doesn't like to wait.”

“Hmm, I'm afraid this time, he's going to have to be patient. I have a duty to perform first.”

“Duty?”

“Yep.” He looked around the office. Lee had worked for Torin for many years, and the office represented the kind of woman she was—neat as a pin and an adherent of minimalism. In fact, the office was decorated very stylishly, with only one photo of her and her mother on a side table. “No photo of your father?”

Lee seemed taken aback. Not surprisingly, since Ronan rarely made small talk with her or anyone else. Perhaps it was the topic of her father that she would rather avoid. Her curt response answered that question.

“Never knew him. He ditched my mother the moment she told him she was pregnant.”

“Asshole.” He shrugged but offered a gentle smile to soften the word. “On the other hand, rather he walked away than trying to build a family within the foundation of a loveless marriage.”

“Oh, please, don’t tell me you’re another one of those!” The disappointment in her voice caught him off guard.

“I’m afraid I’m lost,” he drawled. “One of what?”

“You’re just like Torin and Razor. You don’t believe in love, and you think men shouldn’t show any emotion. It’s a sign of weakness... right?”

“To the contrary, Miss Cynical. I fully embrace the concept of love. My parents are celebrating their fiftieth wedding anniversary this year. To this day, they’re still happily married, so I have the perfect example from which to be inspired.” He shrugged. “At the moment, I just choose not to give in to its allure. Unless I find the one who tips the scale, it’s too much of an effort for too little return.”

“Tips the scale?”

“Yeah, you know, the one who makes you forget why you walked into a room the moment you clap eyes on her. So, Miss Powell, those who dare, win. How daring are you? Would you be brave enough to swim in uncharted waters?”

Why he asked the question was beyond him. Didn’t he just explain to himself why he was all wrong for her, not to mention that he was ten years older than she? Both were perfectly sane reasons not to offer himself as a candidate for baby making and living happily ever after!

“If by uncharted waters, you’re referring to yourself as plausible husband material, the answer is an emphatic...” Her words drifted off as she stared at him with widening eyes. He felt the flicker in their depths in the twitch of his cock.

Goddammit, this woman is potent and alluring. I really should steer clear of her. I really, really should.

His eyes darkened as he looked at her. Realization flashed through him then. She was the one and equally, the source of his confusion. No matter how he had tried to ignore it over the years, he couldn’t deny the unwanted emotions he felt for her.

Lee Powell was drop-dead gorgeous and wicked-smart. She blinked as she stared up at him, forcing him to dig deep for control as he began to drown in the mossy green pools of her eyes. Like numerous times before, the longing to become hopelessly tangled in the ropey strands of the dark red tresses that framed a heart-shaped face seared him. It was that potent.

He smiled as her rounded jaw jutted forward stubbornly and her perfect nose flared in reaction to his continued scrutiny.

For a brief moment, he was lost in a fantasy of feeling her warm body surrender to the probe of his. An errant pulse careened into his loins and jerked him out of the exquisite reverie. Could it be? Was she the one woman who could make him feel, truly feel, something inside his soul?

Forget it, Snake. She’s not for you. She deserves a good man... which you definitely aren’t.

“You were saying?” he probed as he straightened from the negligent pose against the doorframe, doing the exact opposite of what his conscience was telling him.

“I was saying that— Wh-What are you doing?” she stammered in a breathy voice as he closed the door and flicked the lock.

“Accommodating you.”

“A-Accommodating me?” She retreated with a hand warding him off as he approached. The sultry, honey-smoothness of her voice unleashed a fresh seam of lust to spear through him.

“Hmm, if I didn’t know better, I’d be concerned about your vocabulary. Yes, Miss Powell, accommodating you. You know... being the first man who walked into your office and all.” He chuckled at the explosion of redness on her cheeks. “Remember?” One eyebrow crawled lazily higher. “The vow you just made to your mother.”

“I... didn’t... that was... stop! You cannot be serious,” she snapped.

He walked into her hand, forcing her palm to flatten against his bulging chest.

“I’m dead serious. I want to make sure you honor your oath.”

“I didn’t take a freaking oath!” she protested, desperately seeking an escape route. She gained another pinch of respect as she squared her shoulders and indignantly flipped her hair back. “All I did was try and—”

“Sounded like an oath to me. What did you say again? Hmm, I believe your exact words were, ‘I’ll fuck the first man who walks into my office.’ Isn’t that right?”

“I wasn’t saying it to you. I was talking to my mother.” She pushed away from his chest to gain back some breathing room. “Get your big ass out of my space, Mr. Scott!”

“Definitely an oath. I’m sorry, but I just can’t allow you to break your word. Not to your mother, of all people.”

“You don’t even know my mother!”

“A minor detail I intend to correct in the near future.”

Her eyes widened as he suddenly appeared to become even bigger and more powerful. She stabbed a finger against his chest.

“You’re a Dominant. Good Lord, I should’ve known better. The other men working for Torin probably are, too. Look at the lot of you—arrogant, conceited, and absolute experts on everything. Ugh! How tedious it is to be in your presence. I can’t believe I never realized it before.”

“Dare I hope that it means you’re not vanilla?”

Her mouth opened and closed, clearly intending to lie before thinking better of it.

“Good girl. A blatant lie from a submissive will always invite punishment.”

“The emphasis on a submissive. I am not your sub, so kindly remove your body from my personal space... SIR!”

“Ah, now you’ve sealed your fate, little one.”

“Believe me, my fate has nothing to do with this.”

“Then you shouldn’t have put so much emphasis on calling me Sir.” He brushed his thumb over the fullness of her lower lip. “That sounded like a commitment or rather,”—his teeth flashed in a broad smile—“an oath”

“You seem to have an unhealthy preoccupation with the word ‘oath,’” she muttered as she did her best to remain steadfast.

Lee was a feisty sub... exactly the kind Ronan, aka Master Goliath, coveted at Decadent Sins Club.

“I’m rapidly developing a fixation with you, little subbie,” he growled as he whipped her around, bending her over the desk, and pushing her skirt up over her hips—all in one smooth movement. He stretched her arms out. “Hold on to the edge of the desk. Do not let go, kitten.”

“Pfft,” she snorted, ignoring his instruction as she attempted to drag her skirt back down. “I’d rather you keep your fixation to yourself! You’re a deviant! Let me go. You can’t do this!”

“I hate women who lie and ignore my orders. You just did both.”

Crack! Crack! Crack!

“Oww! Stop that. How dare... oww, spitting lizards that hurts!” she wailed as another strike connected with her soft behind, urging her to quickly clasp the edge of the desk.

“Yep, I truly abhor blatant lies. Care to correct your statement, Miss Powell?”

“You can go and suck on a cactus before I—”

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Ronan couldn't recall when he last had so much fun spanking a woman. The way she writhed her perfectly round ass, wiggling in an effort to escape—it was just that delicious movement that invited a swipe of his meaty palm over its curvature. He checked every strike, ensuring it left a sting in its wake but not enough to justify the histrionics she so acutely displayed. The little subbie was a brat through and through.

“Stop your caterwauling.” The heat of his breath brushed against her cheek as he leaned forward and, with a quick economy of movement, ripped her panties off and forced them into her mouth. “That’s better. We don’t want Torin striding in here, wondering what the hell is going on, now do we? Imagine his reaction if he were to walk in on us fucking like rabbits?”

The glare threatening to disintegrate him was more than enough reaction to let him know what she thought of that statement. Still, her hands remained clasped around the edge of the desk.

“Ah, my instincts about you were spot on. You might be a brat, but you’re an experienced submissive. Now this, my little dove, is the best discovery I’ve made in a very long time.” He leaned closer as she responded with an unintelligible garble.

“What was that? No mumbling, please. I hate that.”

This time, a low feline growl filtered through the piece of silk, but the fact that she stayed immobile was enough to set his mind at ease that she was comfortable with the play unfolding between them.

“Ah, I love this color on you. And look at that,”—his voice dipped low as he caressed her rounded buttocks—“the perfect jiggle with every strike.”

This time, she yanked the panties from her mouth and scowled at him over her shoulder. “Are you saying I’m fat?”

“That’s a word that should be banned from your vocabulary,” he grumbled as he slapped two quick strikes against her already smarting cheeks. His grin was one of pure pleasure as he watched the resulting ripples over her buttocks in reaction to the hits. “I love your body, kitten. Every curve, every niche and hollow of your sensual architecture excites me. The absolute perfect size to fit like a hand in glove.”

“That’s hardly reassuring since your hands are the size of watermelons, you oaf! It’s more of an insult, truth be known,” she said as he folded his hands around her behind and squeezed hard.

“Hmm, absolute perfect fit.” His gravelly voice resonated through the room as he blithely ignored her sharp retort.

“Oh, sweet Lord,” she moaned as he leaned over to nibble on an earlobe.

“I can’t wait to see you completely naked, spread out, begging to be fucked into the back of beyond.”

“Sho-oo-oting stars,” she wailed as his large paw reached down to completely cover her pussy.

“So soft.... so hot,” he hissed as his teeth sank into the deltoid of her shoulder. And so fucking wet.” Her scream was muted as his other hand clamped over her mouth when he bit

down and sucked on her flesh. Now, alight with anticipation, he gently hilted two fingers inside her pussy, spiking her lust into a euphoric frenzy—the hot, sticky essence flowing from her channel was all the proof necessary of just how worked up she was.

“So, about that oath to your mother...”

Yanking her head back, she dislodged the hand covering her mouth to protest in a husky voice, “It wasn’t an oath and definitely not meant for your ears. I told you, I was speaking to my mother.” The crack in her voice was a silent plea for him to continue.

“Hmm, pity.” Straightening, he removed his body from hers, exulting in the shiver that trailed over her frame as the only connection that remained was his fingers buried deep inside her pussy. “Especially since I am more than willing to comply.”

“Oh, dancing lizards,” she moaned as Ronan rapidly pumped two fingers inside her, fingerfucking her with deep penetration that resulted in a squishing sound from her wet pussy—a melody of lust for an audience of two.

“I guess that means I won’t be as late for my meeting with Torin as I initially thought.”

He was already at the door before Lee found her voice.

“You cretin! Don’t you dare leave me like this! Get back here and finish what you started.”

“You really don’t want me to do that, little subbie.”

“Don’t tell me what I want! I know exactly what I need. Get back here and make me come!”

“Hmm,” his dulcet-toned voice reverberated through the room as their eyes caught. Her cheeks turned an enticing ruby red as he slowly licked the sticky essence from between his fingers. “I’d love to make you come, Miss Powell, but the only way that’s going to happen is by us keeping to your oath... by me fucking you.”

Unlocking the door, he winked at her.

“Now, be a good little kitten and don’t come until then. No masturbating either. At least not until I fuck you. That, of course, will only happen when you ask me to... at Decadent Sins Club. I’ll be there every night this week.”

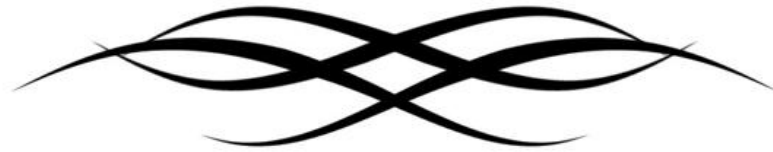
With a broad smile at her expression of disbelief on her face, he opened the door and walked out, his words chasing after him.

“Don’t disappoint me, little subbie, and be warned. I primed that cute little cunt of yours for my pleasure. Inviting someone else to fuck you would only result in him being beaten up good and well after I whipped your ass tomato red.”

His deep laughter mocked Lee as her response floated to his ears.

“Primed, my ass. It’s completely fermented.”

Chapter Two



“Don’t fret about it, Dario. I know you’re swamped with opening another resort on the island. I didn’t expect you to attend Kian’s funeral. To be brutally honest, with the circumstances of his betrayal, I was feeling hard pressed to go myself.”

“When is the little brat coming for a visit?” Ronan said as he walked into the office and sat down opposite Torin in between Matteo and Razor.

“Is that Snake?” Dario’s voice echoed through the room as Torin switched the cell to speaker.

“How are you, little buddy?” Ronan taunted him. It was the one thing he missed since Dario had left—the little jabs at each other. The rapport that the two of them had built over the years had developed into a strong bond of friendship.

Dario laughed. “I might be a couple of years younger than the three of you, but I’m anything but little. I’ll have you know, I’ve pumped some serious iron since I moved to Bora Bora.”

“Believe me, Dario, you’re still no match for Snake. He gets bigger by the day. Everywhere we go, people want to know if he’s our bodyguard,” Matteo interjected.

“Ah, well, I’m still not scared of him. His big ass could never catch me. The moment he starts throwing punches, I’ll just haul my ass and the fight’ll be over.”

“Big mouth you have with all the water separating us,” Ronan laughed. “I’m serious, man. When are we seeing you?”

“I second Ronan’s question. I haven’t seen you in over a year. It’s time, little brother.” Torin’s voice thickened. He had been Dario’s protector from when he was small. It had all come to a head when his mother had used Dario to gain a position of power for herself in the Mafia Commission after their father’s death.

“Sooner than you might think.”

“Now, that’s the best news I’ve heard in a very long time.” Razor’s deep voice resonated through the room. To the Carusos he was a father figure. Although not much older, he had always looked out for them. No matter that he was now the Pakhan of Black Diamond Bratva in Russia, he chose to continue his life here in Seattle as the Boss of the National Crime Syndicate, Kings Inc. Torin, aka Boss X, was also the covert leader of the West Coast Mafia Commission. Dario was as much a little brother to him as he was to Torin.

“As soon as the opening of the new resort is finished, I’m heading your way. I want to discuss our partnership, Torin.”

“It’s never been a partnership, Dario. The resort group is yours. It was a gift.”

“So, you said, but I want to feel I earned it myself. I want to pay you back the money you invested.”

“Dario. Before you—”

“Let me finish, please. I don’t mean to be rude, but I’m going to stand firm. There will be no polite debate. It’s time that I become more assertive as a businessman. I’ve hidden behind the excuse of being emotionally abused for too long. I want the world to know that my success was realized because I worked my ass off for it, not because my big brother offered a lucrative business to me on a platter.”

“Very well. We’ll talk about it once you’re here.”

Torin ended the call after another friendly bout of banter between Dario, Matteo, and Ronan.

“I never thought I’d say this, but I miss the little bugger,” Ronan muttered as he looked around. “What? No Java? C’mon, Torin. I can’t function without a serious shot of caffeine.”

“I’m not sure what’s keeping Lee, but knowing her, she ordered breakfast as well. So, be a big boy, and curb your need a little longer.” Torin’s eyes narrowed at the self-satisfied smirk that flashed across Ronan’s face. “Something tells me you know why my very dependable PA is late with our coffee.”

“A true gentleman doesn’t kiss and tell,” he responded with a deep chuckle. “So, what’s up? I have a meeting across town in two hours with a potential new supplier.”

“Venom.” Torin’s voice darkened. “The situation is becoming untenable. Even with all the skills and technology at our disposal, we still can’t find him or trace where the submarine disappeared to. Surely the magnetic anomaly

detector technology employed by the Military ASW must've picked up the disturbances in Earth's magnetic field caused by its metallic hull?"

"I have a friend in the ASW. We went over that day's report. There was nothing." Razor's fingers tapped on the desk. "I told you before, whoever the bastard is, he's very tech savvy. If he has the contacts to obtain a mini sub, he must be clever enough to have ensured it was covered with sound-absorbing tiles."

"You mean anechoic coatings?" Ronan interjected.

"Yes. That way the sonars wouldn't have detected it, especially since it was a mini sub."

"It's been three weeks since President Whittell's abduction," Matteo said. "Have the NSA or the CIA received any demands?"

"Nothing." Torin lit a cigarillo and fired a ball of smoke from his mouth. Transfixed, he stared as the wooly vortex shape-shifted into a ring and began to spin back on itself as it encountered friction from the air. "They don't even know if POTUS is still alive." He leaned forward. "I want the bastard. A mini submarine like Venom used doesn't just appear out of the blue. Find me the fuckface who built it or procured it for him. One way or the other, we need to close in on Venom. James Thorn, the Vice President, has been sworn in. The NSA, in correlation with the CIA and the FBI, has initiated a worldwide manhunt for Whittell."

"What about the FBI? Both the Director and Deputy Director are dead."

“I suspect it’ll be one of Thorn’s first appointments now that he’s acting president.” Ronan straightened. “Hypothetically, what if that was the aim of the abduction? To put someone in charge of the FBI who is under Venom’s power?”

“And/or whoever he’s in cahoots with,” Matteo said.

“Yeah, I suspect this entire situation involves more than just one man with the desire to obtain a NASA secret space microchip nanotechnology design.” Torin frowned. “I’m still pissed that the West Coast Mafia and the Kings Inc. are implicated as scapegoats of POTUS’ abduction.”

“You should be,” Ronan’s guttural voice sounded grim. “Concerned too, I’d say.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning, that this vendetta against us goes back much further than Venom’s appearance. It’s been building for a couple of years. In my opinion, it’s personal... and aimed at you, Torin.”

“Honestly, I had the same thought.” Torin looked up as Lee arrived after a brief knock, carrying a tray laden with croissants, toasted sandwiches, and coffee.

“About time, Ms. Powell.” Ronan eagerly lifted a cup and took a slug. “Ah, heaven,” he cooed, winking at her. Mumbling unintelligibly and with a becoming blush darkening her cheeks, she left the room.

“Okay, what did I miss?” Matteo said as he watched her leave. “Lee would never let that remark go without a sharp retort.” He cast a narrowed look at Ronan. “For that matter,

she never blushes. Out with it, Snake. What did you do to her?”

“Let’s just say I realized she ticks all the right boxes.” Ignoring their questioning looks, he filled a plate and sat back to nibble on a sandwich. “Don’t give me that look, Torin. I’d never make a move if it wasn’t wanted. I simply cast a line. She bit, and I reeled her in... slowly, ensuring mutual pleasure was achieved during the process.” A Cheshire grin indicted him. “Did you know she’s a submissive, Torin?”

“Yes, I did. She has an open invitation to Decadent Sins.”

“Yet, I’ve never seen her there,” Matteo said.

“Because she said it would be weird to watch her boss whip and fuck a naked woman, then the next day at work, try to pretend she didn’t see his dick.”

“Can’t say I blame her. That’s the kind of thing from which nightmares are made,” Ronan laughed.

“Don’t forget you’re one of her bosses, too. The same goes for you, so don’t get too cocky,” Razor said deadpan.

“Shit.” Ronan frowned. “That’s unfortunate. For us, that is.”

“Enough chit-chat,” Torin said, cutting them short. “Maxim, has Maia been able to make contact with Andrew Wilson?”

“She sent out a couple of feelers on the dark web, but to date, there’s been no response. We’ll keep trying. In the meantime, I’m working with a sketch artist who specializes in aging art. If we have a picture of what her uncle and aunt

potentially look like now, we might strike it lucky on a global facial recognition search.”

“Good work. Continue with it and keep me informed. I want all of you to concentrate on finding whoever supplied Venom with that submarine. If we find him, we find Venom. Also, Ronan, I want you to do an in-depth background check into the life and movements of the acting president. Go dark and deep. If he’s put one foot wrong, I want to know about it. Someone must know something about POTUS’ abduction. I refuse to believe only Venom and Kian were involved.”

“Already working on it.” Ronan checked his watch and got up. “I need to get going or I’ll be late for my meeting.”

“Whatever any of you find, report back to us immediately. Don’t wait for me to set up a meeting,” Torin said as he stood. “For now, I think it’s time I evaluate young Brandon’s knife skills which you’ve boasted about so much.”

“Damn, I would love to watch that showdown,” Ronan said. “Be warned, Boss X, that youngster might just surprise you. seeing as I’m the one who taught him the finer techniques in handling a blade.”



*A remote cabin on the Lopez Hill Trailhead, Lopez Hill Island,
San Juan County, WA...*

“You’re naive if you think you’ll get away with this. They will hunt you down until they find you. Only cowards hide behind a mask— Ahh!”

The sound of President Whittell's grunt was lost as a sickening crack from a right cross smashed into his nose, crushing the cartilage of the nasal septum, and flattening the shapeless flesh against his face. An attempt to answer only produced a gurgling noise as blood dripped into the nasopharynx and pooled in the back of the President's throat.

"Don't piss me off more than I already am, old man. I'm no fucking coward!"

Noel had a second degree in philosophy—knowledge that served him well in his dire circumstances. His tormentor wasn't as confident as his actions revealed. His conduct was irrational and reeked of conflicting emotions. Whatever Venom was really after, it had nothing to do with the NASA development he and Andrew Wilson spearheaded in the early eighties—a microchip with still unknown potential. It could help cloak a satellite in stealth technology, could be used to deploy a space laser and unbeknownst to them, was the first to help create an AI nanotechnology that had the ability to evolve in space. The four scientists responsible for its advanced technology development had decided it was just too dangerous to further evolve. They encrypted their research and for years, it remained hidden in the depths of NASA's vaults, until the final year of William Roe's presidency.

Someone uncovered the files, and all hell broke loose. Of the four people involved in its development, only he and Andrew were still alive. William Roe and Hector Goldberg were supposedly killed in a motor vehicle accident a week after the existence of the design was leaked a couple years ago. That was when Noel and Andrew decided it was best to make the design disappear for good.

It didn't take a rocket scientist to know who was behind his abduction. Only one man was eager enough to go to such extreme lengths to obtain the design for his own gain.

“Wh-Who do you work for?” Whittell blinked. The pain from his smashed nose was blinding and the metal taste of blood in his mouth made him wonder how much longer he'd last without medical assistance.

“An astonishing, and at once, naively arrogant question from the most powerful man in the world who somehow believes, erroneously, that a millennia's worth of royal blood runs through his commoner veins. Therefore, everyone should bow down and kiss his sacred ring. What utter apostasy, forcing others to embrace an opinion that is contrary to their own, leveled upon the rest of us. An ancient, man-made construct that continues to this very day to curse this world.” His voice grew darker. “You, good sir, are at my mercy and have the audacity to question me? What makes you think anyone else is involved?”

“An-And yet I am. You don't strike me as a scientist or an aerospace en-engineer, so no, I don't believe you're w-working on your own.”

“Shut the fuck up!”

Venom's angry response confirmed Noel's suspicion. Venom wasn't the mastermind. He was the executioner.

There had been an added salvo in the phase of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union with the launch of the first Sputnik as far back as the late 1950s. At the time, Bjorn Korolevov founded and led the Soviet space effort with the R-7 rocket's launch of the first Sputnik. Korolevov's

son, Sergei, was the one who gave the Soviets a head start with the pioneering rocket work in the subsequent years. Sergei's son, Vasili Korolevov, followed in his forbearer's footsteps with one exception. He had a chip on his shoulder. Because of the success of his grandfather, who was regarded by many as the father of practical astronautics, he wanted the accolade of launching something into space that no one else had achieved.

Although Vasili was trained as an aircraft engineer, some of his greatest strengths proved to be in design integration, organization, and strategic planning. Over time, his desire for the domination of space became well known. He had sworn that before he died, Russia would overtake the U.S. insofar as space supremacy was concerned.

Noel believed this went far beyond a desire to have that accolade added to Vasili's repertoire. This was about space warfare—creating a weapon that could flatten a country from space. If their microchip design ever got into his hands, it would mean Armageddon for the United States—or any other country for that matter. It would be the kind of satellite that could be used to erase an entire culture off the face of the Earth.

The first strike would come without notice, no warning, no time to react.

Total annihilation.

Over and out.

“I'm getting tired of repeating myself, Mr. President, but I will ask you one more time. Where are the WOSC designs?”

“So... ugh!” A glob of blood exploded from his mouth as another blow whiplashed his head. “S-So, it is Vasili Korolevov.” Noel managed a half-smirk through the pain as the masked man visibly started. “I th-thought as much. Since he is the grandson of Bjorn Korolevov, he’s the only one who would know what the a-acronym for the design is.”

“My patience is running out, Mister President, and so is the same of the Russian President. Answer my fucking question!”

Noel was taken aback at that revelation. The curse that followed the announcement was proof that Venom had disclosed information he wasn’t supposed to.

“The Russian Pr-President?” Fear burrowed into the very core of Noel’s being. Not for his own life but for those of the people of the United States and the country currently at war with Russia, Ukraine.

“Forget what I said. Just tell me what I want to know!”

“Go fu-fuck yourself.”

Noel saw the gun appear in Venom’s hand. He had nowhere to go, no way to defend himself since he was half blind and incapacitated from a broken nose. Not to mention tied up in a chair. All he could do was pray the end would be quick. His sigh of relief was cut short as he watched Venom’s arm pull back.

“Ugh!” Venom slammed the butt of the Glock against the back of his head. The last thoughts that flashed through Noel’s mind before he lost consciousness was whether Maxim Ivanov, CEO of Alligator International, had been right all

along. The Secret Service had approached his security company to assist in the additional protection of his family when intelligence picked up chatter about an assassination plot. At the time, when intelligence reports had indicated that the West Coast Mafia and the Kings Inc National Crime Syndicate were behind it, Ivanov believed it was a ploy and they had been set up.

Except there was no assassination. It had been used as a ruse to open the door to kidnapping him. They needed him to disclose the location of the microchip that he had helped develop all those years ago.

Someone other than the Mafia was pulling the strings. The Mafia would have no interest in space technology. There was no financial gain in it for them, except... If anyone was aware of the kind of weapon those designs could generate, they would be forerunners as his kidnappers. The design of space technology using the microchip would be worth billions on the black market if offered to the highest bidder as a weapon of destruction. Countries like China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar would all vie for it. The U.S. and the EU would be fools not to participate, if only to keep such dangerous weapons from their hands.

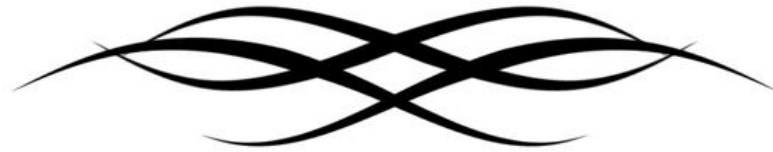
This entire setup reeked of someone, an individual or a group of high-powered companies, who had power and money. A scheme that must have taken extreme planning and precision. Extorting someone the likes of the Russian President or playing him off against the United States Government and the Middle East would be the perfect playground to peddle such a weapon to the highest bidder. Any

of those countries would pay top dollar to keep others from getting their hands on it.

Terrorists like ISIS would've asked for a huge ransom, perhaps even killed him if everything went south.

This bastard was so unsettled, he still might.

Chapter Three



Decadent Delights Restaurant on the Corner of Yesler Way and 2nd Avenue, across from the Smith Tower...

“Snake? Why would any man choose such a moniker? It doesn’t fill me with confidence that he can be trusted, Lee. A person referred to as a snake means he’s treacherous, deceitful, underhanded, or a backstabber.”

Lee wasn’t surprised at Emily Hobbs’ scathing response to hearing what Ronan Scott was called at the company. For some reason she was allergic to big, muscled men. Just the thought that he had spanked her in her office turned Emily’s cheeks puffy with annoyance. They had been best friends for the past five years ever since Emily started working there as the Financial Accounting Manager.

“Apparently. he earned the name because he’s silent, strikes fast, and his bite is as lethal as a mamba’s.” Lee shrugged as she sipped a crisp Sangria. “Anyway, that’s the explanation Torin gave me.”

“Strikes fast at what? A deal with a new supplier? He’s not an assassin for heaven’s sake. He’s the COO and a shareholder of The Restaurant Wholesale Depot.”

“You know what men are like when it comes to nicknames. Anyway, it hardly matters. I never use it. I’ve only ever called him by his given name.”

“So, what did you do that ended with your ass up in the air? For that matter, why didn’t I hear your shrieks for help when he started hitting you?”

“Because he stuffed my panties in my mouth.” An urgent secret revealed itself in a discreet smile that flashed like a bolt of lightning across Lee’s face. “And because I didn’t want anyone to interrupt him.”

“You didn’t want anyone to... hold on. You little slut!” she whispered. “You wanted him to fuck you. Right there in your office, didn’t you?” Emily leaned forward eagerly as her earlier distrust of Ronan quickly dissipated. “So, did he?”

“Turns out the delinquent is a Dom. Whaddaya think?” Like *coitus interruptus*, Lee felt robbed of being left unfulfilled—marooned high and dry from the ecstasy of *le petit mort*.

“Oh, come on, Lee. Don’t tell me you never realized he was a Dominant? Torin, Matteo, and Maxim never made a secret of their lifestyle. And *he* is their friend for heaven’s sake! One plus one is two!”

“You know my motto, Emily.”

“Yeah, I know. Never mix business with pleasure. That doesn’t mean you have to go through life with blinders on.” Sipping her drink, she watched Lee with speculation in her eyes. “I foresee a change in you. Come on. Spit it out. There’s more to this story than Ronan Scott going all Dom on you.”

“I think my mother harping about her desire for grandchildren has finally rubbed off on me. I’ve always shrugged it off when she bleats about babies and marriage. This year is different.” Lee’s eyes drifted over the other diners. “I’m ready, Emily. I want my own happily ever after. More than anything, I want to become a mother.”

“About time,” Emily said, with a smile. “Now, all we need to do is find the perfect match for you.” She exploded at the look on Lee’s face. “No fucking way! Are you serious? Ronan, aka Snake, is the man you want? As a husband and a father to your child?”

“Please don’t ask me to explain myself. I can’t. It’s completely emotional. He’s a lady killer, an Adonis, and if that wasn’t enough, he’s incredibly successful to boot.”

“I’ll give you that. He’s a very good businessman but all those bulging muscles are too much of a distraction to notice his face,” she grumbled.

“He always sparked something inside me. I just never allowed myself to acknowledge it. When he asked me if I was brave enough to test uncharted waters, that’s when I knew. At that moment when I looked into his eyes, I saw my future. The two of us in front of a roaring fireplace with a little boy and girl running around.”

“That’s quite a vision.”

“More than a vision, it was surreal—a revelation. I don’t care what you say, Emily. Ronan Scott is my future. The man who will make me happy and give me the forever after I want.” She finished her drink. “All I need to do is give free rein to my emotions and make him fall in love with me.”

“Not to be a doom’s angel but you do know he’s got quite the reputation with the ladies. A connoisseur of variety, from what the girls in the office say.”

“What’s in the past doesn’t matter. What does matter is the future. He told me his parents are celebrating their fiftieth wedding anniversary. With an example like that, my instincts tell me once he commits, it’ll be for good. Besides, if he ever dares to cheat on me, I’ll cut off his little manly bits.”

Emily burst out laughing. “Are we talking about the same man? I sincerely doubt any part of that man is small. His *manly* bits included.”

“Sounds like quite an interesting conversation. Mind if I join in?”

The gravelly voice vibrating so close to Lee’s ear teased the vellus hair at the nape of her neck to rise among a patch of newly stimulated goosebumps.

Good Lord, I’m in trouble. Serious trouble, if this was how her body reacted to the sound of his voice.

“I... ehm, what are you doing here?” Lee mumbled as suddenly without waiting for an invitation he sat down beside her in the booth. She tightened the light coat she wore around her waist that barely concealed the kinky corset dress hoping that it would deflect his sharp gaze from wondering what was underneath. She just wasn’t ready for him to know that she was actually there to go to Decadent Sins.

A ghost of a smile appeared on his face. “In case you missed it, Miss Powell, this is a restaurant. Quite a popular one. I eat here often.”

Lee cast a furtive glance his way. His dark brown hair had a sprinkle of salt ‘n pepper on the sides, which against his deeply tanned skin gave him the beginnings of a sexy silver fox look.

She had always been fascinated by the color of eyes, and Ronan’s had a magnetic quality. The shade of midnight blue, they sometimes flashed with a glimmer of the ocean’s hue, that changed according to his moods. More than their beauty, his eyes had intensity, honesty, and gentleness. Her perusal was hijacked by the thick eyelashes that invited her gaze to his distinct cheekbones and angular jaw. The man was too damn attractive for his own good.

A small tremor shimmied down her spine as their eyes caught briefly before his gaze swept over her body. They deliberately lingered on her full breasts that were constrained under the lapels of the coat. She resisted the temptation to cover their fullness, which appeared more prominent, courtesy of the black demi-cup bra of the corset. A suppressed moan followed as she felt the tightening of her nipples under his salacious stare.

Desperate to subdue the sexual excitement that bombarded her loins, she squeezed her thighs together. Two days had passed after the scene in her office. Since then, he had regularly dropped by to taunt her with his masculine presence. His intentions had been devious—to keep feeding the lust he had awakened. Now, the pressure inside was becoming unbearable and with his unexpected closeness, she was battling not to succumb to her own demons.

“Do you have any idea what these rosy cheeks do to me, little one? Especially since it tells me exactly how you feel about my presence.”

Lee struggled against the desire to retreat to avoid the butterfly touch of his fingers. Otherwise, she was bound to do the opposite, leaning against his rippling muscles, and locking lips with his delicious mouth.

Although she had been a submissive for six years and had never shied away from the opposite sex, this was the first time she experienced such an unbridled attraction towards one man. Exhilaration rippled through her body. It took all her willpower not to throw caution to the wind and fuck him senseless, right then and there.

“Ha-ha! Oh, how wonderful! Mansplaning! I don’t think I’ve ever seen a gasconade in action. How fabulous! A strutting Cock of the Walk all puffed up in his feathered finery,” Emily snorted. “I so regret having to be the one to burst your shiny, little bubble, Ronan, but the truth of the matter, Mr. Man, is that Lee’s rosy cheeks have nothing in the slightest to do with you. It’s not the testosterone oozing from your every pore. It’s the Sangria that has caused such a bloom upon her cheeks and nothing more. Any kind of alcohol has an immediate effect on Lee.”

Lee offered her a smile of thanks. Emily’s interjection gave her the opportunity to scramble for some semblance of sanity... before she made an utter fool of herself.

“Hmm. Hmm. Is that so?” A Cheshire grin launched Ronan’s parry. He chuckled at Emily’s start as she realized the tirade she had blathered so bravely was toward one of her

bosses. “I truly admire the creativity of your impromptu slight and might’ve considered its value, if it had any, but judging by what I see so clearly with my own eyes right in front of me with these lovely, taut, little nubs standing at attention, saluting me, I’d have to say, it has none.”

“Oh! What are you... take your hands off me, you marauding pirate! We’re in public,” Lee screeched under her breath as he brushed the back of his fingers over her erect nipples. How he knew with the coat covering her, she had no idea. Belatedly, she realized her protest would’ve carried more weight if she had slapped his hand away. Instead, she treasured the final sweep over the protruding tips before he sat back with his hands folded on the table in front of him.

“So, you ladies seemed to have an interest in my manly bits.”

If ever there was a time that she might’ve had the ability to control the bloom spreading across her cheeks, that discipline no longer existed. Not that it would have helped disguise the truth anyway because it was the excited, blunt-tipped protrusions that embellished the sheer fabric of the coat that laid bare her thoughts. That betrayal, incited by the vision of him naked and aroused, unmasked the white-hot lust burning out of control inside her loins.

“Oh, sweet daisies,” she bleated as the spicy bouquet of her aroused state assaulted her nostrils. A fact he was witness to, if the knowing glimmer in his eyes was anything to go by.

“Again, you put too much stock in the effect you have over women, Ronan,” Emily repeated, once more coming to

Lee's rescue.

“Do I?” His voice darkened as he locked his eyes on Lee. “Let me explain the concept of cause and effect. This explicit reflex, expressed by Lee's lovely nipples, was caused by a chemical reaction that was induced by a confluence of words and emotions. It has nothing to do with a plurality of women as you continue to wrongly assume. Even Casanova understood that. Instead, it has everything to do with just one woman. This one. Right here. Lee Powell. Now with her... I am one-hundred-percent sure of the effect I have on her.”

“That is quite a boast, Mr. Scott,” Lee scoffed, desperate to regain some semblance of composure. “I think the confidence you exude about your singular brand of sexual prowess is misplaced.”

“Oh, I don't believe you truly believe that for one-minute, little dove. Tell me. Have you climaxed since our little tête-à-tête in your office the other day?”

This time, an embarrassment of red erupted across Lee's cheeks to answer the question.

“Well then. There it is. That lovely hue that indicts. The color of the unabashed truth. Doesn't that sensation make you feel free? Surely it must. And, I want you to know that pleases me, little one, so very much. It's also why we both know that I'm not in danger of you bursting my bubble. To the contrary, I believe as much as I have an itch that only you can scratch, so, too, you have one that only I can soothe. We can set each other free and there is no better feeling in the world than freedom.” With that, he leaned over to help himself to a decorative glass tray filled with roasted nuts and popped a few

into his mouth. Savoring their salty taste, he watched and waited for a response.

“You don’t think so? No? Well then. Correct me if I’m wrong. I’ll be waiting downstairs at Decadent Sins. Why don’t you join me... if you dare.”



Decadent Sins Club...

“The way you’re watching that door, I’m starting to think that some flesh-eating monster is about to come charging through it.” Matteo poked an elbow into Ronan’s side to draw his attention. As was customary for the two of them, along with Torin and Maxim, they were having a drink at the bar before heading to the dungeon for some playtime.

“Honestly, a toothy monster would be much easier to handle,” Ronan muttered as he took a sip of his drink.

“C’mon, Snake. Don’t pretend you don’t love a bratty sub. They just make punishment so much more fun,” Maxim said, his eyes wandering to where his wife, Maia, was dancing with Dakota and Jamari—Torin and Matteo’s subs.

“That reminds me,” Torin said as he drained the last sip of his drink. “Dakota needs a little attitude adjustment before we start our scene tonight.” He squeezed Ronan’s shoulder in passing. “Good luck with whoever you have your eyes set on, my friend. May she become for you what our subs have been for us.”

Ronan watched his friends go and followed their trek toward the dungeon with their women. The Dom/sub dynamic that vibrated between each couple was tactile. So much so that everyone they passed turned to watch them with envy.

“Yeah, I think it’s time to stop feasting from the buffet. I want what they have. It’s time to settle down. I’m not getting any younger.”

“What was that, Snake?” prodded David, the bartender, behind him.

“Just wagging my tongue,” he said with a grimace at being caught thinking out loud.

“Aren’t you heading to the dungeon, as well?”

“Not yet.”

“Want another drink?”

“No. I need a clear head tonight.”

“It sounds like you have some big plans.” David looked around at the dwindling number of subs still in the open entertainment room. “Better pick a play bunny, Master Goliath. Most subs have already paired up. Not many left from what I can see.”

“Don’t worry about me, David.” Grinning, Ronan spun around on the stool to look at the younger man. “A splash of cold water would be refreshing right about now, though. I need to cool off a bit.” The smile froze momentarily as the atmosphere around him suddenly turned hot and humid. A veil of perspiration brought into relief, the tightly drawn musculature of his chest, that twitched like a Thoroughbred in anticipation.

Without turning around, he knew she was there. He could feel her eyes sweep over his body, stoking the intense fires that burned inside him. Never before had he reacted this way to a woman, to the prospect of being the recipient of her submission.

“You okay, Snake?” David asked. “You look a little red in the face.”

“Just psyching myself up for the pleasures ahead, my young friend.” Ronan gulped down the water, feeling its cooling effect all over his body. Only then, did he swivel on the stool.

There she was. Lee Powell. As gorgeous as always, confident, with a sense of self-awareness that gave her that added attraction he just couldn't resist. It was the first time he'd ever seen her decked out in kink clothes. Even as an experienced and being a highly sophisticated man, he was overwhelmed by her presence. Transfixed, with the sensation of a freight train running through his chest as he fought to present himself as the cool, calm, and powerful Dom he was.

The dark green corset dress fit like it had been molded onto her body. Black fishnet stockings drew his eyes down the length of her long legs, shapely, and with just the perfect amount of padding to make him drool. Just the thought of them cinched around his waist as he hilted his turgid length inside her, made his blood boil.

With the stealth of a predator, he quietly slipped from the stool and slowly moved in, eyes transfixed, listening intently to the sound of her breathy gasps as he closed the distance.

“You please me by coming here, kitten. Now, I must ask you for something more. Are you ready to submit to me, Lee?” The dulcet-toned notes of his voice deepened as he envisioned her succulent, pouty mouth pleasuring the length of his burgeoning cock. Standing toe-to-toe, he made no further attempt to persuade her.

“I never walk away from a dare, Mr. Scott.”

“In here, you will address me as Master Goliath. Either that, or Sir. I don’t have a preference, but it’ll never be Mr. Scott, Ronan, or Snake. Is that clear?”

“As crystal... Sir.”

Ronan understood immediately that her hesitation had been deliberate—a delaying tactic used to savor which sobriquet tasted best on her tongue.

A pang of disappointment that she chose the abbreviated title, Sir, gnawed briefly at his pride, then just as quickly, left. Master Goliath, with its multiple syllables requiring her to shape each one within her exquisitely shaped mouth, would have been an intimate act in itself for him, which based on his reaction to her, he might need time to adjust to. Nonetheless, to him, her choice to accept his challenge was an affirmation that Lee Powell was the woman he wanted as his sub.

In a formal, exclusive relationship.

“So, you’re here only because I dared you?” He let his voice roll over her, deliberately keeping it pleasant and deep-toned.

“Why else would I be here?”

His fingers teased the top edge of the corset, following the voluptuous curve of her breast from one side to the other.

“Perhaps because I invited you here first.” He smiled as he caught the scent of mint on her breath. “Or do you often make a habit of going to dinner wearing kink?”

“This might come as a surprise to you, but I’ve been a sub for many years. Emily and I always go to dinner on nights we decide to—”

A finger against her lips muted the next word before it formed.

“I prefer honesty in the sub I choose. Can you at least give me that, Lee?”

“I...” In an unconscious act, she swabbed the wet, pulpy underside of her upper lip with her tongue. The involuntary display caused a tightly wound spool of lust to begin to unravel inside him.

“Of course, I can, Master Goliath.”

The words punched him in the gut. Without realizing it, the little mite had just sealed her fate by instinctively calling him Master.

“Very well. I’m here because I want to know if you’re the man, the Dominant I’ve been searching for all these years. One warning, Master Goliath. If you are indeed *the one*, there will be no debate about this. We will be exclusive. I’m looking for a husband Dominant. If it is you then no other woman will be allowed to frolic in my playground.”

“Agreed.” His amazement at her declaration was hidden behind a controlled breath and a poker face. “But first,

you have to survive a night with me.” He pointed to the spot in front of him. “On your knees. Better not think of not swallowing, otherwise our first time is going to kick off with a painful lesson.”

“Here? Now?” Her head tossed her eyes this way and that, clearly not having expected something that intimate in the open entertainment area.

“Let me spell out my rules, so we don’t waste each other’s time. I don’t repeat an instruction... ever, so listen and act when I give you one. You do not climax without my permission, and you never question where or what I ask of you. That’s the kind of Dominant I am. I will never push you too far past your boundaries, but I will do so to ensure I find exactly what it is you truly need.”

“You don’t even know what my boundaries are.”

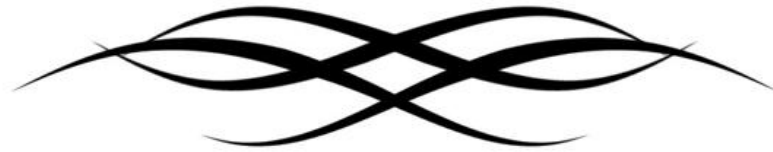
“On the contrary. I studied your limit list in your file.” His smile flashed white. “Or did you forget that Torin invited you in as a member and you completed the application and forms?”

“I guess I did forget.”

“Well? Do you trust me enough to submit to the kind of Dom I am, or are you leaving?”

Dropping to her knees in front of him wasn’t the answer he expected but the way his cock twitched approved of her instantaneous response.

Chapter Four



Lee could still feel the effect of his fingers tracing the curve of her breast as she landed on her knees in front of him. She had no words to explain why she hadn't masturbated and settled the growing desire inside her, which had her on edge since that day in her office.

Now, here she was. So close, so very close to finding release. With difficulty, she refrained from wrapping her arms around her waist. Her body was tense, shivering one moment just to spasm in the next. His fingers brushed over her cheek, amplifying every reaction under his touch to lock down on the tiny erotic shocks that sparked and shot up through her sex and burst inside her core.

The choice to stay and submit to whatever he wanted from her hadn't been a conscious decision. Landing on her knees just happened. One minute she was standing, and the next, she was kneeling in front of him. Not that the end result would have been any different even if she had given it a moment's thought. How could it? It was the only thing she had been thinking about for two weeks. Two weeks of lamenting over whether she should come to Decadent Sins and be brave or as usual, crawl into her shell and hide until a patient Dom with no particular demands invited her to play.

As Emily told her ad nauseam, that was exactly why she had never found the right kind of Dom. She was too feisty, too forward, and too sassy for most of them. No one had an interest in looking deeper to see behind the facade and find the true needs of the submissive yearning for release. The ones who did, didn't last long since in truth, they didn't tick all the boxes.

Not like Ronan did. Now, this Dom was the real deal. Except she was a little worried he wouldn't be as easy to manipulate as all the others in her past.

Why would you want to? Isn't that exactly why you're so attracted to him? He's the one man who makes your knees weak and awakes tingles all over your body. The one you can't wait to submit to. The one who wouldn't fall for your sassiness.

Of course, her psyche was right. Only a strong, powerful Dominant would be able to unleash the needs she had been shying away from. It was time to stop hiding. This was do or die time. She wanted a husband, and somehow, she knew he was the one. All she had to do was accept his Dominance and allow him to tap into the submissive part of her.

Instinct warned her that Master Goliath wouldn't accept half-hearted submission. For him, it would be all or nothing.

Full, unchecked submission.

“Are you sure about this, Lee?” Pinching her chin, he tilted her head. “Once your lips lock around my cock, there is no turning back. The night will ride out, and there will be no

coming back from it. That will be your commitment to me as your Dominant for the evening, to do with as I please and how I please.”

“As long as it’s within my limit list, I am ready for us to start, Sir.”

“Are you?” He leaned closer. “I’ll always keep your limit list in mind but make no mistake, I will use any and all means to unleash your needs along the way. Know this. No amount of sass will manipulate a reaction from me, nor will any amount of begging stop me.”

Lee shivered as his warning rang through her mind like a cymbal crash.

“Only your safeword can do that. Do you have one?”

“Yes.” She swallowed courage by the glassful, her cheeks reddening as she whispered the word, “Panties.”

“Panties?”

Lee had known he would find it amusing, and he was curious why she had chosen said word, but she refused to offer an explanation. Maybe if she survived tonight, she would tell him.

“Yes, panties, and lace if I need a breather.”

“Hm. I like the combination. So, little one, what sub name are you known by?”

“Missy.”

“Good Lord, I can’t wait to hear the story of how all of these came to be, but not now. We wasted enough time.” Lee closed her eyes briefly as he combed his fingers through her

hair. “I want only your mouth and tongue touching my cock, so keep your hands out of the way. On second thought, hold on to me since you are not to touch yourself. This is for me, to take the edge off so I can concentrate on our upcoming scene.”

Lee didn't know if she should be concerned at how ominous that sounded, but she grasped his thighs to brace herself. Then she became riveted by the slow motion of his paw-like hands unbuckling his belt and unzipping his fly. His cock sprung loose, thick, hard, and bigger than she'd ever had, a proud tool jutting in a perpendicular arc toward her mouth.

“Open, Missy.” His fingers fisted in her hair as he teasingly brushed the blunt head of him across her lips. “Remember what I said, my pet. You will swallow every drop. A Master's cum is valuable. You will not waste any.”

“Ehm, I think I need to tell you something.” Lee peered up at him from beneath feathered eyelashes. “I have never swallowed before. I kinda find it gross, so...” Her eyes lowered to the throbbing length of his cock. She might not have had the desire to in the past, but somehow everything felt different with Ronan—her reaction to him, his domination of her. With him, she wanted to do this and so much more.

Besides, it would be fitting, especially since he was the man she had chosen as her potential future husband. Who better than him to pop her *swallowing cherry*, so to speak? A shy smile trembled on her lips.

“I think with you, I'd like to try.”

“Good girl.”

Lee found her gaze locked with his as his hand tightened in her hair and the other cupped her jaw. Her lips parted under the smooth glide of the tumescent head as it slid over her tongue. There was no need to ask for permission or coaxing to give in to his demands. Here and now, he was the one in command, and she was the one who obeyed.

Lee didn't see herself as an expert in blowjobs, but she had a fair share of practice over the years. In comparison, Ronan tasted good—tangy, rugged, a spiciness appropriate to the man himself. Her tongue flicked over the tip, enjoying the tiny drops of precum that drizzled onto her tongue. The urge to explore more of him could no longer be denied. One hand circled his shaft, wrapping around a steely length, and tested the sensation of satiny smoothness.

“Perfect, Missy,” he praised. “Just perfect.”

His grunt of approval urged her to cup and fondle the potent heat of his balls that were already growing tight with lustful need.

Lee had been deep throated before, but Ronan was much bigger than the ones she had been able to swallow. Opening wide, she engulfed him, eager to test how much she could take, just how deep she could hold him. Peering at him, the tension in her loins threatened to snap at the expression on his face.

He watched her with a dark look and a desire so primal, it sparked flashes of electricity in the air between them. She quickened the slide of her mouth, pumping faster, suddenly impatient for his taste—undeniable proof of the pleasure she was giving him.

“Careful, Missy,” he growled as her teeth nibbled in her overzealous eagerness.

Relaxing her jaw, she was surprised, in her excitement, she had forgotten about technique. That was unusual for Lee, who always made sure she offered just the right amount of pressure. Humming, she swallowed him down, for once living in the moment, reveling in the deep growl emanating from his chest. His hand tightened to the edge of painfulness in her hair.

“Are you ready to be a good girl for me, Missy?”

The question was a demand in disguise. Lee was thrilled that he still was open to giving her a choice. She offered him the answer with a blink of her eyes.

“Good girl,” he praised again, clearly thrilled that she was willing to let go of her limitations. “Open your mouth wider and relax your throat. I’m going to fuck you now, and you are going to swallow every drop.”

Holding her in place with one hand on her head and the other bracing her jaw, he thrust, short and shallow jabs until Lee’s jaw relaxed as she adapted to the tempo. The hum of voices and the applause from the crowd that had gathered to watch broke through her concentration. Her cheeks imploded with embarrassment, particularly since she was so aroused by Ronan’s enjoyment, she could no longer ignore the vibration waltzing through her pussy, a pulsing demand for a climax long denied. The folds of her nether parts were suffused with her essence, turning her panties into a wet mess. In the middle of a club like this, she had no doubt they were all aware of her predicament.

His fingers tightened, drawing a gasp from her lips as he fucked a little harder, deeper, using her as a pleasurable purr crawled from his lips.

Lee was stupefied at how much she enjoyed being made to accept all he demanded from her. She had always been the one in control during a blowjob. To be this vulnerable as he took command and shoved himself so deep down her throat that she wanted to choke, was a new experience. He ignored her gagging, thrusting deeper, past the reflex, forcing her to accept more of him.

In the past, when a Dom became this fervent, she would end it. Ronan kept pumping into her, and no matter how hard she tried, as she clawed at his hips, panic set in. Closing her eyes, she struggled to relax around his hard length and fought against the instinct to jerk away for a much-needed breath. Or was it perhaps to pull him back and force his entire length down her throat? She didn't know which.

That conflict stumped her and threw her into a flat spin. She was still battling to comprehend the mixed emotions when he stopped. The raw gasp as he caught his breath sounded like a ragged expulsion, perhaps to give himself a moment. His body shuddered when he pulled himself almost completely out of her mouth, with only the head of his cock dangling on the tip of her tongue.

Looking up at him, she silently begged him to continue. For the first time, Lee yearned to prove to her Dom she wasn't only a brat but an obedient submissive when it mattered, especially now that she wanted to please him.

Opening her mouth as wide as she could, she pushed forward, forcing him back inside.

“Time to swallow, Missy. Remember, do not waste a drop,” he warned as his hands tightened on the edge of brutality around her head. Thrusting hard once, twice, he pulled back to release thick stringy jets of cum over the back of her tongue. The slickness eased the bruising of her throat as, for the first time, Lee accepted a man’s semen in her mouth.

The taste, however, didn’t matter. What held her spellbound was the raw look of pleasure mingled with pride on his face when he yanked her head back, standing witness to his ejaculate disappearing down her throat. She swallowed every drop, just as he instructed.

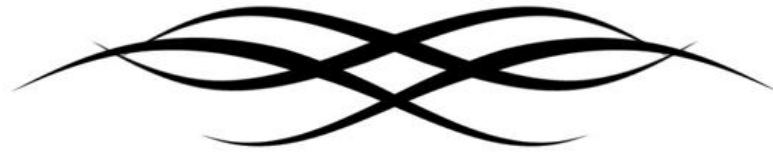
“You look beautiful, Missy. Streaks of mascara staining your cheeks, slithers of spittle dripping onto your breasts... all testimony of the pleasure you just gave me.”

Lee stared at him; her mouth still stretched wide with his cock now lying flaccid inside. She waited patiently for his next instruction.

“Suck me clean, little one.” He picked a tear from her cheek and licked it off his finger. “Then we’ll see what we can do about that climax your pussy is begging for.”

Of course, he would know. The spicy scent of her lust was a bouquet of desire in her own nostrils. No doubt he had picked up on it the moment she had walked into Decadent Sins.

Chapter Five



Lee was known for being haughty at the clubs she attended. The Doms who played with her always allowed her to set the pace. Not one of them had ever delved deeper or pushed to test her boundaries. Perhaps that was why, after six years in the lifestyle, she still felt like a bystander.

“I can walk without guidance,” she said, shrugging off the hand Ronan gently placed on her shoulder. “Hey!”

One moment, she was strutting toward the dungeon, and the next, she was pressed against the wall, feet dangling in the air, with a raging bull in her face, his large paw firmly clasped around her throat.

“I don’t know what kind of clubs or Doms you’re used to, but at Decadent Sins, you will show the Dom you chose as your partner respect. You committed to a night as my sub, so you will adhere to my rules. Every one of them, no matter how trivial or belittling they may seem to you. Do not ever shrug off my touch, sub. Do you understand?”

“I c-can’t breathe,” Lee stuttered, clawing at his hand that threatened to cut off her oxygen supply. In reality, his body pressing against hers held most of her weight, not the hand around her throat, but the restriction raised her panic.

“I asked you a question.”

“Yes! Yes, I understand.”

“Say it right, sub.”

“Yes, Master Goliath, I understand.”

“That’s better.”

Lowering her to the floor, he stepped back and watched her with a brooding expression as she struggled to catch her breath. At that moment, she stood bare before him—a new Eve, a female Cain—and like him, she had the chance to overcome previous failures and correct her ways. For with one act, Master Goliath had shown her what true domination meant. More importantly, how it made her feel. A bead of sweat, like the touch of a lover’s hand, traced down her spine, eliciting a shudder in its wake. Contrary to historical behavior, Lee didn’t snap back in response. Instead, she lowered her head and waited breathlessly. The brat cowered in the face of her Master, allowing the true submissive to come forth. The one who had been yearning for just this kind of treatment—strong, fearless, guiding, caring, and most of all, powerful.

This was *her* Dom. Hers. No one was going to take away or come between what she had now claimed.

“Do you have something to say to me, Missy?”

Lee should have known he wouldn’t just let it go, not the kind of Dom he was. Fidgeting with her fingers clasped submissively behind her back, she cleared her throat. She was desperate for a climax, and she was damned if it was going to be delayed in lieu of punishment that she could prevent.

“I’m sorry, Master Goliath. It was a force of habit.” She darted a quick look at him, then zoomed in on his boots once more. “No one has ever reprimanded me for being a forward sub.”

“Being a forward sub or a bratty one is one thing, Missy. What you just did was plainly disrespectful. Surely, as an experienced submissive, you understand the difference?”

“You’re right.” Her fingers twirled together. “No excuses, Sir. I messed up, and I’m sorry.”

“Very well. I will let this slide, but be warned, this is the only time it’ll happen. Don’t invite punishment, Missy, because believe me, if there’s one thing I abhor, it’s a disrespectful sub. Tread carefully, my pet. It doesn’t take much for me to fetch my cane.”

“I’ll do my best to behave.” She smiled and fluttered her lashes delicately, like a brand-new butterfly testing its first flight. Her gaze fixed on him in a lazy squint. “Although I can’t promise anything. I have been branded quite the brat.”

“An unfortunate quality I have already had the pleasure of encountering. Just remember my warning, kitten. Every action invites a reaction.” He leaned closer until his warm breath teased the tendrils of hair at her ear. “Just don’t expect mine to always be what you believe it should be. I like to surprise my subs. Punishments can be so much fun at times.”

“For you, I imagine.”

“Of course, subbie. What would punishment be if the receiver has fun or receives pleasure from it?” His grin shrunk in favor of a stern look. “In truth, little corrective punishments

are fun. Real punishments, not so much. Believe me, Missy, as much as you'd hate them, so would I in giving them. I'm not a sadist, but I am a strict Master. Never test my patience. You would lose... every time."

"Excuse me, Master Goliath," interjected a tall, young Dom from behind them. A tag on his vest identified him as a Club Coordinator. He grinned as he held out a black leather collar and a thin silver chain to Ronan. "I was wondering if you would be needing these?"

"Ah, Dom Patrick, as always, you read my mind," Ronan smirked as he wrapped the chain around his fist. "The situation most definitely warrants these as guidance tools."

"Guidance tools?" Lee eyed the collar, not sure she liked where this was heading.

"Yes, these are very effective to ensure one's sub follows behind at a respectable distance and form." He pointed to the floor. "On your knees."

Lee didn't move, just watched him with disdain. "If that's what I think it is, let me remind you, Master Goliath, I'm not into pet play."

"Oh, this isn't pet play, Missy." His smile widened as he deftly fastened the collar around her neck. "This is a little lesson in attitude adjustment." He clipped the chain link into the small O-ring of the collar, then tossed a nod toward the floor as he narrowed a lazy gaze against hers. "Do I need to repeat the instruction?"

The irritated huff on her lips died at birth as she caught the warning flash in his eyes and identified it for what it was.

This wasn't a test of wills. It was a test of her submission.

“No, Master Goliath. Of course, not.”

“You will crawl after me. Ensure the chain doesn't pull tight. When I stop, you will sit back on your legs pressed against mine in the nadu slave position.” His eyes glimmered as he watched her go down on all fours. “Beautiful form, my pet.”

Without another word, he took off toward the dungeon. Luckily for Lee, he kept his gait slow, so she could keep up. The only thing she prayed for was they didn't bump into Torin on the way. It was one thing to be snippy toward him at the office. Having him witness her crawling after his partner with her ass in the air... now that would be humiliating!

Lee only relaxed when they made it to the whipping chamber without anyone barring their way.

“Thank God for small favors,” she muttered sotto voce as Ronan stopped in front of a St. Joseph Cross.

“Lucky for us, this one just came available. Up you get,” he said as he caught her looking at him askance.

“Lucky for us? Exactly what kind of luck are you referring to?”

“This isn't a vocabulary lesson,” he said with a twinge of humor in his tone. “Undress and get on the cross. You're wasting time.”

His sharp tone loosened a shiver down her back. Lee stared apprehensively at the cross, then glanced at him as she took off her clothes.

“What are you going to do?”

Ronan laughed darkly as he ran a finger down her spine to the sleek crevice between her cheeks.

“I promised to take care of that climax you’re chasing, and I believe an erotic whipping is a perfect way to aid you in achieving one,” he murmured as he leaned closer, kissing the nape of her neck. “Or rather... a couple.”

A shard of fear pierced her stomach. She was always very careful in choosing a Dom when impact play was happening, one she could manage. Master Goliath had shown who was in charge here tonight.

An eyebrow arched at her expression. “What’s the problem, Missy? Worried that you won’t be in control?”

A dash of red splashed across her cheeks and raced over her chest as he accurately identified her dilemma. To hide the embarrassment, she got onto the cross.

“Don’t worry, little one.” He smiled. “This is an erotic scene. Yes, it’ll hurt, but at the same time, I’m going to make your body sing and dance. Then, if you beg me nicely, I might fuck you and allow you to come.”

Lee was already tied up by the time she realized she had been played by the dulcet tones of his voice, lulling her into relaxing so he could go into action.

“That was sneaky,” she mumbled, gasping as Ronan slowly ran his hands down her flanks. She bit her lip as he caressed her buttocks until he had awakened every nerve ending.

“Relax, Missy. I would hate to leave bruises on your skin, so this is to prepare your skin.”

She shivered as he took a deep breath against her throat. The groan vibrating against her skin caused shivers of delight to race down her spine. Tilting her head sideways, his lips brushed over hers in a tantalizing caress.

The kiss was intoxicating—masterful—and hinted of more to come. Not content with just a touch, he wanted more. His tongue met hers and ignited a firestorm of passion, inflaming her body with an incandescent euphoria. He robbed her of breath until her head spun, destroying her resistance.

Lee could feel his reluctance as he ended the kiss. It warmed her heart that he was as affected by the caress as she was. His look was pensive when he picked up the calf’s leather flogger.

“Even though this is an erotic flogging, it’s not a play date. I expect you to use your safeword if this becomes too much. Is that understood, Missy?”

The gruffness in his voice warned Lee that this was going to be more than an erotic flogging. Ronan was going to push her boundaries. He intended to break her down and make her beg—just as he had promised.

He caught the look in her eyes and whispered with his lips pressed against her ear, “Yeah, Lee. Before I’m finished, you will acknowledge that I am exactly the kind of man you need in your life... in every way.”

Fondling her buttocks, his large hands covered the firm, round flesh, and then slapped it hard.

“Ah, yes,” he purred as she cried out in pain. “A good little squeak to start off with.” He swung the flogger in a tight circle, his wrist barely moving. “How many floggings have you had?”

“A couple, but to be honest, I’ve never been as shit scared of them as I am now.”

“Being scared is healthy, but in this instance, unnecessary. Enough chit-chat. Ready?” He didn’t wait for her response and swung the first blow against her ass cheeks so gently, she barely felt it. Lee took a deep breath, clenching her muscles as another blow fell.

“This ends now,” Ronan snapped. “You know how this works. Keep your body relaxed. Don’t tense your muscles when you hear the swing of the flogger.”

Lee nodded and attempted to concentrate. There was no reason for her to be scared. No matter that this was their first scene, she knew he could be trusted to take care of her. Closing her eyes, she breathed in and out a couple of times.

“Let’s continue.” His deep voice eased her distress as he stepped back.

She expected him to land punishing blows, but he surprised her. The way he landed the strokes was far more sensual than anything she had ever received from other Doms. The strips of leather connected with thrilling precision, each stroke leaving her gasping in delight.

She lost count as her mind spun into a whirlpool of elation. Each stroke exhilarated her senses. She sighed as Ronan leaned against her and kissed her throat.

“Hmm, that’s better. Now, you’re going to feel the bite of the leather, my pet. Prepare yourself. Take deep breaths.”

The first blow fell, stealing her breath before she could inhale. The leather bit into her and stung as it landed randomly across her back, then again as he whipped it around her waist, burning into the soft skin there, first on the one side, then the other.

“Yes, my pet. I love those little cries.”

The blows landed higher, wrapping around under her arms as they bit into the tender sides of her breasts.

“Holy shit!” Lee cried as the pain intensified. She felt the rush of heat running through her veins, filling her loins with need.

“Good girl,” Ronan praised her as he stepped closer, pressing his body against her stinging back, eliciting a hiss of breath when he ran his hands up and down her sides. Tweaking her nipples with sharp pinches, he then slowly ran his palm down the center of her body.

“Oh, Lord,” she moaned as he teased her clitoris with a stiff finger. It wouldn’t take much for her to topple over the edge and climax, but she remembered his warning. She had no intention of disappointing him but keeping the orgasm at bay wouldn’t be an easy feat.

“Hm, I love your bouquet,” he murmured as he slipped his finger inside her pussy, finding her soaked as she clenched around his finger. “Ah, beautiful, my pet.”

The pressure in her loins intensified. Desperate for more, she canted her hips into his hand as the rush of pleasure

filled her veins.

Then he was gone.

“Fuudge!” Her scream resounded through the room as the next blow fell. Each ensuing strike flashed home, inflaming her buttocks more intensely than the last, searing the edges of her consciousness with it. White-hot pain throbbed in nerve endings, igniting the fire that soon scorched through her veins, leaving her pulsing with need. Lee had never felt the like.

“Please, no more... I need...” she whimpered, as he rained down blow after blow. She felt transported—ethereal. Her body shuddered with aftershocks as her pussy clenched in spasms, spurred on by the throbbing in her clitoris.

“Please, Master. I need... I need to come.”

Ronan stepped closer, rubbing against her blazing back. Lee screamed as her pussy gushed with juice.

“What do you want, Lee?” he murmured, as he massaged her clitoris. She thrashed against the cross, only to jerk back against his body.

“I need... I need...” Lee’s head rolled back and forth against his shoulder as she tried to fight the intense pleasure that threatened to devour her.

“Fuck me... please.”

“Do you know how I’ve hungered for this, Lee? This moment where you have no defenses, and you tremble beneath my touch, shivering with need, completely tamed and vulnerable,” he whispered into her ear as he pulled her hips back. He pushed his cock between swollen folds. “When you

admit that you need me to quench that ache inside you. Do you?”

“Yes, please Master Goliath. I need you inside me,” she hissed as she pressed her face into his throat.

Ronan hesitated, waiting until she drew a shuddered breath, then slammed into her, driving her body against the cross.

“Come for me, my precious little sub.”

Lee screamed as the world tilted. Her loins surged, engorged with blood, splintering her apart as she climaxed. She wanted to curl into herself as shocks of pleasure and pain electrified and flung her about only to be yanked back with the next breath. Her breath faltered as Ronan pounded into her. Each kiss of his bulbous head against her cervix triggered more pleasure to rush through her.

It didn't take him long to erupt as a wave of euphoria crushed both of them helplessly under a whitewater that staggered their bodies. Ronan untied her quickly and carried her to the entertainment area. She clung to him... spent and completely relaxed.

Her heart thundered in her chest. His tenderness and the intensity of their encounter had shaken her. She was lost in a maze, not knowing what to do, terribly confused, her emotions scattered all over. She was too weary to put a name to what it was that swirled inside her mind.

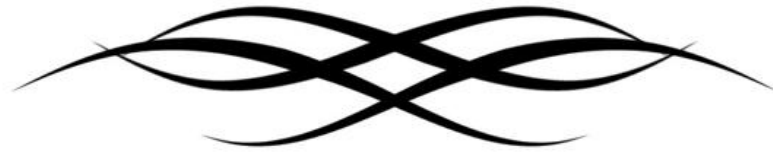
Ronan surprised her at his ability to read her mind as he murmured in her hair when he sat down, “Don't overthink it, Lee. Just let it be. I promise you; you won't be sorry.”

His tender caresses soon soothed her into a state of relaxation that lulled her to sleep. Her breathing slowed. Ronan was right. She was overthinking it. Why, she didn't know. Hadn't she already decided he was the one for her before the scene?

Except Lee had in no way been prepared for the influx of emotions that now threatened to overwhelm her. She had known Ronan for years. Truth be known, she had secretly had a huge crush on him. Could it be that in one night, all of it changed and morphed into love?

Holy shit! I'm not ready for this. No... him. I'm not ready for a man like him.

Chapter Six



Kings Inc Headquarters at The Restaurant Wholesale Depot...

“I found the engineer who designed and built the mini sub for Venom,” Razor said as he walked into Torin’s office.

“And?” Torin’s attention turned from Ronan. The two of them had been discussing the third term profits for the company.

“Sergei Korolevov.”

“Wasn’t he involved with the Russian Sputnik satellite design?” Ronan asked.

“His father Bjorn was. Sergei was known for the R-7. His son Vasili has been attempting to design a specialized satellite missile for years. They’re after fame and glory. The WOSC design could make that dream a reality for him.”

“So, in the meantime, Serge is spending his time designing mini subs? Doesn’t make sense.” Ronan looked between them. “Or am I missing something?”

“It is the confirmation we need that Venom isn’t the mastermind behind all of this. Vasili’s eagerness to get his

hand on the designs tells me that he would use any means at his disposal to achieve it.” Torin shook his head.

“No surprise to find out his father is also involved. The two of them had always dreamed big. Their failures have been piling up over the years, so they’re after a big win. The question is, exactly what is their game plan? To unveil the WOSC design in a satellite missile for glory or to design it on demand for the Russians?”

“Or make a shitload of money and auction it off to the highest bidder.” Ronan sat back. “So, Sergei Korolevov designed Venom’s mini submarine. Did you find anything that proves there is a connection between them? An official handover? Paperwork?”

“No. Venom was very careful. Our IT found the information on the deep, dark web. We don’t even know where Venom stored the sub until it appeared the day of POTUS’ abduction.”

“So, we still have nothing.”

“Of course, we do.” Torin started pacing. “We’re not the cops, Snake. We don’t need proof before we act. We need information. We now have the means to get it. Razor knows where the Korolevovs are. Get the coordinates from him and take Brendan and a team with you. Interrogate them. Find out what their plan is.”

“By any means?” Ronan asked for confirmation as he stood.

“Don’t waste my time with stupid questions, Snake,” Torin sneered. “Most importantly, find out who the fuck

Venom is and where he's holding the President.”

“On it, Boss.”

“Oh, and Snake,” Torin stopped him at the door. “Leave no witnesses who could point a finger at us. We're already fucked as it is.”

“Wasn't planning to, Torin. Thought you knew that about me by now.” Ronan snorted as he walked out. ”



“So, how will killing the Korolevovs help us clear our name?” Razor asked as soon as the door closed behind Ronan.

“The Korolevovs are collateral damage, Razor. They should've stayed on the straight and narrow. I didn't make them stray, nor did you. They forced their way into a situation where they became key players, spurred on by the gravity of their own desire for fame, glory, and power. That, as you know, is and always will be the downfall of humankind. You know the saying, what you sow, so shall you reap. We live that every day. Now, so do they.” Torin stubbed out his cigar. “The only way to clear our groups of suspicion is for Alligator Secure to work with the NSA and the CIA in finding POTUS and bringing him home.”

“Yeah. How exactly? No one knows we're the leaders of the WCM and NCS groups, Torin. Personally, I'd like to keep it that way. I like my life the way it is, living two lives on the opposite sides of the law, with no one being the wiser. Being a Mafioso that no one can identify is much easier than having to hide behind walls for the rest of your life.”

“You forget, we assisted you in your capacity as the CEO of Alligator International in safeguarding the President and his wife on the day of his abduction. If not for that, more people would’ve died.”

“I’m not a dickhead, Torin. I know all that. You seem to forget that in their eyes, *you*, in your personal capacity, aided Alligator International, not the West Coast Mafia or Kings Inc. In case you forgot, those are the key suspects in this fucking mess. Or have your two lives become so entwined that the thin line you walk between them is disintegrating?

“Fucking hell, Torin. If you aren’t careful, that will be the end of you. You have to concentrate on what’s important. If it’s your fiancé, The Restaurant Wholesale Enterprise, and your Investment Businesses more than being who you were born to be—a Mafioso—you better walk away. Before you get us all killed.”



Lines became blurred all too easily if one wasn’t careful. Torin couldn’t deny that he had been walking a tightrope since Dakota had come into his life. Razor was right. It wasn’t easy to juggle a balance between living a normal life as a successful businessman and one as a crime boss. If only his life had been a two-way street, all would have continued as before.

Now, there was a third path that disrupted the smooth balance he had been managing his entire life—Dakota Harris. The woman who was trying to teach him how to identify emotions and learn to love.

Dakota was an expert in emotional warfare, with a Master's degree in Computer Science. She was also the Deputy Director of the CID in Seattle.

His future wife... who had no idea he was Boss X of the West Coast Mafia Commission and founder of the National Crime Syndicate, Kings Inc.

Decisions made in life carried consequences. He knew that all too well. Razor had warned him numerous times to come clean with Dakota, to tell her the truth about who and what he really was. Torin was running out of time. He demanded honesty from everyone in his life, her included, yet he was the one living a lie. Telling her the truth had to happen... before they got married or worse before she found out by another means.

“Yeah, Caruso, you can't promise a happily ever after to a woman without giving her the choice whether she *wants* to live the kind of life you do. Her commitment to oust all criminal activities in the country doesn't bode well for what her decision will be.” His voice sounded hoarse as he turned into the driveway of his home. That was the main reason he had held back.

Fear.

As a man who had grown up in an emotional void and with zero empathy, the transition from being a loner to a committed husband-to-be over the past couple of months had been paved with thorns and vicious curves. The one who had held it all together, had been Dakota because of her love and belief that deep inside him, there was a kernel of emotion just waiting to be watered and expanded.

In a way, he had changed. He wasn't as closed off as in the past, but to this day, he had yet to say the words she longed to hear.

Love... he still didn't know if it existed or what it felt like. All he knew was the thought of losing Dakota when he told her the truth filled him with dread. Finding her waiting for him at night when he came home had become the highlight of his day. If she wasn't there, his life would be empty, cold, and meaningless, as it had been in the past.

"You're a fool, Caruso," he muttered as he parked the car and got out. He met Dakota when she had been undercover, specifically following up on a lead that he was involved with the Mafia. Since Kian was her boss at the time, he had easily closed that case and set her mind at ease that it was false information. Of course, it only came to be known upon his death that he had done so because he had his own agenda.

Betrayers were haunting every street of the city. Many would love the accolade of ousting Boss X. Something that would be exceedingly difficult to prove. Although no one in the Mafia or Kings Inc. knew his true identity, courtesy of the disguise he always wore, there was no guarantee it would remain that way. He had to stay vigilant.

Still, that didn't negate the fact that he was indeed a fool. His fear that Dakota would leave him when she heard the truth should be the least of his concerns. His main concern should be that once she did, would she hand him over to the authorities? Or was her love strong enough to just walk away?

“Yeah, I’m a fucking big fool. Don’t forget the saying, Caruso, about a woman scorned.”

Dakota Harris might have declared her undying love for him, but she was a woman with integrity. Her main goal since she joined the FBI had been to eliminate crime syndicates in the U.S.

For the first time, reality hit Torin. He wasn’t only a fool, he was delusional. Not because he didn’t trust in Dakota’s love but because he expected her to live the kind of life she abhorred.

“I always knew this was just a fairy tale.” His voice sounded tired and drawn. “She’s a good woman. Pure of heart and soul.” Standing in front of the house, he stared sightlessly at the intricately carved door. He had been living in denial, knowing this day would come.

“I can’t do this to her. I’ll have to let her go.”

Torin knew forcing Dakota to make a decision would result in guilt. Not for him, but whatever decision she made, she would have to live with that choice for the rest of her life. Knowing her, he knew there was only one option for her to take.

In the end, she might get over the heartbreak quicker if she believed he betrayed her rather than feeling guilty for doing her job—putting the man she loved in jail for the rest of his life.

With a heavy heart, he walked into the house, his voice sounding more guttural than usual as he called out, “Honey, I’m home!”

The silence and darkness that met him, immediately sent a red flag to his brain. With his senses on high alert, he quietly moved through the house toward the den where the orange glow of a roaring fireplace flickered.

“Fuck me,” he whispered as he found Dakota sitting in front of the fire, naked in the nadu position. Her eyes were closed as she waited in serene patience for her Master to come home and claim her submission.

Torin was torn in two.

How the fuck am I going to be able to walk away from her? She's become more than my sub. She...

Warmth flooded his mind as realization struck. He had no idea what love felt like, but as he stared at her, he knew the emotions threatening to drown him might be that elusive emotion. Maybe, after all these years, he was ready to really feel. She had taught him that.

Theirs had been a match unforeseen, doomed from day one. He should have known better. Should have walked away from the warmth her soul offered. A man like him wasn't meant to love and be loved.

He was a criminal. She was the law. No matter what his screwed-up mind had made himself believe, nothing could ever change that.

In the end, they could never be.

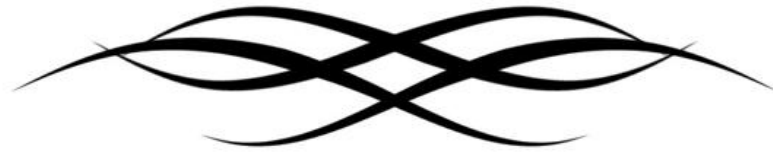
He would have to end it. Soon... but not tonight. Tonight, he would bask in the submission of the one woman who held his future in the palm of her hands.

“You take my breath away, love.”

“Ah, my Master,” she cooed without opening her eyes.
“You are finally home.”

“Yes, little one. I am home.”

Chapter Seven



Dolce Paradiso Estate, private beach house of Ronan Scott on Center Island, WA...

“This is your last chance to save your ass, Korolevov,” Priest sneered as he systematically broke the last two fingers on Sergei Korolevov’s left hand.

Ronan snorted at the pitiful screams echoing through the room. He was rapidly running out of patience. Since Razor had been promoted to Mr. S of the NCS, Ronan was the lead assassin for King’s Inc. and the West Coast Mafia Commission, a position he took seriously. An expert in knife skills and a sharpshooter who could hit a target the size of an ant from a distance, he used his skills to complete his missions quickly and efficiently. Torture wasn’t his style. Truth be known, the process was too slow, and he didn’t have the patience.

Sergei Korolevov had been hiding in Sweden, except the man liked to live large, which was why Razor’s team found him easily. His son Vasili, however, was nowhere to be found and upon initial enquiry, Sergei had refused to disclose his location. Not wishing to end up in a foreign country jail

should something go wrong, Ronan had dumped his target on Torin's plane and headed back to Seattle.

They were in an underground interrogation bunker on a secure property Ronan had inherited from his grandfather when he was still in school. Locals had maintained the property until he formally took possession of it years later. A couple of years ago, he built a mansion on the estate and renamed it *Dolce Paradiso*—Sweet Heaven. It had become his safe haven, surrounded by the ocean and the thick forest. The place where he escaped to when he felt the need to breathe.

Steele and Priest believed there was an arrangement between the owner of the property and King's Inc. to use the bunker when they required privacy. Something that was done often, especially when they were in a different state or country.

Taking pains to avoid detection with a foreign national on board, the plane had landed directly on Central Island from Sweden. Ronan had a contact at the FAA, who had provided the necessary airport customs bypass approval.

Steele and Priest had been interrogating the older man for hours. He looked like shit, all his fingers on his left hand were broken, and he could hardly breathe, but he refused to break. It seemed he feared whoever his benefactor was more than he did his current tormentors.

“I told you, I don't know who V-Venom is. I have only spoken to him over the phone and video calls, at which time he always wore the m-mask.” Sergei spat the blood pooling in his mouth on the floor. The earlier beatings were taking their toll. Ronan's eyes narrowed on the splatter of red staining his leather boots.

“These are my favorite boots,” he muttered ominously. “As my personal guest, I expect you to respect boundaries, Sergei.”

“I didn’t aim for...” Sergei hung his head. He was close to being defeated. Not surprising since by Ronan’s calculation, he must be in his mid-sixties, and as an aircraft engineer, not fit for fighting or withstanding the beatings. “I apologize.”

“Well, since I believe you’re being sincere, I accept your apology.” Ronan hunched down in front of him. “When last did you speak to Venom?”

“Wh-When I explained the operation of the submarine just after he took possession of it.”

“So, that means Vasili is the one he communicates with in regard to WOSC.”

“The WOSC is a myth. I’ve been telling Vasili that for years, but he refuses to listen.” Sergei shook his head. “No sane engineer would develop something that could destroy not only the country the satellite is aimed at but the entire world if not handled with care.”

“A myth. Hmm, I heard otherwise, and since you built the submarine in which Venom abducted POTUS, I doubt you believe that. Now, why else would he be interested in the President other than for the location of where the full designs are for the microchip that would launch the World Orbit Satellite Cannon? That’s what the acronym stands for, isn’t it?” Ronan straightened. “Or are you going to claim you weren’t aware he was one of the designers of said microchip?”

Ronan laughed at Sergei's expression.

“Yeah, I know what WOSC means and from all counts, since your son's desire to make a name for himself is widely known, I'm sure he wants to lay claim to it to finalize and perfect the deadliest weapon ever created. For no other reason than to see his name written in gold.” He leaned in. “It's not gonna happen. Russia isn't going to get their hands on such a weapon. Now, Sergei... where is your son?”

“Vasili had nothing to do with the submarine. It was only me. That's the only—”

“This is a fucking waste of time. Bag the motherfucker,” Ronan sneered.

He watched stoically as Priest pulled a plastic bag over Sergei's head and pulled it tight over his nose and mouth. Panic kicked in as Sergei fought for release.

“Enough,” Ronan said when his struggles became less frantic. Priest yanked off the bag, leaving Sergei gasping for breath, the sound raw in the silence of the room. “By now, I'm sure you're clever enough to realize you're not leaving here alive. It's up to you how you die. Slow and painful or quickly. I want answers, Korolevov, and until I have them, I will keep you alive.”

“I... please!” Sergei pleaded in a broken whisper.

“Where is your son?”

“I can't tell you!”

“Again,” Ronan snapped, his patience was rapidly receding. It took five more times before Sergei gave in.

“He is on L-Lopez Hill Island in W-Washington. That’s all I know. I don’t know where. H-He’s...” Struggling to breathe, Sergei licked his lips.

“Give him some water,” Ronan said gruffly. “He’s what?” he grated irritably a moment later when Sergei finished gulping down the water Steele poured down his throat.

“V-Venom built an underground engineering lab for us there. I was supposed to join Vasili next week. He oversaw the construction of the submarine, which was built there. It’s wh-where we were supposed to complete the development of and launch the WOSC microchip.”

“So, you’ve never been there?”

“No. I designed the submarine at home. Vasili took the schematics when he left to oversee its assembly.”

“Then you’re of no further use to me.” Ronan unsheathed his curved blade Tactical M71C Combat Karambit knife. Within one smooth motion, he brought it around, slicing Sergei’s throat from one end to the other. “We’ll meet again, Korolevov... in hell.”

Before he bled out, his eyes wide in fear at the realization of what was happening, Ronan drove the blade straight into his eye, the curve driving it all the way into his brain.

“Bag the body and load it on the speed boat.”

“The speed boat? Aren’t we going to dump it at the shark feed site?” Priest stared at him.

“No. We’re going to leave the body to be washed up on Lopez Hill Island.” Ronan cleaned his knife. His movements

were meticulous as he ensured there was no speck of blood left. “It’s only about six clicks from here. I want Vasili Korolevov and Venom to know we’re on to them.”



Fisherman Bay, Lopez Hill Island...

Lopez Hill Island was less than thirty square miles in land area, with a population of just over two thousand. Not vast but still big enough to make finding someone who didn’t want to be found difficult.

“So, where are we gonna start looking for the bastard?” Priest asked as they got off the boat.

Sergei’s body had been dumped a couple of miles offshore. With the currents, Ronan calculated the body would wash up on Lopez Beach or somewhere inside Fisherman’s Bay within three hours. Either way, news like that would spread across the island like wildfire, and Vasili would soon know his father had died. Once he found out how, he and Venom would realize his death had come only after he had given up their location.

“Do you think they’re holding POTUS prisoner here as well?” Steele asked.

“Yeah.” Ronan looked around. “I doubt they would have two base points. We’re splitting up. Call me with anything that sparks suspicion, no matter how insignificant.” He headed toward the village center. “Go. Get a move on. We’ll meet back here in two hours.”

Ronan did a tour of the convenience stores, raising subtle questions about deliveries if he chose a remote location to go camping somewhere on the island.

“We deliver everywhere, my dear giant.” The greengrocer smiled broadly. “Even as far as the Lopez Hill Trailhead. There are a couple of lodges, camping sites, and private log houses in that area. This time of year, there are quite a number of visitors, so I suggest you head on over to Joey’s Realtor on Lopez Road if you haven’t secured a place yet.”

“Oh, I’ll be sure to do that, especially now that I know I won’t starve out there.”

“Oh, don’t fret, young man. We’ll take good care of you.”

Ronan waved as he walked off, heading toward the bar he had passed earlier. A quick beer was just what he needed to rejuvenate himself.

“Fuck, I needed this,” he muttered after the first couple of swallows of the cool, bitter brew. Ostentatiously relaxed, he looked around until his gaze got hijacked by a yacht mooring at the dock. “Now, that’s a monster of a yacht. Must’ve cost a couple of million for sure.”

It was impressive to watch the crew hustling as within minutes, the three stories high yacht was secured.

“What the actual fuck!?” Slowly getting up from the bar stool, he squinted at the man descending the stairs to the dock. He hadn’t seen him for quite some time but there was no mistaking it... he knew who it was. Ronan wasn’t the kind of

man who believed in coincidences. Seeing him here, at this specific moment, on this exact island, didn't make sense and raised a plethora of red flags.

Forcing himself not to charge over, Ronan watched as the man oversaw the loading of supplies onto the yacht.

“You have changed, my friend,” he said sotto voce as he took in the muscled frame and the way his nose inched into the air in a show of superiority. He oozed confidence... and wealth. Two qualities he had lacked to date. Something drastic had changed, and it wasn't only the way he looked.

Ronan finished his beer, then jogged to where his boat was moored as the loading of supplies on the yacht neared an end. He was driven by the same instincts that had kept him alive all these years. Acting on impulse wasn't in his nature, nor was he a follower of absolutes. To him, life wasn't only black or white. He preferred to dwell in the gray realm, where unforeseen shit happened—like the unexplained appearance of this man. Until he found out exactly what the hell was going on, he had to make sure he wasn't seen.

“Well, let's see where you're heading, shall we?”

By the time the yacht drifted away from the dock, Ronan was waiting in his speed boat, doing a couple of slow turns in a pretense of enjoying the pleasures of the rich and famous. Following behind Forbidden, the name emblazoned on the side of the yacht, he continued a show of playfulness with the boat, all the way around the north of the island to the east, where the yacht docked in a secluded bay.

“So, since you're offloading supplies here, you're obviously staying somewhere close by,” Ronan mused aloud

as he cut the engine, watching from where his boat was half hidden behind a sailboat. He took out his phone and made a call. Luckily, he was close enough to shore to have a signal.

“Ronan, buddy! How are you doing?”

Ronan’s eyes darkened as he watched the man stroll along the beach when he took his call.

“Same old, you know. Work, work, and work.” Nimble fingers refocused the dial on the binoculars. The easy smile on the younger man’s face was as familiar as his own reflection in a mirror. The flesh-colored leather eye patch he used to favor in the past had been replaced with a bright red one. Another sign that he was looking at a changed man—a complete stranger.

“You should come for a visit, my friend. I’ll teach you how to relax.”

“Sounds like a plan. I’ve been itching to take a break. How about I get on a plane tonight?”

“Hells bells, you sound stressed, but it’s a bit of a short notice. My schedule is tight for the next two weeks.”

“Ah well, maybe later, then.”

“Hell, yes. I gotta go. Duty calls, but I’ll see you soon.”

Ronan cut the connection, his eyes dark, dangerous, and filled with a mixture of anger and confusion as he watched the man get in a Jeep and drive off.

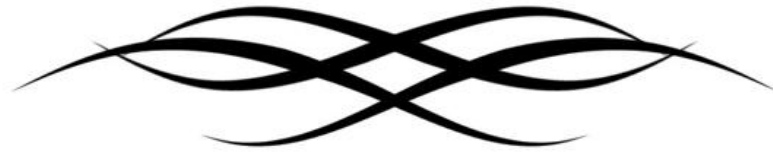
He made another call as he turned the boat around to search for a spot to moor the vessel where he wouldn’t be

seen.

“Fuck!” His curse married with the waves slapping against the hull of the boat as the call went to voicemail.

“Razor, we need to talk. We have a problem. A huge fucking problem.”

Chapter Eight



“Brendan, instruct our IT guys to lock onto my location with the GeoEye live feed and look for the Jeep that left half a klick from here a minute ago. I want to know its end location.”

“On it, Snake. I’ll send you the coordinates as soon as they have them.”

Ronan didn’t wait. He logged in to the GeoEye map to study the layout of the area. This side of the island was dominated by the Lopez Hill Trailhead. Roads were limited, but one led inland from where the Forbidden was moored. Along the route there were many camping areas but only a few cabins. Still, it was a massive piece of land to search and unless he had a sense of the direction to head, he’d be running around like a headless chicken.

Breathing in deeply, he wandered into the forest, looking around. Ronan loved nature, the one place he could forget about the rotten part of his core and just... be. The forest floor was layered with trees of yesteryear, fallen in storms long forgotten. The seasons had been harsh, stripping away the bark and outer layers, yet rendering them all-the-more beautiful. They had the appearance of driftwood, twisting in patterns that reminded him of gentle waves. Even the color of the moss felt kelp-like, soft and damp.

“God, this is such food for the soul,” he murmured as he tilted his head upward. The pines were several stories tall, reaching toward the golden rays of the sun. Birdsong came in lulls and bursts, the silence and the singing working together as well as any improvised melody.

Shrugging off the melancholy awakened by the magnetism of mother nature, he forced his attention back to the matter at hand.

Hanging around until Brendan found something was going to drive him nuts. The decision to head out and follow the road was the only solution to saving some time—if his instincts guided him in the right direction.

“Yeah, I might be lucky and happen on the Jeep.”

For a man of his size, Ronan was surprisingly fit and agile. He started jogging through the forest in the direction of the road.

“Well, ain’t this my lucky day,” he said as he approached the road and came upon two bikes abandoned in lieu of their owners wandering into the forest. He could see the couple in the distance, foraging for something unknown. Selecting the larger of the two bicycles, he saluted in their general direction. “Thanks for the ride, friend.” He pedaled off, at first awkwardly since the bike was slightly small for a giant like him, but he soon found his rhythm.

“About fucking time,” he grunted a couple of minutes later when his phone pinged. Not stopping, he answered the phone while following the road, his head moving back and forth as he scoured the area for any signs of the Jeep. “What’s taking so fucking long, Brendan?”

“It’s Razor. What’s the problem, Snake? You sounded spooked.”

“Where are you?” Ronan skidded the bike to a stop to concentrate on the conversation.

“I just finished a meeting with a potential new client at Fidalgo Island.”

“Then you’re close. I’m on Lopez Hill. I need you here, Razor. I’m sending you my coordinates. Get here as fast as you can. Look out for my boat in a small alcove just north of where a big yacht, Forbidden, is moored.”

“What the fuck is going on, Ronan?”

“Just get here. This you have to see to believe. Make it quick, Razor, before I do something stupid.”

“Ronan, you better fucking tell me—”

“Just get over here.” Ending the call, Ronan sent a pin of his location to Razor’s cell. With a grunt, he acknowledged the arrival of the awaited coordinates that Brendan dropped at the same moment. Opening the map, he stared at the red pin.

“I’ve got you now, you bastard.”

With the guidance of the map, he quickly and easily found the destination of the Jeep. A luxurious log cabin loomed through the forest as he took the curve in the dirt road he was on. Ditching the bike, he approached cautiously. Hunching low behind a thick bush, he settled in to observe and wait for Razor. Two heads were better than one, especially in a situation such as this. For all he knew, he might be yanking the horse’s feet from under him with unwarranted suspicions.

That theory blew to smithereens when the front door of the cabin opened. Ronan's fury threatened to boil over as he watched the man wearing a Venom mask exit the house. His frustration was obvious when he slammed a fist against the porch pillar before yanking off the mask.

“Unwarranted, my ass. I hate betrayal and you have tipped the scales on that one, you bastard.”

The rustle of a footstep behind him was enough warning for Ronan to roll over and draw his gun in one smooth motion. “Fuck man, I could've shot you!”

“In your dreams,” Razor growled as he hunched down beside Ronan.

“How did you get here so fast?”

“I was already seaborne when you phoned. I've got a couple of quad bikes on my boat, so I had an advantage.”

“A suit?” Ronan snorted as he noticed his attire.

“Fuck off. I told you I was at a business meeting.” Razor looked around as he yanked off his tie and blazer. “What are we doing here, Snake?”

“Interrogating Sergei Korolevov led us to this island in search of Vasili in hopes of finding Venom. It seems the submarine was assembled and put to sea here, which also means it might be hidden in some underwater cave somewhere. Potentially, this cabin is the base of the underground engineering facility their benefactor, Venom, provided for them to finish the development and launch of the space satellite.” Ronan's eyes turned stormy as he peered toward the cabin. “I haven't seen any signs of Vasili.”

“Then why am I here?”

“Because this might be where POTUS is being held. Also, because I saw Venom.” His voice turned guttural. “With and without his mask.”

“You don’t need me to accost the bastard, Snake. You’ve got Steele and Priest. What aren’t you telling me?”

“Because of whom Venom is.”

“More riddles. Spit it the fuck out!”

“I’d rather you see for yourself,” Ronan said, gesturing toward the cabin as the man who had led him there, stomped back onto the porch, grabbed the Venom mask, and yanked it over his head before disappearing into the house.

“Jesus Christ, Snake! That can’t be. It just... can’t be.” Razor sat down on the ground, the hand that ran through his hair trembling. Ronan knew him well enough to know he was fighting rage while struggling with disbelief.

“If I didn’t see it with my own eyes, I wouldn’t have believed it.” Ronan sat down with his back pressed against a tree. “What are we gonna do?”

“How did you find this exact location?”

“I saw him arrive with that flashy yacht while searching the Lopez Village for Vasili. I recognized him when he oversaw the loading of supplies at the docks and followed him in my boat.”

“So, you believe Vasili Korolevov and President Noel Whittell are inside that cabin with... Dario, Torin’s brother,

who is also the bastard who betrayed us and is attempting to set us up?”

“It’s no use denying it, Razor. It’s fucked up, I know. Jesus, we all love Dario. We were there when he was almost killed, we... fuck man! He’s like a little brother to me.”

“Yeah, and a son to me.” Razor wiped a hand over his face. “How the fuck am I going to tell Torin his own brother is a backstabber? Dario Caruso... a liar, the biggest betrayer of all.” He looked up at a movement from the cabin. “Must be the supplies they’re offloading.”

“We need to establish if the President is being held here and get him out of there, Razor.”

“Agreed.” Razor looked around. “I suppose Dario has established himself within the community as a rich man on vacation, so no one here would suspect him of anything. There doesn’t seem to be any guards around the house.”

“Maybe not, but he has always been the tech savvy one, so there could be sensors and alarms around the cabin. Remember, he was the one who developed the virtual clone image that always attends the West Coast Mafia meetings to ensure Torin’s identity remains intact.”

“Which is also why he’s one step ahead of us all the time. He has direct access to our entire network. He’s been spying on us all this time.” Razor’s eyes flashed with anger.

“Then it’s about time the little shit realizes the power of family. We might not all be Carusos, but we stand as one as part of WCM and Kings Inc. Dario is alone, no matter who his allies are in this fucked-up mess. Let’s go.”

“No,” Razor reined him in with a hand on his shoulder. “He’ll clamp up like a pearl oyster if we go in guns blazing. We need to fight him at his own game. He’s a strategist. The abduction of the President was only part of his end goal. I don’t believe he’s really interested in the microchip designs. I always felt this vendetta was personal. Now, I know why.”

“Are you saying Dario is after Torin, who has only been good to him. Supported, loved, and protected him?” Ronan shook his head. “I find that hard to believe.”

“Don’t forget that Dario was under the control of his mother, a very devious woman, for most of his life. Some of that must’ve rubbed off on him. He might have presented himself as meek, but there were times when I noticed a flash of fierceness in his eyes, a desire to be more. I think the success he achieved in Bora Bora with the resorts gave his confidence a boost. Money is power, Snake. He knows it. He lived it his entire life. Now, he wants it all.”

“He had it all and walked away from it. He never wanted to be Boss X.”

“That’s just it, Snake. He was never in charge. Not really. For one, he was too young to assert himself. In all the years he sat in the seat as the Boss, every word that came out of his mouth was fed by Rebecca Costa. She was the one with the power, not him. When Torin stepped in, he became Dario’s protector against his mother but in the end, it was still someone else who made all the decisions, who had the power of the group. He’s had a taste of success and now, I believe he’s after the Caruso family fortune and Torin’s power as Boss

X, the true leader, the *Capo di Tutti Capi* of the West Coast Mafia.”

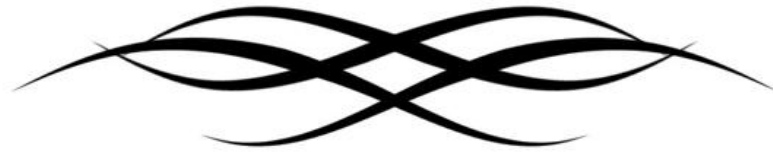
“You’re right. Everything that has happened points to someone attempting to end Torin’s reign.”

“We need to scramble the order of Dario’s plan. The President is a game piece in his coup to unseat Torin. He used his strategy skills to form an alliance to give him the edge. We need to find out who else is involved so we can end this once and for all, but first, we need to free the President. See what he does in retaliation.”

“He’ll realize we know who he is, Razor.”

“I’m going to make sure he does since that will force his hand. Dario was always the weak one, emotionally unstable. Even though he has built muscle, I don’t believe that has changed. He bit off more than he can chew. We’re going to ruffle his feathers, Ronan. Make him sweat and force him to face his biggest fear and challenge.” Razor grinned. “His brother’s wrath.”

Chapter Nine



“Let’s go. The quicker we get in there, the sooner we’ll know what we’re dealing with. It serves no purpose hanging around here,” Razor said.

“Agreed. Steele and Priest have just arrived at the alcove where our boats are moored. They’ll have the engines running and ready to go.” Ronan checked his watch. “Brendan sent me a visual from a drone that’s hovering out of sight overhead. There are only two heat sensors inside the house and four in the smaller cabin at the back.”

“Which means Vasili and Dario are in the house. We can assume Whittell is kept in the underground lab area, which is why there’s no heat signal for a third person. The guards or houseworkers are probably in the back quarters. Let’s keep it quiet and fast. In and out. I want to be at sea before they realize the President is gone.”

The sound of crushed graywacke ground under their soles as they made their way around the side of the cabin.

“I see Dario went all out with this place,” Ronan snorted in disgust. “This is a supposed hideout but reeks of everything luxurious.”

Razor grunted his agreement as they pressed against the side of the two-story home.

“Yeah, there’s much to be said for those born with a golden spoon in their mouth. He’s waited years to live the grand life. Now, he doesn’t seem to know where to draw the line. The expansions of the resorts, the yacht, this place? He’s tipped over from being humble to the exact opposite.”

“There’s a side door... no guards,” Ronan said as he pushed against the door which easily swung open into a large den. For a moment, he soaked in the relaxing ambiance of the interior. “Yeah, as you said, quite the opposite.”

The floor was an intricate herringbone parquet, blended together in hues of bronze. Slabs of sandstone clad the interior walls, and banisters of burnt ironwood, with aqueous grain and carved by a master carpenter, framed the staircase that led to a second story. Under the sun streaks, it was nature’s art.

“It seems Dario is much more of an enigma and complex man than I ever thought him to be. I always believed he hated the kind of lives we lived. He openly defied the brutality inflicted on those arrayed against the family business, yet his actions the past year proved him to be on the same track.”

Ronan turned his head and listened. The sound of voices floating from the front door drew his attention, urging him to withdraw a semi-automatic from his waistband as they moved deeper into the house. “Let’s find the entrance to the underground lab. I’m sure that’s where POTUS is.”

With a light footfall, he led the way under the arch created by the staircases on either side of the room. Classed as the best of assassins, neither of them was ever complacent. They were always prepared for the worst. If the situation demanded it, they'd shoot to kill.

“What the fuck is keeping you, Vasili? If you want to go fishing on the yacht, get your ass down here. I'm not going to stand around waiting on you all day,” Dario's voice boomed from the front entry. They flattened themselves behind the sofa, waiting.

“Don't get your panties in a twist, partner, I'm coming.”

“Let me set the record straight, Korolevov. I'm not your fucking partner. You work for me. I don't need you to get what I want.”

“Gah, without me you'll never get that microchip design finished or launch the WOSC into space.”

“There is danger in overestimating one's own worth. I suggest you remember that, Vasili. There's a plethora of space and nanotechnology engineers who are more skilled than you to finish the job. Believe me, with the money I'm prepared to throw at this project, I won't struggle to find someone else.” Dario's voice sounded demeaning, unconcerned about any throwback.

“You're naive if you believe that, Venom. There is no one better than me. I honed my skills and can offer what none of them can.”

“Pray tell,” Dario scoffed.

“You may be the strategist behind this scheme but I’m not an idiot. You have no interest in the end result. What you’re after are my Russian Bratva connections.” This time Vasili barked a laugh. “I promised to link you up with them, but that’s not going to happen until I’m safe and secure, protected from the violence you thrive on. Believe me, Venom, that’s not going to happen until that satellite is in space, and my name is enshrined in gold as its creator.”

“You would be wise not to push your luck, Vasili. You offer an easy path to what I’m after but my patience dealing with your peevishness is wearing thin. There are others who can give me what I want. Don’t fucking forget that.”

“Noted. So, are we going fishing?”

“Two hours and that’s it.”

“Let’s get to it then, and for fuck’s sake, don’t you think it’s time you remove that vile mask? If you still don’t trust me after all we’ve been through—”

“There is only one person I trust on this Earth, and it’s not you, Korolevov.”

The sound of footsteps stomping toward the door echoed through the house, followed by the door slamming shut. Soon after, the sound of the Jeep driving off confirmed they were gone.

“Jesus, this is even more fucked up than I initially thought,” Razor mumbled in the silence that followed.

“Let’s just find President Whittell and get the fuck out of here,” Ronan sneered. “If I’m here when they return, I can’t guarantee that little shit is going to see another sunrise.”

Like a well-oiled machine, the two men moved through the cabin, searching every room for the basement door.

“Found it,” Ronan smirked as he lifted the key off the hook by the door. “How kind of them to leave the key so accessible.”

“Check the drone feed. I don’t want to be caught down there by guards coming in to check up on Whittell,” Razor said as he cautiously pushed the door open.

“No movement. Only the two of us.”

“Let’s move.”

“Fuck me. This place looks like a NASA R&D lab,” Ronan said as they walked inside. It was large, decked out with a vast variety of computers, monitors, and technical equipment. “I don’t give a shit that Dario has made a success of the resorts on Bora Bora, there is no way he has the kind of money to finance this shit. There are millions of dollars invested in just building this fucking place, let alone all the equipment and technology used.”

“I concur. We better find out who brainwashed the little twit before all hell breaks loose in this country.”

“Over there.” Ronan headed toward an arch leading to a hallway. The first room was an office, the next a storage room, the third, a bedroom. They found President Noel Whittell in a second bedroom, battered and bruised, sleeping on a bunk where he was chained.

His eyes flickered the moment they opened the door. With a direct stare he looked at the two men.

“Ivanov? Is that you? Maxim Ivanov from Alligator International?”

“Morning, Mr. President. I apologize it took so long for us to find you.” Razor helped him to sit up.

“I’m just glad you did.” He groaned as he got up and slowly stretched. “I think I have a couple of cracked ribs.”

“Excuse me for stating the obvious, but you look like shit, Mr. President,” Ronan said.

“I can’t remember your name, but I do know you were on Maxim’s protection detail the day I was taken,” Noel said as he studied the large man.

“Ronan Scott.” Snake’s response was curt as he checked the drone feed. “We better move. The signal is busted down here. We have no way of knowing if anyone is heading this way. Mr. President, do you think you’ll be able to run?”

“Jesus, every muscle in my body aches,” Noel complained as he walked around the room. “It feels like I haven’t used my legs for months, but if I need to run to get away from that mad man, you can bet your ass I will.”

“Then let’s move.”

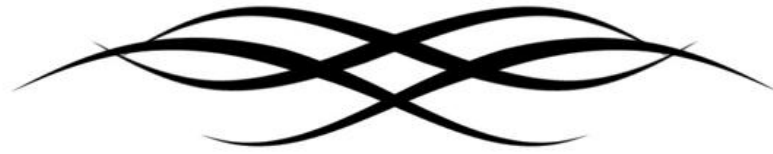
Ronan and Razor managed to extract Whittell without being detected, half-carrying him to where Razor left his quad bike.

“Don’t wait for me,” Ronan said as he got on the bicycle. “Get him off this island. I have a safe place where we can take him. Priest knows the location.”

“Please inform Torin we found President Whittell and Venom’s layout.” Razor’s voice lowered. “The rest of what we uncovered... keep quiet about it. For now, at least. We need to discuss how to relay the news to him.”

“Agreed.” There was no doubt Torin would be shattered to learn that his own half-brother was the one attempting to ruin his life. Pedaling, Ronan waved as he went past them. “See you on Center Island.”

Chapter Ten



Two hours later, Venom's cabin on the Lopez Hill Trailhead...

“That was invigorating. We should do this more often,” Vasili said as they arrived back from their fishing excursion.

“In case you forgot, we're not on fucking vacation. You're here to work. Something, you have done very little of since you arrived here.”

“I've told you this ad nauseum. Until I have the actual fucking designs of the microchip, as well as the entire portfolio, there's not much I can do.”

“I'm sorry to disturb you, Boss, but the local sheriff is here to talk to Mr. Korolevov.” Victor Rush, the leader of Venom's small army, walked into the house. “I offered him coffee at our cabin. He's waiting there.”

“What the fuck for?” Venom sneered; aware he wouldn't be able to join the conversation without exposing his identity to Vasili.

“Apparently, a body washed up on Lopez Bay a while ago, and they have some questions.” Victor shifted his weight

uncomfortably. He had always hated the mask but understood why Dario had to wear it at times.

“Questions? Dead body? I’m a scientist, not a killer,” Vasili said in a thin voice.

“Calm the fuck down. I’m sure it’s just routine since you’re a newcomer on the island,” Dario snapped, hiding his own concern behind a relaxed demeanor.

“So are you, and you walk around with a fucking mask.”

“I’m a well-known islander, Vasili. I’ve been coming here for years. You don’t honestly think I’m stupid enough to draw attention to myself, do you? Besides, you’re the only one who sees me with the mask. When I’m out there, they see the real me.”

“You’re fucking setting me up, aren’t you? If something goes wrong, I’m the one who’s going to take the blame.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You just do what you’re here for and all will be well. Now, calm down and get out there. I’m warning you, Korolevov, don’t fuck this up and say anything that could jeopardize our mission.” He gestured toward the door, cutting a warning look at Victor. “Don’t let him out of your sight. Do a live video on your cell to mine. I want to see and hear what’s going on.”

Victor nodded and dragged a still protesting Vasili after him. His voice floated back to Venom as he stomped toward the bedroom closest to the guards’ cabin so he could observe from the window.

“Stop acting like a wimp or you’ll raise the sheriff’s suspicions. Just act your normal self-absorbed self.”

Venom removed the mask before opening the blinds just enough for him to see through but not that his features would be visible should anyone look his way.

The sheriff got up from the garden chair he was sitting on as Victor and Vasili approached. He met them halfway between the main cabin and the smaller one. Dario’s phone pinged as Victor’s video recording started streaming. He opened it without looking at the screen. The voice of Sheriff Watts sounded gruff as he shook Vasili’s hand.

“Mr. Korolevov, I assume?”

“What is this all about, Sherriff?”

“A dead body washed up on Lopez Beach an hour ago.”

“What does that have to do with me?”

Venom grinned as Vasili responded in his usual egocentric manner. In his mind, no one was clever enough to be granted his time, which was probably why he had been cast out by the State Space Corporation, or as they’re known in short, Roscosmos. Vasili wasn’t a team player. All that mattered to him was his own fame and glory.

“I’m afraid it has everything to do with you, Mr. Korolevov. The deceased was identified as your father, the revered scientist, Sergei Korolevov.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Vasili exploded. “That’s impossible. My father is in Sweden. I just spoke to him two days ago.”

“I’m afraid there’s no mistake, Mr. Korolevov.”

“If the body washed up from the sea, it must be mauled and torn apart by fish and sharks. How can you be sure it’s him?” Vasili’s stance remained aggressive with his hands on his hips, but his voice sounded jittery.

“Keep it fucking together, Korolevov,” Dario growled as he watched the scene outside. At the same time, his stomach twisted into a knot at what this meant.

“The coroner’s initial inspection at the scene indicates that the body had been in the water for less than two hours. There is minimal damage to the face. It appears that it has been dumped at sea in the currents feeding through to Fisherman Bay. We identified him using the global facial recognition portal.”

“H-How did he die?”

“I’m afraid there are signs of cruel torture. Whoever killed him wanted information from him. We can only assume they got what they were after and they... I’m sorry, there is no easy way to say this. His throat was slashed, and his eyes gouged.”

“I’m sorry, but how did you know where to find me?” Vasili was clearly shaken.

“Every visitor on the island is registered upon arrival, Mr. Korolevov. The day you arrived; your passport details were locked into the Sheriff Department’s server. We run a very tight and controlled community here, which is why our crime rate is so low.” Sheriff Watts shifted his weight.

“Why do you think your father’s body washed up here, on the island where you’re visiting? It seems rather a coincidence, wouldn’t you say?”

“How the fuck should I know? I came here for some peace and quiet to work on a new satellite design. My father retired two years ago. I wasn’t aware of him being involved in anything that would’ve gotten him killed.” Vasili ran a hand over his face. “I can’t believe this. Are we done? I need to... this is...”

“Of course, I apologize. I didn’t mean to imply anything. It’s the first dead body on one of our beaches and we’re all on edge.” Sheriff Watts smiled briefly. “Take your time to work through it, but I do need you to come down to the coroner’s office to formally identify the body.”

“Sure, I’ll... sometime,” Vasili muttered as he walked away.

Dario’s phone pinged as the video recording stopped. He watched Sheriff Watts walk toward his car, with Victor accompanying him. He stepped back from the window as Watts looked over his shoulder. It wouldn’t do to be caught spying at a time like this, even though he was the owner of the house. He needed to keep his slate clean, at all costs, and being caught in the middle of a murder investigation was the last thing he needed. The timing couldn’t have been worse.

“Venom!” Vasili shouted from the front door as he barged inside.

Dario waited until the Sheriff’s car disappeared around the bend before he yanked the mask over his head.

“Did you hear that?” Vasili wailed as he walked into the den. “My father is dead. Murdered and dumped here. Here! What the fuck does that mean?”

“He said Sergei was tortured. His body washing up on Lopez Hill Island is no coincidence, Korolevov. It’s a message. They know you’re here, and they made the connection to me. They wanted us to know they know, which means, they... fuck! Whittell!”

Dario stormed toward the basement door. A string of curses chased him down the stairs as he found it standing open. Doom washed over him. He knew what he would find before he ran down the hallway and burst into the second bedroom.

“Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! He’s gone. They took the goddamn POTUS!”

“So, we’re next,” Vasili said in a dour voice as he stood in the doorway, watching a furious Venom pace the room.

“We have to get the fuck off this island.” In a rage, Dario tore the room apart. The rough blanket on the bed gave way under the strength of his hands tearing it into pieces. The desk crashed in two under the heel of his sneakers, even the wood frame of the bed gave way under the fury he unleashed. By the time he calmed down, sweat was streaming down his face, and his hair was wet and plastered to his head, courtesy of the heat his exertion had generated under the mask. “Go pack your shit! Don’t leave anything you’ve worked on behind. We’re leaving.”

“But I have to go and identify—”

“You’re welcome to stay and wait for the bastards who took Whittell and killed Sergei to come back. I’m leaving in less than thirty minutes. If you’re not ready by then, I don’t give a fuck. I will not fail to achieve my goal. This is a minor setback, an inconvenient one, but I will overcome it. Like I have every obstacle in my life. He’s not going to win this war. Not this one.” Shouldering Vasili out of the way, he stomped past him. “Make your choice, Korolevov, but do so quickly.”

Dario didn’t bother to pack. He had enough clothes on the yacht, and his entire life was encased in folders on the dark web. All he needed was his briefcase with his laptop and tablet. He headed toward the study.

“Boss, what now?” Victor had been Dario’s right-hand man since the days he was under the control of his mother and forced to play her puppet as Boss X. The only one who knew the true goals and desires of the man deep inside him was this man. For that and completing his training in criminal warfare over the years, he valued him by his side.

“We’re leaving. Get the men to load up all the supplies and get it to the boat. I want to cast off in less than thirty minutes. I need you to go to the Sheriff’s office and identify Sergei’s body. Tell Watts that Vasili is too distraught and has fallen into a state of depression.”

“Where do I meet up with you?”

“Rent a speedboat at the marina. I’ll drop you the coordinates where we’ll wait for you.”

“You think it’s Torin? That he knows Venom is associated with the Korolevovs?”

“Yeah, he knows. The fucking bastard knows.”

“We’ll win this, Dario. I know we will.”

“Get going, Victor. We don’t have time to waste.”

With a curt nod, Victor left.

“You’re right, Victor. We will win. I will win!” His vow cracked in the silence surrounding him. It was the sound of pure evil. His eyes circled the room as he took in the luxury—the deep leather sofas, the dark mahogany desk. His eyes came to rest on the intricately carved cigar box on top of the desk—a gift from Torin. He sat down behind the desk, reached for one of the Cuban cigars and lit it.

Puffing on it, he leaned back in the chair, blowing the smoke in the air with obvious relish.

“I’ve been practicing, Torin. Isn’t this exactly how you do it? A pensive look as you plan your next scheme to add to your already overflowing bank account?” A short laugh echoed through the room. “Except I bet over the past year it’s been worry and anger feeding your brain. See, I know you, brother, better than anyone. That, in the end, will be your downfall. You might be the great Boss X of the West Coast Mafia, the leader everyone looks up to. The one who rules crime like a Godfather of the movies, but all that will come to an end when we face off. I will win because I know what your one true weakness is.”

Stubbing out the cigar, he packed his briefcase and got up.

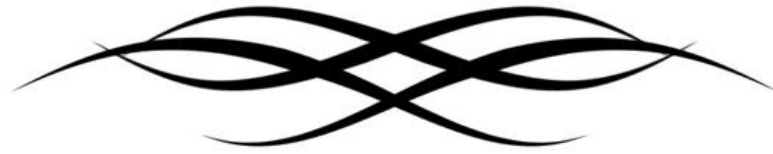
“Me. I’m the one you have no defense against. That’s going to be your downfall. You’ll never kill me but me? You

don't fucking know me, big brother. None of you assholes do, and that includes my whore of a dead mother. I won't hesitate to pull the trigger and watch with glee as it splits your brain in two."

It was with a twang of regret that he looked around the luxurious cabin as he opened the front door moments later. He loved this place. It had been the perfect hideout to finish the game. One day, he'd be back but for now, it was time to go.

"Korolevov! I'm leaving. If you're not in the Jeep in two minutes, you're on your own."

Chapter Eleven



The North Pacific Ocean, two-hundred-and-fifty-miles from the West Coast of the U.S. ...

Dario dropped the pin of their location to Victor, using the satellite phone. He breathed in the freshness of the ocean, allowing the force of nature to calm his nerves. Having had the upper hand all this time had been exhilarating and made him feel all-powerful. The message sent by Sergei's tortured body had brought him down to Earth with a crash.

The age-old lack of confidence clawed at his insides. Dario's insecurities were rooted in fear of abandonment. Oh, his mother and father had bestowed him with everything money could buy, but he had always felt like a burden. To his father because he didn't have the physical or emotional strength or desire to be part of the criminal world he had created. In his eyes that made Dario a failure from when he was a young boy, so he never bothered to train him in the ways of a mafioso, not like he had Torin and Matteo.

His mother, on the other hand, used him for her own power games. She had never loved him, not with the maternal kind of love he craved, definitely not with the kind of love

Torin's mother had shown him. In the end, both of them proved they didn't need or want him in their lives. Oh, they didn't cast him out physically. No, their actions cut much deeper. They emotionally distanced themselves. He'd felt banished, extradited as an unimportant member of the family, a particle of dust that no one noticed.

“Not now, Caruso. Don't you fucking dare drive over them.” His hoarse voice floated through his mind, yanking him away from the dark hole he was about to tumble into. “Yes! You're stronger than this!”

Time had taught him strength to overcome those anxieties. He refused to fall back into the same vortex of weightless existence where he didn't matter, where his opinions were scoffed at. A period, in truth the majority of his life, where he had been ruled by others.

He had no idea how Torin found out about his—or rather Venom's—connection to the Korolevovs. In the years after he had lost his eye when his uncle had shot him, he'd spent his recuperation to hone his computer tech skills. Over time, he had become one of the best hackers in the world. He knew how to disappear in the void of cyberspace, how to do business and destroy as much as he created using the virtual world. Every step he took was double-checked, then verified and secured. There was no way he would've slipped up.

“Yes, I am a self-made fucking expert. I turned myself into something! A man feared by many.” He snorted as he straightened, his body taut with a fresh wave of confidence washing over him. “You, dear brother, would do well to do the same. So, how the fuck did you find out, Torin?”

He grunted as the satellite phone rang. “Talk and do it quickly. I’m not in the mood for chit-chat.”

“You forget who you’re talking to Caruso. It would serve you well to remember who is footing that fifty feet yacht you’re steering. One, I might add, that’s sinking fucking fast.”

“What do you want? I told you I’d contact you if I have anything to report.”

“Which is exactly the reason for my call. It’s been weeks since you abducted Whittell. You don’t seem to be making any progress, Caruso. I want that fucking design. Without it, we can’t move ahead with our plan.”

“He escaped,” Dario snapped. “Or rather, he was taken.”

The silence that followed his announcement was telling. He swore he could feel the anger emanating from the man on the other side of the phone.

“You lost the fucking President?” A string of expletives rang through Dario’s mind. “I should’ve known not to put my trust in the runt of the litter. I would’ve achieved much more had I approached your brother. Perhaps I should just contact him to get the results I’m after.”

“Fuck you! I told you I’d get what you want, and I will. Don’t you ever threaten me with Torin again.”

“You allowed the only advantage we had to slip through your fingers. The only person who knows where to find Andrew Wilson. I suggest you pull your finger out of your ass and find him. Or you are of no further use to me.”

Venom's eyes darkened as he summarily ended the connection. He was over people threatening him in an attempt to manipulate the end result.

“Fuck you. No one threatens me. It's time to take charge. I don't need more of your money, President Smirnoff. I have amassed enough from your greedy ass. Besides, you're only slowing me down. Your needs and mine are different. I don't give a fuck about those designs, except...” He gazed pensively out to sea.

“Well, big brother, at least some of what you tried to teach me during those years I was forced to play at being Boss X stuck. Cut out the middleman.” A cackle of laughter drifted out of his mouth. “I can make more money selling the finished product once Vasili has the microchip to finish the laser-sensor-driven satellite. The kind of space roaming bomb any country would pay top dollar for, and other than you, I don't give a shit who buys it, as long as they pay me a shitload of gold.”

“You allowed the only advantage we had to slip through your fingers. The only person who knows where to find Andrew Wilson.”

Dario slammed a fist against the banister.

“No, Whittell isn't the only person who knows where Andrew Wilson is.” For the first time since he had found out POTUS had escaped, he relaxed. Now, once again, he had the upper hand. He had another trump card to play. One that was as close to Torin as he was.

“That's the benefit of being your little insignificant little bro, Torin. You and your friends take me into their

confidence about everything. Fuck! I can't believe I didn't think of this earlier. I know exactly how to find Andrew Wilson. Razor's newly acquired wife, little Maia... Wilson's niece."

"Who are you talking— You're not wearing your mask," Vasili cut himself off as he stumbled to a halt, staring in shock at the younger man facing him. "Jesus, you're much younger than I imagined."

"Your point?"

"Nothing, just that I..." He looked around, seeming uncomfortable. "Why did you take off your mask? Now, after all this time."

"We've traveled a couple of miles together, Vasili. I believe the time has come to trust you. Or am I making a judgment error?"

"No! Of course, not. It just came as a surprise." He handed Dario a beer. "Brought you something to drink."

"Exactly what I need," Dario said. Hiding his amusement behind the bottle, he gulped half of the bitter drink down.

"I don't recognize you, so who are you, really?"

"What's in a name?" Dario tilted his head sideways, watching Vasili through heavy eyelids. "Who said that?" He snapped his fingers. "Ah, I remember. 'What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell just as sweet.' From William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*."

"I guess you're right." Vasili shrugged. He didn't seem impressed as he chucked down his beer. "Your real name is

irrelevant but keeping me in the dark doesn't fill me with confidence that you trust me."

"Trust is such a fickle and objective concept. I wouldn't dwell on it too much if I were you."

"What I am dwelling on is the fact we have become the prey. I don't like the feeling that we're on the run, Venom."

"We're not."

"No?" Vasili spread out his arms and spun in a full circle. "Then why are we moored in the middle of the ocean? With nothing but water and more water surrounding us. If that's not hiding and running away, I don't know what is."

"It's called strategy, Korolevov. Retreat, recover, adjust, plan, and execute. Simple and basic principles of any project or military combat. Unwind your fucking panties and relax. Enjoy the calmness of the sea because once we find those designs, you'll be working around the clock."

"I'm not scared of work. I'm just getting bored with lazing around. How the fuck did your army not notice someone breaking in to take Whittell?" Vasili finally allowed his frustrations to explode. "We had him. You were slack, Venom. I think you're too soft, which I suppose is understandable now that I realize how young you are. A more experienced mafioso would've extracted the information from him within hours of arriving on the island. Two weeks! No, more than that, and you got shit out of him."

Dario didn't react. Vasili was an end to a means. His opinion didn't matter. Not since Dario's reason for exposing

himself to him was he had come to the decision that once Vasili completed the designs, his worth ended.



The next day, Dolce Paradiso Estate, Ronan's private beach house on Center Island...

“This is an amazing place, Ronan. How long have you had it?”

“I inherited the property from my grandfather, but I only built the house a couple of years ago. This is my safe haven. My private breakaway from everything and everyone.”

“Now, you've exposed it to me. I'm honored, but trust me, no one will find out about it from me. I can see why you wish to keep it a secret from the outside world. Come to think of it, it's exactly what I need to do. Between the Kings Inc. and the Black Diamond Bratva responsibilities, I need a place where no one can find me.”

“Especially if you need a little alone time with Maia.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“God, I need one of those,” Noel Whittell said as he walked onto the porch where Razor and Ronan were having coffee.

“Help yourself,” Ronan said as he sipped on the dark brew. “Sleep well?”

“Like a baby, and believe me, it was the first night of sleep I've had since that bastard kidnapped me.” Sitting down,

he glanced between them. “Do you know who the man behind the mask is?”

“No idea,” Razor asserted. “We will find out though.”

“I appreciate your candor, Maxim, but that man is clever. That much I realized over the past couple of weeks. He’s not going to wait around once he finds me gone.”

“We realize that, Mr. President. Granted, he’s been a step ahead of us for the past couple of years but that’s in the past,” Ronan finished his coffee and got up for a refill. “Before I followed you back here, I planted a tracking chip on the inside of the speed boat docking bay of his yacht. From now on, we’ll know exactly where he goes.”

“He’s not going to stay at sea, Ronan,” Razor drawled. “Not if he’s intent on obtaining those designs.”

“I know, but at least we’ll know where he’s headed the moment he makes a move.” Ronan sat back down. “Mr. President, you were involved in the original design along with Andrew Wilson, Hector Goldberg, and William Roe.”

“Correct.”

“We know the existence of the microchip designs was leaked, and that’s what everyone is after. I now know that the acronym WOSC stands for World Orbit Satellite Cannon.”

“Jesus,” Razor said as the implication of what the microchip was worth struck home. “A bomb in space?”

“Not just any bomb,” Whittell said, his expression grim. “With that microchip technology, someone like Vasili has the potential to design the deadliest weapon ever created.”

“Yeah, the acronym says it all,” Razor said in a dull voice.

“Be more specific, Mr. President. Exactly what kind of weapon?” Ronan said around a sip of coffee.

“The designs were years advanced to what other engineers were working on. They’re not only after the microchip designs. They want the entire portfolio of what we envisioned as the full potential of the technology.”

“Which is?”

“We developed the first of the nanotechnology engineering chips but our vision is what sparked our fear and decision to stop and hide it from the world. It was an elevated technology we didn’t realize we created until right at the end. The technology was designed to be operational in space, but it also has the ability to adapt in space, to home in on daily signals fed to its base from Earth. Based on the conditions of visual feedback the satellite receives, it chooses which weapon to use.”

“The World Orbit Space Cannon,” Ronan said.

“That was the original technology we were working toward. The strength of the cannons was the only option provided in our design. Or so we thought... until we did our first initial tests in space. The microchip has AI intelligence of such advanced technology, it attempted to change the bomb into a laser beam, using the magnetized fields of Earth. A beam that upon further investigation we found could potentially generate so much power, the velocity with which it would hit its target could destroy entire states in a flash.” He shook his head.

“To this day, we don’t know how we managed to build that into the design. Something so adverse that we had no idea how to control it. We couldn’t allow it to be released or pursued by future engineers like Korolevov, who didn’t have the skills to identify the dangers or worse, didn’t care. We scrapped the design as failed and locked it in NASA’s fault.”

“What the fuck does Venom want with something like that?” Ronan exploded.

“I think the question is rather who he’s working with,” Razor said.

“He spoke out of turn when he interrogated me once,” Whittell continued. “He mentioned the Russian President becoming impatient. I’m not sure if he’s directly involved, but one thing I do know is that if the Russians get their hands on that design, every country in the world is in danger of being controlled by them. Those who refuse to bend to their rule would be annihilated.”

“Why keep the design in the first place?” Ronan said. “Why not just destroy it?”

“It was a collective decision by the NASA board. Thinking back, we should’ve destroyed it and suffered the consequences.”

“You still can.” Razor watched him unblinkingly. “From all counts, Andrew Wilson disappeared with the designs. Why not contact him and tell him to destroy it?”

“I don’t have contact with him. We agreed to break all association when he went into hiding, for his and his family’s safety.” He got up, visibly upset at the grim possibilities of

failure to keep the designs safe. “I’m going for a walk on the beach.”

Ronan waited until Whittell was out of hearing distance. “We need to get him to tell us where Andrew is, Razor. It’s the only way to ensure no one gets their hands on that design. We need to destroy it.”

“So, you don’t believe him, either.” Razor’s eyes followed the President’s track over the beach.

“No. He might not have contact with him but there was a flicker in his eyes when he said it. He knows where Wilson is.”

“Then we better make him understand our only desire is to destroy the designs, not use it for any other purpose. Least of all give it back to NASA.”

Ronan scratched the morning stubble on his chin as he turned pensive, his thoughts drifting in another direction.

“Dario used to hate the cruelty of the life his family lived. Suddenly, he’s backing a country who has no compunction of destroying lives with no empathy for the innocent? Jesus, Razor, what happened to that boy?” He spat out the words through gritted teeth, frustration and disdain wrapped up in each word.

“Fuck if I know, but one thing is for sure, his deceit is going to destroy Torin.”

“The question is, what is he going to do about it? From everything we saw over the past couple of years dealing with the backlash of Venom, aka Dario’s war on the Kings Inc. and

Torin directly, he wouldn't hesitate shooting to kill. His own brother included. Torin on the other hand..."

"We'll have to ensure we're there should a face-off between them happen," Razor said emphatically. "I don't know what switched a shy, empathetic young man into a murderous, money-hungry asshole, but he's not going to destroy a man I love like a brother."

"Yeah, he ran away from the life as a criminal, and it was only due to Torin's interference that he could without repercussions. Now, he's turned on the one man who helped him to come into his own."

"We can't keep this from Torin, Ronan. He has to be prepared."

"Yeah, that's if he believes us."

"I took a video clip of Dario on the porch when he took off the mask. He won't be able to dispute it." Razor sighed. "We're going to have to keep POTUS here, at least until this entire mess has been resolved."

"I agree. I'll set up a guard rotation roster with Steele, Priest, Brendan, and Dylan. At this point, they're the only ones I trust."

"I'm going to take a shower, then head back to Seattle. The sooner we put this discussion with Torin behind us, the better."

"It's not going to be easy, but you're right. I'll see you at the office in an hour." Ronan stared out to sea as Razor walked into the house.

The shocking discovery of Dario's deception and betrayal of his own brother brought reality home. He was a fool to believe there was a future for him with a woman like Lee Powell. To the world out there, he was a respected businessman, a partner in a sought-after business with branches nationwide. In the end, all of that meant nothing. He was and always would be a criminal. Like the Carusos and Razor, he had been born into the life. It was all he knew how to be. Truth be known... all he wanted to be.

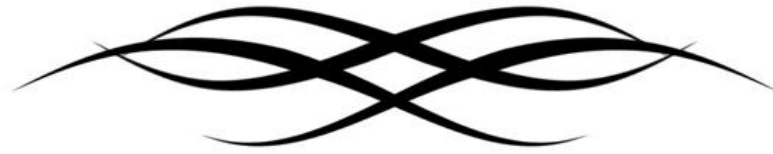
Ronan couldn't envision his life without the criminal part that was at the core of the man he was.

That realization alone was enough to know hoping for a life with a sweet and loving woman like Lee was not meant for him. The only way he would find love was to search among his own kind.

A criminal for a criminal.

Lee Powell just became off limits.

Chapter Twelve



The Restaurant Wholesale Depot...

“Happy birthday, darling.”

“Morning, Mom, and thank you.”

“Did my gift arrive in time?”

“It was delivered this morning. It’s absolutely gorgeous, but you shouldn’t have. It’s way too expensive.” The white gold and diamond sunflower-shaped locket and chain had brought tears to her eyes when she had opened the gift. She lifted it from its resting place on her chest and flipped it open. Inside was a photo of her as a baby in her mother’s arms. It was delicate, depicting the same fragility of sunflower petals, but at the same time it offered her the warmth of her mother’s caring. Something, she had felt the moment she had put it on.

“I wanted to give my little baby girl something special. The locket is similar to the one my mother gave me when I fell pregnant with you.”

“Mom, please...”

“No pressure, darling. It’s just... one never knows what tomorrow holds, so at least this way you’ll have the locket in case... well, you know, something unforeseen happens.”

Lee’s stomach lurched at the sudden change in her mother’s voice. She sounded forlorn, lonely, but mostly sad.

“What’s wrong? Are you sick? Mom, please don’t tell me—”

“No! No, no, no. I’m fine. I guess I just miss you more than I realized.” A thin laugh crackled in Lee’s ear. “So, any big plans for tonight? A hot date perhaps?”

Lee didn’t bother to refrain from rolling her eyes. From one extreme to the next. She should be used to it by now, but insofar as pushing Lee to find a husband, Sandy just didn’t have an off switch.

“Actually, yes. I’m having dinner with friends.” It was a lie, but if Sandy knew Lee was going straight home from work to wallow in the fact that Ronan hadn’t contacted her once over the weekend, she’d never hear the end of it.

“Friends as in all of them women or is there at least one with the burly type of muscles and a... you know, a manly rod, among them?”

“Good Lord, Mom, stop.” Lee blew out her cheeks, praying for patience. Her mother meant well but since Lee had decided Ronan was the man for her, she didn’t need more pressure. Most definitely not now that he seemed to be ghosting her after the hot night they had shared at Decadent Sins. “A manly rod? Where in the world did that come from?”

“I may be in my sixties but that doesn’t mean I’m ignorant to the excitement of sexual explorations, young lady.”

“Okay, Mom. TMI, really!”

“Pfft. You’re a thirty-six-year-old woman. Don’t pretend that you don’t love cock.”

“Mom!”

“Well, don’t you?”

“That’s not the point. This is *so* not the kind of conversation I want to have with my mother!”

“Why not? Are you turning into a prude?”

“Okay, who are you, and what have you done with my mother?”

Sandy’s tingling laugh broke through Lee’s resolve. She joined in her mirth with a burst of laughter, triggered by the sheer enjoyment reflected in her mother’s reaction.

“Since I know you hate baking, I ordered a Death by Chocolate cake from your favorite bakery. It should be delivered around teatime. Don’t bother snapping at me, Leeandra. You know my motto about birthdays.”

“Yeah, yeah. It’s not a proper birthday without cake.” Lee shook her head. “You’re spoiling me, so thank you. I really appreciate it.”

“Just be happy, darling. That’s all I wish for you.”

“I’m working on it. I’m just lucky to have you as my mother. You have been my strength throughout my life. For that, I’m eternally grateful.”

“And you mine, darling. If not for you... Well, I won't keep you any longer. I just wanted to wish you a wonderful day.”

Lee's day seemed brighter after her mother's call. She might be overprotective and overeager to see her daughter married, but she made Lee feel loved.

“So, thirty-six, right?”

“You don't have to rub it in. That's my mother's job.” Lee smiled at Torin as he walked into the office and planted a brief kiss on her cheek.

“Happy birthday, Lee. May the year ahead bring you love and joy.”

“And a baby.”

Torin's eyebrows crawled higher. “Unfortunately, I can't help you with that. Dakota would skin me alive if I offered.” He smiled when she tsk'ed. “But maybe this can help with decorating the nursery. From Matteo and me.”

“Holy shit!” Lee stared at the check in shock. “It's more than my annual bonus. I can't accept this, Torin. It's too much.”

“You always underestimate your worth, Lee. Not only as an employee but as a friend. It's a small token of our appreciation for everything you do for us over and above your job responsibilities.” He squeezed her shoulder. “It's your birthday present. You can't give it back.”

“Thank you. I truly have no words.”

“Your expression says it all. I hope you’ll have a wonderful day.” He smiled. “So, back to work. Razor and Ronan asked for a meeting this morning. Please slot them in at nine and move the Plaza Hotel group meeting to eleven. Reschedule the one with the logistics department for next week.”

“Will do.” She smirked as Torin stopped in the doorway. Preempting what he wanted to say, she cut the words hovering on his lips short. “And yes, I know Ronan’s stomach will be growling when he gets here. I’ll order something to eat.”

With a salute, he disappeared into his office, leaving Lee to deal with her stomach suddenly turned to knots. Although Ronan was a partner, she didn’t see or deal with him every day. He had his own PA, and his office was on a different floor. Unless he had a meeting with Torin, days would go by without them bumping into each other.

She had been on tenterhooks since their scene, waiting for him to contact her, ask her out, come to her house and... well, fuck her. Nothing. Not a damn word. Not even a phone call.

“Oh Lord.” She hugged her waist. The thought of seeing him today, on her birthday, caused goosebumps to tickle her skin all over. “Well, this is it. Another sign that he’s the man for me. Even though she irritates me with her insistence, in that, I’m like my mother. I’m not giving up. I want him and come hell or high water, I’m going to get him.” She straightened and squared her shoulders.

“Ghosting me isn’t going to scare me off, Ronan Scott.”



“The two of you look like the dog ate your breakfast. Spit it out. What’s going on?” Torin watched the two men with narrowed eyes.

“Don’t remind me,” Ronan patted his stomach, which accommodated him by rumbling loudly. “I haven’t had breakfast yet.”

“No surprise there,” Torin said. “Don’t worry, Lee’s already on it.”

Ronan had avoided popping into her office upon arrival. He needed his mind sharp for the discussion with Torin, but the mention of her name and the idea that she was so close, hit him like a shot of tequila in Red Bull. His resolution earlier at his beach house came back to taunt him.

Lee Powell is off limits. Lee Powell is off limits.

He repeated the words like a mantra, as if hearing them ripple through his mind would change the way his heartbeat spiked, and his breathing stuttered in anticipation of seeing her.

“I have to take this. We have a manufacturing crisis.” The phone call was Ronan’s saving grace as Lee chose that moment to arrive with their breakfast.

“Fuck,” he cursed under his breath as Razor jumped up and kissed her full on the lips, wishing her a happy birthday. Ronan always brought her flowers and her favorite Belgium

chocolates, but with everything that had happened over the weekend, it had slipped his mind. The way her cheeks turned all rosy and the sweet smile on her lips when Razor handed her a gift, turned his legs to rubber. It was a first for Ronan. Not that beautiful women didn't affect him, but he had never reacted like an adolescent schoolboy with his first hard-on for his math teacher.

Lee Powell is off limits.

The mask of the professional assassin slipped back into place. When Lee glanced in his direction, his stare was blank and looked right through her. The way she blanched ripped a slash of regret directly into his heart. It was for the best. The expectations both of them had felt that night at Decadent Sins needed to be crushed, now rather than later. For his own sanity, more than hers.

She had already left the office by the time he ended the call, allowing him to breathe normally.

“Ah, food,” he gushed with a forced grin as the aromatic smell of freshly baked croissants wafted toward him like a snowflake carried by a gentle breeze.

“I only have an hour, gents. Why are you here?” Torin said as soon as everyone had a plate in front of them.

“We found the President,” Ronan kicked off with the easiest of the news.

“You mean you know where he is or that you found him, found him?” Torin's sharp gaze drilled through him.

“We already extracted him. He's under guard at my beach house.”

“The one on Central Island?”

Ronan blinked. “How do you know about it? I never told anyone.”

“There’s very little I don’t know about the people I care about, Snake,” Torin said. “Why there? Why not hand him over to the Secret Service?”

“Because we don’t know who we can trust,” Razor interjected. “Whittell is fine. A little beat up but Ronan had the local island doctor come to the house to treat him. Not surprisingly, since his face is all swollen and bruised, he didn’t recognize him, so don’t worry about that.”

“Razor is right,” Ronan said. “Until we have resolved the issue with Venom, we can’t let his location be known. At least it’s one advantage we have over him.”

“Where was he held prisoner?”

“I followed Razor’s lead and interrogated Sergei Korolevov. He led me to Lopez Hill Island where his son, Vasili, was. Venom supplied them with a state-of-the-art underground lab where the submarine was built and where they intended to utilize the microchip design and build a nanotech space laser bomb.”

“WOSC, I assume.” Torin sipped his coffee as he looked between them. “And?”

Razor briefly detailed all the dangers of the technology and why it was vital to keep the President, Andrew Wilson, and the design out of Venom’s hands.

“That much I already know. Did Whittell tell you where to find Wilson?”

“He claims they broke all contact, but we don’t believe him.” Ronan took the last bite of his breakfast and leaned back in the chair. “For some reason, the President doesn’t seem all that keen to destroy the WOSC design.”

“The fucking data should’ve been burned all those years ago,” Razor sneered.

“So, who is Venom working for?”

“Might be the Russians.” Ronan’s voice resonated through the room. “He mentioned the Russian President to Whittell during an interrogation, but in our opinion, his actions are driven more toward himself. Well, actually, we believe it’s an accelerant to the grand finale of his vendetta against us.”

Torin’s fingers did the usual rattle on the desk when he was in concentration mode. His gaze drifted between the two men before settling on Ronan’s hands, which were clenched into tight fists.

“You know who Venom is.”

Ronan looked sideways at Razor. He had known Torin the longest. They were more than friends and the news he was about to disclose could bring out a side of Torin he would never show to anyone. Mainly since he would deem it as a weakness.

“I think I’ll leave you to it, Razor. I need to take care of that problem in the factory.” Ronan got up and walked out, aware of Torin’s gaze searing his back.



“Why do I get the feeling I’m not going to like what you’re about to tell me?”

“Because if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn’t have believed it.” Razor wiped a hand over his face, a sign of tiredness more than discomfort.

Torin noticed the dark circles under his eyes, realizing it was partly due to a lack of sleep.

“So, I failed him... again.” Torin covered his eyes with one hand, the other turning into a fist so tight, his knuckles turned white. “Failure is the reset, Razor. A do-over, a chance to fix what needs fixing and set sail once more.” His voice resonated with desolation and raw pain.

“Torin?” Razor sat up. Torin’s words sounded as if he was sifting them like sand, perhaps in an attempt to lessen the hurt of what he already suspected.

“Don’t beat around the bush, Razor. It’s Dario, isn’t it?” He lowered his hand, not bothering to hide the glimmer of anger in his eyes.

“Yes, Dario is Venom.”

Torin listened with a stoic expression as Razor relayed what had happened on Lopez Hill Island. He didn’t blink as he watched the video clip of when Dario removed the Venom mask and exposed himself.

“How did you know?” Razor was struggling with how astute Torin was. Not that he should be, since it was that exact trait that made him the best *Capo di Tutti Capi* and why the West Coast Mafia was at the top of the criminal ladder.

“I’ve noticed a change in him over the past four years. It’s why I was happy to buy the resort in Bora Bora for him. I suppose I was naive in thinking it would settle his mind. Except... I read him wrong. He wasn’t really interested in running the resort. He wanted to get away from here... from me.”

“Dario has never been happy with his life, Torin. You know that as much as I do.”

“Maybe, but we emotionally appoint the ones we love to certain positions in our inner landscapes, yet for the life of me, I don’t remember ever asking Dario what he really wanted.”

“You saved him from that bitch, Torin. If you hadn’t stepped in and guided him when he was forced into the Boss X position, he would’ve cracked long ago.”

“This last year was as if a switch had been flicked with him.” Torin started pacing. “He hid it well, but I knew. I could feel he was drifting further and further away from me. There were times when his resentment flowed into me even over the distance.”

Looking out over the city below, he allowed the anger that had been slowly boiling deep down to surface. There came a time when keeping one’s self-respect intact, they must leave what they hoped would be a good thing, like he had done trying to help Dario. The disappointment at his half-brother’s betrayal arrived as a sadness, a grief, an ending. In time, Torin knew it would pass and his soul would heal, maybe even forgive—not that a corpse would benefit from such noble intentions.

“What I had believed to be respect and brotherly love had been a facade of his hatred for me.”

“He’s out of his depth, Torin. He might have the financial backing from someone eager to become all-powerful, but he’s no match for you.”

“Dario has tasted success and with it comes the craving for more. Power, money, and success... they all go hand in hand. Don’t misjudge him, Razor. One thing I realized when I coached him in the operation of the WCM is that he’s a brilliant strategist. He’s not stupid.” He looked at Razor over his shoulder. “And he knows exactly how we operate. That’s what’s given him the edge.” His lips straightened into a thin line. “It seems I’m an easy target for my family. First his mother and her brother, now him.”

“You don’t think he’ll back off? Now that he realizes we know it’s him?”

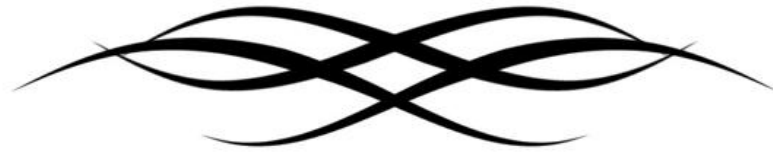
“No. Dario is banking on one thing.” His eyes turned dark. “He’s clearly much crueler than any of us ever realized, but unfortunately for him, he chose the wrong man to play games with.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning he doesn’t know me. He believes I have compassion and empathy. In a sense, Dakota taught me those traits, but what he doesn’t realize is that I know how to filter them and switch them off when needed. He’s making one major judgment error. My guess is that in his newly acquired egotistical way, he thinks he’s my one weakness.” He sat back down. “He believes I won’t be able to kill him when the time comes.”

“You’re right. He definitely doesn’t know you at all.”

Chapter Thirteen



Lee's house, Beach Drive, Alki Point, Seattle, WA...

“Thanks for understanding, Emily. I’m just not in the mood for partying, tonight. It’s been a long day, and I want nothing more than to soak in a hot bath with a glass of red wine.”

“Very well, but I’m not letting this go. We are going to celebrate your birthday, even if it’s a week late.”

“It’s a date.”

With relief at her understanding, Lee ended the call and headed to the bathroom. Might as well put action to her words. Maybe if the water was scorching, she would forget that it was her birthday, and she was supposed to have fun.

For a day that had started off relatively bright and happy, it had turned sour very quickly. Within the blink of an eye, to be exact. The look of disinterest from Ronan in Torin’s office had torn open her heart. Worse was that he hadn’t even bothered to wish her a happy birthday after the meeting or given her the usual gift of chocolates and flowers. From there, everything went south. It had turned into the longest day she ever had to labor through.

“Ahh, this is bliss,” she sighed as she lowered herself into the tub. Soaking in the heated water, feeling it hug every inch of skin so gently, inhaling the aroma of the bubble bath... this was her own little heaven, a mini vacation, a place to breathe deeply and let her inner peace return.

Except... this time it didn't work. Her mind wouldn't switch off and kept moping about Ronan Scott's attitude. The disappointment and hurt during the course of the day had slowly given way to anger, which escalated with every passing moment. Now, Lee was seriously pissed off.

“Just who the hell does he think he is? First, he blows every circuit in my body. Makes me believe it's more than just a one-time interlude at the club, only to ghost me? Treat me like I don't exist?”

Taking a long sip of the rich aromatic blend of the Walla Walla Cabernet Sauvignon wine that was in the birthday gift bag Emily gave her, she stared out over the ocean.

“Like hell, big boy. You don't know Lee Powell, but you will. Yes, siree. Oh yes, you will!”

Lee had inherited the three-bedroom house from her grandmother. At first, she was going to sell it because it had been a little rundown, but one of the many attractions of the house was this view from the bathroom. The tub was in front of large open pane windows. The room was on the third level, which offered privacy from prying eyes from the street below, enabling her to appreciate the beauty of the ocean while enjoying a soothing bath.

“Don't overthink it, Lee. Just let it be. I promise you won't be sorry.”

The words he said to her that night reverberated through her mind.

“Hah! I’ve got you. You said it high and mighty, Mr. Scott. You made a promise, and I’m going to hold you to it.”

On the other hand, people said many things in the heat of the moment, and once the cocoon of passion lifted, they dissipated along with it.

“Except he didn’t say it in the heat of the moment. He said it afterward. No, he wasn’t lost on a cloud of euphoria. He was as sane as if he had just woken up. Ronan Scott knew what he was saying, and I know he meant it.”

Lee chose to ignore that in no way were the words a promise of a relationship or a commitment of any sorts. Let it be known that she was a stubborn woman. Her mind had been set on him as her future husband and the daddy of her four children she still wanted to bear—a goal she had every intention of bringing to fruition.

“All I need to do is think of a foolproof plan to entice him into my web. Hmm, it’s not going to be easy, so I’ll have to—”

The doorbell ringing interrupted her thoughts. Slipping a little lower into the fragrant bubbles, as if that would help hide her from the intruder, she chose to ignore the insistent bell tingling through the house.

“Oh, hell’s bells and whistles!” she exclaimed when a loud pounding replaced the ringing. She slammed a fist against the window. “I’m coming! Keep your pants on and stop making such a ruckus,” she shouted through the window.

Muttering about uninvited, bothersome, and inconsiderate visitors, she stepped out of the tub, wrapped a large towel around her, and stomped downstairs.

“You had better not be a vacuum salesman,” she snapped as she looked through the peephole. “Oh, it’s you!”

For long moments all she could do was lean against the door, squinting with one eye at the large man on her front porch. He stood like a veritable Goliath, feet planted apart and arms crossed over his impossibly wide chest. She could imagine herself melting, just sliding onto the floor in a puddle of hormone and liquid lust.

“What do you want, Mr. Scott? I thought I was invisible, based on how you ignored me today at the office.” Anger like sharp barbs formed on her words.

“I’m not talking to a door, Lee.”

His voice, dark and dangerous, pulled her back from the lust ledge just before she did a swan dive into the Abyss of Really Bad Ideas. She might want him, but she wasn’t going to throw herself at his feet. He messed up and would have to put some effort into making up for it.

“I’m not exactly dressed for visitors.”

“Open the door, woman.”

Lee was annoyed enough at his irritated order to yank the door open, forgetting she was only wearing a towel.

“Don’t you order me around, mister. You’re—”

“Fuck! I knew I shouldn’t have come here.”

Lee was rooted to the spot as she stared at his eyes, glowing as if he was about to devour her. Her mental acuity was nearing meltdown as her gaze brushed over his muscled physique. The snug jeans hugged his thighs like they were tailored to fit. She swallowed hard and took back a step, devouring the rippling muscles of his arms and chest straining against a sky-blue cotton shirt.

Damn! He looks good.

She was angry with him, but he was just too tempting for words. It would be a shame not to utilize his... muscled tools, which were so beautifully on display. She licked her lips, forcing the words to crawl from her mouth.

“I think you should leave, especially since you don’t want to be here. At least then I can finish my bath in peace.”

“Yeah, well, it might not be the cleverest decision but since I’m here now, I might as well stay.”

“I happen to believe you should go.”

“Are we going to stand here in the doorway and have a ‘you say, I say’ battle, or are you going to invite me in so I can fuck you to kingdom come?”

“I... you... ehm,” she stammered and retreated farther as he stepped inside, closing the door behind him. She always seemed to be at a loss for words when he let such notions fly. With other men she would have an immediate come back.

“Oh! What are you... You lizard! Give me back my towel,” she shrieked as the rush of cool air along her buttocks confirmed he had just yanked off her measly cover.

Even though Lee wasn't ashamed of her body, the unexpectedness of his actions made her feel vulnerable and more than physically exposed. She was all hands in an attempt to cover her nakedness from his roaming eyes. The gleam in his gaze ridiculed her effort.

"I want my towel back!"

"Not happening."

The mulish tilt of her chin was in response to Ronan rolling the towel into a bundle. It was evident he was relishing her dilemma.

"I love a blatant challenge, kitten." A smile flashed across his face. "Since it's your birthday, I'm only too happy to accommodate you."

Slamming her fists on her hips, Lee stamped her foot. "You're a... a dickhead! I want you to— oh!" she gasped as his eyes dropped to her bobbing breasts. In her anger, she had forgotten she was naked. She covered her breasts and placed a hand over her girly bits to preserve some modicum of modesty.

"Accommodate me?" A flash of anger speared his way. "So, having sex with me is your idea of a birthday gift? You know what, don't bother. I'd much prefer the flowers and chocolates." She dropped her arms, thoroughly worked up now. "Who do you think you are, Ronan Scott? Coming here all holier than thou after ignoring me for days, thinking I'll fall on my back and spread my leg in eagerness to be... to be..."

"Fucked," he offered with a grin.

“Yes, that, into kingdom come. Well, mister, forget it. It’s not gonna happen. I refuse to be your little play bunny.”

“Play bunny? Ah, little one, you are so much more than that.”

“Says he who ghosted me.”

“Come now, love. I’ve been busy. I haven’t been ignoring you deliberately. I was on the phone the first time I saw you today and for the rest of the day until thirty minutes ago, I was on the manufacturing floor, dealing with a crisis. There was no time to wish you a happy birthday.”

“So, you came all the way here to wish me a happy birthday by seducing me.”

“I don’t seduce or have sex, Lee. I fuck. Plain and simple. No complications, no expectations.”

“Well, there you have it. The finale. Life is full of complications, and I sure as hell have expectations. Three in fact.”

“I’m listening.”

“This is ridiculous and a waste of my time. I’m done with this conversation, and since you refuse to leave, I will. I’m going back upstairs to finish my bath, which is probably cold by now. Be gone by the time I return, Ronan Scott.”

She pivoted on her heel, dragged in a deep breath, and marched out of the room. Her face flushed with heat, but at the same time, she reveled in the raw groan that followed each step, all too aware that she was blatantly flaunting her naked buttocks in his face. She had never felt as seductive as she did listening to him verbalizing his desire.

“Yes,” she snickered as she heard the tread of his footsteps behind her. Finally, something was going her way. He was following her! Taking the stairs two at a time, her heartbeat spiking, she was aware of the pounding of his boots, which were too close for comfort.

“Oomph!” Suddenly he was there, pressing her against the wall, his hardness unyielding and hot. Her entire body flashed over with goosebumps. “What are you doing?” She licked her lips as the warmth of his breath teased her temple.

“If you thought for one second, I would say no to your sexy ass swaying in blatant invitation, you have a lot to learn about me.”

“Invitation? You’ve got it wrong.” Lee leaned in to brush her lips against his ear, confidence oozing from her as she latched onto the lust inside her, which was driving every action. “It wasn’t an invitation. It was an order.”

Lee had to dig deep to keep her pose since she was inundated by an explosion of sensations that traveled through her frame from everywhere his body touched hers. It was as disorienting as it was arousing.

“An order?”

She trembled under the delicate touch of his palms brushing down her side and over her hip as he placed butterfly kisses along her shoulder. The power of his tender touch shattered her equilibrium.

“Do I look like the kind of man to be ordered about?”

Breathing was difficult. It felt as if the air had been sucked out of the room. She closed her eyes under his spell.

Talk about a plan backfiring rapidly.

She silently bemoaned her fate at the tender and reverent way with which he traced her curves. Surprising her with his gentleness, he reached that part deep inside her soul she yearned for a man to do to make her feel whole and cherished. He infiltrated her soul with a promise of intimacy and understanding that surpassed any expectation she'd ever had.

“You are the kind of woman whose strength, will, and sharpness of mind should be appreciated as much as your beauty.” Curving his hands around her shoulders, he nibbled on her ear. “I say it again, if only to make myself walk out of here. I should have stayed away, Lee. Perhaps, for both our sakes, you should tell me to leave. Now.”

“Why?” Lee had difficulty wrapping her mind around what he was saying. Little wonder since her mind was as empty as a floating cadaver under the magnetic spell he was weaving around her.

“You deserve a good man, kitten, and I am anything but.”

Although he was saying the opposite of what she wanted to hear, every word he spoke in those mellifluous tones was like dark chocolate to a sweet tooth. Decadent, hot, and so delicious, it roused a fervent craving.

“By whose measurements are you not a good man?” She leaned back to stare at him. “I’m a very wise thirty-six-year-old woman, Ronan, and I know a bad man when I see one. We all have burdens we carry, ghosts in our pasts we wish

weren't there, but that doesn't inherently, deep down where it matters, make any of us bad."

"Believe me, love, the ghosts in my past aren't the kind to be buried. They will haunt me until my dying day."

"I think this conversation has turned way too serious for the position we're in." She hooked her arms around his neck. "I'm in need of a good rinse out, Master Goliath, and I do believe my bath water is running cold. So, how about that birthday present you offered me? Is it still on the table?"

"It shouldn't be, but I'd be all kinds of a fool if I retracted it now."

"Good, because I won't allow you to. Torin told me this morning that birthday presents can't be given back, so it only goes to say they can't be taken back, either. So, I accept my present. Now, Master Goliath, it's time you deliver."

"Since it's your birthday... your wish is my command, little one."

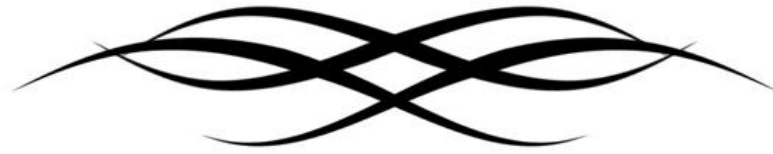
"Mmm." The sultry murmur grew in volume as he sucked her earlobe into his warm mouth. Lee trembled as the luxurious layer of burgeoning desire swaddled itself around the nerve endings in her loins. Reeling from the heat that raged through her core, all she could do was cling to his shoulders as he picked her up and carried her into the bathroom.

"Rinse time, love." His tone deepened as his gaze appreciated the topography of her feminine nakedness. "You are so fucking beautiful, Lee."

Lee had never felt as desirable and cherished as she did watching the heat flare in his gaze.

His voice echoed with raw lust as he took her hand.
“Get in the tub.”

Chapter Fourteen



Ronan surprised her once again by his patience, watching her silently as she considered her options rather than demand she obey. The game was up. They both knew it. He had legitimate reasons for ignoring her today, but that still didn't explain why he hadn't contacted her before. In truth, at this moment, it didn't matter much anymore. He was here, and he had promised sexual delights she had been dreaming of for a week. She'd be a fool to continue playing hard to get.

“If you insist, I suppose I can multitask and finish my bath while we chat.” He chuckled at her muttered response but waited until she sat down in the tub filled with soft rose scented bubbles.

“Let's add some heat, shall we?” He opened the hot water tap.

Lee silently watched as she slid lower against the back of the tub. Her heart sang with joy at finally having part of her dreams come to fruition. This kind of intimacy was what she craved. Not only temporarily, but forever, with him as her husband.

“Let me,” Lee was speechless at the dulcet tone that resonated through the room to pacify her frazzled mind. First

the sound settled her, then the tactile sensations submerged her as he began to massage the soapy foam into her legs.

Lee peered at him from beneath the sooty fan of her eyelashes as his silent exhale filtered through the room, a clear indicator of the conscious effort he was making to remain distant. If not for the whisper of that single breath evaporating into the steaming haze swirling upward from the warm water, she might believe it had been her imagination, especially since his expression remained impassive.

Now I know he wants me! Perhaps not with the same hunger I do, but he lusts after me, too. Just what I wanted.

The firm, comforting circular motions with which he massaged her arms from palm to shoulder, soon completely relaxed her. She closed her eyes and gave over to his touch. It was easier to fight the lustful demands of her body than watch his biceps ripple as he worked his magic. At least this way, it turned her mind from yanking him off balance and pulling him into the tub with her.

Like a maestro conveying direction to his orchestra, with slow, specific aimed strokes, Ronan caressed the rounded contours of her milky-white breasts, then gently tugged, and massaged the pink nipples to tautness.

“Here comes the first rinse. Ready?” She shuddered when he sucked a nub between his lips and snacked upon it with delicate flicks of his tongue.

“Oh God, that feels so... mmm,” she moaned as his touch rippled her equilibrium, sending flashes of heat through her core. With a staggered breath she succumbed to the brush of his fingers feathering over her stomach.

He nibbled on the luscious delicacies, placing kisses on the slope of her swollen breasts to temper a ravenous lust. The song of her melodious cries was a lyric of the lust swirling inside her.

Lee soared on a thunderous wave that had too quickly become the archetype of desire she struggled to contain. Lee couldn't recall that she ever desired to be possessed with as much fervency as she did at that moment.

She traced the muscled cords of his shoulders. Her anguished moan came in the wake of the sharp nip of his teeth around a nipple that sparked an unexpected wave of heat to flush her loins.

“Ronan, enough. I want you. Get in the tub with me.”

“All in good time, little one.” His hand explored farther to roam the heart-shaped aperture between her thighs. She was burning up, under the spell of his mouth stoking the ache deep inside. She was on the edge, and he knew it.

“Oh, fiddlesticks!” She all but swooned as his hands stoked the inferno inside her. Reveling in the feel of his skin under her hands, she explored his chest and back. She breathed in his smell—all deliciously male—which homed in on her already spiked libido and turned her incoherent. Tilting her head for a taste, she lingered a kiss against his throat. Pleasure danced inside her as his throaty groan captured her mind.

Impossible to keep still, she ground her hips against his teasing fingers. Her body reacted in a way she'd never known it could as her pussy throbbed with greedy spasms that turned her breath to gasps.

“Yes, little one... relax and let me take care of you,” he praised her uncontrolled passion.

Ronan brushed his finger over her clit, a butterfly caress that enticed a hiss from her lips. With hands tightening around his shoulders, her face glowed with the unexpurgated lust raging through her.

“Yes, you will take care of me... now!” With an unexpected twist, she toppled him into the bathtub, her hands immediately homing into his zipper.

“Quite demanding little subbie, aren’t you?”

“It’s my birthday, so it’s my right. Now, Ronan. I want you inside me now.” She blinked up at him, her eyes round and filled with profound need. “Please, Master Goliath.”

“No sane man would be able to deny that look,” he muttered as he labored himself out of his wet pants. With a splash of the water overflowing the tub, he settled in the tub, groaning as she crawled over his legs.

All thought dissipated from Lee’s mind as he stared at her, like at the club, searching and assessing her arousal. She breathed in deeply to calm her mind. Even sitting like this on top of him, she felt dwarfed by this massive man—vulnerable and intimidated... hugely so.

It was more than his giant size. It was the way he bore himself with calm equanimity, exuding confidence. As always in his presence, she became aware of the underlying danger he exuded. It was all there—in every movement, every look, and in the silent power that assailed her when she experienced his psyche, which enveloped her... every time.

Not for the first time, she wondered about those ghosts in his past. She pushed the thought aside. Now wasn't the time to ponder it, especially as her body shuddered with need.

Straddling him, she left a trail of titillating nibbles up his chest to gently trace the rigid line of his jaw and ending with a feathered brush over his lips.

He caught her arms before she could kiss him. His voice was harsh, strained from the arousal, which was visible in his hard length pressing against her stomach.

“No, I have no intention of attempting to breathe with my body strangled by the bathtub while I should be enjoying your offering. If we're going to fuck, it's going to be on a nice, comfy bed.”

Before Lee could blink, he was up and in moments, dropped her, sopping wet, on the bed. His eyes were dark with warning.

“It might be your birthday and I'm allowing you the freedom to make demands, but be careful about prodding the beast, little one. For your own good... tread lightly.”

“I'm not scared of your beastly side, Ronan. Don't keep him on a leash for my sake,” she said, smiling as she traced the line of his jaw.

Lee was in awe of the emotions guiding her every action and how her heartbeat thumped at what his taut body promised. It was a perfect marriage to what her body needed.

“Kiss me. Please, Sir,” she whispered against his lips.

Their lips fit perfectly, as if they were shaped to mold together. She moved against him, exulting in the contrast of

their bodies. Ronan fisted a tuft of hair at Lee's nape, growling into the kiss as she whimpered in surrender.

One touch and she was right back on the edge. An electric spark surged through her core—intense and intoxicating.

“Lee, heed my warning. Take it—”

“I need all of you, Ronan, beast or not, to possess me more than anything I've ever wanted in my life,” she pleaded in a voice raw with lust. Her breasts, nipples swollen taut, surged against his chest. “I do believe you spoiled me for other men, so there's no escape for you. Not here and definitely not tonight.”

He gripped her arms to force her back. His eyes glowed in the bluish tint of the night as he stared at her. The warning glimmer thrilled her with anticipation of what was to come.

“Remember I warned you, Lee.”

“Less talk, more action, Master Goliath,” she said in a voice filled with hunger. She gasped as his hands clamped around her hips.

“Impale yourself on my cock... to the hilt,” he ordered bluntly, the dark growl loosened a sublime tremble to chase the excitement down her spine as she positioned herself. “You know what? I changed my mind. I've always loved the tantalizing shape of your buttocks. Turn around... I want to watch your ass when you fuck me.” A fevered carnality transcended the warmth in his voice.

Lee complied blindly. The raw passion driving her was unmistakable in the taut lines of her back as she turned and straddled him, carefully positioning his cock at the entrance to her core. She moaned as his thick venous length pushed into her wet pussy.

“Ohhh! Fuuuudge!” she cried out as Ronan took charge and pulled her down, impaling her to the hilt, hard and rough, stealing every coherent thought from her mind.

“Holy stars,” Lee gasped, digging her nails into his legs, realizing the beast inside Ronan was in control.

“Yeah,” he muttered. “Remember, I warned you, sub. I promised to fuck you to kingdom come, and I fully intend to play rough and dirty. You’ve awakened the devil, and he’s hungry for what you offered. Lean forward and pull your ass cheeks open,” he ordered in a thick voice. “I want your ass open for my pleasure, Lee.”

She followed his demand, blinded by desire.

“Ronan!” she whimpered at the unexpected sensation of his fingers prodding her rectum. “Freaking hell,” she moaned.

He ignored her hoarse cries as he pushed and rotated his fingers into her ass, then plunged them in rhythmic thrusts.

“Yes, kitten, I’m greedy and in case you didn’t realize it, I’m after it all. I want more than just your submission, my pet. Tonight, you will become mine. In every aspect of the word.”

Lee gasped at the ungodly pleasure of feeling the double-penetration removed by the thinnest of fleshy

membranes.

“It hurts, but at the same time, it feels so good,” Lee moaned. Still, she couldn’t abandon the concern about the detachment in his voice. She knew he wouldn’t hurt her but sensed that he was creating a distance between them, and it didn’t sit well with her. What they had was different from what he had with other subs at Decadent Sin. She had witnessed it often enough, watching as he became uncaring, devoid of any emotion, driven by nothing than lust. Being the recipient of the same treatment, hurt... too much not to warn her that she had fallen hard.

“Don’t, Ronan... not with me, please.” The plea crawled unplanned from her lips, and whether he even knew what she was referring to, she had no idea.

“Oh,” she gasped in surprise as he became gentle, and the strokes inside her ass turned teasing. “Gaawd,” she fisted her hand around the duvet as he ended the next thrust by gently hilding his fingers all the way inside her.

“There,” he growled, chuckling as she screamed when the crack of two hard slaps on her ass sounded through the room. His hand fisted around a clump of hair as he sat up and pulled her up against his chest.

“Oww!” A painful gasp slipped from her lips as he squeezed her breast.

“Changed your mind, sub?” His voice cracked ominously. “You wanted the beast, and now he’s demanding to be fed. Don’t piss him off by failing to offer what you promised.”

He released her hair as he laid back against the bed, his fingers cutting into her hips. “Fuck me, Lee... or he’ll take control.” The darkness in his voice warned her he was on the edge. She started rocking and undulating her hips.

“No, not like a timid little virgin. You demanded to be fucked, but I’m the one who will dictate the how of it. Sit up, clasp your hands behind your neck, and then me. I want a proper hard and wild ride.” He hesitated ... his voice lowered. “I’m in the mood for a whore’s fuck.”

Lee moaned. She never used foul language, but when submitting to a Dom, she loved dirty talk. It made her feel sexy and powerful, knowing, in the end, she was the one in control.

Tangling her fingers together behind her neck, she canted her hips in an experimental move, moaning at the tight grip of his fingers inside her ass. Realizing he wasn’t going to remove them, she prepared herself to have her circuits blown as she rocked on him, slow at first, then with rapid hard snaps up and down his hard cock. Her cries of pleasure-pain filled the void of the room. No matter how fast or hard she rode him, she couldn’t reach the pinnacle to tip over into orgasmic oblivion.

“I can’t... I need...” she whimpered without breaking her rowdy romp.

Ronan sat up and pressed his chest against her back, gently kissing the curve of her shoulder. Her back arched as he tugged on her nipples, then in an unexpected twist, he lifted her off his cock and flipped her onto her back.

“You did well to ease the immediacy of my lust, little one. Now, let’s make your birthday worthwhile,” he murmured against her stomach as he trailed hot, wet kisses downward.



“Oh God,” Lee moaned as he flicked his tongue over her clitoris.

Ronan was quickly losing himself in her. She was a natural sensualist. Her vibrant nature teased, promised, and tormented him. He was drawn by the strength and control she exerted over herself.

Drunk with her, he wanted to change, to forget the past that taught him not to care, to find pleasure only in the kind of man he was born to be. Except he was a different man today than he was before. He wanted more from a woman—from her—than just sexual indulgence. He wanted to open himself and offer her tenderness and passion. Could it at all be possible?

She thrashed as he spanned his hands around her buttocks.

“Easy, my pet,” he said with a kiss on her clit.

Instead of calming her, it had the opposite effect. Sparks of fire lit her up at the touch. With her hands cupping his head to hold him in place, she orbited her hips against his mouth.

“Calm down, Lee,” he growled against her swollen lips. He tickled the slit with the tip of his tongue.

“No! I can’t. I need to come!” She spread her legs wider, selfishly thrusting her pelvis forward for more.

“You’re a sensual kitten, an alluring combination of wantonness and desire,” he rasped, his lips warmly pressed against her fragrant core. Closing his eyes, he allowed his mind to be consumed by her aroma.

God, it feels so good to be just a man... to just be me, giving all of me without remembering the bad in my life.

As an assassin, his only friends, true friends, were Mafiosos. Lately, with Lee, he desired something different, wished he was a different man, with a different life and history.

Can it, Ronan. You are who you are and that you can never change. For now, concentrate on her, this woman who gives so much and deserves your full attention.

It wasn’t difficult to aim his focus back on the warm woman in his arms as her husky voice drew him back in.

“Aah, Ronan, that feels so good,” she murmured.

“You’re like a fever in my veins, little one. And what better way to soothe my need than with your fragrant bouquet?” He licked the length of her slit once, twice, then pushed his tongue deep inside. Her back arched in a bow as he lapped at the silken folds. “You taste so good,” he growled as he sucked and licked her lavish gift.

“I’m gonna come,” she wailed as he continued to tongue lash her flesh.

“I love your flavor, my pet. So decadent and... mine. You taste like mine, Lee.”

Dissonant moans tumbled one against the other as they toppled from her mouth, coaxed by the subtle quality and

cadence of his altruistic cherishing. He loved how Lee responded, squirming in euphoria as he toggled the swollen nub, now taut from the dopamine that slammed through her endorphinated mind.

“Hmm, beautiful.” He sucked deeply, every action aimed at catapulting her higher, closer to the edge.

Ronan’s body was stiff with the effort to stay in control, to keep the beast captive in the darkness of his soul. For the first time in years, he wanted to experience the sensations he triggered in a woman.

“Sir, I need your strength inside me. Take me, now.”

“I will, when I’m ready,” Ronan growled in warning as she wrapped her hand around his hard length. Tilting her hips in line with his turgid cock, she wrapped her legs around his hips and eased herself onto the bulbous knob, clenching her inner muscles to entice him inside.

“Now, Ronan.”

“In due time, little one.” With a grunt, he pushed past the soft folds, flexed teasingly, then pulled out.

“Ahh, no,” she protested, her hips doing a tango to entice him back inside.

“Such a hungry kitten, aren’t you?” The gravelly words rumbled from his lips as he watched her tremble and twitch, attempting to impale herself.

“Fuck me, damn you,” she hissed.

“Ah, such a lovely command, isn’t it?” He exulted in the tremors that shook her body, all the while teasing, pushing,

and angling his thick cock deeper into her silky heat.

“Oh, God, what a wondrous feeling,” she howled as she yielded to his power. As she arched her back, Ronan could only savor the exquisite experience of possessing her.

“Uhh... aah,” a lewd whimper crawled loose from deep within her chest.

Ronan watched her, his mind reeling on the edge of sheer intoxication. His face was a mask of controlled desire as he stroked and rocked into her with a smooth, easy tempo.

“More,” she whimpered, begging for more of his uncontrolled strength. Garbled exclamations dribbled out of her mouth with each powerful plunge.

“I recall that my little subbie loves double penetration,” he teased as once again he reached down and pushed his fingers inside her rectum.

He was enamored by the visual wave of ecstasy that shuddered through her body, setting her adrift in a sea of passion that reshaped and molded her to his expert touch as she exploded in a series of climaxes that rippled through her.

Ronan’s movements turned feverish as his pleasure increased. He bucked wildly into her silky sheath, pounding to lose himself in that undeniable delight she offered. He grunted in triumph as searing warmth sparked through his loins. Another hard thrust and he ejaculated inside her, filling her with heat as his primal roar echoed through the room.

In those final moments, he became the demanding beast—staking his claim for her soul, branding her as his.

Ronan slumped onto his back. Their laborious breathing married in the atmosphere as the night sounds drifted around them. He stared into her face, illuminated by the dazzle of the silvery moonbeams.

“I was right,” she lilted with a tender smile.

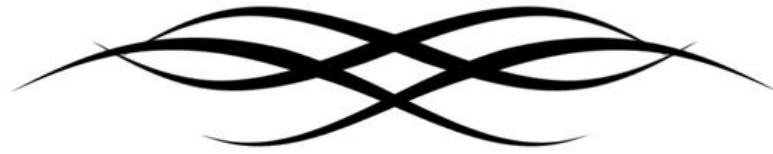
“About what?”

“Taking a chance on you.” She traced his lips, her eyes aglow with emotion. “You are the man I’m going to marry and have children with.”

The vow rocked Ronan to the depth of his soul. Her fingers on his lips stopped the words of refutation from tumbling out. Her voice sounded hushed in the silence.

“No, I’m not interested in your denial. Soon, you will come to realize we are meant to be. That we are each other’s destiny.”

Chapter Fifteen



Early the next morning...

“Before I go...” Ronan finished his coffee and fished a slim black jewelry box out of his jacket. “It’s not flowers and chocolates, but I got you something for your birthday.”

He twirled the box between his fingers, staring at her, a look of self-castigation and self-recrimination flashing through his eyes. It was so brief, but Lee picked up on it because she had been watching him like a hawk, looking for signs that he was going to run away faster than he arrived last night.

“Ronan...” His name felt smooth against her tongue, like an aged single-malt whiskey. Licking her lips, she savored the decadence of it. “Don’t you dare negate what we experienced last night. No negative thoughts. No bullwhipping yourself for not being good enough for me.” Her throat rippled as she swallowed. “If only you knew...”

“Knew what?”

“I’m not faultless or the pure innocent you believe me to be. I told you last night. We all have ghosts and regrets in our lives. I’m no different.”

“Lee, you have no idea who I really am.”

Her hand looked small and fragile against his massive chest as she walked closer to stand toe to toe with him.

“You are the man I’ve gotten to know. Whatever else you hide deep inside you is irrelevant, since this, right here, is who you are with me. All that matters is when we’re together, I need you to be honest with me with who you are at that moment. Not only as a man but in the expression of your feelings and emotions.”

“I wish life was as uncomplicated and easy to manipulate as that,” he muttered, gently brushing her hair back over her shoulder.

“Okay, I’ve had enough pessimism to last me a lifetime. I refuse to embark on the second day of my thirty-sixth year on a note of negativity.” She fluttered her eyelashes as she smiled radiantly up at him. “Now, about that gift...”

“Ah, yes, of course.” He looked at the jewelry box in his hand. “This is a special gift, Lee. I bought it while, although I know it’s the wrong thing to do, but after last night... I know I can’t walk away from you. I want this choker to mean to you what it does to me. A commitment to me as my sub as much as it’s a vow from me to you as your Dom. A promise of mutual caring, protecting, and exploring where life leads us. It’s not a gift of giving, Lee. It’s a gift of acceptance.” He lifted the thin white gold, delicately plated chain with a diamond encrusted infinity sign from its satiny bed. “Do you accept this gift, along with everything I explained it represents?”

“Oh, dancing butterflies! It’s... it’s breathtakingly beautiful.” She lifted caring eyes filled with tears and hope. “I accept, Ronan. I will honor and care for it as much as I will you.” She traced the infinite lines of the piece with a tender smile. “Into infinity and beyond.”

“Lee, don’t jump—”

“Do not ‘don’t’ me, Ronan Scott. I’m going to marry you, and that’s the end of it. Nothing you say or do will change my mind. My mind is set. It’s our destiny.” She spun around and lifted her hair, her voice musical in its eagerness. “Please, collar me, Master Goliath.”

Lee was surprised at the heat that enveloped her throat as soon as he fastened the clip. This must be why most couples had a formal collaring ceremony—the feeling of belonging, of being cherished and cared for.

With a spring in her step, she walked to the large mirror in the entrance hall.

“Oh my,” she gasped. Her reaction wasn’t only awe of how beautiful the collar looked or fit around her throat but at the reflection in the mirror. Ronan stood behind her, so tall that his chin was still a couple of inches from the top of her head. His large hands, muscled and tanned, curling over her shoulders made her skin appear pale. He pulled her back against him. What left her heaving for breath was the look in his eyes as he rested his chin on her head and traced the infinity sign with a thick finger.

“Now you are mine, Lee. Don’t ever forget that. Mine to protect, care for, and keep safe.” He smirked at the wide

smile on her face. “And I guess, in due time, make babies with.”

“Ah! Finally, he gets it,” she gushed as joy overflowed her. Lee wasn’t the dreamy-eyed kind of woman and had never had a forever after dream she coveted. With Ronan, it was different. It wasn’t a dream. It was reality. For the first time since she moved to Seattle, she felt at home.

Turning to hug him, she whispered against his throat. “It’s true what they say.”

“What do *they* say?” His arms tightened as he dragged her up against him.

“That home is where the heart is.” She leaned back to kiss his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart under the tactile caress. “And I found my home... finally.”



“Fiddlesticks! I’m not in the mood for him. Not today,” Lee groaned as the phone rang, flashing the letter V, just as Ronan drove off. The one call she never dared to ignore was from this man, but the temptation to do so today was like a spike in the head. Her head started to ache. Dully at first, then in hot, insistent stabs. Sighing, she took the call.

“Yes?”

“Morning, beautiful.”

“Cut the polite conversation. I’m not in the mood.”

“Hmm. Are you perhaps upset that I didn’t phone to wish you a happy birthday, yesterday? Ah, how sweet. Never

fear, I didn't forget. You should receive your gift soon. I hope you had a pleasant day?"

"It was fine." Lee's shoulders sagged. She hated doing his bidding, but she had no choice. "I'm sure you didn't phone me to discuss my birthday. What do you want, Dario?"

"Where is the President?"

"President Whittell?" Confused, Lee sat down, hoping it would aid her in shifting through her thoughts. Dealing with Dario on a normal day was a challenge. Today, with her mind filled with love and hope for a future, it was excruciating, knowing that by helping him, she betrayed the one man who had been her savior since the day she had arrived in Seattle, Torin, and now, the one she loved—Ronan.

"Yes, Lee. President Noel Whittell."

"As far as I know he was kidnapped weeks ago. There's a manhunt out for him, but from what I've heard, they still haven't found him."

"Don't give me that bullshit! Need I remind you that you are my eyes and ears, my inside woman. You're supposed to keep a close eye, not only on them at the office but on everything they're up to. Do not tell me you didn't plant those listening devices I supplied, which came at an exceedingly high cost."

"They're in place, but need I remind you that I have a life, a job? I don't sit around playing back all the tapes or live in the basement listening to them all day and night."

"I'm the one who took Whittell, but those motherfuckers Snake and Razor found my hideout."

“Wh-When did that happen?”

“Over the weekend.”

“Did they see you? Do they know you’re... Venom?”

“I didn’t see them, but I’m relatively sure they know who Venom is. So, did the two bastards have a recent unscheduled meeting with Torin?”

Panic swelled up inside Lee, threatening to swallow her, belly first. Up to now, the information she had supplied Dario had been general regarding the movements and discussions of the leaders of Kings Inc., she had overheard in Torin’s office and from the devices she had secretly planted in the underground headquarters of Kings Inc. It had been a chilling experience that had her trembling in fear of being discovered weeks after.

She wasn’t supposed to be aware of their operational hub below the business. Some of the intel she wished she could withhold but Dario constantly reminded her what would happen should she keep crucial details from him. Now, with her heart involved, sharing information became impossible. This wasn’t only about her anymore. It was about keeping the man she was falling in love with safe.

“Not during office hours that I’m aware of.” She justified the lie in that Ronan was a partner in the business, so none of his meetings could be classified as unscheduled.

“Fuck, Lee. Do I have to spell it out for you? Or better yet, should I come there and sit with you and listen to those fucking recordings? Do you want me to do that? We could test out how sharp your garden clippers are while I’m there.”

Lee closed her eyes, summoning a deep breath, and held it as she blindly stared out of the window. The threat was anything but subtle. From things she'd heard on the recordings, Dario had a violent streak she didn't want to experience firsthand.

“What are you looking for, Dario?” she asked as she breathed out the breath she'd been holding.

“I want the fucking POTUS back. By now, they would've told Torin about extracting him.” The hesitation was brief. “More importantly, I need to know if they told him about me. I'm supposed to come for a visit in a week. If they know I'm their nemesis, I'd be a fool to walk into that minefield.”

Lee suddenly recalled why she had such a hard day on her birthday. Torin had been in a foul mood once Razor left. He had drilled her the entire day with one instruction after the other, even tearing into her for being too slow to finish a report. Even knowing Torin was Boss X and the mightiest criminal and Mafioso in the country, she wasn't scared of him. Thinking back, she now knew his action spurred from hurt and disappointment. That was the expression she had seen and couldn't identify.

That could only mean one thing. Torin knew Dario was Venom and the one who was doing everything in his power to unseat him as the Capo of the WCM. If Lee had correctly read his evolving hatred over the years, Dario didn't only want to break Torin. He wanted him dead.

“I'm only due to be in the office at ten. I'll scan the recordings and let you know.”

“Do that, my dear. In the meantime, I’m heading toward Vancouver. Maybe I’ll pop in and say hi to your mother. What do you think? Will she be happy to see me?”

Lee cursed herself for denying her mother the desire to visit her on her birthday, where she would’ve been safe from this anarchist.

“My mother has always liked you. I’m sure she’ll welcome you with open arms.” It took everything in Lee not to scream at him to leave Sandy be, but she knew it was the reaction he was hoping for. Lee might not be a trained criminal operative, but she was clever enough to know that once she showed him any weakness and voiced her fear for her mother’s life, he would act on it. Then he would own her—in every sense of the word. She would become more than an information gatherer. He would force her to become whatever he wanted her to be.

Over my dead body!

“I’ll be waiting for your call, Lee. Don’t even think of withholding anything from me. There isn’t much I don’t know about what’s going on in your life.” He cackled an evil laugh. “Good thing I waited until that giant left this morning, didn’t I? It’ll be a shame to nip a budding romance so early, don’t you think?”

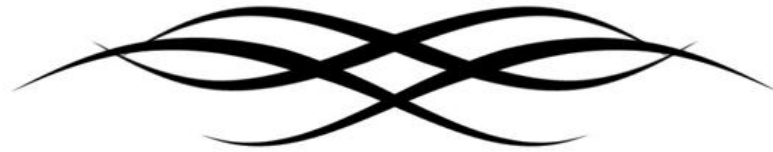
A chill touched the base of her spine and quickly traveled all the way up to her scalp. Fear chased after it to settle like a throbbing migraine behind her eyes.

“Romance? It was nothing other than a pity birthday romp between the sheets.”

“A pity fuck? Hmm, if you say so, but I believe I know better.”

“Do you have anything of importance to say, or are you going to keep wasting the little time I have left before I need to go to the office?” Lee sneered in a clipped voice. The thought that he might have bugged the inside of her house infuriated her. It would be easy enough to hack into the outside CCTV footage, which was how he would know Ronan had spent the night. If his insinuations were true, every moment of her life was under his scrutiny—a life that had just completely turned into hell.

Chapter Sixteen



“Fate is messed up. How am I the unlucky one to be caught in the middle of this clusterfuck?”

Lee’s desolate voice chased after her as she walked down the stairs into the basement—a room that looked like the FBI’s operational hub in the midst of a full-fledged criminal hunt. Standing in front of a wall covered in a myriad of pictures, she stared at the six faces that were up front and center. Headshot photographs of Torin and Matteo Caruso, Maxim Ivanov, Ronan Scott, and Brendan Kent. One photo stood out; of a man she had once loved like a brother but had come to hate over the past four years... Dario Caruso.

Harboring skeletons in your closet bred new meaning when there were those using them to force you to bend to their will. In Lee’s case, that someone was Dario Caruso. Her mind drifted back to the day he had gained leverage over her... through her mother.

Six years earlier...

“Oh, for goodness’ sake, Mom. Get the message! I’m busy. I can’t take your call now,” Lee snapped as she rejected

the umpteenth call from her mother.

Usually, she accommodated Sandy, knowing, even now, four years after she had left Vancouver to live and work in the United States, she struggled to adapt to being on her own. They had always been very close. In Lee's case, claustrophobically so, since her mother didn't honor the concept of private space. When she was a teenager, Lee had taken a ton of crap from other kids at school because her mother was so overprotective, to the extent that it was embarrassing.

It was one of the reasons Lee had left home to finish her degree and go on to obtain an MBA in Business Management in Toronto. Unfortunately, she never got that accolade since her mother couldn't handle her only lifeline being away from home. After the rejection of Lee's father when she told him she was pregnant and her parents passing away before Lee's birth, Lee became the sole focus of her existence.

Sandy took an overdose of sleeping pills after calling and telling Lee she was going to end her life on the first day of the second semester of her MBA year. She claimed she couldn't live alone, and since her own daughter ran away from home, there was nothing left for her to hang onto. Luckily, Lee had been able to get hold of their neighbor, and she had called the ambulance.

That was the end of Lee's dream of using an MBA as credentials, but at least she managed a BCom in Business Economics. For years, Lee had indulged her mother and played to her demands. Eventually, with the help of a psychiatrist and the proper meds, she had slowly weaned her

mother from the constant need to have her nearby. First, she had moved into an apartment a couple of blocks away, cutting down on daily visits, until eventually, she could survive on seeing Lee only once a week.

It had taken another four years before Lee could in good conscience leave when she believed Sandy would be able to cope, so she accepted the job at The Restaurant Wholesale Depot. Torin's need was for more than an Executive Assistant. Her role would be the Business Development Director, the kind of job she had only dreamed of and never thought she would get when she applied for it.

Sandy had smiled and seemed on top of her emotions when Lee left Canada. It didn't last. A year later, she seemed to be struggling once again. She was constantly calling, at the most inconvenient times, and cursed and shouted insults at Lee when she eventually returned her call. After that, visits back home happened less and less. The psychiatrist agreed that it was the best direction to take. Sandy had to learn to allow Lee to live her own life.

When her phone rang again, Lee was in the midst of a project meeting with the development team.

"Mom, I am busy. I can't talk now. I'll phone you back tonight," she snapped into the phone, intending to end the call.

"Miss Powell? Sandy Powell's daughter?"

Lee frowned and checked the number. The call was from Sandy's phone.

"Yes, I'm her daughter. Who are you?"

"I'm a doctor at the Richmond Hospital Foundation."

“I don’t understand. Why are you calling from my mother’s phone?”

Lee stumbled out of the boardroom, her legs barely operational with how much she trembled. Recrimination tore through her. She had been ignoring the phone calls from her mother for the past six hours.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she mumbled as she stumbled into a man at the landing of the stairs. Unfocussed, she walked around him, heading toward her office.

“I’m afraid your mother was found in a back alley early this morning, Miss Powell.”

“What do you mean she was found?” Hysteria scratched at the back of Lee’s mind.

“Your mother overdosed.”

“Overdosed? What the hell do you mean my mother overdosed? On what?”

“Opioids.”

“WHAT!?”

“We found a container in her coat pocket.”

“My mother is on psychiatric medication. She’s not allowed to take any meds with opioids. What doctor prescribed it?”

“It was bought on the black market. The area where she was found is the breeding ground of all kinds of drug pushers.”

“Is she... is she...” Lee slumped in the chair when she finally reached her office.

“They found her just in time, but she’s in a coma. She had no handbag or any kind of identification on her, which is why I used her phone. I apologize for being the bearer of bad news.” He hesitated a moment. “We need to know if she has medical insurance, Miss Powell. Law forces us to enroll her into rehab.”

“She....” Lee closed her eyes and leaned her forehead against the desk. Her mother was a nurse at Vancouver General Hospital. If they found out she overdosed on opioids, she would lose her job. “No, she doesn’t.”

“Can the family afford to pay for rehab, or do we need to send her to a state facility?”

“When do you need an answer?”

“We can only keep her until her vitals are normal. No more than two days.”

“I... thank you. I’ll be in touch. I didn’t catch your name?” Lee was sober enough to ask the question.

“Doctor Kevin Brown.”

“Thank you. I’ll... thank you.” Lee ended the call as sobs overcame her. Her job had been extremely stressful the past couple of months, which added to her not keeping in regular contact with Sandy. The guilt she bore about her mother overdosing threatened to tear her apart.

“Hey! There, there. Come here. Shh,” Dario’s voice resonated through her mind and managed to calm her down slightly. “What happened?”

“I... it’s a family issue. Don’t worry. I’ll handle it.”

“Nonsense. You’ve become like family to Torin and me... our little sister. So, tell big brother what’s wrong. You’re on your own here, Lee. I know your mother is your only family. Talk to me. Let me help.”

It all spilled out. The tale of feeling suppressed her entire life, forced to be her mother’s emotional crutch. How she had worked to break free from the web of the restriction and that she had believed Sandy had adapted.

“Until today. She overdosed on opioids. Opioids! She has never taken pain medication in her life. She hates it because she has witnessed patients suffering from becoming addicted to a prescribed drug. Oh God, Dario, I didn’t even know! She must’ve stopped taking her psychiatric meds. How long, just how long has she been using that crap to suppress her mental suffering?” She wiped the tears from her cheeks.

“I don’t know what to do. She’s a nurse. If the hospital finds out she overdosed on opioids, she’ll lose her job. If that happens, she has nothing left. The next time she’ll die.”

“Which hospital is she in?” Dario handed her a handkerchief.

“The Richmond Hospital Foundation.” She blew her nose. “I have to go. I need to... I need to find a way to get her out of there.”

“I’ll take you.”

“You’ll take me?”

“I’m a registered pilot, and I need to get some flying hours in. Besides, you need help to handle the authorities.”

“What do you... I don’t understand. What are you saying?”

“We need to get your mother out of that hospital. I have some contacts on the board. I’ll make her file disappear. There’ll be no record of her ever being admitted. No one but the three of us ever need to know what happened.”

“If she’s an addict, it’s not going to be that easy, Dario.”

“I’m a Caruso, Lee. Maybe a little flightier than my big brother, but I know people. Trust me. I’ll sort this out. We’ll have your mother back to normal in no time.”

“I guess I’ll have to quit my job and go back to Canada.” The despondency was clear in Lee’s voice as she followed him to the parking garage. “I need to let Torin know what’s going on. I can’t just disappear for days.”

“Leave it to me. I’ll call him once we’re in the air.”

For the first time, Lee found out how it felt to have someone care enough about her to put her needs first, to offer help without being asked. Used to being the one carrying the burden of her mother alone her entire life, it was a foreign feeling.

The expedience with which Dario sorted out everything stayed with Lee for years. In those couple of days, he earned her respect. To date, Dario hadn’t shown any interest of working with Torin, even though he’d been offered a management position a couple of times. He preferred to live the life of a rich bachelor. What he did for money, apart from what he must’ve inherited from his father, she had no idea.

None of that mattered, though. Not in light of everything he had done to help her mother. The day they had picked her up from the hospital, Lee realized just how far her mother had tumbled into a hole of despair.

“Where’s home, Sandy?” Dario asked as he started the car.

“Our house is in Richmond, Seafair Drive.”

“No! I...” Sandy plucked at her fingers. Her eyes were dull as she stared out of the window to the snow-covered landscape. “I lost the house, Lee.”

Lee’s head whipped around so fast, it felt like she slipped a disc. “You did what? When?”

“Six months ago.”

“I don’t understand. You inherited the house from grandpa. It was almost debt free when he died.”

“I took out a loan against the bond when you went to college and... the meds were expensive.”

“What meds, Mom? Since the psychiatric meds are covered by your medical insurance.”

“Easy, Lee. Your mom is still weak.”

“I’m sorry, Lee. I know I failed you. I thought I was cured. I was doing so well. I stopped taking those meds a year ago. Everything was fine until a little girl came in. Her mother had died in the car crash and her father... well, apparently, he came from the same breed as yours. It just all came rushing back. I fell right back into that black hole. The pills helped. It was the only thing that helped.”

“No! You should’ve talked to me or at the very least gone back to your psychiatrist. For God’s sake, Mom. You’re a nurse. You know what that crap does to people!”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

“Jesus! I don’t believe this.” Lee dragged in a deep breath, trembling with rage and disbelief. “So, where have you been living?”

“I rent a small apartment close to the hospital. 13th Avenue in Westside.”

Lee had difficulty hiding her disgust at the poor conditions her mother lived in. The apartment was sparsely furnished and was a pigsty. Her strict mother, who had never even allowed a piece of paper to lie around, now lived among leftover boxes, dirty dishes, and unwashed clothes. The embarrassment that Dario witnessed it all was the worst.

“Yeah, and he used that knowledge to his benefit.” At the time, Lee had believed him to be a knight in shining armor. He had kept his word. The records had disappeared, he’d paid for Sandy’s rehab, and bought back the house she had lost from the bank. He had convinced Lee it would be for the best not to tell anyone about what had happened, Torin included. She had been naive and desperate enough to agree.

“I was such a fool to believe he was doing it out of the goodness of his heart. He knew all the time, even then, and had been working toward using me and my mother’s weakness to set me up to become his lackey.”

This time, Sandy knew she had to turn her life around or forever lose her daughter. Finally, after all the years, she made friends, and within two years, her life was back on track. She lived a normal life and was happy. To Lee's relief, Sandy became the kind of mother she had yearned to have her entire life growing up.

Life had been good from that point until it wasn't. The day Dario took her to dinner and made his demands, everything changed. Once again, she was caught in a vortex of blackness she had no way of escaping.

She had refused to believe him when he told her who and what the Carusos really were. He'd shown her proof, then took her right to choose.

“You owe me, Lee. I never asked for a penny back, and I never will, but you're naive if you didn't realize that one day you would have to return the favor. Today, and from now on until I have what I want, is that day. Refuse, and I will expose your mother for the drug addict she is. She will lose her nursing license, her home, and the posh life she has enjoyed the past two years. Tell me, Lee. Do you think she'll survive a second time?”

And there it was—the threat. Do what he wanted, or her mother's life was over. Lee had no choice. She became his spy, keeping him informed on Torin and the Mafia's movements, discussions, and anything that offered him a step up to reach his goal. What that was, Lee didn't know. In truth, she didn't want to know, nor did she care.

“Except now I do. It’s not only me he’s threatening. He’s after the man I love. Big mistake, Dario Caruso. Huge mistake. I’ll be damned if I know how I’ll get one over on you, but I’m sure as hell going to do everything in my power to stop you.”

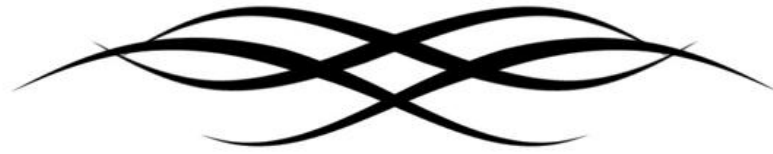
She cringed at the thought of the repercussions should she cave in and tell all to Torin. He was one of the most feared mafiosos in the States, and she had betrayed his confidence.

Her life to him would mean nothing. The Torin she knew as her boss and the Torin as Boss X of the WCM were two totally different people.

One she loved and respected. The other?

Him, she feared with every bone in her body.

Chapter Seventeen



Two days later, Phan Thiết, a coastal port city in Southeast Vietnam...

“I still don’t like it that you’re here, Maia. The Dario you met before he left for Bora Bora is not the same man today.” Razor clutched her hand so tight, it hurt. Maia laid a comforting hand over his arm.

“You forget who and what I am, my love. I’ve had my share of fighting off men like Venom. Besides, my uncle is more likely to trust all of you if I’m present. He didn’t hide in Vietnam for the past five or six years to make stupid decisions now. He won’t talk or hand the microchip design over to just anyone.”

Maia looked around as they approached the luxurious reception area of the Victoria Phan Thiết Beach Resort and Spa.

“It’s difficult to believe a man with such a talent for space engineering is now running a hotel.”

“We all do what we have to do to keep our loved one’s safe,” Torin’s grumbled behind them. “Your uncle made what

must have been a very difficult decision. I respect him for that.”

“I know you’re right, but it’s still such a pity his full potential as a space scientist was cut short.”

They walked through the vast and luxurious open area of the reception hall, where Japanese, French, and Vietnamese elements had been beautifully incorporated into the decorating theme. Not wanting to draw unnecessary attention, they stood to the side, awaiting one of the staff members, who was busy welcoming a tour group, to assist them.

Big, muscled, and dressed casually in cargo shorts and tees, Torin, Razor, Matteo, and Ronan made heads turn. Being incognito was a tad difficult since their size alone drew eyes to them wherever they go.

Steele, Priest, and Brendan were waiting outside, scoping out the perimeter and ensuring there would be no surprises or unwanted interruptions while they were talking to Andrew Wilson.

“There! That’s Uncle Andrew and Aunt Des.” Maia immediately set off in the direction of the large open porch where breakfast was being served. “Uncle Andrew!”

Since the couple had changed their names and were hiding with new identities, Andrew’s immediate instinct upon hearing his real name, was to grab his wife’s hand and run... until he recognized Maia.

“My God, Maia? Is that you?”

“What about not drawing attention didn’t you understand, Maia?” Razor growled as the rest of the team

reached the hugging trio.

“I’m sorry. The excitement of seeing them after so long got to me.”

“And who is this?” Andrew asked, eyeing the four men with tangible mistrust.

“This is Maxim Ivanov, my husband, and this is Torin and Matteo Caruso, and lastly, Ronan Scott.”

“You got married?” Maia’s aunt’s voice thinned. “We missed your wedding. That is so sad.”

“Enough tears,” Andrew interjected. “How did you find us, Maia, and why did you arrive here with an entourage of muscle?”

“First of all, I suggest we have this conversation in a more private setting.” Torin watched Andrew unblinkingly. “I imagine you won’t want our discussion to be overheard.”

Disquiet plowed Andrew’s brow as he returned Torin’s stare with a deadeye one of his own. The sixty-two-year-old man was not to be intimidated.

“Just who the hell are you?”

“Uncle Andrew, please. Let’s find a private place.” Maia looked at him pleadingly, a grim smile splayed over her lips. “I’m sure you already suspect why we’re here. I trust them, Uncle. You can, too. They found President Whittell and are keeping him hidden in a safe place.”

“Follow me.” Hearing that was enough to spur Andrew into action. He led the way to a luxurious bungalow just outside the resort’s boundary.

“This is our home,” he said as he slid open the patio door and gestured inside. “Please, let’s get this over with.” Once seated, Andrew repeated his question. “How did you find me? We’ve been using alias identities for the past six years, and I was assured there is no trace of our real names anywhere, not even the dark web.”

“We used a software program that ages people with the aid of old photos. Those visuals were then used to trace you via a global facial recognition tracking system,” Ronan said from where he stood in the open door, keeping an eye out in case anyone approached the bungalow. “It took a week of searching through visuals around the clock. We finally had a match when you went to the local bank on Saturday.”

“Who do you work for? NASA? The President?”

“We don’t work for anyone,” Torin said bluntly. “But since we have been implicated as the ones who attempted to assassinate the President, we’re here to ensure whoever is setting us up has no further leverage.”

A shadow drifted over Andrew’s face. “So, you’re criminals. How in the world did you end up marrying a crook, Maia?”

“Love chooses the heart, Uncle, not the other way around. You have to listen to them. If we could find you, so can those who wouldn’t think twice about killing you and Aunt Des to get the microchip designs.”

“If I understand you correctly and from what I saw on the news, it’s the West Coast Mafia behind Noel’s failed assassination. What in the world could you want with that design? It’s worthless.”

“We don’t want it, apart from ensuring it doesn’t get in the wrong hands and turned into an AI bomb that could destroy entire cities.” Torin’s voice darkened. “Yes, Whittell told us everything. We know exactly how dangerous further development of that chip could be. Worthless? Perhaps in its current form, yes, but those who know what its potential is will finance its full development, then sell it to the highest bidder. Who do you think will win such a bidding war, Mr. Wilson?”

“I... fuck, I need to think.” Andrew started to pace, not noticing when his wife got up and disappeared down the hallway.

“You should have thought your actions through before removing the designs from the NASA vault. Now, you’ve opened a can of worms that can’t be closed, no matter how hard you try.” Torin checked his watch. “For your own safety, you need to give us those files and hard drives.”

“Not just yours, everyone’s safety, because there’s no guarantee who will end up with it or what they intend doing with it,” Matteo interjected.

“Here. Take it.” Desiree walked in and handed a small titanium case to Torin. She looked at Andrew who hissed in anger. “Don’t you dare give me that look. I warned you to leave it be, but you wouldn’t listen. Instead, we’ve had to go on the run and live in hiding. Now, you brought death to our door. I want this shit out of my life. Today.”

“It’s not going to just disappear because we hand them the case, Des.” Andrew sat down, a sense of doom settling in the grim line of his mouth, flanked by hunched shoulders.

With dull eyes, he watched Torin page through the thick folder he had found inside the case. “There are security protocols written in code to protect the files from being opened or used as they are. The hard drives are all encrypted in such a way, no hacker will be able to decipher it. The only ones left who know them are Noel and me. As long as someone wants access to the designs, that shit, as you say, will never be out of our lives.” He jumped up as Torin put a light to the thick folder and threw it in the fireplace. “NO! What the fuck are you doing? That’s my life’s work!”

“I’m doing what all of you should’ve done when you decided not to finish the design, instead of lugging it around all over the world. This way, no one can access it. No one can turn it into an AI that has the ability to build a mass bomb in space at will.” Torin’s expression remained unchanged as he turned to face Andrew. “This way, this fucking war will be over soon.”

With his words still ringing through the room, Torin threw the hard drives on the floor. Ignoring Andrew’s vicious curse and flailing attempt to stop him, he stomped on them, hard and continuously, until nothing but splinters remained. Picking up the debris, he added it to the fire, watching the plastic and steel bits melt away. His head tilted an inch as he listened, moments before a guttural voice cracked from the open patio door.

“Well, well, well, look what we have here. All my favorite people together in one room.”

Mustering all the control he could, Torin turned to the man with the Venom mask, who was holding a gun against

Ronan's temple.

"You're getting old, Ronan, my friend. Didn't even hear me coming," Venom taunted the bigger man, keeping close enough so Ronan didn't have a gap to sucker punch him.

"Am I? Or have I perhaps been playing deaf to draw you in? Hmm, who knows, maybe I've actually been expecting you." Ronan wasn't fazed with the gun leaving an impression against his skull as Venom gave him a hard tap.

"Bullshit! There's no way any of you could know I was going to come here."

"Stop playing games and take that fucking ridiculous mask off. It puts you right back in the same category you always were before I took you under my wing. Slinking on the ground with the mollusks of the world," Torin smirked. "Cowards hide behind masks in the face of their enemies, pretending to be what they're not. Your attempt to incite fear failed. Come now, let's see your pretty boy face."

"Fuck you, Torin!" Dario sneered as he yanked off the mask. "You bastard," he growled as Ronan used the opportunity to jam his elbow into his solar plexus. Dario doubled over in pain.

"That was stupid, Ronan. His finger could have tightened on the trigger," Matteo spat angrily. "You don't fucking play with your life like that."

"Oh please, Matt," Ronan scoffed as he went to stand beside Torin. "You know as well as I do this little prick could never multitask. The moment he reached for the mask; his attention was off me completely."

“You’re going to pay for that, Snake. No one makes fun of me!” Dario pointed the gun at Torin’s head. “I suggest all of you start showing me some respect. The days of me groveling for attention or pretending I needed your help are over. Soon, I will be the one you call Boss X again, and this time, it’ll be for real. I’ve stood in the shadows of you for far too long, Torin. Now, my day has come.”

“That’s what all the murder and mayhem over the years have been about? Setting me up to take the fall for an attempted assassination, with abduction being the grand finale, I imagine?” Torin laughed. “I think you’ve been watching too many movies, little brother. You’ve clearly lost your sense of reality. You know as well as I do, you never had and never will have what it takes to be the *Capo di Tutti Capo* of the WCM. You’re too dependent on people’s opinion of you. Case in point, coming here for the big face-off.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. I fooled you. All those years you trained me, I listened and learned, even though I pretended otherwise. Believe me, Torin, I have what it takes. A helluva lot more than you’d ever imagine.”

“You had it all, asshole. You walked away from it. Nothing you say is making sense,” Razor sneered.

“I didn’t want it as a pity gift, which it was. Or should I rather say, a whore’s gift. If not for my mother using her cunt to sway our father’s mind, Torin would’ve sat on that throne, but I want it. Yes, I fucking want it, but because I earned it. Everything I did over the past six years is proof of just how capable I am.” He cackled a laugh.

“Once Korolevov finishes that AI WOSC, nothing and no one is going to stop me. With the money I make at auction selling it to the highest bidder, the board of the WCM will beg me to take over.” He smirked. “And unlike you who plays on both sides of the fence, hiding your identity from your peers, I will do no such thing. That, my dear brother, is how I’m going to stomp you to the ground.”

“Good luck with that,” Ronan snickered.

A scuffle outside and the pop-pop-pop of guns with silencers caused the four men to step back, unwilling to put the two women and Andrew in danger. Razor pushed Maia behind him.

“Ah, I see my army has arrived.” Dario waved his gun around. “Quite slack of you only to bring three of your soldiers with you, Boss X. In case you didn’t get the message, I always travel with a big following.”

“Yeah, not surprising. Still the same old Dario, letting others do the dirty work, surrounding yourself with witless followers who you use as shields instead of fighting alongside them.” Matteo took a step closer but stopped when Dario cocked the gun.

“The next one who insults me will taste lead. I’m sick and tired of being ridiculed by you.”

“Coast is clear, Boss.” Victor Rush appeared behind Dario in the doorway. “One dead and the other two tied up. We’re clear back to the airfield.”

“Who the fuck did you kill?” Ronan bellowed, his anger tangible in every taut line of his body.

“Who cares,” Dario’s smile was Cheshire-like. It was evident he was reveling in their distress of having lost one of their most valued men. “Collateral damage, isn’t that what you taught me, big brother? One should think you’d be used to it by now.”

“None of us kill for sport, only necessity, while you have proved to enjoy death.” Torin’s expression turned murderous. “Get the fuck out of here, Dario. My patience has run out.”

“Let me go!” Maia shrieked, fighting off the bulk of a man who caught her around the throat from behind and wrestled her to where Dario stood.

“I wouldn’t if I were you,” Dario warned Razor, who stormed after him, fury blazing off him like a fire starter. “Brutus isn’t known for his restraint. He’ll snap her neck before you take another step.” Dario pointed to the platinum case on the table. “Get that case, then take her to the plane. If anyone attempts to stop you, kill her.”

Torin watched with narrowed eyes as Victor opened the case, then looked up at Dario in obvious distress. His movements were checked and wary.

“It’s empty.”

A string of expletives exploded from Dario’s mouth. He jammed the gun against Maia’s stomach.

“Where the fuck is the design?”

“Come now, Dario. You didn’t think I would wait around for you to come and leave it in full view just so you could pick it up and walk out with it?” Torin’s taunt hit home.

Dario fiddling with the patch over his eye was proof of him losing his confidence.

“You’re not going to ask me how I knew where to find Wilson, are you?” His eyes narrowed. “Because you already knew I would be here.” Another curse crawled from his lips. “The fucking cunt! She told you. Lee blabbed everything, didn’t she?”

“What did you expect, Dario? Lee has been with me for over eight years.”

“You stupid bastard. How do you think she got there in the first place? I needed someone close to you. An informant who trusted me and would tell me things without thinking twice. I started planning my rise to leadership long ago. All the time you believed I was a spineless nobody, I was soaking everything in. Lee told me everything. Why wouldn’t she? I was your little brother.” He laughed.

“I knew exactly what you were looking for and the type of person you would appoint. It took me a year to find her, but my patience paid off. You took the bait and appointed her. At first, I didn’t do anything, just played the part of an underachieving younger brother with no confidence. It worked. She completely trusted me. What I didn’t plan on was her bitch of a mother. She became a pain in my ass, so eventually I had to step in. I was the one who got Sandy hooked on opioids. I was the one who pushed her into overdosing. I became Lee’s knight in shining armor. It was child’s play to force my will onto her after that.” He speared a look at Ronan.

“Except the stupid woman went and fell in love. She set me up by telling me about Wilson’s location, didn’t she? Yes, I realize it now. You were just too prepared and not even surprised to see me.”

“Why the fuck didn’t you warn us?” Ronan growled in anger as he looked at Torin.

“Because she told him everything. The entire sordid tale and begged him not to tell you. Isn’t that right, Torin?”

“Yes, she did. It’s one thing you’ll never understand, Dario. Loyalty can’t be bought or forced onto someone. Love and friendship, even less. That’s why you won’t ever be a leader and you’ll continue to roam the Earth as the loser you are, alone.”

“Fuck off. I don’t need a bastard like you or your pearls of wisdom. I’m done living in your shadow. And yours, Razor. Between the two of you, I became nothing but an add-on. It’s done.”

Reaching sideways, he yanked Maia by the hair in front of him. Ignoring her painful cry and Razor’s furious growl at how he manhandled his wife, he retreated through the door.

“If you want to see your little wife again, you will do as I say. Step down from Black Diamond Bratva and Kings Inc. I don’t need you in my camp nor as a nemesis.” His grip tightened, eliciting another painful yell from Maia. “You, Torin, I don’t even need to tell you what I want from you, but I do want to wish you good luck convincing your little FBI agent fiancé that you’re not exactly who you are—a Mafioso.” His laughter was that of the devil incarnate.

“I did you a favor, since I don’t think you have the guts to do it yourself. I put measures in place to ensure little Dakota finds out the truth. By the end of today, she’ll have proof of exactly who and what you are. You’re done, Torin Caruso. One warning. I have Dakota in my sights. Either step down or she and this bitch are both dead.”

He reached the end of the porch and forced Maia down the steps. He growled in warning as the four men charged through the patio door. They froze on the porch.

“I think it might be a tad detrimental for that little bastard brat your fiancé is carrying, don’t you think, big brother? Ah…” Dario laughed boisterously at Torin’s expression. “You didn’t know she’s pregnant? I guess telling her caring future brother-in-law that he’s going to be an uncle before she tells you that you’re going to be a father is rather telling about where she’s at as far as you’re concerned, now isn’t it?” His smile gave way to a sneer.

“I won this one, Torin. You’ve got seventy-two hours to deliver those designs, or I start slitting throats. I’ll send the coordinates to Lee.”

Silence descended after Dario, his goons, and Maia disappeared from view. Anger emanated from the four men, like waves during a storm, each struggling with a different kind of rage and emotion.

“You better have a plan, Torin. If anything happens to Maia, I’ll—”

“He won’t kill her. It’s me he’s after. Dario doesn’t only want me to step down and announce him as my successor. He wants me dead. I’m too much of a detractor in

his life. With me alive, he'll never have the confidence to rule the WCM or Kings Inc."

"That's all good and well, but he's got my wife, Torin. He's fucking got my wife, and I don't trust him as much as you do." Razor turned to Ronan. "Are you still tracking his boat?"

"Yes. Last report was that it's moored in the Baltic Sea."

"That means he's working with the Russian government, and he's going to lie low in Moscow," Razor said. "Unfortunately for him that means he's on my turf. I'm not going back to the U.S., Torin. I'm going home to gather the BDB soldiers, then I'm fetching my wife."

"How are you going to do that? He could have a hideout anywhere in Russia," Ronan said.

"Maia's bracelet has a tracking chip," Razor's response clipped from his lips. "I'll know exactly where to find them. I'm done wasting time explaining. I'm leaving."

"I have no intention of stopping you, Maxim. All I ask is that you give me some of the seventy-two hours he offered. I need to go home and talk to Dakota, but I will be there as soon as I can, with a full army of my own in tow." Torin's tumultuous emotions were painted on the canvas of his face for all to see.

Razor nodded. Grunting, he stomped off with Priest in tow, who carried the dead body of Steele, the only one of their team who had succumbed with a bullet in the chest.

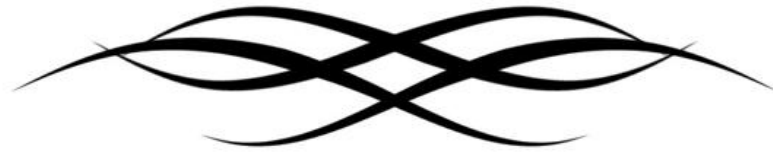
“What about the designs he’s after?” Ronan interjected as he watched the two men walk off. Losing Steele was a blow. He had become a good friend over the years. “You burned everything. He’s not going to take that lightly.”

“I don’t give a fuck how he’s going to react. Even if I still had the designs, I wouldn’t give them to him. You know the saying, Snake. Fake it till you make it. In this instance, we’ll fake it until he’s dead.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?” Matteo said, shocked at the darkness swirling in Torin’s eyes. “You’re going to kill your own brother?”

“Half-brother. If it comes down to keeping our women and loved ones safe or a showdown between him or me, then yes, Matteo. I won’t hesitate to kill him.”

Chapter Eighteen



FBI Offices, the Abraham Lincoln Building, Seattle, WA...

“Larry, I want you and Anya staking out the—”

“My apologies for the interruption, Deputy Harris. Director Flint just arrived. He’s waiting in your office.” Dakota nodded at her PA, who appeared flustered and out of sorts. Lines of concern marred Dakota’s brow as she wondered what had instigated the Director’s unscheduled visit.

“Agent Gomez, take over, please. I want a sitrep at the end of every day.”

“Of course, Deputy Harris.” A tall blonde woman took her place as she briskly walked out of the operation boardroom.

Dakota had no reservations about delegating. Since she had taken over as D.D. of the specialized CID division, which concentrated on eliminating and cracking open crime syndicates, the team had moved to Seattle. Under her leadership, they had become cohesive and strong. She believed in sharing responsibilities and giving credit where it was due, which spurred everyone to give their best.

“Director Flint, good morning,” she said as she walked into her office.

The tall gray-haired man shook her hand with a ghost of a smile teetering on his lips. A sense of doom tiptoed over her spine at the tautness of his frame. Whatever had brought him to Seattle from D.C. was serious. Instinct warned her that whatever it was, it affected her directly. Prior to accepting the D.D. position, she had been the lead agent of a deep covert CID section that solely concentrated on crime syndicates.

“Morning, Deputy Harris. It’s always a pleasure to see you. At least the one good thing from D.D. Watts before he gave in to the lure of gold was to show me the value you would add to the CID.”

“I’m still in shock over Kian’s actions. He was always such a steadfast man, especially in regard to National Security.” She smiled wanly, knowing how devastated Torin and Matteo were, since Kian had been their best friend. “I’ll always be grateful you gave me the opportunity, Director.”

The prior CID D.D., Sam Whitworth, had turned out to be a criminal, selling out in favor of lining his pockets. In the end, Dakota had exposed him, then resigned her position afterward since she wanted nothing to do with a law enforcement agency that was just as crooked as the criminals she was chasing. No matter how heartbreaking the thought was of walking away from a job she had worked so hard to make a success off.

Then Torin’s friend, D.D. of the FBI at the time, Kian Watts, who proved to be the biggest betrayer of them all in the end, proposed her as the new D.D. of CID. If not for Torin

showing her the benefit of pursuing her heart's desire and requesting the unit be moved to Seattle, she might have made the wrong decision. Now, more than a year later, she was the happiest she had ever been. She had a man who she loved and a job she reveled in. The challenges of managing the entire division and the success they were achieving filled her with pride.

“I'm afraid this isn't a friendly visit. We have a serious matter to discuss. Let's sit down, please.”

His voice was redolent with good breeding—deep, measured, forceful, with perfect enunciation. It rang out chillingly as she sat down.

“With the controversy surrounding D.D. Kian Watt's death, we had to reevaluate all the cases he had been involved in. One specific association caught our attention, especially since you were the lead investigator eighteen months ago on this particular case. Coincidentally, it was also after this case was closed due to unwarranted charges that exposed D.D. Sam Whitworth, and his corruption came to light.”

“Are you referring to the allegations that Torin Caruso was secretly involved or associated with the West Coast Mafia and/or the NCS?” Dakota offered her response in carefully spaced words to allow herself the opportunity to maintain an impassive expression.

“Your report showed evidence that all allegations were inconclusive.”

“That's correct. Since I went deep undercover, I managed to build a very close association with Mr. Caruso as part of the investigation. I found no indication or any kind of

proof, however menial, that he had anything to do with either of those groups.” Dakota crossed her legs, the movement doused with feminine grace.

“Torin Caruso is nothing other than a seasoned businessman, Deputy Flint. One who built a global empire based on instincts and evaluating people’s integrity and morals. He is well known for his contributions to welfare organizations across the state. A criminal? That he is not.”

“Is your confidence of his innocence based on true belief and evidence... or because you are in an intimate relationship with the man? From what the reports indicate, you have been living with him ever since the investigation, which I imagine was also why you requested the CID division be moved to Seattle.”

“I told you, I infiltrated his home as an undercover agent. Our intimate relationship only progressed after the case was closed, and he was exonerated of all charges. There was never a need to formally charge him, Deputy Flint. Surely, if you study all my reports, you’ll realize that.” Dakota tipped her head in his direction. “Are you accusing me of falsifying that report?”

Sam Flint stared at her for long, intense moments, and Dakota didn’t flinch or look away. Her work ethic had always been her pride, and nothing would ever sway her in doing the right thing—most definitely not the lust Torin awakened in her at the time. While investigating Torin, she hadn’t found any proof of him having an association with the Mafia or any other crime syndicate. Sam Whitworth had a different agenda. He

had been looking for a scapegoat to cover up his own fuckups, which was why he had tried to set up Torin.

“I’m just following protocol, Dakota. You should know I can’t leave any stones unturned.” He picked up a folder. “However, new anomalies have been brought to our attention about Torin Caruso. There are just too many of these... let’s call them sightings to be a coincidence. If he’s nothing other than a businessman, he has a very bad habit of being at the wrong place at the wrong time. I’m not accusing you of anything, or that you’re even aware of any of this, but I am here to inform you that we’re reopening the investigation. There are things that don’t add up, and Torin Caruso seems to be in the center of all of them.” With a pained look marring his face, he cleared his throat.

“Normally, involving an agent in a relationship with a key protagonist in a case, we’d pull them due to conflict of interest. In this instance, we believe since you know him well and have the best insight to dig deeper than anyone else can, I want you to be the lead.”

“Deputy Flint, I am not only in a relationship with Torin Caruso as you said—we’re engaged to be married. I’m sorry, but me leading the case is beyond a conflict of interest. I don’t believe he’s guilty of anything and therefore, I cannot in good faith be involved in any kind of investigation.”

“I wasn’t told your relationship evolved to such an extent,” Flint muttered as he tapped a fingernail against his teeth. “In truth, Dakota, I have always believed you to be one of the agents who walked the straight and narrow path. That

for you there was only right and wrong, no midways. Was I wrong?"

"No, you're not. I value my job and the contribution I make, however small, in keeping our country and its people safe."

"So, I find it strange that you haven't even asked to look at the content of this file or the new evidence that has come to light. Surely, you'd want to know exactly who and what the man is who you're about to marry and have children with." Director Flint got up and handed the folder to her.

"All I ask is that you study the file, and if you still believe he's innocent of all claims, I'll excuse you from the case. At such time, you'll also be suspended until the investigation is complete. Bureau policy, as you know. In situations such as these, there is always the danger of interference, and even though you are the D.D., we can't treat you any differently than others.

"I beseech you to do the right thing, Agent Harris. If these rumors implicating him are true, we have hit the vein of the West Coast Mafia at its core. It's the best chance we will ever have to finally rip the heart from their chest and end their sovereignty in this country."

Dakota didn't move as he left the office. Her mind was in shambles.

"Why can't life just give me one fucking chance at happiness?" The raw quality of her voice rippled through the room. Devastation and hurt were at battle inside her until finally acceptance won the war. She had been living in a love

bubble for the past eighteen months. It was time to acknowledge what she had been avoiding for too long.

Although there truly had been no concrete evidence against Torin at the time, since their lives had become entwined as one, living in the same house, she had come to realize over time that he was hiding things from her.

He disappeared for days, citing business trips. Long work hours were explained as a crisis at the office. All which she had accepted because he always offered the excuses so eloquently. Still, there were times, although he was there, he wasn't present, not really. He drifted off to a place she wasn't a part of. A place that turned his expression dark, and so cruel, she cringed watching him.

Deep inside, she had been battling with doubt but had refused to give voice to them. He made her happy. They were going to be married and have children.

“Snap out of it, Dakota. He warned you that he didn't know how to love. That his mother had destroyed that ability when he was a young boy. Or did you forget how he begged you to help him find compassion and teach him what love meant?” A slow exhale calmed her mind. Her hands curved protectively around her stomach. “No, he's the man I love and the father of the baby we made together. He is not a criminal. I refuse to believe it.”

The words resonating through the room coated the insecurities inside her, cocooned her belief in the man she loved. She had proved his innocence once. She would do it again. Everything was going to work out. She believed that without any doubt clouding her mind.

Until she opened the folder...



Two hours later, Torin's home in Seahurst, Burien in King County, WA...

“What do you mean Maia has been kidnapped?” Torin had been waiting for her when she arrived home, pacing the den like a caged tiger. It was obvious he was on tenterhooks and itching to leave.

“Torin Caruso, what the hell is going on? Why would anyone kidnap Maia?”

“It's the same bastard who abducted the President, Dakota. You know that Maxim's company was on the added security detail at the time. Maxim managed to find the President and extracted him safely. The perpetrator wants Whittell back, so he's using Maia as leverage to force Maxim to hand him over.”

“My God.” Dakota sat down, her mind spinning as she attempted to piece the puzzle together. “So, where did all of this happen? Since you've been gone for a couple of days, I assume you were with them when she was kidnapped?”

“Dakota, the less you know, the better.” Torin sat down beside her, gently clasping her hand in his. “There's—”

“Fuck you, Torin. I don't need or want to be coddled. I'm sick and tired of the sanctimonious shit you keep spinning around me. Did you forget what I do for a living? I'm like a goddamn bloodhound. I smell a lie a mile away, a criminal

who reeks of bullshit... just like you are right now.” Yanking her hand from his, she jumped up. “I want the truth. Now.”

Accepting the glaring anger that poured from her eyes, he returned the glare with an unrelenting look.

“There are many things I have to explain to you, Dakota, but now isn’t the time. I need to get to Moscow to help Maxim find Maia.”

“So, help me, if you leave here today without giving me something, I won’t be here when you return.” The look she gave him was designed to peel his hide but in true Torin fashion, he shrugged it off. “I’m not an idiot, Torin. Exactly what is your and Razor’s association with these people? And don’t you fucking dare lie to me.”

“It’s not a conversation to be had in five minutes, Dakota. All I ask for is a little patience. When I return, I’ll tell you everything.”

Dakota continued as if he hadn’t spoken, spitting the words out through gritted teeth, frustration and disdain wrapped up in her dissertation.

“You forget I investigated you before. Most of all, you forget that I know you better than you even realize. You’ve been keeping something from me all this time, Torin, but foolish me refused to acknowledge what was staring me right in the face. For God’s sake, I live in this house with you. I know there’s more to your life than meets the eye.” Her eyes turned stormy as full acceptance finally hit home. Hunched shoulders flanked the dejection that flashed over her face.

“The allegations are true. You are living a double life, aren’t you? You’re involved...” Her voice trailed off at the infinitesimal twitch in his lips that told her she had hit the mark. “No, not involved... You *are* the WCM and the NCS, aren’t you?”

“Since you’re so insistent and not willing to wait for me to properly explain, the short answer is yes, I am.” He got up and stepped into her private space, a mere inch separating them as he towered over her. “But it seems I’m not the only one hiding things. I believe you have something to tell me, Dakota.”

The flinch was unchecked, and so was the step she took back to enable herself to breathe. For the first time since she’d met him, Dakota felt fear. Not for herself but for the tiny person growing inside her. A trembling hand covered her stomach.

“H-How did you find out?”

“A better question is, who did you tell before you told me, the father of that child inside you?”

“Dario? He blabbered? He promised he wouldn’t and besides, I didn’t plan to tell him. I had just found out when he phoned and in my excitement...” She pressed her lips together. “You know what, it doesn’t matter. You don’t get to stand there, all pietistic and shit, berating me while you’re the one who should be on the butcher’s block.”

“Fuck, I don’t have time for this,” Torin muttered. The hand that cut through his hair seemed to tremble, but Dakota could be mistaken, since the mighty Torin Caruso would never show any kind of weakness. “Very well, Dakota. The very

short version is that I am Boss X, the *Capo di Tutti Capi* of the WCM and the founder of NCS and Kings Inc. I was born into this life. My ancestors have been in that position for centuries. I chose not to embrace it as fully as they did, since I wanted to make my mark as a normal person in the day-to-day world we live in.”

“Hence the business and investments that allow you to support welfare institutions.” Venomous judgment drizzled from her voice.

His hands dropped to his sides to form clenched fists of tension.

“I’m not going to waste time justifying the choices of my life, Dakota. I am what I am. Unfortunately, being me has placed you in danger and for that, I am sorry.”

“What kind of danger?”

“Dakota, I have to go. Maia’s life—”

“Enough stalling, Torin. I want to know what the fuck is going on. Now!”

“Why? So, you have all the juicy information firsthand to enable you to uncover my entire organization and put everyone behind bars?”

“If that’s what you believe, then I don’t need anything more from you than I already heard and what’s in this fucking folder!” Dakota picked up the file she had dropped on the coffee table and slammed it against his chest. “They have everything on you, Torin. You surround yourself with criminals and believe the world doesn’t see. Well, you fucked

up. I don't need to do shit. The FBI already has everything. How and where they got it from, I don't know, but—”

“So, that's what he meant.” A twinge of anger laced his voice. “The fucking bastard.”

“What who meant?”

“Stay away from Dario, Dakota. If he comes here, don't, for the love of God, open the door for him.”

“But—”

“Listen to me!” The emphasis he laid on the three words penetrated her frazzled mind. “Dario is the one after me. He wants what I have.” His hand drifted to cover her stomach. “And I only realize it now, but that includes my child.”

“You're not making any sense, Torin. Why would—”

“He's after power and money. Dario isn't the man you met, Dakota. He has changed over the past year. I never realized how much he hates me. He's the one who kidnapped the President and is in bed with whoever is after the microchip that could potentially start a space war we could never win. I have to stop him, but I need to know that you're safe.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“I have a security team on the way. You will not leave this house, is that clear?”

“Believe me, Torin, if I want to leave, you won't stop me.”

“You don't know me, Dakota... not the Mafioso. Leave and I will find you, no matter where you are. I suggest

you don't test me. I might care for you, but you will not take my child from me."

Her eyes turned dark. "I have given my entire life to doing what is right. I follow the law, Torin. I don't do crime. If you honestly believe I'm okay with what you just told me, you're naive."

"So, that's how love works. Just as I always believed. The moment hardship enters, it dissipates."

"Hardship I can handle. Lies, deceit and living a life of crime... those I can't. It's not who I am. I've been fighting it all my life. I refuse to bring my child up as a criminal."

"Then I suppose we have a problem, Dakota, because I will not allow any child of mine to grow up without knowing or feeling the love of his father... every day of his or her life." He leaned so close, she could feel his warm breath on her lips. "If you leave, so be it, but it will be the day after my child is born... alone. My child will not leave with you."

Dakota stared after him with dull eyes as he stomped off. The brightness of the day had turned as dark as the cave of Hades. Her heart felt as if it was shattering into a thousand pieces.

"God, how is it possible to feel so much pain and insecurity at the same time? Even knowing what he just told me, I still love him. I guess I always will."

Dakota had always believed the pain of a lover was only felt at parting, that their love was reaffirmed and built stronger by the separations, the ones that made reunions so

very sweet. When lovers were right for one another, they took away the other's pain naturally by virtue of who they were.

Except in this situation the strength of a loving bond had always been one-sided. Torin might care for her, but he didn't know how to love. There was no way her love alone would conquer the challenge this situation presented. Torin was a criminal. She was a hunter of crime.

Two people on opposite sides of the fence could never find a midway to build a life on.

“He said it. He was born into the life, and although he lives a double life, being a Mafioso is all he truly knows how to be. Without that part of him, the other half would wither and die. The man he is would be no more.” She sat down on the sofa to stare blindly out to sea. The crashing waves were as tumultuous as her emotions.

“I am a crime fighter. It is who I am. Can I ever be anything other than that, for the sake of love and happiness?”

The bigger question hovering in her mind was whether she would be able to be happy if she gave up her beliefs and moral integrity to be with a man who lived with no compassion for those who suffered because of who and what he was.

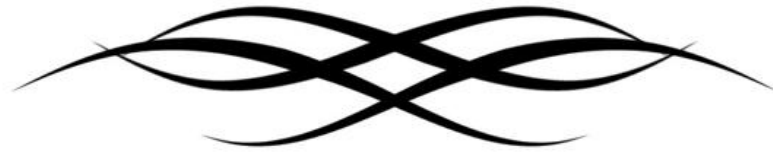
A criminal. A ruthless Mafioso who, according to the folder Flint had given her, included extortion, corruption of public officials, gambling, infiltration of legitimate businesses, labor racketeering, loan sharking, tax fraud schemes, and stock manipulation schemes.

The one aspect that caused despair to settle deep inside her was the photos with scenes of death.

Torin wasn't only a Mafia Boss, he was the human form of Mkultra, where morality went to die, along with empathy and hope.

There was no getting away from it—the man she loved was a murderer.

Chapter Nineteen



Forty-eight hours later. A remote location, four miles west of the Malibu Floating Resort in the Pirogovskoye Reservoir, Sorokino, Moscow Oblast...

It was still dark when Razor, Torin, Matteo, Brendan, and Ronan headed into the dense forest with a following of twenty men strong. The dark woods released the sounds of a plethora of nocturnal ghosts, of those who might move safely within the hug of gray shadowed night.

“Shit, this place is creepy,” Brendan grumbled as they carefully and quietly made their way past the country house estate, Malibu.

“Don’t tell me you feel the grazing of a spirit on your neck,” Ronan teased to enlighten his mood. “Or are you scared of ghosts, little pup?”

“I ain’t scared of no ghost.”

“Good, better not look back then.” Ronan chuckled as the younger man immediately glanced over his shoulder.

“Fuck off, Ronan.”

“Quiet,” Razor barked, his gravelly voice a whisper in the breeze. “Pay attention to the surroundings. I don’t want to walk into an ambush because the two of you are fucking around.” He was setting a grueling pace, driven by an urgency to find Maia.

“We’re watching. Don’t worry, Razor. They won’t know what hits them when we get there,” Ronan’s voice turned gruff, but from then on, he remained quiet and alert.

“We’re less than half a klick away,” Razor said thirty minutes later as he checked coordinates on the tracking unit. He looked around. “There, it must be that house just visible through the trees.”

Ronan squinted at the medieval-looking lodge. It had a roof that rose upward as a proud church spire of olden times. The sunrise was only a whisper to the stars, but the slates on the roof glowed golden at the tips.

“Brendan, how many heat signals do you pick up?” Ronan looked around, his senses on high alert for any sudden movement. Torin and Matteo had joined them just before they had set off into the woods, but he was concerned that for the first time since he had met Torin, he seemed preoccupied and not as attentive to his surroundings as usual.

“I count twelve, scattered in and around the property,” Brendan reported.

“Razor, I suggest we split our men,” Ronan said. “We should approach the house from all sides. That way we can assure no one escapes from the back should our presence be noticed.”

“We won’t be noticed,” Razor said in a clipped tone.

“Rushing in isn’t going to win the day,” Torin cautioned. “You forget how tech savvy Dario is. We have no idea if he has scanners or heat sensors to warn him of any intruders. He’s not as naive about criminal warfare as we all believed.”

“You’re both right. Do it, Ronan.” Razor scanned the area through binoculars as the daybreak brought glimmers of warmth after a long cold night. The golden rays of the sun softly caressed the top of the trees and ignited the birds into a chorus of melodies that whispered through the silence.

“The bastard is definitely cautious,” Razor said. “There are at least five guards on a constant patrol around the house.”

“Dario knows he fucked up by taking Maia,” Matteo interjected as he checked his weapons. “I’m just not sure whether he’s really as cocky as he seems or if he’s a damn good actor in hiding his shortcomings.”

“Whichever it is, he obviously has no idea just who he’s dealing with,” Ronan said as he returned from issuing orders to the men. “I don’t think Dario knows exactly what Razor and the Carusos are really capable of, especially when it comes to protecting those they love.”

“Yeah, I’ve come to realize as much as I don’t believe in the concept of love, neither does he. All Dario truly understands is how to manipulate, use, and hate since that was the kind of life his mother offered him. In truth, he has now become a version of her, which is a shame.”

“You’re right, Torin. Even though you believed she was your mother until eighteen months ago, I always thought she was a heartless bitch,” Matteo said.

Torin chose not to respond. Ronan realized he didn’t have to. Matteo had lived his despair with him from when he was just an eight-year-old boy. Being rejected by his own mother for no apparent reason had paved the way for the emotionless man Torin had become.

“The men are in position around the house, Razor,” Ronan said once he received the confirmation from each team leader through his earpiece. “I instructed them to switch to silencers and use knives before they shoot. The quieter we can breach the house, the better our chances of getting Maia out unhurt. I don’t trust Dario. He might do something stupid, purely to prove a point.”

“He’ll die a very slow and painful death should I find the slightest mark of pain she suffered on her body,” Razor grated through clenched teeth.

“Enough with the threats,” Torin growled. “Let’s get this over with. Dario has done enough to disrupt our lives. His attempt to break me ends here. Today.”

“We’re moving in. ETA at the house in two minutes. Sync your watches... Now!” With Razor’s voice echoing over the comms, everyone moved toward the house, their timing impeccable as they reached the outskirts of the open field surrounding the lodge within moments of each other. Ronan had settled high up in one of the trees, the perfect spot to clear out targets on three sides of the house.

“Ronan, take out the three on the porch on my count,” Razor said into the comms, then looked at his team. “You four stay outside to keep guard. The rest of us move in and spread out to search but stay in a tight formation in groups of two. I want all of you going home.” He tapped the piece in his ear to activate the group comms to all the teams. “We move in three, two, one... Now. Go!”

The pop-pop-pop of Ronan’s rifle had just whispered above the birdsong when the three guards on the porch fell to the ground dead, with bullets dead center between their eyes.

“Fuck, that man is good,” Brendan said in awe as he stepped over the corpses and followed his leaders inside as Razor opened the door without a twinge of sound. He hugged in a tight formation against Matteo as they surged inside, guns at the ready. He checked the heat sensors. “There are two signals to the right down the passage, Razor. Second door, I’d say,” he whispered.

“Must be where he’s keeping Maia.” Razor cat-footed it down the hallway with Torin by his side.

“Dario is mine, Razor,” Torin whispered. “It’s me he’s after. I’m the one who will end this.”

“That depends on the condition my wife is in when we open this door. If she’s hurt, he won’t breathe after one glance. Blind anger will be my guide.”

Torin understood Razor’s torment. It was how he felt about anyone hurting Dakota. In that, the two of them were the same. Razor never had the love of a parent, whereas Torin had his father’s caring. Neither one of them knew what it was like to love someone with the same depth the women in their lives

loved them. However, they did know how to protect those who were their family.

Dario had made one crucial judgment error by not realizing that.

“There’s another signal on the opposite side of the hallway. Seems the rest of the house is clear inside,” Brendan interjected.

“That is probably Vasili Korolevov. Matteo, he’s yours.”

“We’ve got him,” Matteo said as he took a stance in front of the door.

“Ready?” Razor asked with his hand on the door handle.

“Go,” Torin said as the door whizzed open, awakening the two people inside as it slammed against the wall.

“Maxim!” Maia cried, her face lighting up with relief and an emotion that burned into Torin’s mind. It was the same look Dakota had when he had asked her to stay.

Love. A feeling that was expressed in so many ways in poets’ and writers’ scripture, but witnessing its pleasure firsthand was like the heavens opening. That look of adoration and trust, so uncouth and true, could never be practiced. Maybe there was much to be invested in the emotions that made up the word love.

Dario was slower to shake off the last remnants of sleep. His curse of surprise slammed against the walls to mock him as it echoed through the room.

“How the fuck did you find us?”

“The better question would be, how is this day going to end for you, dear brother, especially since you just lost your leverage,” Torin taunted him—his body a weapon of readiness to explode into a fight he was itching to begin. He knew better than to charge since he had been the one to teach Dario to fight. At the time, he hadn’t shown much interest, but now Torin knew better. Even that far back, it had been part of a ruse that had been building over the years to fool Torin into being passive and unprepared. At a guess, they would be equally matched in strength, but Torin’s skills had been honed to perfection over time.

“You can stop checking every inch of her skin, Razor. I don’t hurt women. She was only a means to an end, and she served her purpose.” Dario smirked as Maia extended a middle finger to him. “Ah, so feisty. Pity you found her first. She would be a perfect match for me.”

“You can stop taunting me, Dario. I have no intention of fighting you. I promised Torin you’re his to deal with, but only if my wife was unharmed.”

Dario’s eyes flickered as he looked at Torin, who was now leaning against the door.

“You never answered my question. How did you find me?”

Torin shrugged. “Men like us know we always have to be prepared for our innocent women to be used in the fight for power. Maia’s bracelet has a tracking chip.”

“I assume the lovely Dakota and Jamari are also chipped, like animals in a pen.”

“No need to revert to childish insults. We understand that you’re still finding your feet in the true world of crime.”

“Fuck you, Razor. Fuck both of you!” Dario was quickly losing his cool. “Where are the designs? If you think you’re walking away without handing them over, you’re mistaken.”

“I destroyed the designs in Vietnam before you even arrived, Dario. I had no intention of anyone getting their hands on it. Nothing good could ever come of it.”

“You fucking bastard! You destroyed everything I worked for, Torin!”

“Which is?” Ronan said as he walked into the room.

“Power and money. Once Vasili created the perfect AI weapon, I was going to auction it off to the highest bidder. I would’ve made billions!”

“And here we thought he was working for the Russian government,” Razor said, the surprise evident in his tone.

“Oh, I was, until he started ordering me about like I was his little boy toy. No one threatens me or forces me into a box. I don’t owe him shit. The only one worth standing up for is me!”

A sadness crept unwanted over Torin as he watched his half-brother cautiously get off the bed. It flowed over him like a painful acid cleanse. He always cared for Dario, protected him, and tried to make him strong, physically, and emotionally. Even though he was only a couple of years

younger than him, Dario had always acted like a young, insecure teenager. Torin had never imagined Dario was silently viewing his actions in the same light as his mother's—a way to control him. The time had come to abolish him from the close-knit group of people Torin cared for.

Dario was no longer invited into that circle.

“How long have you been harboring this hatred for me, Dario?” Torin tilted his head, suddenly curious to understand when the switch had flipped in his mind.

“I’m surprised you even need to ask. I suppose you could say I was born into it. Father never saw anyone but you as worthy.”

“Bullshit. He cared for us both.”

Dario burst out laughing. “He might have cared for me, but he loved you.”

“Do you really believe that, or are they the words Rebecca planted in your brain in her pathetic attempt to control you?”

“At least she was honest about what she was doing after she convinced Dad to put me in the Boss X chair instead of you.”

“And I wasn’t? Correct me if I’m wrong, but weren’t you the one who approached me and begged me to get you out from under her spell? That you’d had enough of being her puppet? Wasn’t I the one who spent hours every day teaching you the ways of our world? Skills that are now coming to your aid, in fact.”

“Indeed, you did, and as soon as I fully embraced the world of the Caruso family and you took your rightful place as Boss X, you cast me out like a dead rat.”

“You walked away, Dario. You were the one who wanted out.”

“I walked out because I needed you to reach out to me. To invite me back in to sit by your side and rule the fucking WCM as one! Instead, you forgot about me. I was nothing more than just one more steppingstone to your road to power and glory.”

“You’re truly delusional if you believe Torin needed you to elevate his worth as the leader of the WCM,” Matteo scoffed from where he stood in the doorway.

“Shut your fucking mouth. I hate you the most. You were always there, like a leech attached to Torin, never allowing me in,” Dario sneered, spittle flying from his mouth like bats in flight.

“I was there because I belonged there... as you did. Not to keep harping on the same tune as Torin, but you were the one who didn’t have the courage to stay.”

“Fuck the hell off!” Dario was quickly losing control.

“I’m not a psychic, Dario,” Torin offered in a calm voice. “I don’t read minds. If you wanted back in, all you had to do was walk through the door. I would have welcomed you with open arms.”

“Don’t fucking lie. You would never give away your position of sovereignty. The big almighty Don of the WCM. The *Capo di Tutti Capi* everyone respects as much as they fear

your wrath.” He spat on the floor. “I spit on you, Torin Caruso. I don’t want or need your pity. I want it all, and now, once I rid the world of your selfish corpse, I’m going to take what I deserve!”

“You’re right. I wouldn’t give up my position, not to you or anyone else. Not only because it’s my right as the firstborn of the family and because I was voted in unanimously by the entire board, but because I deserved it. Those who have tried to unseat me over the years have all failed... as will you.”

“No, Torin. This is one time I know without a doubt I won’t fail. Do you know how I know?”

A wisp of a smile contorted Torin’s lips as scorn dripped from his words like venom from a spitting cobra.

“Because you believe I won’t kill you?” He laughed at Dario’s expression. “Wrong, Dario. I killed the woman who I believed was my mother for forty-four years without blinking and with no remorse. What makes you think you deserve different treatment?” The smile gave way to an expression so dark; Dario took an unchecked step back. “No one challenges me, puts my entire family and business at risk, and gets away with it. The worst thing you could’ve done was to involve Dakota by leaking information about me only you had access to. Whether you realize it, your cryptic remark about her pregnancy was a threat in itself, a hint to hurt my unborn child. Therefore, you have signed your own death warrant, Dario.”

Torin removed the Marine Ka-bar from its sheath strapped to his leg. He breathed shallow breaths as he watched Dario.

“Ah, so it’s a knife fight you want. Bad choice, big brother. You taught me the skill of street fighting, and I’ve become an expert,” he boasted as he grabbed his Ka-bar from his belt.

“God grants us the serenity to accept the things we can’t change and the courage to change the things we can. And the wisdom—”

Dario charged with a screech of anger at the biblical taunt Torin had always used while training him—a memory of a time when he was the weaker one. Now, he was clearly aiming to prove his worth.

“First mistake, Dario,” Torin sneered as he went down on one knee, thrusting the Ka-bar upward into his groin with a twist, then plunged it hilt-deep into the femoral artery. “Never attack in anger.”

Torin stood up and stared impassively at the shocked expression on his half-brother’s face as he stumbled back onto the bed. He would bleed out from his carotid being slashed open. His expression, grim Torin didn’t make a move to stem the bleeding.

“Second mistake, never assume you know how your enemy will fight. I didn’t come here for glory or to have a drawn-out battle to measure dicks with you. I came here with one purpose in mind. To kill you. Quickly.”

Torin turned and headed for the door. “You lose, Dario. May your soul rot in hell.”



Dario watched his brother saunter out of the room as if he didn't have a care in the world. He probably didn't because as he said, Dario had overplayed his hand. He had been too confident, too cocksure he had the upper hand.

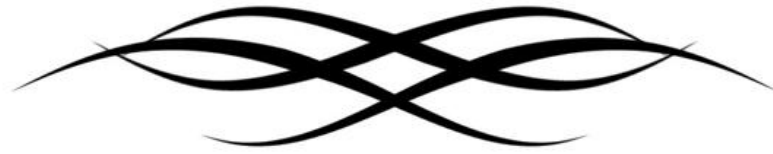
“Ugh!” The raw grunt crawled from his chest as he struggled to breathe. The light dimmed and the sounds of their footsteps became muffled, almost as if he was swimming underwater. Aside from the beat of his heart, no muscle moved. It pounded to a rhythm of the words of his execution, of the cold steel and Torin, his brother and his judge and jury. He had been found wanting and guilty as charged.

Dario felt himself grow weaker and weaker. His breathing turned haggard and shallow. He looked out of the window. The early morning sun was bright as the rays played hide and seek through the curtains. He had lived in luxury all his life. He owned the most luxurious resort in Bora Bora, yet here he was... in a rundown cabin... his dying place.

“This is not right. No o-one should d-die alone,” he stuttered, gurgling on his own blood. “I'm not re-ready to die. N-Not yet,” he cried. The light in his eyes shimmered one final time, then went out.

Dario Caruso died alone, once again... like he had always felt, even when surrounded by people.

Chapter Twenty



One week later. Decadent Sins Club...

“Do you see him? Is he here?” Lee used Emily as a shield when they walked into the entertainment room at Decadent Sins.

Ever since she had told Torin the truth about the role she had played in Dario’s scheme and that she knew exactly who and what all of them were, Ronan had become incommunicado. Maybe he was struggling with how everything turned out, and since he had been good friends with Dario, his death must weigh heavy on Ronan’s mind. Either way, he hadn’t been to the office once in ten days. He’d ignored her text messages and had yet to return any of the myriad calls she had made.

It had taken all the courage she could muster to finally call Emily and invite her to the club, but she was desperate to see Ronan and tell him her story. Torin might already have done so, but she still felt the need to express her own experiences and thoughts to him.

Once she told all, she wanted to know where she stood with Ronan. If he felt she had betrayed his confidence by

spying for Dario over the years and couldn't be trusted, at least she would know she had tried. It would be a devastating blow since her infatuation had morphed into love.

Now, more than ever, she knew Ronan was her future. Convincing him might be the biggest challenge she yet had to face. Ronan was known for his hard-headedness. Forgiveness didn't come easily to a man like him, but she wasn't going to give up before she gave it her all.

“Well? Do you see him?” Lee prodded again.

“Hold your horses. This place is packed tonight.” Emily took her time searching the faces for Ronan. “I know it's the twenty-first century, but do you honestly think it's wise to be the one hunting him? Yes, it's modern times but one thing will always remain the same. The man is supposed to be the hunter, not the other way around.”

“I'm not a traditional follower, Emily, and besides, why can't a woman fight for what she wants?”

“Totally agree... for a Gucci handbag or a pair of shoes at the Black Friday sale, but a man isn't a piece of leather you wear draped over your shoulders.”

“Stop psychoanalyzing the situation, and me, for that matter. If Ronan wants to end this relationship, he'll have to tell me to my face.”

Emily spun around. “Relationship? When exactly did it become that? It's only been a couple of weeks since you first hooked up with him... right here in Decadent Sins. I should know. I witnessed it all.” She waved a hand in the air. “For that matter, so did half of the club members.”

Lee's cheeks turned beetroot red at the reminder that she had succumbed to a very intimate and public scene in the dungeon... and thoroughly enjoyed it.

Her hand drifted to the diamond choker she wore all the time. "He collared me on my birthday, Emily. This is a token of our commitment to each other. He's not at all opposed to starting a family, either."

"This is all a bit sudden, isn't it?" Emily squeezed her hand as Lee's lips turned into a pout. "I'm just concerned, Lee. I don't want you to get hurt."

"No matter what happens, Emily, it's already too late for that. I've secretly had a crush on Ronan for years. Falling in love was a natural progression, and in my case, it happened without realizing it. Who knows, maybe it's the same for him. Besides, neither of us are young anymore. We know what we want out of life, so if we love each other, why wait? I would rather spend the next year with him by my side than following a traditional courting time. I don't need or want his courtship. I want his love, and I want him by my side."

"Well, at least I tried, and I know when I'm defeated. It's evident that nothing I say is going to change your mind, so... let's find your Mister Right, shall we?" She looked around. "If that is possible in this stampede of kinksters!"

An hour later they sat down at the bar. Lee felt defeated. Ronan wasn't at the club. If he was, he was doing a good job of staying out of sight.

"Not to be a buzzkill but maybe this is fate sending you a message, my friend," Emily said around a sip of the dry Martini she'd ordered.

Lee concentrated on sipping her own drink rather than debate the issue with her. Giving up on Ronan without face time wasn't an option. If not tonight, she would continue with her quest to find him and force him to listen.

“If it's fate, I scoff at it. Ronan is my destiny, and fate can go swimming in the Red Sea for all I care.”

“It's never wise to brush off fate, Missy. One never knows when it might bring good things across your path.”

Lee's head whipped around so fast, she imagined she heard her neck crack.

“Ronan!”

A small grin stole across his full lips as he witnessed the joy in her face.

“What did I say about calling me that in here, kitten?”

“I'm sorry, Master Goliath. I'm a bad subbie. I definitely need to be punished.” The eagerness to jump into his arms was difficult to suppress but Lee did it. Nothing was going to sour this moment, especially since she felt herself drowning in the loving warmth she spied in his eyes. For once, she was going to be the perfect submissive.

“I agree, but first, we need to talk.” With a sharp yank on her hand, he pulled her off the stool into his arms. “Don't you think your Dom deserves a proper greeting, subbie?”

“Oh, indeed I do, Sir.”

The moment their lips met, Lee lost herself—in the moment, in him, and in the love she could feel emanating

through him into her. Happiness finally made its way to her heart, and this time, she was confident it was there to stay.

The kiss Ronan offered was anything but gentle or meek. It was rough, demanding, powerful, and filled with a promise of an eternity of the same. Her toes curled as his tongue took possession of hers, sweeping with masculine pleasure at her reaction. By the time he lifted his head, her legs felt like rubber, and she had to lean heavily against him as he guided her to a semi-private booth in the corner of the room.

“I’m sorry about Dario, Ronan. I know you were very close to him,” she began with a tremulous smile.

“I loved him like a brother, Lee. His betrayal hit me just as hard as it did Torin. That he used and abused you so callously pisses me off even more. If Torin hadn’t killed him, I would’ve ripped his black heart out.”

“You... does that mean you’re not angry, upset, or disappointed in me for betraying the trust you had in me as an employee? I told him things, Ronan. I hated doing it, but I had to protect my mother.”

Ronan planted a brief kiss on her lips to silence her.

“Torin told me everything, and we all agreed, you had no choice. What I am upset about is that you didn’t have the confidence in us to tell us sooner and explain what was happening. You shouldn’t have had to carry such a burden alone for so long.” The hand cupping her cheek was tender and loving. “Don’t you know how much you mean to us, little one? To me, in particular?”

“I have to admit, however much I sell myself as a modernist, in this I lean toward tradition. You know?” An impish smile made her lips twitch. “Being told how you feel, rather than assuming or guessing.”

“Ah, well, I suppose that makes sense.” He leaned back in the seat. “By the way, your mother sends her love.”

“My mother?”

“Oh, I didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“I went to visit her.”

“You’ve been in Vancouver all this time?” She frowned at him as he gently pushed her gaping jaw closed.

“Not all the time. I accompanied the President to a secret location in Washington D.C., where the Secret Service took over. Of course, that resulted in a thousand questions I had to answer. Luckily, President Whittell attested to me being his savior, and they released me. From there, I went to Vancouver.”

“Not to be nosy, but what happened to Vasili Korolevov?”

“He was charged with conspiracy against the United States and will spend the majority of his life behind bars.”

“You’re going to make me ask, aren’t you?” Lee folded her arms across her chest when he didn’t offer any further information.

“Well, love, I’m not a psychic, so I don’t read minds. If you want to know something—”

“Oh, for fudge’s sake!” she exploded. “My mother, Mr. Scott. What were you doing at my mother’s?”

“For one thing, I went to meet her, and of course, I asked her permission for your hand in marriage.”

“You asked... huh?” For once, Lee was struck mum as she swallowed the breathy response. “You... her... marriage... me?” Her mouth worked soundlessly, the sentence she attempted to formulate unable to permeate her brain. Instead, the words pinged around her skull like rogue ping-pong balls.

“Of course. I can hardly go down on one knee and propose marriage unless I have her blessing, now can I?” He grinned as he dug a square jewelry box out of his pocket. “That being said and discounting what I just mentioned, I’m not the dropping to the knee kind of guy, so I’ll just do this in my usual eloquent way.” He offered a lopsided grin.

“With this ring, I officially declare my love for you, Lee Powell. For years, I’ve yearned to be the man you noticed, but I never believed I was good enough. Now that you know everything about me and you haven’t run to the hills, I know I have found my home... right here with you. Like you said... where my heart is.” He slipped the ring, an oval-shaped diamond hugged by a combination of smaller round and baguette-shaped diamonds, onto her ring finger. Ignoring her gasp at the beauty of the piece, he continued, “With this ring, we are now officially engaged and will be married. I’m not prepared to stretch out this engagement for months. I want you as my wife, and I’m impatient.”

Filled with joy and happiness, Lee studied her hand, twisting it this way and that, enthralled by the glimmer of the

diamonds in the overhead lights.

“Just like that? You’re telling me this is it. No asking or even begging a little.” Her head dipped to the side as she looked at him, a playful smile tiptoeing over her lips.

“It seems you still don’t know me very well. I’m not a begging kind of man, kitten. Besides, why waste the time? I’m not letting you get away, so I followed the most expeditious route.”

“Of course, you did.” She leaned in to kiss him lingeringly. The smile on her lips trembled against his mouth. “I bet there’s something I can make you beg for.”

“Hmm, I’m all for you trying, Missy.” Ronan leaned back and boldly unzipped his pants. With his arms on the back of the seat, he watched her down the length of his nose, pure excitement, and joy dripping from his expression. “So, go for it, future Mrs. Scott. I’m all yours. Make me beg.”

Lee’s eyes darted back and forth. Although many couples had already disappeared into the dungeon, the entertainment area was still packed with members milling around.

“Now? Right here?”

“Backing out, Missy?”

One eyebrow easing its way higher was enough of a challenge to spark the fire inside her. Without giving it a second thought, she lifted one leg over his and straddled his lap.

“Now, that’s more like it.”

“Oh, this is only the beginning, Master Goliath. One way or another, you’re going to beg, even if it takes me the rest of our lives together.”

“Now those are the kind of odds I like. A long-term challenge. So? What are you waiting for?”

“Very well, Master Goliath. Round one commencing.”



In a booth on the other side of the room...

“Why do you look so glum, Dakota? You hardly said a word all the way here.” Jamari frowned at her. “Come to think of it, we haven’t spoken to each other since before Dario died. Is it a case you’re working on?”

Dakota looked at Jamari and Maia with a listless expression. She had purposely avoided them since Torin had admitted who he really was. Further investigation into the folder Director Flint had supplied showed Matteo and Maxim were both in cahoots with Torin. Not that it should have come as a surprise. In truth, it hadn’t, and if she was brutally honest with herself, there had been suspicions that had stuck in her mind since the initial investigation into the allegations against the Carusos. She just hadn’t wanted to pursue them... because by then, her heart was already fully invested in the man.

“Yes, or rather, I haven’t committed to lead the case yet.”

“I don’t understand. Isn’t it part of your job to oversee all cases, no matter which team it’s allocated to?” Maia

watched her intently. As a well-trained CIA assassin, her instincts to read people were usually spot on.

“Yes, and that’s the core of the problem,” she mumbled. “I can’t discuss this.”

“Hold on. Does this have anything to do with Kian Watts? Since he was exposed as a criminal, it makes sense that the FBI would look into everyone he had close friendships or business relationships with.” Maia leaned forward. “Is that it? Have they opened the case against the Carusos... and Maxim?”

“Maia, I told you I can’t...” Dakota breathed deeply. These women were like sisters to her. They had formed a bond, and they should know who and what the men they loved truly were. “Yes, they’re reopening the case. They want me to run lead on it since I’m in the best position to dig deep. If I refuse, I’ll be suspended until the investigation is complete to ensure I don’t tamper with evidence.”

“Dakota, there’s something—”

“The worst is... it’s all true. Torin, Matteo, Razor, Ronan... they’re all living double lives. They’re the WCM and the NCS. Criminals. Mafiosos. For years they’ve been lying to us.” Dakota felt a weight lift from her shoulders but gaped at the two women who didn’t react in shock and anger as she’d expected.

“I always knew, Dakota.” Maia squeezed her hand. “I was undercover and during that case, I met Razor, the mafioso, not the businessman Maxim. I’ve known from the start. He begged me not to tell either of you. He said Torin and Matteo should take the responsibility.”

“I also know.” Jamari smiled briefly. “Matteo tried to tell me after the kidnapping, but I refused to listen because in truth, I didn’t want to know about anything that could turn our love sour. A couple of months ago, he sat me down and told me his entire life story.”

“He told you everything, and you didn’t walk away?”

“I love him too much. Did you speak to Torin about it?”

“Yes, he admitted it, but that was just before they left to save Maia, so I only know that he’s Boss X. Since then, I’ve been avoiding him.”

“You should talk to him, Dakota. Let him tell you his story,” Jamari urged. “Believe me, it’s what made the difference for me. The reason why my love is still as strong as ever.”

“Maybe you do, but I can’t just accept that he lives on the wrong side of the law. It’s my life. It’s what I do. I can’t just walk away from it.” Dakota’s gaze drifted to where the three men under discussion were having a drink at the bar.

“Come now, Dakota. After all the investigation you did when you first met him and everything that has happened since, are you truly going to tell me you never once thought that maybe you’re the one living in a bubble?” Maia’s sharp gaze drilled through her defenses.

“I’m not. I believed him when he—”

“Did you? A clever and experienced FBI agent like you specializing in crime organizations? Or did you choose to ignore the signs so you could continue working for the FBI

and pretend you didn't suspect anything?" Maia shook her head. "Life isn't black and white, Dakota. There are no absolutes. No matter how much you try to justify your actions to yourself, you know you looked the other way because you love Torin. That was what carried the most weight. Not your desire to pursue what's required of you as an FBI agent."

"Maia is right, Dakota. If she wasn't, knowing you, Torin would've been behind bars long ago. Whether or not you like it, you have to make a choice. Do what your heart tells you to do or do what your moral compass and career demands of you. You can't hide your head in the sand and pretend you don't know who and what he is. You have to choose which side of the fence you're on. If not with Torin, you need to walk away."

"I agree," Maia said. "Dakota, you know as well as I do, you're not going to hand him over to the authorities. I couldn't with Maxim and believe me, I had every intention to until I realized loving him is what gives me the most fulfillment in life."

There it was. The reason for Dakota's confusion. That was exactly how she felt—fulfilled. Now that she was pregnant, all her dreams were aligned... all, except for her career as the Deputy Director of CID.

"I know you're right. I have to make a choice, and God knows, I have no clear direction which way to go."

"Talk to Torin and listen, really listen. Not to what he's saying but to the emotions in his voice. Men like Razor and Torin, they don't know the words because they don't feel

emotions like we do, but it's there. Just listen, and you'll know which choice is the right one."

Chapter Twenty-One



“It’s time we talked, Dakota. You can’t keep avoiding me.”

Torin’s dulcet-toned voice rolled over her, settling deep inside her soul, where she had no defense against his quiet strength. Forcing her rattled senses to calm, with her back ramrod straight from tension, she sipped her drink rather than respond immediately.

Since Maia and Jamari had joined their Masters in the dungeon for playtime, she was alone. A state she preferred of late since it offered her the quietness to think.

“I’m here, Torin. Talk.”

“I have no intention of washing my dirty laundry in public. My office.” He hesitated briefly. “Please.”

By the time Dakota got up, he was nowhere to be seen. A grim smile split across her face. It was so like him—demanding and confident. It would serve him well if she chose not to follow him, but then she would never come to a decision about the conundrum overpowering every waking moment of her life.

Dakota hesitated in the doorway as she spotted his taut body in front of the window overlooking the dungeon. His

office was designed in such a way, he could oversee the dungeon and the entertainment area on the other side.

Contrary to how confident his stance was, she detected a dip in his usually straight shoulders. Perhaps he was as unsettled about the conversation they were about to have as she was.

“I didn’t choose life as a criminal.” His voice droned in a low, musical rhythm through the room. Every note was distinct, precise, and told the tale of a man who didn’t regret the choices he made in life.

“I was born into a family of Mafiosos that dates back generations. Growing up, it was the only life I knew. Contrary to my ancestors, I was different. I reveled in having fun with normal friends as much as I thrived in being taught the ways to be the successor in the line of the mightiest dons in the country. That’s how I ended up living a very successful life as a businessman while running the largest Mafia Commission in the States.”

His voice remained equanimous and still, he didn’t turn to face her.

“My father was a strict man. Although I always felt cared for, I didn’t feel loved. My mother, who you know was never my blood mother, hated me. Of course, I didn’t know why as I grew up in the lap of her rejection. Love became a word people used to soft soap others. It had no meaning. I still don’t know how it’s supposed to feel or make one feel.

“Ultimately, I am who and what I am because of the family I was born into. Could I have walked away from it all? You of all people should know the answer to that. You don’t

walk away from the Mafia, especially if you're the successor. Besides, I didn't want to. I was brought up with the knowledge that one day it would all be mine, and I lived for that day. I worked hard and proved my worth to be called Boss X, to date, the most respected and feared *Capo di Tutti Capi* the WCM has ever had."

The hand he ran through his hair trembled, startling Dakota. It was the first sign of vulnerability she had ever witnessed in him. She walked closer, willing herself to do what Maia said—listen... really listen.

The tale unfolded. When he spoke about Dario, his voice thickened, and she realized that although he might have been the one who killed Dario, he had loved his brother. Yes, Torin could love, he just didn't realize it.

"How have you managed to keep your identity as a Mafioso from leaking? That's the one thing I don't understand. I dug into every nook and cranny I could find when I investigated you, and even though over the past year, I've had suspicions about you, I never found any concrete evidence."

"We always mask up when we're in the presence of WCM or NCS members. No one has ever seen our faces or knows who we are. Caruso is a general surname, so since there is nothing linking us to crime, we were never on anyone's radar... until you arrived on the scene."

"Only because Whitworth worked for Kian."

"That's the danger of being who we are and living like we do. We can never completely open up to anyone who isn't part of our lives as Mafiosos. That's why I didn't tell you. Not only to keep my secret safe but to keep you safe. In the world

of crime, it's where enemies always hit first... our family. I wanted to ensure no one would ever hurt you because you wouldn't know anything to tell."

"And at the same time, you made me vulnerable, Torin. I can't fight an enemy I don't know exists. I can't be cautious if I don't realize there's potential danger." Dakota cleared her throat. "If I hadn't found out, would you ever have told me?"

Torin blinked slowly. Just once and it was all the answer she needed. Then he looked at her, his expression of such tortured conflict, she was hard pressed not to hug him. It was the first time he ever showed her any emotion, and she embraced the moment. Maybe this was all she needed to make her decision.

"The day you agreed to wear my ring, I made the decision that I would protect you with my life, and the only way to keep you safe was to ensure you had no knowledge of the double-edged sword I danced on. For that reason, no, I wouldn't have told you." He shook his head as if clearing it from cobwebs.

"Somehow, that resolution became dimmer the longer you stayed. It felt wrong to keep it from you. The desire to take you into my confidence grew with each passing day until it clawed at my insides like a chisel that kept chipping away, more and more."

"But you never trusted me."

"No, love." A remorseful look crossed his face as he traced her eyebrows with the tip of his finger. "You, I trusted. It was myself I didn't trust. I was changing. I could feel the way your presence in my life reached the softer part of my

soul, unlocking it to feel things I didn't and still don't understand. It scared the shit out of me, and I didn't know what to make of it." His eyes drifted back to the dungeon below.

"That night you waited for me in front of the fire, naked and offering your full submission was the night I realized I might not have the future I wanted with you."

"Meaning?"

"For the first time in my life, I was filled with fear, Dakota. Fear of losing you. You had become so much a part of my life, I didn't know how I would continue without you, but I also realized I had to tell you the truth and let you make your own choices. I was done forcing my decisions on you. I wanted you to choose... me. Me, Torin Caruso, the man you say you love. Not the businessman or the Mafioso. *Just me.*" He glanced sideways at her before concentrating on the scene below. "Just me."

"Torin," she laid her hand on his shoulder, urging him to look at her. "Would you ever walk away from it all?"

The smile was brief. "I told you, Dakota. No one ever walks away from the Mafia."

"Not even if I ask you to for me... for our child?"

His expression was one of agony, of a pain that tore his insides apart, then it was gone in a blink of an eye.

"No, Dakota. I will live my life out as it has begun. I am what I am. That is never going to change, although unlike my father, I will treasure and cherish my children. Love, even, if I ever learn to understand and embrace that concept."

“What about me, Torin? Who I am? What I want out of life?”

“I can’t answer that for you, love. I refuse to because if I do, I fall right back into the same hole I just climbed out of... leaving the choice to you. I want... I need this decision to be yours.” He smirked in self-recrimination.

“I know you’re struggling against this with everything in you. The black-and-white syndrome. I know, better than anyone, the risk of admitting all this to you. Yes, love, even that is part of the choices you get to make. To hand me over and let me rot in jail.”

“I... don’t go there, Torin.”

“It is what it is, love. I knew it, and I took the risk, nevertheless. I didn’t want our marriage to kick off with lies. Now you know it all. It’s your decision.”

“It’s a fucked-up choice, Torin!”

Leaning in, he gently kissed her lips, a brush so light and tender, it was nothing more than a promise. And at that moment, she felt it. Torin loved her. He truly did. He had put his entire life in her hands by telling her all... because he trusted and loved her.

“I do know that I want you in my life. That much hasn’t changed. I want nothing more than to allow the emotions growing inside me to come to fruition until one day, I truly understand them and perhaps even put words to what they mean to me. I want you as my wife, Dakota, but I will always live a double life.

“I know it’s not fair for you to be the one making the sacrifices, but that’s who I am. One thing I do know without a doubt is I will never abandon my children, nor will I allow you to take them away from me. My flesh and blood. They will be protected and cared for under my roof. I would be a very happy man if that includes their mother, but if not...”

“You know me better than that, Torin. I’d never be able to walk away from my children.” Dakota stumbled to the sofa and sat down. The choice was hers and although it affected her entire life—her job, her career, her family, and her heart—there was only one choice to make. In truth, it was one she had made weeks ago.

“As much as I can’t walk away from a child of mine, so can I not walk away from the man whose heart beats inside me. You know I love you, Torin. You, the man in front of me now. I fell in love with you, and that will never change. My heart belongs to you. It always will. All I ask is that you never expose me or our kids to the other side of you. I don’t want them involved in that part of your life.”

“If we have a son, it would be his birthright, Dakota. I can’t deny him that.”

“Can’t or won’t? Where is it a law that being a criminal has to be passed on to your children? You can break the chain, Torin. *You* can be the change.”

Torin stared at her for long breathtaking moments. He didn’t say a word, just allowed what she said to soak into him, locking it away in a chamber in his mind to revisit at a later stage.

“When I asked you the first time, I didn’t really give you true freedom of choice. This time, I need to know your answer comes from your heart and your own free will.”

Kneeling in front of her, he took off her engagement ring, kissed her finger and looked up.

“Dakota Harris, I know you have awakened the ability inside me to feel. So far, it has been an exciting journey. One I would like to continue and a path I don’t wish to walk alone. I need you in my life, love. Perhaps even more than I’m willing to admit to myself. Will you marry me, Dakota? Will you be my wife?”

“I have to be honest, Torin. This is the hardest choice I’ve ever had to make. In the end, the toss-up is between a successful career or a life with you and our children. It was an easy one when I could have both. Now, knowing I can’t, I have to weigh which one of the two I can do without, and it’s still an easy decision to make.

“I had a good career, and I’m so grateful I will walk out of the FBI with my head held high and the knowledge of how successful I’ve been. I can live without the job, Torin, but I can’t survive without you in my life. You are my life and my future with our kids, to the end of time.” She brushed her fingers over his stubble chin.

“Yes, Torin Caruso, I will marry you. I can’t wait to be your wife.”

“Then we won’t,” he said as he slipped the ring back on her finger. “We’re getting married in two weeks.”

“Two weeks? But I—”

“We’ve waited long enough, love. Two weeks until we say I do.” He pulled her into his arms and winked with a wicked grin. “Now, how about we pay our respects to the new sex swing we installed this week?”

“Sex swing?”

“Yes, and this one has some added attachments I can’t wait to test out on you.”

“Well, what are we waiting for, Master Zeus?”



Two weeks later. Torin and Dakota’s wedding day...

“I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride, Mr. Caruso.”

“Aww, now look at that. They just made me cry.”

Lee felt like rolling her eyes as her mother’s body shuddered with the tears she tried to suppress.

“A wedding is just such a beautiful way to express love, isn’t it?”

“Mom...” Lee hugged her, hearing notes of longing in her mother’s voice. She realized for the first time that her mother had never experienced it. After the man she thought was the love of her life had run off in fear of the responsibility of raising a child, she had never opened her heart to another. It was sad that the kind of woman she had become over the past couple of years was still alone, with no one to bask in the wonder of the beautiful person she was.

“Don’t mind me, darling. I’m just being sentimental, is all.”

“Enough happy sadness,” Ronan interjected. “Come on, Moms, I want to introduce you to my parents.”

Sandy beamed as she took Ronan’s arm. He had been calling her Moms from the day he met her. Now, he could do no wrong in her eyes.

“Come on, babe, we’re talking about wedding dates, so you better join us.” Ronan’s voice floated over his shoulder back at her.

“Wedding dates?” Lee jumped up and stomped after them. “Our wedding? Ronan Scott, don’t you dare ignore me. No one but you and I will be discussing any wedding date. Fudge you, Ronan, I’m talking to you.” She was left half-running to keep up after the two loves of her life, chatting up a storm, both ignoring her tirade. “One would swear I have no say in my own wedding,” she muttered as she joined them when they stopped next to Ronan’s parents.

“What was that, Lee?” Valentina Scott said as she dragged Lee against her side with one hand around her shoulders.

“Oh, nothing much. Just this giant ignoring me.”

“Ah, the Scott male trademark. Let me give you some advice. It’s a little game I call tit for tat.”

“Hey, Mom! You’re supposed to be on my side.”

“Pfft,” Valentina scoffed at Ronan as she smiled at Lee. “Every time my husband plays that game, I repay him by,”—she held a hand over Lee’s ear and whispered—“well, I’m sure

you can use your imagination about withholding something he would bend over backward for. Just never overplay your hand. Just tease enough, then swagger off with a sway of your hips. The Scott men are suckers for a sensual hip tango.”

“I’ll definitely remember that.” Lee laughed at Ronan’s expression as he watched the two colluding women.

Valentina rubbed her hands, took Sandy by the arm, and led her to their table.

“Now, about those wedding dates.”

“Oh, Lord, your mother is as bad as mine,” Lee projected a wan smile. Realizing she was fiddling with her fingers, she clamped them into fists. A little too late as Ronan’s gaze had already zoomed onto her discomfort.

“Will you please excuse us, Dad? I believe my fiancé has something she needs to get off her chest.”

“Of course. I think I’ll just mosey over and join Razor and Matteo at the bar. Wedding date talk isn’t exactly my forte.”

Ronan guided Lee to the edge of the balcony of the hotel overlooking Elliott Bay.

“Out with it, Lee. What’s bothering you? Is it really our mothers talking about wedding dates?”

“Well, it’s kinda all connected.”

“Connected how?”

“You know... the timeframe. From the way my mother has been talking, the kind of wedding she wants to plan is going to take a year, if not longer.”

“So? We love each other. We’re committed to getting married. We already moved in together. I know I said I don’t want to wait, but if it makes our parents happy, does it really matter if we wait a year?”

“Well, that depends.”

“For God’s sake, love! Do I have to drag it out of you? Depends on what?”

“On whether you’re happy if our first child is born out of wedlock.”

“Our first child... wedlock... what the fuck!?” Ronan gaped at her, growling when she returned the favor by gently tapping under his chin to close his mouth. “Are you saying you’re... we’re pregnant?”

“Yes. I went to the doctor yesterday, and she confirmed it. We’re going to be parents in eight months, and since I have this very tight wedding dress in mind, we’re either going to have to get married soon or after our little cherub is born.”

“You’re... we’re... holy fuck!”

“Ronan, I’m not sure if you’re angry, upset, or happy. You better string a sentence together soon, or I’m going to fall apart from worry.”

“I’m happy. Shit, love. I’m so fucking happy! I’m going to be a father. I’m going to be...” He cleared his throat and straightened from the crouching position in front of her. Clamping his hands behind him he looked around, seemingly cool, calm, and collected. “I’m assuming you don’t want to tell anyone until the twelfth week? I heard somewhere that it’s a magic number.”

Lee smiled, her cup of happiness overflowing. “Yes, since most miscarriages happen within the first twelve weeks, couples generally wait to ensure the pregnancy isn’t jinxed.” Her face sobered. “With my age, it’s a high—”

Ronan cut her short by kissing her lingeringly. “No negative thoughts or talk around our child. Only positive, loving ones. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

“Well then, I guess that means I better catch the garter and you the bouquet, right? Since our wedding will be next... and soon.”

“You bet we do. You fucking bet we do.”

“Ahh, my little kitten used the F word! I’m shocked but so proud!” Ronan gushed as he hugged her.

“Prepare for more to come, my love. I plan on keeping you on your toes until they’re curled up by arthritis.”

“Ah, now, that’s a prospect I’m looking forward to.”

“Remember you said that, Mr. Scott. I’ll be sure to remind you often.”

“Oh, I know you will, love. I know you will.”

The End.

The final story in this series, *Dominant Mercy*, is about Brendan Kent, Torin's protégé. There will be a twenty-year jump in time to tell his story. Read on for the blurb below. Don't forget to preorder yours today.

Dominant Mercy

DECADENT SINS, BOOK 5

The Decadent Sins Saga concludes with the riveting story of the young man Torin Caruso took under his wing, Brendan Kent. Now, twenty years later, he is the Mafioso to fear...

They say I am the Devil's Spawn.

They aren't wrong.

They say I am evil incarnate.

They aren't wrong.

I am Death.

Brendan Caruso

I was born Kent but since my eighteenth birthday, one man taught me the true value of who I was and who I was meant to become... a man I now call Dad, aka Torin Caruso, who legally adopted and changed my name on my nineteenth birthday. Now, I am the legal son and successor of the most feared Mafioso the country has ever known.

Until me.

Under Boss X's tutelage, I became the best of the best Mafiosos out there. The word no isn't in my vocabulary and those who dare use it, quickly learn the error of their ways. I'm fiercely protective of my Caruso family, so when Xia Silver came snooping at Decadent Sins under the premise of looking for a job, I smelled a rat. She was too refined, too articulate, and too pretty to be as destitute as she claims to be.

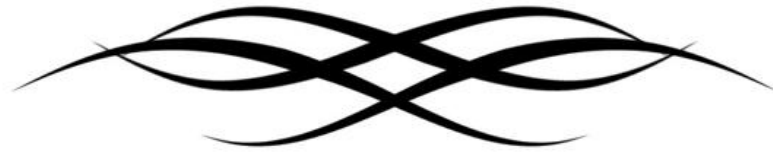
Not that it stops me from allowing my testosterone to get the better of me. Instead of looking out for my father, I was too caught up expunging pent up lust with the pretty redhead to take notice. He ended up behind bars because of my slackness.

Now, I'm on the warpath. Xia Silver will pay for her deceit, and since her father is the Boss of the East Coast Mafia intending to oust the Caruso family, I know just how to get Torin out of jail and end their interference—killing two stones with one bird...

I'm going to marry the twit. There will be no mercy. She will learn no one prods the Devil's Spawn and walks away scot-free.

Available from most eBook stores. Preorder here:
<https://books2read.com/DS5-DominantMercy>

Excerpt: Vadim



The Guzun Bratva Series, Book 1

CHAPTER ONE

Jeneč, Prague-West District in the Central Bohemian Region of the Czech Republic...

“Something’s up,” Vadim Guzun said as he scanned the main square through night vision goggles from their concealment. Although a small village with only a thousand-three-hundred inhabitants, it was a Saturday summer’s eve when street-cafes and restaurants teemed with patrons and local inhabitants strolled languidly along the sidewalks. That there was absolutely no one about was too obvious.

“It was a prearranged meeting, so why the complete absence of any life anywhere? This looks like a hit. Someone was concerned about collateral damage.”

“Yeah, I have the same feeling. We’ve been set up.” Arian, the eldest of the three siblings and the leader of the Guzun Bratva followed suit by studying their surroundings. He

lowered his binoculars. “Your gut instinct was spot on, Vanya. Someone is using this meeting to get rid of us... all three of us.”

After their father died, Arian succeeded as Pakhan of the Guzun Bratva and immediately changed the way the family business was run. For one thing, he believed in sharing power and responsibility with his siblings. Along with Vadim and Vanya, they now ruled Moldova’s criminal world as a triumvirate.

As the oldest, Arian maintained primary control as the Pakhan but each of them had autonomy with their own responsibilities. As triumvirs, they grew stronger and became one of the most feared criminal syndicates in Eastern Europe.

“It’s more than my gut instinct, big brother,” Vanya said. The tall blonde woman leaned a shoulder against the wall and studied her nails, a bored expression on her face. “Or did you happen to forget that there have been two assassination attempts on all three of us over the past couple of months? Not to mention that prior to that, every deal we made with new clients went south because of outside interference.”

“Which tells me that whoever wants us out of the way is getting impatient. They’re obviously after our territory. Hence, meeting us here,” Vadim grunted as he straightened. “Someone is really desperate to get rid of us to set up such an elaborate scheme to draw us out.”

“Not a scheme, brother dear, this is another assassination attempt and whoever it is, they have the resources and money to silence an entire community from the streets on a Saturday night.”

“Yeah, it’s so pathetic, it’s laughable,” Vadim smirked. “We should thank them for the heads-up. Clearing the streets of patrons on a warm Saturday night as if that wouldn’t stick out like dog’s balls? Even a blind man could see through that.”

“Which tells me they have no idea what we are capable of.” With a raised hand, Arian signaled left and right, a sign to a squad of soldiers that remained hidden, to flank the village from both sides.

“Either that or they’re just incredibly stupid if they thought we’d come alone.” Vadim checked his Russian Makarov semi-automatic. “Whoever it is, I’m after the mastermind, not the goons sent to off us.” He tapped his ear to activate the comms to the teams. “I want the leader alive. Make sure you find him first.”

“Copy that, Boss,” Andrei Balan, the Underboss of the Guzun Bratva, responded in a dark voice. “Alpha team to the right, Charlie to the left, and Bravo center behind the Boss. We’re a go, Vadim.”

“You know the drill. Shadow tactics until you make contact. Silencers on and use knives where possible. I don’t want the bastard alerted that we’re early. Give no quarter. Good hunting, everyone. Let’s move.” Vadim led the way toward the tavern where the meeting was supposed to be held with Boris Sidorov, the supposed head of a Russian international weapons syndicate. Their suspicion had been triggered when he had demanded that all three leaders attend the meeting, even though all communication to date had only been with Vadim, who was the Guzun Bratva leader in charge of weapons smuggling.

“Stay low,” he whispered as he hugged the dark shadows of the narrow alley, knowing that his brother and sister would guard his back.

As part of forming a rock solid facade, Vadim had spent part of his life in the Russian elite Spetsnaze, the foreign military intelligence agency of the Soviet Armed Forces. As a lieutenant colonel, he knew there was a mental disconnect between perception and reality. Experience came from every encounter and prevented one from being lulled into a dangerously complacent mindset. It was that first moment of contact; the mad minute when the veil of calm was suddenly ripped away by an overdose of adrenaline dumped into one’s veins that slammed the brain’s amygdala into overdrive to warp one’s sense of time and saturated every memory in surreal technicolor.

All the training in the world couldn’t prepare one for what was to come. Every encounter was different, offering up its own set of challenges to overcome. Vadim had learned to be alert and outwit his enemy. This time would be no different.

There was no way of knowing how many of the numerous heat signatures that their thermal imaging cameras had picked up might be locals being used to obscure the real number of players who were there to kill them.

“Heads up, Vadim. Heat sensor is picking up two bodies to the left at the entrance of the alley,” Vanya warned in a hushed voice.

Vadim didn’t hesitate as he pivoted around the corner. His sharp gaze immediately homed in on the automatic weapons they carried. Using the laser sight to acquire the

target, he fired two rounds from the suppressed barrel. The first key-holed on impact, ripping away the upper thorax of the assassin. As his weapon recoiled up, the second round hit the philtrum just below the nose, blowing tooth and jawbone through the back of the skull, severing the brain stem. Before he dropped forward, the serrated blade of Vadim's K-bar was embedded up to the hilt in the second man's heart. His mouth gaped open as he stared at the widening red bloom spreading over his shirt and then he dropped dead to the ground.

Vadim tapped the comms in his ear. "Stash the trash, Andrei, and plant two of your men to take their places. Be sure to keep up appearances." Vadim gestured to the opposite side of the street. "Let's move." He didn't wait, secure in the knowledge that his order would be carried out.

Vadim ducked into the shadow of an alley across from the restaurant where the meeting was supposed to be and listened. Inside, the soft glow of incandescent lights complimented the melodic sound of Smooth Jazz. He stiffened as the murmur of voices and the tinkling laughter of women floated toward them.

"There are numerous people inside," he muttered.

"Locals?" Arian squinted in the dark but from their position it was impossible to see inside the restaurant.

"Used as a screen." Vadim closed his eyes to visualize their next move, then tapped his ear. "Change of plan Andrei. The three of us will go in first through the side entrance and use stun grenades to create a distraction. When you hear them detonate, that will be your cue to toss a couple of flash bangs through the front door. All hell will break loose inside. Pass

the word. Our ceramic vests are embedded with blue LED light strips so you can identify your own team members. Wait for my command.”

“Copy that, Boss.”

“Balaclavas on.” Vadim moved down the narrow alley, scanning left to right. This was going to be a surgical strike to limit any collateral damage. They might be mafiosos but he always made use of his military background to ensure successful raids.

He stopped at the door and looked at Vanya. “How many heat signatures?”

She pointed to the little screen. “There are a lot of people sitting around, I assume, having dinner. But then, look at this. There is a row of heat signatures at the back of the room, near the bar. I count about six. And here, too, just behind the side entrance. Must be a storage room of some kind. I count another six signatures. We’ve got at least a dozen bad guys, maybe more.”

“They’re expecting us to walk through the front door, unaware, then get cut down as they pop up from behind the bar and out of the back with guns blazing. Fucking cowards are going to use the locals as shields,” Arian sneered.

“Everyone listen up,” Vadim’s voice clipped over the comms. “Time on target is crucial. Our goal is to get in, neutralize the motherfuckers then make a hard exit. Alpha and Charlie teams go through the side door. Alpha, you hit the bar while Charlie neutralizes the storage room. Bravo will enter through the front to concentrate on the tables. Let’s make some noise and see who wants to come out and play.”

Two flashes of light preceded the sharp explosions as both teams stormed through the side entrance. Two more short-fused grenades exploded inside the storage room, catching the assassins flat-footed. In an instant, an explosive breaching device blew the front door off its hinges immediately followed by two more flashes and explosions.

The two teams entering through the back quickly disarmed both the gunmen behind the bar and in the storage room. It was a clever move to arrive an hour early. The ones seeking personal glory by engaging were killed. The others were quickly disarmed and zip-tied.

Vadim turned to take stock. All of the unsuspecting diners were cowering under several tables, some whimpering, others in the clutch of each other. His eyes narrowed as he studied the men, easily identifying those who were locals and others who weren't. One man, in an act of desperation, charged with a knife drawn. Vadim unsheathed his Marine Ka-Bar and with a pronated grip, slashed from right to left, severing the man's carotid artery. He then thrust hard in a downward motion into the base of the man's neck, fileting the spinal cord from the brain stem.

"Remove the locals," he snapped as his sharp gaze searched the faces watching them. One in particular drew his attention; a man sitting at a table in the center of the room. His eyes, red from the smoke, glared at Vadim. "Disarm that man and cuff his hands to the chair."

"Get off of me, fuckface," the man shouted as Andrei grappled with him.

“Are you going to behave like a gentleman or will I have to break both your fucking arms? You decide.” He looked around before confirming, “All the locals are out, Boss. The rest of these shitheads are with this asshole.”

Finding a brief interlude to distract themselves from the disquiet that ensued, Arian produced a relatively young bottle of Chateau Margaux from behind the bar.

“Look what I found,” he said, planting himself next to Vanya at a table somewhat removed from the action.

“Good fortune does smile on us occasionally. You are so resourceful, dear brother. A very large splash, if you please, to help fortify me against the morbid theater that’s about to unfold.”

“Knowing you for as long as I have taught me what might help assuage your intrepidation. Observant, that’s what I am.”

“You are, indeed. I am so lucky to have you as my flesh and blood!”

Arian forced a smile and toasted. “C’mon, sis. Let’s attend to this messy business, even if with one eye shut, so that we can report back at a later date to gauge whether or not Vadim’s methods have borne fruit. Hold fast. The curtain is about to rise.”

Overhearing their banter, Vadim snorted at their intimate sideshow, rendered with perfect pitch and expression befitting of British royalty—all in reference to his skills as a modern day inquisitor.

“Who are you?” Vadim’s voice turned gravelly.

“Fuck you!” The curse was interrupted as the business edge of the blade sliced into the subcutaneous tissue of his chin. The neat patch, newly flayed raw, bloomed bright red with oxygenated blood to drip, as if from an abused faucet, its crimson stain upon a pristine, white silk shirt.

“Let’s try again, shall we?” Vadim drawled lazily as he circled the chair. “Your name.”

“And I said fuck—what are you doing?”

“I’m going to show you what I think of little men with big mouths. Give me his right hand, Andrei.”

“Wait a minute. Jesus Christ! You can’t do this!”

“I can and I will. Hold his hand flat on the table. This pest has taken up valuable time. This was supposed to be a hard exit and we’re still fucking around with this lot. Hold the motherfucker tightly around his neck.”

As the seated man squirmed helplessly, Vadim produced a Fairbairn Sykes from a slim leather sheath tucked under his left arm and forcefully drove it through the top of the man’s hand to impale it firmly against the wooden table. His screams turned to whimpers as Andrei struck with a hard fist to break the man’s nose with a sharp crack.

“I’m going to ask you who you are again and every time you refuse or lie to me, I will remove a finger one phalange at a time starting with the distal, then the middle and finally, the proximal, beginning with your pinky.”

“No! Fuck, wait!”

“I’ve already waited long enough.”

As the man looked on in horror, screaming like a banshee, Vadim cleanly severed the distal phalange with his Ka-Bar.

“Just like cuttin’ up carrots, Boss,” Andrei snorted as he watched the man writhe in pain.

“Who are you?” Vadim asked again as he positioned the Ka-Bar over the middle phalange.

“You bastard!”

“Wrong answer, fuckface.”

“No!” A raw scream exploded from his lips.

“Yes. Right through that buttery, fat little knuckle of yours, my friend.” The blue carbon blade sliced with the ease of a surgeon’s scalpel as Vadim looked at the remaining stub.

“Holy Fuck! All right! All right! Stop! Please!”

“Did you know that most of our sensitive nerve endings are located in our skin, the primary tool we use for touch?” Vadim leaned in closer. “I am in no hurry, so believe me when I tell you that I can filet long strips off you right down to your subcutaneous tissue and keep you alive for days while slowly removing your identity. Who do you think is going to give in first? Me... or you?”

“Boris. I’m Boris Sidorov,” he spat through thin lips.

Vadim bellowed out a laugh as he looked at his brother. “Did you hear that, Arian? He says he’s Boris Sidorov.”

“Impossible. Boris is a burly Russian, as big as a fucking bear. This little rat wouldn’t even fit in his shoes,” Arian mocked while watching the man turn ashen.

“Just as I thought. I’ll start here.” A quick slash down the center of his chest produced a blood curdling scream. “There. Two more perpendicular incisions and I will tear away the skin covering your left pectoralis major.” Vadim’s dulcet tones made a mockery of the pain he was eliciting. “At a guess, I’d say he’s Italian, or maybe Greek? What do you think, Vanya?”

“Hmm, I’d go with Italian.” She took another sip of wine. “Wrap this up quickly, brother dear. I have a hot date waiting for me back home.”

Vadim turned to the man, trembling with pain. “You heard my sister. She has an itch that needs to be scratched and she gets grumpy when her time is wasted. Again, fuckface. Your name.”

“Matteo R-Romano,” he stammered.

“Now why would a Russian Syndicate be involved with an Italian?” Vadim mused aloud.

“I don’t work for him. He…” He swallowed the words back, suddenly realizing he was about to spill out information that would get him killed should he make it out alive. “Ahh!” he screamed as Vadim stabbed the knife through his other hand, pinning it to the arm of the chair. “*Fanculo! Fuck! Gesù Cristo!*” he panted as his eyes rolled back in their sockets.

“I suggest you start talking, Matteo. My patience is wearing thin.” Vadim left the knife in his hand and pulled out a thin rapier from the inside of his jacket. “This little beauty will cut deep little holes. You might not even feel it as it goes in but you will bleed like a pig.” That said, he quickly jabbed the blade twice into his side.

Matteo jerked in horror with each puncture. “He works for us... the *La Cosa Nostra*.”

“The Italian Mafia? I don’t believe you. We have a very good relationship with all of them.”

“Things have changed. The Guzuns’ reputation has been magnified as word of their power has spread. They want to reign supreme over the entirety of Europe and with you gone—”

“You want us to believe that this meeting was set up by the Italian Mafia?”

“Yes, I’m just following orders,” he wailed as Vadim carved a lateral incision to intersect the mediastinum at a right angle.

“Which family?”

“W-what do you mean?”

“There are several families that comprise La Cosa Nostra, Matteo. Which one do you work for?”

“I work for the *capo di tutti capi*. Since his father passed away, he’s making changes.” Matteo spat on the floor. “We will become supreme again. He’ll make sure of that.”

“The Boss of all Bosses,” Vadim said. He cast a sideways glance at Arian. They knew that Luciano Maranzano had taken over after the old man had died six months ago. Rumors had surfaced that he was ambitious but whether Matteo was telling the truth, they had no way of knowing.

“I guess we will have to verify the authenticity of that.” Another glance at his brother, who nodded his consent. “Since

I think you don't have anything else of use and I don't believe in making a man suffer unnecessarily... *marcire All 'inferno,*" he said in perfect Sicilian dialect. With surgical precision, Vadim located the carotid artery an inch and a half below the surface and severed it. The three siblings watched dispassionately as the man twitched with his life force spurting from the wound and then with a final gurgle, slumped in the chair... dead.

"Yep, as Vadim said, Matteo—rot in hell." Vanya got up and headed toward the door. "Let's go. All this has made me ravenous."

Vadim shook his head as she hooked an arm through Andrei's and walked out of the restaurant.

"Do you believe what he said?" he asked Arian.

"I suppose there could be a modicum of truth in it but Luciano Maranzano is a very clever man. This entire setup seemed amateurish." Arian frowned. "So, either he did it to throw us off his trail, or someone else is trying to fool us into starting a war with the Italian Mob."

"Which we have no intention of doing. At least not until we have enough proof to back his claim." Vadim wiped his knife clean on the dead man's shirt before reclaiming the knives still embedded in Matteo's hands. "I'll start an investigation immediately. In the meantime, we need to secure our communication channels. Whoever is behind this might have found a backdoor to hack into our systems or devices... or worse, we have a mole in our group."

"You do that. Keep me in the loop."

“Of course.” Vadim looked up as Andrei walked back into the restaurant. “Get this mess cleaned up, please. Leave the owner compensation for whatever is broken and a little extra for loss of income for the night.”

It was time to find out who wanted them out of the picture. Whoever it was would soon find out that the reputation of the Guzun Bratva was more than just a rumor.

“What about the rest?” Andrei gestured at the strung-up men.

“Release them. Whoever sent them needs to get the message.” His expression turned grim. In the Secret Service, killing had been a necessity and although he did his fair share now as a mafioso, it left a bitter aftertaste of regret. Taking someone’s life always came with a price.

If not on earth... his would come at the Gates of Hell.

Books by Linzi Basset

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S is for Safeword – Book 1

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Vadim – Book 1
Vanya – Book 2
Arian – Book 3

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- His Devil's Mercy – Book 4
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- His Devil's Fire – Book 6
- Her Devil's Kiss – Book 7
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Their Bold Sub – Book 6
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About the Author

“Isn’t it a universal truth that it’s our singular experiences and passion, for whatever thing or things, which molds us all into the individuals we become? Whether it’s hidden in the depths of our soul or exposed for all to see?”

Linzi Basset is a South African born animal rights supporter with a poet’s heart, and she is also a bestselling fiction writer of suspense-filled romance erotica books; who as the latter, refuses to be bound to any one sub-genre. She prefers instead to stretch herself as a storyteller which has resulted in her researching and writing historical and even paranormal themed works.

Her initial offering: Club Alpha Cove, a BDSM club suspense series released back in 2015, and catapulted her into International Bestseller status. Labelling her as prolific is a gross understatement as just a few short years later she has now been published over a hundred times; a total which includes the other published works of her alter ego: Isabel James who co-authors and alternative penname, Kimila Taylor.

“I write from the inside out. My stories are both inside me and a part of me, so it can be either pleasurable to release them or painful to carve them out. I live every moment of every story I write. So, if you’re looking for spicy and suspenseful, I’m your girl ... woman ... writer ... you know what I mean!”

Linzi believes that by telling stories in her own voice, she can better share with her readers the essence of her being: her passionate nature; her motivations; and her wildest fantasies. She feels every touch as she writes, every kiss, every harsh word uttered, and this to her is the key to a never-ending love of writing.

Ultimately, all books by Linzi Basset are about passion. To her, passion is the driving force of all emotion; whether it be lust, desire, hate, trust, or love. This is the

underlying message contained in her books. Her advice:
“Believe in the passions driving your desires; live them; enjoy
them; and allow them to bring you happiness.”

Stalk Linzi Basset

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