

A Vancini Mafia Dark Romance



DOVE

JAYLA TALBOT

Jayla Talbot

Dove

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Thank You

Also by Jayla Talbot

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Author's Note

Books can provide a catharsis and a safe place to work through our own personal fears and traumas. But please be mindful of your mental health.

This is a dark romance and will not be for every reader. It is intended as a work of fiction, not a representation of safe sexual practices. Please be advised of the following content warnings.

References To:

Suicidal Ideation

Drug Use

Child Neglect

Scenes Depicting:

Kidnapping

Attempted Sexual Assault

Murder

Torture

Violence

Dub Con

Orgasm Control

Degradation

Impact Play

Knife Play

Breath Play

Blood Play

Anal Sex

Kincaid

I woke slowly, my senses returning to me one at a time. My nose picked up the sickening scent of a damp chill. My body shivered in response. I shook my head back and forth, trying to force my eyes to open, but they wouldn't. The lids felt heavy, like they were glued down. They squeezed together involuntarily, trying to push away the throbbing ache in my skull. I let out a shuddering breath as my head lulled to the side connecting with something hard. Where was I?

I licked my dry lips as I tried to clear the rawness in my throat. It felt like I'd been screaming. I tried to find my last memory. Tried to figure out why I'd feel like this. Was I hung over? Lying on the bathroom floor? My thoughts were cloudy and fuzzy around the edges, like an old TV screen. I used my other senses to assess my surroundings.

I was lying on a hard flat surface. It must still be night because there was no light behind my eyelids. A slow dripping sound echoed nearby. I felt heavy, as if my very bones were tired.

Suddenly a deafening screech filled the air. My body flinched as the sound magnified the pain in my skull. I wanted

to scream from the noise, but some primal instinct told me not to.

My heart knocked painfully against my ribs as adrenaline coursed through my body. Even if I could open my eyes, I wouldn't. My brain had flipped to fight or flight mode. It was telling me I was in danger. Telling me to run or hide. And I was going to listen.

I forced myself to take slow, even breaths. I stayed perfectly still, as if I was still asleep. My ears strained to learn more. To find any information I could about where I was and why.

The sound of two steps of boots pounded the floor. I felt the slight vibrations as they came closer to me. I shut down the voice that told me to move. I was too tired to fight back. Too weak to try. Hiding in plain sight was the best chance I had from whoever was waiting.

“She’s still asleep.” A male voice said. I didn’t recognize it. It had the rough quality of someone who smoked a pack of cigarettes a day.

“Maybe we gave her too strong of a dose.” Another male voice responded. This one was deeper.

“Or maybe she’s faking.”

I only had a second to brace myself before a hard boot connected with my stomach. I let my body jerked back, but I swallowed the groan of pain that wanted to come out.

Whoever hit me was stronger than I anticipated. It felt like my liver was exploding from the impact.

I resisted the urge to curl into a ball and shield for another blow. I bit back the angry retort that wanted to form on my tongue. Seconds ticked by like hours while I waited to see if another hit would come.

“Careful. We’re supposed to keep her alive.” Deep Voice said.

“He told us not to kill her.” When Cigarettes spoke it was right next to my face. I forced myself not to flinch as his rancid breath tickled my cheek. My stomach rolled as his hand skimmed down my hair. The way he stroked it and pushed it out of my eyes as if he cared for me made bile rise in my throat. “We’re allowed to have a little fun as long as there’s something for Maddox to search for.”

Maddox.

Memories rushed back into my mind like a dam breaking. Maddox and his deep blue eyes. His strong lips and hard body. His dark hair that curled on his forehead. Maddox kissing me goodbye. Henry driving me home.

Gunshots.

Blood.

A needle.

I’d been kidnapped. I’d somehow fallen into this world. The world of criminals. Of villains. A demon had opened the

door to his cage, and I walked in. Willingly. I'd been seduced by my darkest desires. Intrigued by his brand of pain

Now it was too late to go back. Too late to pretend I hadn't wanted it. Him. It was time to pay for my sins.

Maddox

“**W**here is she?” I asked as I pressed the barrel of my gun further into his temple.

“We didn’t tak-“

The gunshot echoed around the empty warehouse as his body fell limply to the ground. Blood spattered my formerly white shirt. There was so much blood and brain matter covering my skin, my clothes that I stopped worrying about what I looked like. It didn’t matter. Nothing matter.

Except her.

I took two steps and walked to the next man kneeling on the floor. He whimpered as the gun came to the back of his skull. Pathetic. We’d rounded up every person we could find who worked for the Gallos. They either had a death wish or were loyal as fuck because not a single one would tell me where she was.

Kincaid had been missing for over twenty-four hours, and I wasn’t any closer to finding her. Every minute that passed was a minute she could be hurt.

Tortured.

Dead.

Images threatened my mind; flashed behind my eyes. This is what I did every day. My imagination wasn't short on ways a person could be harmed. Used.

I kept seeing her bleeding, blood coating her porcelain skin. Her white blonde hair matted with it. I saw her body broken and bruised. Her insides spilling on the floor.

The gun shook in my hand as I blinked back the images. "Let's hope you're smarter than the last four guys. Where is my little dove?"

"I-I." He stammered as a tremor of terror ran through his body. Reaching back, I smacked him across the face with the butt of the gun. I heard the crunch of bones breaking, but there was none of the usual satisfaction. No relief at seeing the pain I caused. I would never be satisfied again. Not until she was back in my arms. "I—"

"Mad." My head whipped around at the sound of my name. Leif stood in the open doorway, the setting sun highlighting him from behind. My chest constricted as I waited for him to say something. Had he found her?

The beat of his steps bounced off the walls as he came to stand beside me. He took in the scene in front of him. Four bodies lay on the floor while six more men knelt on the hard concrete. Pools of their friend's blood inching closer to them. The scent of death hung in the air. I didn't register any of it.

“Mad. You need to stop.” My hope deflated as his hand came to rest on my shoulder. “Father said—“

I shoved him off as I pointed the gun toward him. My woman was missing, and he came here to give me a bullshit order from our father. I didn’t fucking care that he was the boss. I’d already proven that.

Tension rippled through the air as Tristan appeared at my side. His eyes flicked between me, Leif, and the gun. He was my guard, but he was also a part of the family. Protecting the family came before anything else, and right now I had a gun pointed at the second in charge, the underboss, my half-brother. None of that would save him.

My fingers tightened around the trigger. I preferred a knife. Preferred a close and personal death. But guns were faster. My little dove didn’t have time to waste. I didn’t have time to savor their deaths. There was no enjoyment in it while she was missing. That would come later.

“I don’t give a fuck. No one else in this world exists until I find her. There’s no job. No family. Nothing without her.” My voice was calm.

I didn’t show emotions. Until Kincaid was taken, I didn’t think I had any. But I was quickly being proven wrong. The physical reaction to missing her. Afraid of what was being done to her made my body shake. My heart pounded my ribs as I tried to relieve the tension gripping my limbs.

Fear flooded my veins; trapped my mind. It commanded everything I did. My thoughts were consumed with how to

find her. How to save her. I'd brought her into this world. I'd forced her. Coerced her. Fallen for her, and now she might die because of me.

I'd killed more people than I could remember. I enjoyed it. Relished it. I was a psychopath.

A murderer.

A demon.

I had a disregard for life. Except for hers. And I would kill anyone who stopped me from finding her. Even if it was my own brother who died at my hand.

"You're starting a war." Leif said as he held his palms up, trying to keep me calm as if he had any chance of talking me off the edge. If I decided he was getting in my way, there was nothing that would stop me from taking his life.

"They started this when they infiltrated our clubs. When they stole our shipments. But they escalated it when they took her." I turned back towards the Gallos' men. One of them whimpered. The noise grated on my frayed nerves. Working its way under my skin until I felt itchy. I fired, cutting off his pathetic whines. I had a moment of reprieve in the silence that followed. "I didn't start it, but I will end it."

"I spoke to Matteo." The Gallos' second in charge. Supposedly he was reasonable, not insane like me. He was like my brother. Treating this life as normal. Acting like he was a businessman instead of a ruthless killer. Making deals and creating peace among the families. The time had passed for

that. It had passed when they ripped Kincaid from my grasp. “He denies any involvement. He’d never hurt one of our women. There’s a code.”

“You’re stupid if you believe him.” I moved down the line and crouched to look the next man in the face. He glanced away as if not facing death in the eyes would make it easier. My hands hung loosely between my thighs, the gun an afterthought. “Your boss has a code? He doesn’t hurt women?”

The man’s eyes flicked to mine before he jerked away again. He nodded his head once. I spoke through a clenched jaw. “And what about Carmine?”

Everyone had a limit; even I avoided hurting women and children. But I’d reached mine. I would destroy anyone who got in the way of finding my little dove. Carmine Gallo included. He was the kind of mafia boss others feared. I knew what few did. Exactly how Carmine had gotten his power. His nephew and underboss, Matteo, might be oblivious. He might have a code, but Carmine had no such principles.

The man glanced away from me, confirming what I already knew of Carmine. There was nothing he wouldn’t do for more power. I blew his brains out without a second thought. The hot spray hit my face, mixing with the rest. I addressed my brother without looking at him; my eyes focused on where the brain matter covered the concrete.

“We’re monsters, Leif. Every one of us. We don’t have codes. We don’t have souls. We do whatever it takes to be on

top. And I'll do whatever it takes to get her back. I suggest you leave before you join the mess on the floor.”

There was a pause while I listened to the sound of his fingers tapping his leg, a nervous habit. Every moment I waited for him to leave was a moment I didn't have. I would rather avoid killing my brother. Not because I felt anything for him. Because I couldn't. I didn't have the capacity.

But I would find no peace in his death. And it wouldn't be easy to explain. I'd bring a whole different kind of war onto myself. It would only delay me from my goal. But I would do it if he made it necessary. Leif knew that.

“Try not to get yourself killed.” He said a second before I heard his steps retreating.

I didn't care if I died. I didn't fear death. But I also wasn't ready to leave Kincaid. I needed her back. Needed her to keep the demon locked in his cage. He was roaming free. Killing everything in sight.

“We'll find her.” Tristan spoke. I flicked my eyes to the side to look at him. Kincaid had once said he resembled Draco Malfoy; I saw it now. The memory brought a brief smile to my face before it faltered again. I wanted to believe him. But hope didn't belong in my world.

My little dove didn't belong. But I'd taken her. She was mine.

Mine to touch.

Mine to have.

Mine to protect.

And I'd failed.

Now she was mine to avenge.

Kincaid

I held my mother's hand when she died. I watched the last breath leave her lungs. And I waited for her to take another. In that beat, I saw the acceptance in her face. Saw the pain and struggle leave her body. She was at peace. Even through the pain, her body found peace in death.

That was how I knew this wasn't the end for me. I wasn't going to die here. I didn't feel any of that peace in this cold concrete box.

All I felt was a need to fight. A burning desire not to die on this disgusting floor. I'd often dreamed of death. Even wished for it. But I'd always found the strength to go on. I wasn't going to let that strength fail me now.

I sat on the ground as I looked around the room. The air was damp and dark, but my eyes had long ago adjusted. There were no windows to tell me if it was night or day. Maybe I was in a basement or the office of a warehouse.

There was nothing in the room I could use as a weapon. I'd already inspected every inch of the floor and walls. It was an empty concrete box, other than a hose attached to the wall, which I assumed was used to clean up when they were done. I

refused to think about what would need to be cleaned from this room. My mind pushed away the horrible image of them washing blood from the concrete where I sat.

I shivered as I drew my legs closer to my body, my clothes doing nothing to keep me warm. I was still wearing the leggings and sweater I'd put on this morning, or was it yesterday morning? Minutes felt like hours as I waited for my captors to come back. I didn't know what their plans were for me. But I planned on staying alive. Whatever it took.

Finally, the sounds of voices carried to me from outside the tiny room I was in.

"I think you should leave her alone." I recognized the deep voice from earlier. "Do you know what Maddox will do to you if he finds out you touched his girl?"

"That's why he's not going to find out it was me." Cigarettes answered. "He's still questioning every Gallo he can get his hands on. Our man will keep his attention focused on them."

"I wouldn't trust him to protect you." Their voices were right outside the door now. "He was supposed to be loyal to the Vancinis. If he can turn on them, he'll turn on us."

Someone had betrayed Maddox? Someone had led these men to me. Why? Maddox didn't talk to me about his business. They could torture me, and I still wouldn't be able to tell them anything. I didn't even know who the Gallos were. I'd kept myself away from this part of his life. Because it was

easier to want him when I turned my head. When I ignored who and what he was.

A capo in one of the biggest mafia families. A killer. A soulless monster.

“We’ve already become their enemies. We might as well have a little fun.” Cigarettes chuckled.

The creak of the door opening drew my attention. I whipped my head up and blinked as light shined directly in my face. I tried to clear the spots from my vision as my eyes burned.

“Time to wake up, princess.” Cigarettes spoke.

Before I could respond, a blast of cold water hit my body. The force of the hose knocked me to the side. My hands slipped in the water as I tried to right myself. I choked as he kept a steady stream of icy water pointed at my face. I felt like I was drowning as my chest seized for air.

As suddenly as it started, it stopped. Shivers ran down my body as I hacked and coughed, trying to push the water from my lungs. Gagging and heaving as I tried to survive.

Once it subsided, I scrambled back into a sitting position, not wanting them to have any more of an advantage than they already did. I wrapped my arms around my legs to gather any warmth I could. Water dripped from my soaked clothes and hair onto the hard concrete. My teeth chattered as my body racked with tremors.

I narrowed my eyes as I looked at the men before me. I assumed Cigarettes was the one with the hose dangling from his hand. He was in his thirties with stringy black hair that hung to his shoulders. His gut pushed over the waistband of his jeans, and his plain white t-shirt was stained.

Another man stood beside him, holding one of those giant flashlights that cops used. He was around the same age but looked like he took better care of himself. His head was shaved, and he had a plain forgettable face. I could've seen him at the club a hundred times and not remember him. He was completely average.

“What the fuck did you do to her neck?” Average asked. Cigarettes crouched before me as Average aimed the flashlight at my body.

“She was like that when we grabbed her.” Cigarettes reached out to tilt my chin up to better inspect my neck. I smacked his hand away as my skin crawled from his touch.

“Jesus sweetheart, we might be the better option if that’s how he treats you.”

“Fuck you.” I growled at them. They kidnapped me. Froze me to the bone. Sat outside this room and discussed ‘having fun’ with me, but now they were going to pretend they cared about my well-being.

Cigarettes smiled, and the sight of his yellowing teeth made my lip curl in disgust. “Oh you’re one of those bitches.”

“What?” Average asked with no real interest in his tone. Like he was already bored with my kidnapping.

“This little princess likes its rough. I bet she gets all hot and bothered when he chokes her out.” I fought the urge to gag as the scent of rot wafted off his breath. “I bet she even likes it when he hits her. Isn’t that right, baby? You like a little pain. Have you let him do disgusting things to your body? Hit you? Maybe even cut you up a little?”

I ground my teeth together as I glared at him. I knew it was smarter to stay quiet. To bide my time until I could find a way out. Until Maddox came from me. Because if what they’d said was true, he was looking for me. I just had to stay alive until then. Alive and unharmed.

“Such a pretty thing to have such a fucked up head.” He stroked a finger down my cheek, and I jerked away. “Is it because daddy didn’t love you? Is that why you get off on the pain? Looking to punish yourself for being a piece of trash that not even your own father wanted.”

I had never dove into my psyche to figure out why I liked what Maddox did to me. I didn’t want to like it, and if I ignored it, maybe it would go away. Was this asshole right? Was it because I felt lost and alone? Was I punishing myself?

No. He was just trying to get a rise out of me. Trying to make me yell out, so he had an excuse to hurt me. I wasn’t going to give him one.

“Do you think he left your whore mother because she was a freak like you?” I heard the blood pounding in my ears as a

rush of fury overtook me. My rage blinding me from my plan, clawing at my chest until I couldn't get it inside anymore. I yelled before I could swallow the words.

“You're a monster.” Anger and cold made my body vibrate as I glared at them. I knew I should've stayed quiet because he grabbed my chin until I could feel his fingers bruising my face. My teeth cut into my gums from the force. The metallic tang of blood filled my mouth.

“I'm a goddamn criminal. Torturing people is literally my job, but you're the monster here. You'd have to be to let a psychopath like Maddox fuck you. To moan as he hurts you. It takes a special kind of freak to come from that.”

I was glad it was dark when my cheeks bloomed in shame. I'd tried to push away those feelings since the first day Maddox had made me come from pain. But now I was faced with the reality of it. People who enjoyed pain were sick, demented. Even these monsters standing in front of me thought I was the crazy one.

My ex had called me a freak too. The only person before Maddox who I'd told about my secret desires. The ones I kept locked away before Maddox had forced them out. I'd always known it was wrong. Known I would be judged. Ridiculed. Shamed. That's why I had repressed them for so long.

“Maybe you just need the right dick. Someone to treat you nice. If you suck my cock real good, I'll treat you right. How about it? Want to suck my cock, baby?” Cigarettes let my chin go as he smirked down at me like he was asking me to go to

dinner with him instead of sexual assault. Average chuckled softly in the background. I thought he sounded like the more reasonable of the two, but not enough to stop his friend from raping me.

“You bring that tic-tac you call a dick anywhere near my mouth, and I’ll bite it off.” I resisted the urge to squirm away from him as he continued to crouch before me and crowd my space. His protruding belly brushed my knees that were soaked and still tucked into my chest.

As quick as a snake, his hand moved, striking. His fist connected to my cheekbone with a sickening crunch and a jolt of pain. I felt the explosion below my skin as the force of it shoved my head back, hitting the concrete wall behind me. My wet hair slapped my face as I blinked back the tears that formed in my eyes. My brain throbbed, but I didn’t know if it was from the drugs or the hit.

“How’d that feel, baby? Did your pussy get wet for me?” There was no smile on Cigarettes’ face. It was twisted with rage. A queasy feeling settled low in my belly. Is this what my desires brought? Anyone thought they could rape me because I allowed one person the permission to hurt me?

“That was your fault.” Average said. “Play nice, and so will we.”

“Yeah, I really believe you.” I said as I shivered and glared back at them. “I’m sure if I’m nice, you’ll just rape me instead of killing me.”

The sarcasm in my voice was heavy as anger boiled my blood. I knew there was nothing I could do, no way I could act, that would stop them from hurting me. Especially because they'd quickly seen inside my depraved mind. Could everyone see how fucked up I was?

I knew what I felt for Maddox; the enjoyment I got out of him hurting me wouldn't happen with these men. He'd been the first person to ever see that side of me before. It was only supposed to be him who saw it. There was no one else I'd ever want to act on it with.

I wanted to touch my face to see if anything was broken, but I refused to show any sign of weakness. It would only make it that much easier for them to hurt me. My fingers curled into my damp clothes to stop the urge.

"Is it really rape if you get off on it?" Cigarettes whispered in my ear, making my stomach heave. My chest caved in as his threat washed over me. My limbs started to shake from fear and adrenaline. Willing me to run. To save myself. But there was no way out of this trap. The one I'd allowed myself to walk into.

I might have twisted desires, but I knew what rape was. I'd chosen Maddox. That's what made it different than what these men were describing. Even if now I realized it was a mistake to be with him.

"We weren't paid to kill you." Average said. "Just keep you for a while. But we didn't realize you'd be so pretty. We have to find some way to pass the time." He shrugged as

Cigarettes reached out to touch me. A single fingertip brushed the cheek he'd abused before trailing down my jaw and neck. I swallowed the bile that rose up my throat as I jerked away from him.

So someone had paid them to take me. I was a distraction. A way to keep Maddox busy while he searched for me. They didn't want him focused on something else.

I didn't know if these guys were stupid or if they thought I was. But I filed away all the information I could gather from them. Anything that could help me escape. Anything I could use once I was out of here.

"Well, I hope it's worth it when Maddox cuts your throat." I braced my hands on the floor so I could sit up straighter. I looked Cigarettes right in the eyes as I spoke. The low light made them look dark and unfeeling.

Cigarettes laughed. I scrunched my nose to try and stop the putrid smell from filtering through me. He inched his boot forward until it rested on my fingers. I stifled the small squeak as he pushed his considerable weight onto my hand.

I felt a burn and a pop, the agony following soon after. But the noise of my finger breaking was drowned out by his words. "You actually think he cares about you enough to come looking? To kill for you. You're just a whore he paid to hurt."

My chest constricted because a part of me knew what he said was true. Maddox had paid me in the beginning. I had been a toy to him. If I knew anything, it was that Maddox

didn't care about people. He didn't feel those types of emotions.

However, he was possessive. His feelings didn't matter. I was his, and he would take offense to anyone touching something of his.

I smiled as I looked between them, ignoring the aches and shivers in my body. Slowly their faces fell. I could feel their apprehension as they failed to scare me. They expected me to cry. To beg. To crumble. I spent time with Maddox. He was a true demon. These regular monsters could barely touch the kind of pain he'd caused me. The pain I wanted him to cause.

"He already has." I spoke calmly. "I watched him beat a man so badly his face looked like ground meat. Do you want to know what he did to deserve it?"

I flicked my gaze to Average, whose hand had tightened around the flashlight. I could see the fear in their expressions. "He touched me. And that was before Maddox claimed me as his. So the question isn't if he'll kill for me. The question is... will it hurt when you die?"

Cigarettes stood up, grounding his boot further into my hand before walking over to whisper in Average's ear. I quickly brought my abused fingers into my lap. My pinkie was twisted at a weird angle, and blood seeped from a puncture wound on my middle finger. At least it was my right hand, which wasn't my dominate one.

I glanced back at them. Their brows were creased, and Average's jaw was locked tight. He shook his head at whatever

Cigarettes had said. I could read their expressions. I'd spend years watching people, learning who to avoid while working at Entice, the Vancini run strip club. They were realizing they'd made a big mistake.

"I suppose..." I continued talking as if I'd never stopped. Their eyes whipped back to me. "It'll depend on how he finds me. On what you do to me." I lifted my broken fingers into the air and examined them. A soft tsk escaped my lips. "Broken fingers." I gestured to my cheek. "Bruised face." My hand swept down my body. "Risk of hypothermia." I shook my head lightly back and forth. "Not looking good for you guys."

"Shut the fuck up." Cigarettes shouted. I tilted my head and smiled at the fear in his voice.

Whoever they were working with might be a villain like them, but no one was as terrifying as Maddox. I'd seen how people looked at him. Even other criminals feared him. He might not have the top title, but he had the power.

I opened my mouth to speak again, but Cigarettes sprayed me with the hose. I sputtered and jerked, trying to get away from the cold. He cut it off abruptly so I could hear him yelling at me. "I said shut the fuck up, or I will kill you."

Please, just end it.

The thought popped out of my mind as quickly as it came. This was not a time for one of my dark moods. I couldn't afford to be weak right now. I might think about suicide sometimes, but this was not how I wanted to die. Not here. In a concrete box, being tortured by criminals.

Average smiled as he looked down at me. “Or is that what you want, sweetheart? Is that why you’re with a psycho like Maddox? You want to die, but you’re too afraid to end it on your own. Don’t worry; we can help you with that.”

I refused to let their words sink in. Refused to believe they were right. Even if I’d thought them myself before. I pushed my insecurities away and smiled at them through my shivers. I wasn’t going to show my fear.

Both their faces fell, and without another word, they headed towards the door. I couldn’t stop myself from taunting them. “Leaving so soon? I thought we were going to have some fun.”

My voice was lost as the door slammed shut behind them. As soon as the metal lock clicked into place, my bravado fell. All my fear came rushing back. I winced at the pain in my hand as I pulled my legs closer to my chest. I tried to stop the shiver that ran through me, but there was nothing I could do.

I believed everything I said to them. I knew Maddox would kill them, but would I be alive when he got here? Even if they didn’t come back to kill me, I could die from hypothermia or dehydration. My head fell back against the wall as I closed my eyes. I didn’t know what I was supposed to do now.

It felt wrong just to wait for them to come back. Or wait for Maddox to save me. But I’d already looked for weapons. I’d already looked for a way out. And that was before they broke my finger and drenched my clothes.

My mind wandered back to what they'd said. Was I a freak? A monster because I'd allowed Maddox to hurt me? I'd let him whip me with a belt. Cut my skin with glass. Burn me with wax. Not to mention countless hits to my most intimate parts. I had to be insane to allow a man to slap my pussy. Not just allow it, but beg for it. Come from it.

And he wasn't just a man. He was the worst of the worst of these kinds of men. I'd allowed myself to forget that. To ignore it. I'd fallen into his world. I let him make me believe it was okay.

There had always been a darkness inside me. A bleak feeling. It had told me to kill myself. Told me that life was too hard. That it was easier to leave this world behind. I'd never acted on it.

I certainly wasn't alone in that feeling. People found all kinds of ways to deal with it. Drugs. Sex. Love. I'd coped with books. Lost myself in the fiction of romance. It was the only time I could disassociate. To forget about the world and my problems. It was how I was able to keep pushing forward.

Until Maddox. He'd made me feel alive. But at what cost?

There would be no escaping into words now. No hiding from what was happening. I'd allowed myself to hide for too long. To ignore what Maddox was. Now I was paying for it.

I didn't know how long I sat there, but I could feel my body shutting down on me. Whether it was the overwhelming fear or a way to conserve energy, I didn't know. Slowly the shivers stopped. My limbs became heavy, and my mind started

to wander. I could no longer track my train of thought. It was all floating images and tangled words. I didn't try to. I just let it take me. Let myself float away into nothing.

Kincaid

M*y mom stroked my face, brushing a blonde strand of hair behind my ear. I stared into her gray eyes, the same color as mine, as I tried not to cry. I clung to her hand, not wanting to let her go. Her skin was papery and pale. It was the end. I could feel it. The air was heavy with sadness and death.*

A part of me wanted to look away. Wanted to shield myself from these last moments. I didn't want to remember her this way. Frail and lost. But I refused to let her die alone, and there was no one else. No aunts or uncles. No friends. Certainly not my father. I was all she had, and she was all I had. And soon, she would be gone.

I would be alone. Truly alone. I would be floating in space without my anchor. Without the person who grounded me to life. The one who'd given it to me. The one I stayed alive for. I'd never lived without her. I wasn't sure I could. Wasn't sure I wanted to.

How could I go on without my mother? My best friend.

"Live." Her voice croaked as she spoke. She could always do that. Read my expressions to know my thoughts. "Don't let

yourself die because of this. Your life is a precious gift. Don't let it go."

"Mom." I didn't bother hiding the tears that rolled down my cheeks. They felt warm compared to the chill that had seeped into my veins. Her words pressed against the dark places in my mind. The ones that had started to take over since she'd gotten sick.

"Promise me? All I ever wanted for you was to be happy. It's okay to be sad when I'm gone, but don't let it consume you. Find a way to be happy again. Find your happiness and grab onto it. Don't let it go."

I swallowed the lump in my throat as I shook my head. I couldn't talk. Couldn't tell her all the things I felt. She already knew. We'd spoken enough over these last few months. I rested my head on the mattress next to her. I counted her breaths as her chest rose and fell, shifting the hair on my head.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

In.

** * **

I woke abruptly; the dream of my mother shoved back into the darkness. I peeled my eyes open, flicking around the small room, trying to figure out what had startled me. I wanted to go back to sleep. Wanted to see my mom again.

My eyes were slits, and my vision blurry as I tried to see past the haze. Something told me I should be cold. That my body should have been shivering, but I couldn't care. I felt nothing. I wasn't even sure I had a body anymore.

Shouts carried to me through the closed door. Reminding me I was being held hostage. I tensed, waiting for the door to open. They kept coming back, hosing me down and whispering vile words into my ear. Torturing me with my own desires. With the things Maddox did to me. I had no sense of time or how long between each assault. It just never seemed to stop.

I had the vague thought that maybe they were arguing over how to kill me. That maybe it would finally end, and I could find some peace in my dreams. That's when the gunshots started.

Rapid fire; echoing around the concrete as if they didn't know what they were aiming at. A part of me wanted to sit up. Prepare for what was coming. Defend myself. But I couldn't move. I was weighted down. Or maybe I was afloat.

My mother's voice slammed into my mind, telling me to live. I whimpered as I thought of her. Or just giving up and joining her, the way I'd imagined doing it a hundred times before. But I couldn't.

I groaned as I rolled to my stomach. I tried to lift myself, but my fingers were numb. My arms weak. They wouldn't listen to my commands. The cold, wet concrete didn't even register in my senses. I didn't feel the puddles of water beneath me.

It was as if I was floating again. There were no surroundings. No pain. Finally.

I stopped trying to fight. It was a waste of energy. What was coming would come. I wouldn't be able to stop it. And I wasn't sure I wanted to.

I closed my eyes and tried to pull forward the dream I'd been having. My mom had been talking to me. It had been her last words. I hadn't thought about them since she'd died. I'd buried that day in my memory. I didn't want to remember her that way. Frail. Sick. Gone. Why had my mind conjured that image?

Maybe this was the end. If there was an afterlife, I wondered if it'd get to be with her. Probably not. She was kind and sweet. Nothing like the darkness and depravity that lived in me. What a disappointment I must be to her. Her only daughter a freak. Tied to a demon.

Instead of seeing my mother, his face came to my mind. Dark hair and soulless blue eyes; brightening for me. I felt his touch as if Maddox was really here. I heard his deep voice; telling me to stay. To choose him.

The image vanished, the sound of the door banging against the wall drowning out his voice. But it was faint, as if it came

from the other side of a tunnel. As if I wasn't really in the room. But I wasn't really gone either.

I didn't bother trying to open my eyes. My cheek was pressed into the floor, and my hands were tucked by my face, almost as if I was sleeping. I waited for the pain to come. For a hit or a gunshot. For the slice of a knife or another burst of cold water. Instead, a hint of warmth brushed my wrist.

“*Cazzo.*” The Italian curse was spoken roughly from a voice that was vaguely familiar. Or maybe not. My mind was fuzzy, unable to collect a thought. A light brush down my face made me twitch. “Kincaid, can you hear me? You have to wake up. If you can hear me, wake up.”

He sounded so concerned I wanted to tell him I was here. That I was okay, but nothing happened. My mind fogged as I tried to find the words. Tried to place the voice in my memories.

I felt bad for him. He was so worried about me. But all I wanted was to see my mom again. Hear her voice.

“Kincaid. I'm going to take these clothes off of you, okay?” His words were soft but rushed. “You'll freeze if I don't.”

I was already freezing. Or I was frozen. Because I didn't feel cold. Not anymore. I didn't feel anything. I heard the splat of wet fabric hitting the ground next to me. I thought I should shiver when my clothes were removed, but nothing happened. Something soft wrapped around my body. Then I was floating.

No. He'd picked me up. I was being carried. I was leaving the gray box. Leaving the concrete walls. I wanted to thank him. The man whose voice I recognized but didn't know. But I couldn't. I faded again into the darkness. Into the cold. Back to my mother.

Maddox

I ripped the front door open, making it smack against the wall as my feet pounded down the steps to the car coming up the driveway. When Leif called me and said he'd found Kincaid, I hadn't believed him. I still didn't. I thought he was trying to get me to stop the warpath I'd started. I wouldn't believe she was safe until I held her. That was the only way this burning sensation in my chest would stop.

Tristan had forced me back to the house and into the shower. If she really was here, I'd be thankful I wasn't covered in blood. If not, I would soon be again.

I practically took the car door off its hinges before it even stopped. Kincaid lay in the backseat, my brother's jacket wrapped around her naked body. Her white blonde hair was wet and plastered to her face. Her perfect lips were an unnatural color of blue, as was the porcelain skin I loved so much.

"Is this how you found her?" I asked Leif as I reached into the car to get her out. I took a moment to let my thumb linger down the curve of her cheek. To feel that she was here. Here, but barely alive.

A million scenarios ran through my mind. There was only one reason she'd be without her clothes. If anyone, *anyone* had hurt my little dove in that way, there would be no safe place for them. They would feel every violation they'd put upon her bestowed on them. They had no idea what pure torture was coming.

“No. I had to take her clothes off.” My jaw clenched as I whipped my head around to him, ready to kill. But the sound of Kincaid's soft whimper drew me to her again. “She was drenched and on her way to hypothermia. I still can't get her to open her eyes.”

“The doctor's inside.” I lifted her into my arms. She didn't stir, and her body was cold against mine. I tucked her close, trying to give her my warmth as I rushed back into the house. Tristan, Henry, and a few guards followed. “Little dove, can you open your eyes for me?”

Her eyes fluttered behind her lids but didn't open. My chest constricted, and tension coiled low in my gut. It felt like the walk up the stairs was miles. Like it was taking days to reach my bedroom.

Dr. Mechan waited next to the bed. He was in his sixties with hair graying at the temples. His face was deeply lined as if the stress of being a mafia doctor for most of his life was getting to him.

We couldn't always go to the hospital. Nurses and doctors were required to ask questions and report gunshot wounds.

And large public buildings weren't easy to secure. But I didn't care about any of that.

As I placed Kincaid on the bed, I swore I'd take her to the hospital if he told me to. I'd rip the beating bloody heart out of my chest if it would bring her back to me. I sat beside her, grasping her cold hand in both of mine. My thumbs stroked her palm and the back of her hand as I kissed her knuckles. I couldn't let her go.

"Leif, stay. Everyone else out." Henry lingered in the doorway, but I didn't have time to deal with him.

He'd been the one with her when she'd been taken. He'd been shot and lost part of his ear, but I had no sympathy for him. He'd already be dead if I didn't need every available person out looking for her. I stroked her hand as the doctor rolled the sleeve of Leif's jacket and inserted an IV into her arm.

"Tell me everything." I asked Leif after the others left. I watched as the doctor examined her. He lifted her lids and flashed a light behind them. He applied a bandage to a cut on her cheek before wrapping a splint around her fingers.

"I got a tip from Mike that one of our old warehouses was being used." I'd have to thank Mike for his loyalty as an informant. A frog ring wouldn't do it this time; he'd saved my little dove. "They were guns for hire. I don't think they expected to be found so easily. Or how hard we would hit them. They weren't prepared for an attack. My men took most of them out. Bash is securing one for you to question."

“Why didn’t you call me?” I snapped. I should’ve been there. I should’ve saved her. Killed them. Nothing would stop the inferno inside me, not until I saw their blood on my hands. Not until I inflicted every injury she had onto them.

“We didn’t have time to wait.” Leif glanced at Kincaid again with a look I couldn’t decipher. It was something close to fear, but he didn’t know her. Didn’t care about her. Why would he be afraid if she lived or died? “I left one alive for you.”

Knowing there was still pain to be delivered curbed my anger a little. For now. I looked at the doctor as he finished his exam. “How is she?”

“Bruised cheekbone, broken finger, and fractured right wrist. The hypothermia is bad, but the warm fluids will help. She needs to be dressed. I’ll send for a heated blanket as well.” He cleared his throat as he glanced away from me, busying himself with putting away his supplies. He feared what would happen to him if she didn’t recover. “I won’t know more until she wakes up.”

“What does that mean?” I ground my teeth together as I looked at her porcelain skin. Her blue, cold skin.

“The body is amazingly efficient at keeping itself alive during extreme cold. I can’t make promises, but....” Dr. Mechan trailed off as he glanced at Leif. Whatever he had to say next would push me over the edge. He knew it, and he was hoping my brother would save his life.

“But.” I said through a clenched jaw.

“She has several bumps to her head; without her awake, I can’t assess if there will be any deficiencies.” He spoke clinically as if my little dove was another number to him when she should be his world. His life depended on her getting better. If she didn’t, I would take it out on him and anyone else who failed to help her.

“Deficiencies?”

“Memory loss, seizures, personality changes. When she wakes up we—.”

“Get out.” My voice was low, but the threat of death was in every word. The doctor looked to Leif then back at me. Neither moved. I’d already held a gun to my brother once today, and I’d do it again if I had to.

I couldn’t take it anymore. I felt like my skin was being peeled from my body. Like my heart was being cut from my chest. I’d done this to her. She might never recover, and it was because of me.

If one more person said the wrong thing, I was going to shoot them. I would rip their throat out if only to make someone else feel as bad as I did. The demon inside me was roaring to life. It wanted to maim and kill. The countless bodies I’d left across the city in my pursuit of Kincaid meant nothing now. They didn’t stop the need for more. The darkness that wanted to consume everything in its path.

It wasn’t even anger. It was something else. Something I’d never felt. Something I couldn’t identify. It was slimy and sick and hung heavy in my gut.

“I said get the fuck out!” I shouted as I gripped Kincaid’s soft hand. I didn’t yell. I didn’t show emotion. But right now, who I was, what I’d done before, didn’t exist. Only she existed. And I only existed to be with her.

“Mad.” Leif took a step towards me. I could see the confusion on his face. He didn’t know how to react to me.

I was insane, but not like this. I was soulless and killed without remorse. I didn’t form attachments to people. I didn’t care if someone was hurt. Women were holes for me to fuck. People were toys for me to play with. For me to manipulate and destroy.

“Let the doctor take care of her.” He placed a hand on my shoulder briefly before shrinking back at my glare. My brother was second in command; he ran from no one. Whatever he saw in my expression had a rare show of fear crossing his features. “I know you feel for her. But—“

“I don’t *feel* for her.” I sneered. He might be my older brother, but he was a child. He’d never felt for someone what I did for my little dove. I brought her hand to my lips again as I stroked her arm. I wanted to be closer. I wanted to pull her to me. But the IV was still attached, and she was tucked under the blankets, locking in the warmth she needed.

I didn’t think I was capable of this feeling. It felt very close to love. But not the romantic, sweet love in movies and books. It was dark and twisted. Obsessive. The kind of love that meant I’d rather we both die than be without her.

The kind of love that had made me consider doing it just so she'd never be taken away from me again. But then I wouldn't hear her voice. Or see her beautiful blue veins under her skin. Or feel her touch.

“I love her.”

Kincaid's hand twitched in mine. I squeezed back as my eyes jerked to her face. Her cheeks had some color in them again. I watched as her lashes fluttered. And then I saw the beautiful sight. The thing I'd been craving since she'd been taken away.

Her pale gray eyes. Eyes that looked like the sky on a winter day.

She looked directly at me like she knew where I was the whole time. “Maddox.”

Cazzo. I always loved hearing her say my name, but now it was different. It was my salvation. She was saving me from the edge. I would've tumbled down without her.

“Right here, *mia amata*.” I moved closer so I could cup her cheeks. I placed a soft kiss on her forehead and then her lips. Soft isn't what he did. I liked administering pain, and she liked getting it. That would come later. When she was healed. And then I would really know she was with me again.

“You're safe.” I whispered in her hair as I pulled her close, ensuring the blanket covered her naked body. Kincaid whimpered in my arms. I shot Leif a look. He ushered the doctor out of the room and closed the door behind them. I

knew she wouldn't want anyone else to see her like this. She might fall apart for me, but my little dove wasn't weak. She was strong, and showing anything else to the world would hurt her. "How do you feel?"

"Cold." She whispered.

"Okay. Give me a second." She gripped my arms as I tried to get up. I didn't want to leave her, but I knew what she needed. "I'll be right back, my little dove."

I kissed her wrist, feeling her pulse bump under my lips before I tucked her back under the covers and crossed the room. I filled the tub with warm water and placed towels on the warming rack. Once it was ready, I went back to get Kincaid.

Her eyes were closed again, and for a second, I was worried she'd passed out. I rushed to reach her, my heart trying to jump out of my chest. But as soon as she heard my footsteps, she looked at me. It hit my square in the chest like the last time.

Mine.

She was mine; no one would ever take her from me again.

Kincaid

Maddox's intense gaze never left me as he stripped off all his clothes. My eyes tracked down his body. Taking in the way his hair curled on his forehead and the handsome plains of his face. I'd always thought he was too beautiful. A predator designed to lure his prey.

Hard muscles covered his chest and arms. Leading down to the perfect ridges of his six-pack and the V cut that pointed straight to his thick cock. My breath caught in my lungs as my core clenched.

I was surprised I could feel anything besides bone-deep exhaustion and fear. But that was the power Maddox had over me. I'd always chosen him over sense and reason.

Slowly without causing any pain, he removed the IV from my arm. He stripped off the borrowed jacket and blankets before scooping me into his embrace. I rested my head against his chest, absorbing his warmth and safety as he carried me. At this moment, I never wanted to be anywhere else but in his arms.

It was foolish. It was the illusion of safety. I would never be safe with him. From him. Or the people who would use me

against him. From myself and the depraved desire, I felt for him. But I was willing to allow myself the comfort because I needed it. Needed to pretend, if even for a moment, that I would be okay. That he might actually care for me. That I might survive him.

He stepped into the giant tub with me still cradled in his hold. I hissed as the warm water touched my cold skin. It burned and ached as it covered my body.

Maddox was careful to keep my hand, that had a splint and brace, out of the water as he adjusted me until I sat between his spread thighs. My head rested back on his chest; his arms wrapped around me. He'd held me like this many times before while we were in bed. I let myself fall into the familiar pattern even as questions plagued my mind.

"Henry?" I asked. I had an image of him lying in a pool of blood. I needed to know if I was the reason he was dead. If I would carry that stain on my soul forever.

"Lost part of his ear. A bullet clipped his scalp." I let out a sigh of relief. I didn't know if I could live with myself if he had died. "He'll live. For now."

"Maddox." I tried to turn in his hold, but he wouldn't let me. Instead, I tilted my head back until I could look at him. "Don't do anything. It wasn't his fault. He tried to save me. He took a bullet for me."

"It was a flesh wound." He grumbled. "I'd take one for you right here." He intertwined our fingers and brought them to his chest directly above his heart.

I sucked in a sharp breath as I felt the rapid beat of his pulse. My eyes flicked to his. The deep blue swarmed with emotions I'd never seen on him. Emotions I hadn't thought he was capable of. I could sense his fear and unease. It unsettled me because Maddox was never afraid.

"I'm okay." I whispered before bringing our hands to my heart. "I'm right here."

"You're hurt." His other hand traced the brace that stopped at my mid forearm. I didn't need to ask what the doctor had discovered. I'd lived it. I wasn't ready for a retelling.

"And I'm sure you'll hurt them worse." An uncomfortable feeling tugged at my stomach as I spoke the words easily. I spoke of him torturing someone as if it was normal.

Was he really any different than the men who'd taken me?

He was. He was worse.

Those men were everyday criminals. I didn't see the sadism in their eyes that I saw in Maddox. The enjoyment he got out of pain. I'd told myself a million times I should fear it. Maybe now I actually would. Now that who he was and what he did bled into my life. Threatened it.

Maddox reached forward and grabbed a bar of soap sitting in a dish beside the tub. Ignoring the washcloth nearby, he rubbed the soap between his hands until they were full of suds. He set it back down again before skimming his hands over my body.

He started at my wrist, avoiding the broken one, then up my arms. He brushed my hair off my shoulders as he worked the lather into the sore muscles. He kneaded until I felt boneless and at risk of sinking into the tub.

He lingered at the pulse in my neck. Gently tracing the veins there, as if feeling the beat helped him know I was alive. He slowly trailed his hands back down. I expected him to tease my nipples, even ached for it, but he was thorough and efficient.

He wasn't touching me to turn us on, even though I could feel his hard cock pressing into my back. He was touching me to know I was safe. He was washing away what had happened to me. What he had allowed to happen. I could feel the guilt and sorrow in the way he sighed as he came across a bruise or scrape on my skin. I wanted to reassure him, but his touch had lulled me into a trance.

I wasn't safe with him. His life would continue to bring fear and hurt like this. As much as I never wanted to admit it, I cared for him. I maybe even loved him. In a depraved and twisted sort of way. But I didn't know if I could live in his world.

I could handle what he did to me. To my body and mind. I'd been handling it. Reveling in it. Craving it. Or I had before. Before I started to question everything again.

But if I were his, people would always come for me. People would always use me to punish him for his sins. I

didn't know if it was worth it. If he was worth it. If the way I felt around him was. He made me feel utterly alive.

Free.

But for how long? For how long could I live in his world? How long before the next person came? Or before my mind finally snapped and I sunk so far into my own darkness, there would be no way out?

For this moment, I was going to take comfort in his touch. Maybe none of my worries mattered anyways. This situation had to have woken him up as well. He didn't want to have a weakness. And I was a glaring weakness with fragile bones.

I knew he didn't have normal emotions. He didn't love me. Maybe this would be the thing that pushed me away from him. That broke his obsession. I ignored the stuttering in my chest as I rested my head back on him.

“Do you want to talk about it?” His voice was surprisingly soft as he spoke against my ear. A shiver ran down my spine as his lips brushed the sensitive skin. He cupped water in his hands and poured it over the soap lingering on my body.

“No.” The physical pain was minimal. I'd had much worse. Begged for much worse with the man who was currently wrapped around me.

It was the things they said. The vicious words. The harsh truths that were creeping into my mind. Making me doubt who I was. I cleared my throat to stop the lump from forming. I

knew it could've been much worse. In some ways, I was lucky. Lucky to walk away with only a few broken bones.

Maddox lopped his arms around me, pulling me closer. There was no space between us. I got the impression he would absorb me into his very being if he could. "Who got me out of there?"

I was curious about the voice. The one that had been vaguely familiar but laced with remorse. With sorrow. It was like they blamed themselves for not protecting me. Protecting a person who didn't even recognize them.

"Leif. My brother." His fingers continued to inspect and soothe every inch of my skin.

"I've met him at Entice." I spoke slowly as I tried to process why Leif would react that way. I sort of remembered him. There was a family resemblance to Maddox; only he had an air of authority, whereas Maddox exuded insanity. I never paid much attention to anyone else once he'd sucked me into his depravity.

"It should've been me. I'll never let anyone hurt you again." His breath stuttered in his chest. "I'm sorry."

The door I was trying to close, the one that held the desire that only Maddox brought out in me, rattled at his words. I'd never heard him apologize. In all the times, he'd forced me to his will. All the times he'd caused me pain.

I wanted to reassure him. To tell him it wasn't his fault, except I'd been telling myself the exact opposite. All I really

knew was that I didn't like the agony I heard in his voice.

“Someone told them about me.” I said instead because maybe he was to blame, but someone else was more at fault. Someone else who deserved whatever retribution Maddox would bring to them.

Someone had betrayed him. Someone had thrown me to the wolves to get to him. Someone had used me like an object. Like I wasn't a real person, who could be hurt. A person with feelings who'd be traumatized by being kidnapped and tortured.

“What do you mean, *mia amata*?” Maddox continued to hold me close; his head rested on the top of mine. I took solace in his soothing touch.

“I could hear them talking. They mentioned that you would never find out what they did to me because someone was keeping you focused on the Gallos. But one of them was worried this guy would betray them because he'd already betrayed you.” His arms tightened around me, almost making it impossible to breathe. I could feel the rage pumping off him in waves. “They never said a name. I should've tried to get a name.”

Maddox gripped my chin between his fingers until I was looking into his dark blue eyes. “You did the only thing you were supposed to do... you stayed alive. You came back to me.”

His mouth pressed into mine. His tongue parted my lips gently. I willingly let him in. I tried to ignore the

overwhelming rightness as our tongues tangled together. Tried to pretend it was the emotions of the day. It was relief to be out of the cement box. It wasn't him.

I let myself get lost in his kiss. Lost in my lies. Lost in him.

My chest pinched as I wondered if it was worth it. If I could continue to pretend he wasn't what he was. Continue to let myself live in his cage.

Maddox

I rubbed Kincaid's silky hair between my fingers as I stood looking down at her sleeping form. I had a flashback to months ago when I'd done the same thing. When I'd broken into her apartment and tried to figure out what had drawn me to her. I knew what it was now.

She was always meant to be mine.

There was no one particular thing that had taken me in. That had spread these feelings inside me. Yes, she was gorgeous. Smart. Strong. Defiant. Her depravity matched my own. I'd never met another woman who could take my pain. And she took it so well.

Screamed for me. Bled for me. Came for me like it was her purpose in life. Because it was. She was put on this earth for me.

That was what had drawn us together. I didn't need to name a reason. A quality in her. I knew it deep in my bones. The same way I knew my name. It just was.

She was mine.

But I could feel her pulling away again. Whatever progress I'd made before her kidnapping had been shattered at my feet. I could feel her shrinking back inside herself. Hiding away her desires. Her nature, like she'd done in the beginning.

Fury licked through my veins. I brushed the strand of hair behind her ear before leaning down to place a kiss on her shoulder. I inhaled the powdery scent that always seemed to cling to her skin as I pushed down the urge to crawl back into the bed beside her.

I'd spent most of a day with her next to me in bed. It was an example of what I was willing to do for her because she'd been naked the entire time. I'd fought the constant urge to fuck her. To remind us both who she belonged to.

I wasn't a man who delayed gratification. If I wanted something, I took it. Like I'd taken her in the beginning. But I'd held myself back so she could heal. So she had time to remember who she belonged to. And now I had to leave. I had to deal with the problems that had been caused.

I closed the door quietly to not disturb her. I found Bash, Tristan, and Henry at the bottom of the stairs. I addressed the man I'd fully planned on killing until Kincaid had asked me not to. His long blonde hair was pulled at the nape of his neck. His once boyish face had hardened after what had happened. A bandage still covered his ear. He now looked like he belonged in this world.

"Henry." My tone was clipped, but I managed to keep most of the venom from it. "You know you failed. My little

dove almost died because of your inexperience.”

“Yes, sir.” He showed me respect by staring into my eyes instead of looking to the floor in shame. I’d liked him when we met. Well, as much as I could ever like anyone. I thought he could make something of himself, and because of Kincaid, he’d get another chance.

“Fail again, and I won’t hesitate to end your life.” His eyes widened slightly in surprise. “She’s asleep now; see that she gets anything she needs when she wakes up. But she’s not allowed to leave.”

“Understood.” I turned, dismissing him, but I heard his voice as he headed up the stairs. “Thank you.”

I rubbed between my eyes as he walked away. I didn’t care for his thanks. I didn’t want it or deserve it. I never should’ve left her alone with someone new. She was right to ask me not to hurt him. It was me that needed to be punished.

“Tristan, check on the clubs. We’ve neglected them the last two days.” I’d worried about Tristan lately. He was my cousin and set to take the next available capo spot, but he’d been erratic at best.

However, he’d never left my side while I’d scoured the city looking for Kincaid. His loyalty wouldn’t be forgotten. “Bash, we have a meeting with my father.”

I walked out the door without waiting for their responses. They’d been with me long enough that I trusted them to take

my orders. Bash's tattooed hand came out to open the car door for me before I could.

He was the son of my father's guard. I used to wonder if he'd been planted to spy on me, but years together had proven his trustworthiness. Plus, his huge size, buzzed hair, and body covered in tattoos were always useful when we needed to scare someone. I climbed in the backseat and waited for him to get behind the wheel and pull away.

My mind raced on the drive to my father's estate. I had a rat. I'd already been told but assumed it was one of the other Capo's men. I'd foolishly ignored the warning, and I'd almost gotten my woman killed because of it.

I was arrogant. I believed everyone feared me. I'd let my guard down. It was time to remind Sayton City who was really in charge. A murder spree through the criminal underworld was already a good start.

The rat had to be someone close to me. Someone who'd realized what I had only just figured out; that Kincaid was my weakness. I loved her. That made her a target to be used against me. If I were a better man, I'd let her go. Let her live a safe life without me. But I had never claimed to be a good man.

But I needed to find who had betrayed us if I had any chance at keeping her safe. Why hadn't I discovered it already? My job was to know secrets and weaknesses. Was I blind to my own? Because of her? Had I become too distracted?

I didn't care about the family business. Not as long as it gave me a reason to use my skills. A way to release the demon inside me. I did care what happened to my little dove. I would need to become more involved if only to protect what was mine.

This was my fault. I'd allowed this to happen. I'd allowed her to stay at her apartment. I'd tried to let her come to me. Let her have her freedom. Because I was trying to be nice. Trying to hide my true nature.

It ended today. She'd been drawn to the demon once. She would be again. I'd make her.

* * *

There was no fear as I walked into my father's office. In theory, I should fear him. He was the biggest mafia boss in the Midwest. He'd worked his way up to becoming the head of the criminal world in Sayton City. It had been won in years of bloodshed, and now he owned the city. No one did a thing without his permission.

I was a capo in the family, not destined to take over the Vancini family, so technically he owned me. But he ruled with fear. And since I didn't feel fear, I was hard to control. My insanity meant he feared me. Worried what I would do.

I was unpredictable. People hated that more than anything else. As humans, we were designed to look for patterns. To like them. I was born to destroy them.

The scent of cigars hung heavy in the air as I took a seat in front of his desk. It was larger than necessary, made of dark wood meant to be imposing. It was a prop, just like everything else in his life. He'd risen in the ranks so that he could display his wealth and power. I'd taken my position so I could have a reason to let loose the darkness inside me. The family gave me protection and a purpose to torture and kill.

Smoke curled from his mouth as he pulled the cigar from his lips. A small smile played on my own as I waited for him. I had things to do, but I enjoyed that he thought he could scare me. It was like watching a child throw a tantrum.

"You disrespected me in front of the family." I took in his features. Leif and I looked remarkably like our father. Dark hair, lean muscular builds, and olive skin. They both had dark eyes as well. The corners of his were now wrinkled, and his hair was peppered with gray. Leonardo Vancini was an intimidating man to most.

"I did." I stared at him blankly as I leaned back in the chair. There was no use denying it. I'd held a gun to his head in front of everyone. Even if I could feel remorse for my actions, I wouldn't. I'd done what I needed to.

"And do you think that'll go unpunished?" He snapped as he ground out his cigar in the ashtray. It was an act meant to intimidate. Obvious and overused. He leaned forward and placed his hand over the gun that rested on his desk.

My eyes went to the weapon before slowly looking back at him. My posture stayed relaxed as I waited for the real threats

to come. If he thought this would scare me, then he was mistaken. My own life meant nothing. I thought after all the blood I'd shed this week that I'd made it perfectly clear what mattered. I lived now only to protect her.

“I saved you from that roach-infested apartment. I killed your whore mother and took you in.” His brown eyes held so much contempt a regular person would've crumbled before him. “Even though it embarrassed the family to have a bastard son. I saw the potential in you. I thought you would be an asset to us. Instead, you've proven to be a liability. Your insanity is a risk we can no longer afford.”

He raised the gun and pointed it at me. I almost laughed. He loved to pretend he'd saved me from my mother. In some ways, he wasn't wrong. She was a junkie and a prostitute. We lived in filth, where I worried for my next meal. But if it had been up to him, he would've had me aborted.

I held no illusion that my father cared about any of us. It didn't bother me. I didn't seek his attention or affection. But it was slowly killing my sister Alessandra. Leif and I were assets; she was property. An item to be sold to the highest bidder; to form an alliance.

“Don't be ridiculous, *father*.” The disrespect was heavy in my tone. “We both know you're not going to kill me here. What a mess you'd have to clean off your desk.”

I shifted in my seat, running my fingertips along the polished surface, leaving a smudge behind. His jaw clenched;

his rage at my indifference evident, but the gun never wavered in his hand.

I had no doubt he could kill me if he wanted to. But if that were truly the plan, we would've met somewhere else. Where disposing of my body would be easy. Somewhere away from my sister. All of this was just for show. An attempt to assert his dominance. To instill fear in me.

“I am an asset. I know more about our enemies...” A smirk crossed my face as I tapped the wood. “And our friends than anyone else. We both know information is power.”

“Strength is power.” He shot back. I inclined my head slightly in agreement.

“Of course. But information can wound almost as easily as a bullet. Information such as how Carmine Gallo became the head of his family.” I saw the flash of fear in my father's eyes. “Or how a large sum of money was deposited into a Swiss bank account under my mother's name. I wonder how a dead woman could open a foreign bank account.”

He'd made a mistake when he'd aligned himself with Carmine. If the other capos found out he'd helped him gain the power that Carmine was now using to try and take us down, they'd see my father as a traitor. We don't involve ourselves in each other's businesses except with a formal contract. Like the one Alessandra would sign for her marriage. Backhanded deals are punishable by death.

“If you died, that information would die with you.” His jaw clenched as he stared at me. The gun still pointed in my

direction.

Maybe I should feel something as he threatens my life. He is my father. But I don't. I had no feelings of attachment to him. He'd given me his name, his power, and I enjoyed it.

But he'd also benefited from having me as a son. A soulless monster that had gotten rid of countless enemies for him. I made people fear the Vancini name, and until now, no one had dared to question our strength.

"Would it. Or have my men been instructed to send a package to every capo detailing your involvement with Carmine... if I died." I smiled, relaxing back in my chair again.

He stared for another moment. I saw him considering his options. Wondering if I was ruthless enough to effectively end his life. His jaw worked back and forth, undoubtedly trying to find a way out. An excuse for his actions. A way to explain what he'd done so he could kill me. If he had any reservations before, he didn't now. Keeping me alive was a risk, but a risk he would have to take. I'd left him no option.

He lowered his weapon in defeat. He cleared his throat as he straightened in his seat. "You're right. You have been an asset to the family. I'd hate to kill my own son.

I gave myself a moment to enjoy the victory. The power. The strength. Before I stood, looking down at him. I wanted him to feel the shift between us. The dynamic that had always been there, but he was now being forced to recognize.

“Glad that’s settled.” I started towards the door but stilled when a thought occurred to me. Could you have taken her? Was he the rat? I spoke over my shoulder. I didn’t need to look at him for my threat to land. “And if I find out you had anything to do with what happened to Kincaid... you’ll wish I’d given you to the capos.”

Satisfied he understood his place, I quickly exited the house. I had one more stop tonight. One that would hopefully calm the rage running through my veins.

* * *

I unbuttoned my cuffs and rolled up the sleeves of my dress shirt as I watched Bash spray the unconscious man. The toes of his feet scraped the floor as he tried to twist away from the icy cold blast. His wrists were bound to the ceiling by chains as he dangled helplessly. The sounds of his wet chokes danced along my skin, making me smirk in excitement.

My little dove was still recovering. Because of this man, I couldn’t have the pleasure I really wanted. Instead, I would find it in his torment. I gave Bash a slight nod, and the water cut off. The slow drip as it ran down his body would live in his nightmares as it did hers.

The man’s stringy black hair fell over his beady eyes. His white shirt was plastered to his round stomach. Disgust rolled through me as I looked at him, knowing he’d touched Kincaid. Hurt her.

I ignored him as I addressed Bash. “Did you send their heads to the Gallos?”

My captive’s face paled as he realized what we were talking about. As the reality of his situation pressed down on him.

“Delivered this morning.” Bash nodded. I should’ve enjoyed the idea of Carmine opening the box and seeing the faces of the men he’d sent after Kincaid, but I didn’t. Not when what they’d done to her couldn’t be so easily erased.

“I-I didn’t know what she was to you.” He gasped. “I’ll tell you anything you want to know. I swear.”

My steps were careful as I walked to the table Bash had readied for me. The warehouse was deserted for miles. It gave me the freedom to work without interruption. The sound of the bay outside was barely audible over his pathetic words of pleading. Being close to the water was convenient when we needed to get rid of his body. Chopping someone up and feeding them to fish had become a stereotype for a reason. It wasn’t a bad way to dispose of evidence.

Before me sat everything I could possibly want to use. Knives in various sizes called to me. It was usually my preferred method. Nothing was more dissatisfying than a slow kill. There were also pliers, a screwdriver, and a hammer. But it was the match and cigarettes that caught my attention tonight. I picked up the small box then moved to stand in front of my captive.

The water had done nothing to cover his stench; stale cigarettes and desperation. I pushed the box slightly, revealing the sticks inside. I took my time selecting one as I fed off his terror.

I knew it wasn't normal to revel in torture. I'd known it the first time I'd cut open a body to see what was inside. I'd long ago stopped caring. People cared too much about the world's opinion of them. They broke themselves to conform. To perform for an audience more worried about themselves. Ultimately they died unfulfilled and depressed.

But not me. I fulfilled my potential. I did only what pleased me. No matter the consequences. Of course, in my position, consequences had become nonexistent.

It's what I was trying to teach my little dove. To live for herself. To make herself happy. Because when she died, as we all would, it was only herself she had to answer to.

I smiled at my deep thoughts. Torture always brought out my philosophical side. My captive's eyes watched my every move as if he could find a way to stop me. With precision, I pulled a single match from the box before stepping to stand within an inch of him. Water dripped off his body, splashing onto my glossy black shoes.

I struck the match and brought the flame next to his cheek. A centimeter separating the heat from his skin. Close enough for him to feel what was coming. For the scent of sulfur to linger in his nose. For the flame to flicker in the corner of his eye.

I wanted him to live momentarily in the horror of what was to come. Just like she had. Wondering what would happen next. Worrying how bad it would truly be. How much a body could take.

“No.” He groaned as he fought against his chains. The rattling sound feeding the demon inside me. Fueling my depraved desire to inflict harm. “I told you I’ll talk.”

“I’m not interested in your confession tonight.” I pressed the flame into his cheek, the sound of his scream making me relax for the first time since Kincaid had been taken from me. His skin sizzled as the smell of burnt flesh mixed with his terror.

“Wh-what do you want?” He panted as sweat beaded on his top lip.

“Your fear.”

Kincaid

I heard the click of the bedroom door opening, but I kept my eyes closed. I pretended to sleep as I listened to Maddox enter the room. I could feel him lingering at the edge of the bed, just as he had before leaving. It seemed like I could always feel him. Like the invisible strings that had attached us that first day were still intact.

Back then, I'd wanted to run as far away as possible. I wanted to snap the connection. Somewhere along the way, I'd forgotten that. I'd forgotten who he was. Or I'd chosen to ignore it. Pretend it wasn't important.

A relieved breath left my lungs as I heard the bathroom door close behind him. I turned slightly, staring at it. I knew without asking where he'd gone tonight. He'd barely left my side since I'd come back. The only reason he would leave in the middle of the night was to kill. Maybe it was my kidnappers. Maybe it was someone else. I wasn't sure if it mattered. Killing was killing.

At least, that's what I tried to tell myself.

But a part of me wondered if that was true. Would it really be such a terrible thing if the men who'd taken me died?

Would the world really miss them? Would killing one monster protect someone else?

I groaned as I buried my face in the pillows. The silky, expensive, soft pillows. Suddenly everything felt like it was paid for with blood money. The sheets on the bed. The clothes in the closet. This house. All of it was stained red. Tainted. And I'd touched it. Slept in it. Enjoyed it.

I couldn't do it anymore. I had to leave. I'd let myself into the cage, and now I needed to find my way out.

* * *

A week later, I still hadn't found it. I sat across the table from Maddox as we ate dinner on the bedroom balcony. Something we'd done many times before. That wasn't all we'd done on this table. I shook my head and pushed down the memories of Maddox dripping hot wax onto my skin. I tried to forget the way I'd come from the pain alone. The way I'd begged him to claim me.

I thought I had moved past this, but shame burned my cheeks. I thought I could come to terms with what we were. But everything had shifted when I'd been taken. I was reminded how the world would truly view me.

Him. Us. There would be no happiness here. Not for someone like me. Someone twisted.

Even as my body pulsed for him, I resisted. It would be a mistake to start again. He hadn't touched me since I'd come back. I tried to tell myself it was a good thing. If he touched

me, I would get lost in the pain. In the bliss. In the freedom. It would be better if he never touched me again. Better that he'd finally become bored of me. It would make it easier to leave. It was what I had always wanted.

I ignored the sharp twist of my heart as I repeated the words in my head.

“When can I go home?” I asked before taking another bite of food. Maddox watched the fork disappear between my lips. He was always fascinated by watching me eat.

“You are home.” He answered without looking at my eyes.

My throat closed at his words. I reached for the glass of wine as my eyes watered, choking on the pasta I'd been eating. I coughed and tried to clear my airway. The shock of his statement hitting me hard.

“Maddox, this isn't my home. I want to go back to my apartment.” I finally managed when I could breathe again.

His jaw worked from side to side as I stared at him. His eyes had become more soulless the longer I'd been back. They had once started to soften for me. To lighten. But now they were almost black again. Just like when we first met. I wondered if I was becoming a liability for him. If soon he would need to get rid of me. Permanently.

“It's not safe for you to go back there.” He sipped his whiskey as if we were having a casual conversation. Not a discussion about him locking me inside this house.

I slammed the glass back on the table. “You can’t keep me here.”

A wicked smile crossed his face. I fought the urge to squirm even as my panties dampened. I knew that look. That look had brought me both pain and pleasure.

“We both know I can.”

I flew from the table without thinking. The need to get away clawing at my chest, making my heart race. My bare feet hit the stone patio as I rushed towards the glass doors. I pushed them aside and raced through his bedroom. I ripped the door open only to run into a strong body.

I stumbled back, almost falling before hands gripped me in place. I looked up into Henry’s boyish face. Oh thank God it was him. I don’t know what I would’ve done if I’d run into Tristan.

“Do you need something, Miss Kincaid?” Relief exploded inside me at his words. I had an escape.

“Yes.” I rushed. “I need to go home. Can you take me back to my apartment?”

His eyes flicked behind me before settling on my face again.

I deflated, sagging against his arms. He wasn’t going to take me anywhere. I might like him, and he might respect me, but he worked for Maddox. Maddox had saved his life. He wasn’t going to turn away from him.

Anger burned in my blood as I yanked from his hold. I slammed the door in his face before whipping around. Maddox was clearly visible through the windows, leaning against the railing of the balcony. His sleeves were rolled up, revealing the tension in his veins where his arms were crossed over his broad chest. His dark hair curled just above his eyes.

Everything about his body portrayed his casual power. He could keep me here without moving a muscle. Without a second thought. And no one would stop him.

I wanted to run to him and take comfort in his arms just as much as I wanted to slap the smirk off his face. I might have walked in this cage willingly, but he'd closed the door. I wasn't free to leave.

My foot pounded the ground as I ate up the distance between us. I shoved at his chest, trying to do anything to alleviate the anger boiling my blood. "I was perfectly safe there before you."

His hands flattened mine against his chest, trapping me to him. Trapped. I was always trapped. The warmth of his body burned where we touched. "Safe, but not alive."

"I won't be alive much longer if I stay with you." I screamed in a panicked rage. "You made me a target. They took me because of you. If you had left me alone, none of this would've happened. I didn't want any of this."

I snapped my mouth shut as my eyes flicked down. Regret intensified these feelings of being caged. It wasn't fair to put it all on him. Maybe he'd started this, but I'd become a willing

participant. He lowered his head until his mouth rested on the shell of my ear. Intoxicating me with his warmth and smoky scent.

“Seemed like you wanted it when you begged me to claim you like the good little slut you are.” My heart felt like it was beating in my throat. “When you asked me to fill up your cunt with my cum. Maybe I need to remind you.”

I didn't have a second to breathe before his lips crashed onto mine. His tongue invading every corner of my mouth. His presence encroaching on my space. All of him threatening my mind.

Maddox gripped my throat as he reversed our positions. Suddenly I was shoved up against the railing. The harsh metal cutting into my spine. My head and upper back hung over the edge as my fingers clawed at his shoulders. I ripped his shirt as I tried to cling to him. I could feel my hair swaying behind me.

I was at his mercy. If he wanted to, he could push me over the edge. No one would ask questions. No one would come for him.

The fear turned into a twisted sense of desire as he continued to claim my mouth. His tongue thrust into every corner as if he couldn't taste enough of me. His teeth nipped and bit until I tasted the metallic tang of blood. My pulse thrummed under his hand, part desire, part fear, as I ground my hips into his. I moaned into his mouth as his thick cock pressed into my stomach.

I hooked a leg against the back of his calf as I tried to climb him. I wanted to pretend it was because I didn't want to fall, but I knew it was because I wanted to press my aching pussy against his bulge. I wanted the friction. I wanted him to make me come.

I whimpered as he wrenched his lips from mine. The loss of his warmth making me shiver. But the look in his eyes made goosebumps break out across my skin. There was none of the softness that kept me safe with him. They were dark. Endless.

He stepped back until the only thing that held me up was his hold on my neck. His fingers flexed, squeezing the air from my lungs. My back was bent painfully, the metal railing digging into my spine. My hands gripped his forearm, clawing at him. I was nothing compared to his strength. His muscles barely strained underneath my fingers as he held my life in his hands.

“You're mine.” He growled. I saw the fury in his eyes. He shook me enough to prove his point without hurting me. “You're not going anywhere.”

“Maddox. Please.” I croaked as I loosed my hold on him.

My touch turned gentle as I skimmed my fingers up and down his arm. I traced the veins and tattoos. I savored how my fair skin looked against his olive tones.

We were opposites in every way. My emotions were constant, churning on the surface, where his were buried beneath. I was soft where he was hard. Innocent where he was deadly. But my darkness mirrored his. A perfect reflection.

We fit together, as much as I hated it, we matched. A single tear fell as I looked up at him. His fingers flexed on my neck, letting me take a deep breath.

“You said you didn’t want to do this.” I pleaded. “That you didn’t want to force me.”

Immediately he dropped his hand. My head was dizzy from the rush of oxygen as I slid down the railing until my ass connected with the stone balcony. I brought my legs to my chest and wrapped my arms around them.

“Little dove, I—“ I held up one hand to make him stop. I didn’t want to hear what he had to say. An apology or an argument. I didn’t care. I knew why he did it. To make me feel alive. To remind me why I had been drawn to him in the first place.

“I’m scared. I don’t want to die.” I was surprised by my words. When had I stopped wanting death? Stopped wanting to see my mother again. Stopped wanting to run from my life.

A part of me knew, but I refused to acknowledge that what now brought me agony had once brought me bliss.

Maddox crouched in front of me. His fingers tilted my chin until I was looking up at him. He brushed a tear away with his thumb. “I’d never hurt you, *mia amata*.”

“Maybe not.” He seemed to have formed an attachment to me I hadn’t thought possible from him. I knew he would never love me, and because of that, I feared he might still get rid of

me someday. “But someone will always want to hurt me. If I stay with you, someone will always come for me.”

“I’ll never let anyone hurt you again. I know I made a mistake. But that’s why you need to stay. I can protect you here.”

“This isn’t my life. I wasn’t born for it like you.” My eyes pleaded with him, trying to get him to understand I wasn’t made for this. I wasn’t meant to live like him. I couldn’t live with this darkness in my soul.

He stroked my face as he stared at me. I could see the black leaving him. The softness he only gave me returning. “Let me end the war with the Gallos. Once it’s safe, you can leave. If that’s what you want.”

I could feel how painful it was for him. He didn’t want to let me go. It wasn’t in his nature to give in. He took until there was nothing left.

“Thank you.” I whispered as I let my head drop to my knees again. But I didn’t get to ignore him. Maddox scooped me up into his arms. I tried to pretend it didn’t feel right to be in his embrace. Tried to block his smoky scent. His strength. His gentleness. A demon wasn’t supposed to be gentle.

He placed me on the bed. I expected him to climb in with me; instead he pulled the blanket up and stepped back. The pit in my stomach wasn’t disappointment. I didn’t want to finish what he’d started on the balcony. It would be better if we didn’t.

“I’ll have Henry bring you some things from your apartment.” He said as he stared down at me. “You know you can have anything you want, but maybe you’ll feel better with some personal items.”

There wasn’t a possession he couldn’t buy for me. Clothes, books, a car, probably even a plane. But he was right; I’d like to have the few special things I still owned. My mother’s necklace, some photographs, my childhood blanket. I might not feel like a caged animal if I had them.

“And I’ll see about having Tessa come visit. I know you miss her.”

My brows furrowed as I watched him. I’d talked to Tessa a few times since I’d been back. She was understandably upset when I’d gone missing. She was my only friend. The only person I had. I would love to see her. But Maddox knowing that surprised me. The fact that he thought about my feelings. Thought about what I might want.

“Thank you.” He looked at me for a minute longer. I tried to figure out what he was thinking, but his face was his usual emotionless mask. I cleared my throat as he headed towards the door. “I think I should stay in the guest—.”

“No.” He growled.

“Maddox!”

“You stay in my bed. It’s where you belong.” His hand ran through his hair. I could see the muscles ripple in his back with tension. “I won’t lose a minute with you while you’re here. So

you'll continue to have dinner with me. You'll stay in my bed. And tonight, you'll take my cock like the good little slut you are."

I sucked in a sharp breath as he walked away from me again. My emotions were raw from the conversational whiplash.

"Why?" His steps faltered at the desperation in my voice. "Why me?"

Why had he chosen me to begin with? Why did he soften for me? Why did he care for me when he didn't care for anyone? What made me different?

"Because you were made for me."

Maddox

I swallowed another sip of my whiskey, hoping the burn would calm my restless insides. Instead, it churned in my gut, making me more anxious to leave. I glanced around the private room at Entice, the strip club we owned. The red booths and dark walls. The same place I'd fucked my little dove with my fingers and spanked her plump ass. My fingers traced along the wood at the memory. But all it did was make me want to go home and fuck her again until she was covered in my cum.

The rage inside me grew when I thought about her trying to leave me. Trying to run to Henry for help. She should've been running to me. Obsessing over me as I was her. Whatever they'd done to Kincaid had hurt her. Not physically, but mentally. They'd tried to break her. It hadn't worked. She wasn't broken, but she was bent. Twisted. Pulled away from me.

My body hummed with the agitated energy that told me to hunt down her monsters and kill them. To rip apart whoever had taken her from me. She was back in my arms but refused to let me back into her body. Her heart.

They would pay for her suffering. I would make them pay for every day I had to wait to be inside her. I would find their fears, their weaknesses and torture them as they'd tortured her. I would make them know what it felt like to be trapped in your own mind. To war with your own desires as Kincaid did.

Leif was talking beside me, giving orders on how we planned to strike back since the Gallos had destroyed another of our shipments. I held my body still, not giving the other capos any reason to sense my mind wasn't in the room. I needed to focus. To observe our men. We still hadn't found our rat.

“People will begin to talk.” Cesare said. His wrinkled face was lined with anxiety. I knew he wasn't the rat. He was too old to want a war. There was nothing for him to be gained from it. He had all the power he was ever going to want. “They'll question the strength of the Vancinis.”

“Highly unlikely, given the display, Mad put on last week.” Dante smiled, his bloodlust almost as strong as mine. He could be the rat. He lived for violence and chaos. Still, I didn't see him leaving the bed of his latest toy to plan the attacks. “He wiped out a good portion of their men.”

“Yet they still attack our shipments.” Constantine said. I had thoroughly investigated all his men and hadn't found a traitor among them. But I still couldn't rule Constantine himself out. He held secrets. Would he kill to keep them hidden? Did my relationship with Kincaid put his secrets at risk? I'd need to ask Bash to follow him closely.

Leif raised his hand to stop their squabbling. “I have a meeting with Matteo soon. Lines will be drawn.”

I cracked my neck to relieve what little tension I could. I didn't want to be in this meeting. I didn't want to hear about who we were going to torture. Or what meetings were happening. It was unusual for me. I loved to torture, but right now, there was only one person I wanted to unleash my pain on. I wanted to be home. I wanted to be with my little dove. Feel her touch. Hear her cries.

“Maddox will accompany me.” Leif continued. My fingers bit into the glass I was holding. It took everything in me not to crush it in my palm. I would need to hold that back while I met with the person I believed was responsible for harming my woman. “If we can't settle their attempts for a power grab, we shall remind them who we are.”

The men rose as final orders were given. I fought to open the door with ease, to not yank it from its hinges in my desire to get back to Kincaid. Tristan and Bash flanked me as we walked through the club. I saw Kincaid's friend Tessa dancing on the pole as we went. I ignored her as we cleared the main area, and the night waited for us.

As soon as we were outside, I turned to Bash. “Stay here. Follow Tessa. Make sure the Gallos aren't targeting her to get to Kincaid. If it's safe, bring her to the house tomorrow.”

I hated taking unnecessary risks with Kincaid's safety, but she would need the comfort of her friend. I was holding her against her will. And tonight, I would take her. She could deny

she wanted it, but her body spoke the truth her mind wouldn't admit.

Bash nodded as he turned to head inside the club. I ran my fingers along the knife in my pocket as I waited for Tristan to bring the car around. The cool night air did nothing to calm my agitation. Before the hand even landed on my shoulder, I had the blade held to his neck.

Constantine raised his palms in a show of innocence as I reluctantly lowered the knife. Men in our position should know better than to approach without a warning. A monster is always on alert.

"Didn't mean to surprise you." He smiled as he placed his hands in his pockets casually. He nodded to his guard, who left to grab his own vehicle.

"What do you need, Constantine?" I asked as I let out a controlled breath, hiding my annoyance at being unable to kill someone.

"I only wanted to ask how your woman is doing." My head snapped up, and my eyes narrowed.

Kincaid's existence in my life was no longer a secret if it ever had been. But I still questioned Constantine's motives and his knowledge.

"Well. Safe at my estate." I answered. I needed to get the word out that she was no longer an easy target. That she was secure in my home. She wouldn't step a foot outside until this war was over. Even then, she would have guards with her. My

little dove would fight, but her life was no longer her own. She was bound to me forever. She had been since the day I fucked her for the first time. Since I realized she was made for me.

“That’s good to hear.” His smile was kind, almost grandfatherly, but I knew it hid the monster inside. Men like us were always monsters. We didn’t get to our position without a certain disregard for life. “Being tortured can take a toll on a person. Even if the physical injuries are repaired, the mind is not so easily healed.”

The demon inside me rattled its cage. Clawing at the reminder of what had been done to her. I needed to fill in the blank spaces. I had no chance of getting her back if I didn’t know what I was fighting.

“Who said she was tortured?” I said with a level of control I didn’t feel. But something must have given away my anger because Constantine took a step back.

He cleared his throat as if he realized he’d made a mistake mentioning it. “Our enemies do not take a woman without the intention of hurting her.” He shook his head. “Woman and children should be protected from our world, but when you love men like us, there is no stopping the pain that comes with it.”

His words echoed in my mind as he headed towards the curb where his car was waiting. An observer of our conversation might have thought he showed genuine concern for his friend’s woman, but I knew Constantine. He didn’t care for other people. He had no reason to hope Kincaid was

recovering. I had to wonder again if I had underestimated the threat he posed.

Maybe we didn't have a rat. Maybe we had a cunning fox. One who would go to the extreme to keep his secrets buried. Protected.

Maddox

I closed the bedroom quietly behind me. I watched the rise and fall of Kincaid's back as she pretended to be asleep. I knew she was awake. Just like I knew she was listening to my every move. I lost myself in the smooth curve of her neck. In the way her white blonde hair fell on the pillow around her. I wanted to run my fingers along her slightly blushed cheek. I wanted to kiss her again.

My little dove was the only person I had ever wanted to kiss. I loved the moans and whimpers she made when our lips touched. I was obsessed with swallowing them all. When she made those sounds, I lost control. No one else could do that to me.

But what I felt when she tried to leave was worse than a loss of control. It was a raging inferno that threatened to consume her. It was my obsession telling me to hurt her. Kill her. Anything to keep her from leaving me.

It's why I'd left earlier. I didn't trust myself. I needed to release some of the tension gripping my chest. So after my meeting, I paid a visit to my captive. I took some of my

aggression out on the man who had pushed my little dove away from me. It was his fault I had to fight for her again.

And I would fight for her. I would do anything for Kincaid. There were no bounds, no restraint when it came to her. But I resented that someone had put me in this position. I resented that I was a pawn in a larger scheme. That they'd used her as one.

They'd done something to her. Convinced her what we had was wrong. I'd spent so long breaking down her walls. Showing her that it was okay to want the depravity. To be a little sick and twisted. To find her pleasure in pain. And all that work had been stripped away.

When she begged to leave, I'd been tempted to tie her to my bed and show her how much she liked the pain. The demon inside me relished the idea of seeing her withering and bleeding beneath me.

But then she'd touched me. Begged me not to. And like always, her touch soothed whatever monster lived deep inside.

But not enough. I was afraid if I touched her, then I'd kill her. Because I lied. I was never letting her go. She was mine.

As I crept across the room, I saw the imperceptible flinch in her shoulders. My hand barely touched her as I made my way up to the corner of the covers. With a slowness that was physically painful, I drew them down her body. I groaned as I revealed her porcelain skin. She wore one of my t-shirts; the oversized fit made her seem even more fragile.

From the beginning, the darkness inside me had been drawn to her fragileness. Then I'd discovered her body might be fragile, but her personality was defiant. She couldn't have been more perfect for someone who liked to administer pain. Her body bled beautifully. Broke perfectly as she fought.

The shirt had ridden up enough to show me the swell of her ass cheeks encased in red lace. Her legs were bare and smooth beneath my fingertips. I skimmed up and down her thighs, committing the feeling of her silky skin to my memory.

Everything she was felt like it was burned into me. I'd never be able to forget how she felt beneath my hands. The way she looked when I hurt her. The sounds she made when she came from my pain.

She could say she didn't want this. Me. But her actions and body told a different story. My fingers pushed under the edge of her panties. The lace scraped my knuckles as I massaged her plump cheeks. She'd worn these for me. She could pretend otherwise, but deep down she craved me as much as I craved her.

Kincaid continued to faint sleep as I traced the seam of her ass with my fingertip. She clenched around me as I traced that tight hole that was made to take my cock. She acted like she wasn't going to let me in. I smiled, knowing she would. One day she would. I'd have all of her like she had all of me.

My hand skimmed down her porcelain skin until I reached her ankle. I held for a beat. Two. Let her relax, thinking she'd won, and I would leave.

I curled my fingers around her foot and yanked her down the mattress as I dropped to my knees on the floor. Kincaid yelped as I maneuvered her body, flipping her over until my face was inches from her perfect pussy. I brought her ankle to my shoulder as I leaned forward. Pressing my nose to her red lace panties, I inhaled the scent of her arousal.

“Maddox.” She tried to scold, but it came out a moan as I sucked her clit through the fabric. Her fingers came to my head. Twisting in my hair as I flicked my tongue on the swollen bud. She was ready for me. Already wet and begging from the simple touches I’d given her.

“That’s right, my little dove, say my name.” I growled as I ripped the panties from her body with my teeth. The sound of the fabric tearing was lost among my groans as I stared at her cunt. At the place I belonged. Right here between her thighs... for the rest of my life.

Kincaid stilled beneath me. Her hands dropped from my head to the mattress. My eyes flicked up to see she’d turned away. Her face was buried in the covers. She was shutting down. Shutting me out. Trying to put a wall between us.

No fucking way was I letting that happen. I’d thought I lost her once. I wasn’t going to lose her again. Especially not when she was here, in my bed. In my arms. Under my tongue.

“You going to pretend to be shy now?” I chuckled as I took a slow lick through her pussy. I groaned as the taste of her came back to my memories. Heat coiled in my balls as my body readied to be touched by her. “Pretend you don’t want

me to lick this sweet pussy until you come on my tongue? Or would you rather I fill you with my cock? Is that what you want, my little slut, to fall apart as I fuck this perfect tight cunt?”

“No.” She whispered, even as I watched her squirm and clench at my words.

Anger simmered low in my veins as she lied to me. Thankfully I’d burned off enough to keep the slap on her thighs a sting instead of a hit. Her skin pinked as I slapped her inner thigh again. Kincaid jerked as she sucked in a sharp breath.

“Don’t fucking lie to me.” I ground my teeth together. “You think I can’t read you? I know every inch of this body. Every sound you make. Every tremor. Every shiver. I know exactly what you want. What will make you scream in pain. In pleasure. I know how to make you come. How to make you beg. So stop fucking pretending you don’t want it.”

“I don’t.” She whimpered as she tried to wiggle away from me.

My hand clamped down on her thigh, putting it back on the bed as I reached for her. I grabbed Kincaid by the throat, lifting her to a sitting position. I let go long enough to rip my shirt from her body and over her head before tossing it aside.

She could’ve worn anything. She had clothes here. I’d bought her silky negligees and comfortable pajamas. But she’d chosen to announce herself as mine by wearing my clothes. Now she wanted to deny it.

She was so small even though I was kneeling; we were face to face. I stared deep into her gray eyes. Her eyes had drawn me in from that first moment. When she'd walked into my life, and made me question who I was. I squeezed her neck lightly as I intertwined the fingers of our other hands. Her porcelain skin seemed to glow under the moonlight coming in through the windows.

She was so goddamn beautiful; I ached to be inside her. To claim her again. To show her that she was mine. She was mine to worship or torture.

I wanted to touch her like she'd been made for me. Like I'd been born to give her pleasure and pain. Because I was.

I brought our joined hands to her stomach. With my finger controlling hers, I traced small circles into her flesh. Her wintery gray eyes flicked between mine as she tried to figure out what I was doing. Our hands traced up her body until her full breast filled her palm.

I groaned, dying to feel those peaked nipples on my skin, but I couldn't with her hand trapped between us. I maneuvered her hand until she was plucking her rosy nipples. Kincaid tried to drop her head back as she sucked in a breath, but I squeezed her neck, forcing her to watch as I made her touch herself.

"Watch." My lips brushed hers as I spoke. "Feel how much you want to be touched." I pushed until her fingers pinched her nipple hard, making her cry out. I swallowed the sound as it brushed across my lips. "How much you crave the pain."

She shook her head slightly as if to deny it. I dropped my hold on her neck to slap her inner thigh again. Her fingers instinctively tensed on her nipple, pulling tighter, leaning into more pain. I smiled down at her and she released her hold. I chuckled as her palm rested flat against her breast.

“You can admit you like it.” I whispered as my lips trailed across her cheek until I was sucking on the soft spot just below her ear. My cock jumped at the feel of her beneath my lips. “Tell me you like it, and I’ll give you more, *mia amata*.”

She made a soft choked sound as she shook her head. I felt the anger rising up inside me again. The more she denied, the more she tried to push me away, the angrier I got.

I wanted to hurt her more. Hurt her in the way I knew she loved. She could take it, that wasn’t the problem. She’d taken much more than a few slaps. She’d bled for me. Let me burn her. Let me whip her. It wasn’t her I feared. It was me.

I was afraid I’d never stop. That I’d push her off the edge until she admitted she wanted this. Me. She made me crazy. Made me lose control. I didn’t know where the line was. Eventually, I’d hit it. I’d take her too far and drive her further away. If I didn’t kill her first.

No, I needed to take this slow. Remind her what she liked.

I slapped her sensitive inner thigh again, loving the jiggle of her curves and the twinge of pink that my hand left behind. Her skin was made to be marked. By me.

I shifted slightly, rubbing my palm against her soaking pussy. Her hips flexed, pressing further into me. She wanted it. And I'd get her to say it.

My hand came down on her pussy. Slapping her with more force than I'd used on her thighs. She moaned and flexed her fingers around her breast. I did it again, and Kincaid arched into my touch.

Her wetness dripping onto the bed. Coating herself. Getting her ready for what she wanted but wouldn't say. I spread her thighs wide as I moved our joined hands down her body. Her arousal covered our fingers as I swiped them through her center.

"You don't like it?" I stared into her gorgeous eyes as I lifted one brow. "Then why are you so wet?"

Kincaid licked her lips as she stared back at me. Her expression was already turning hazy. She was already falling into the pleasure and pain.

Her lips parted on a gasp as I shoved two fingers inside her soaked pussy. One of mine and one of hers. I gripped her throat again, forcing her to stay with me. She wasn't going to turn away or close her eyes. I wasn't going to let her hide from us.

Slowly I dragged our fingers back out until we were circling her entrance. I groaned as her inner walls tightened, trying to keep us inside. Trying to create the friction she needed. Abruptly we shoved back in, making her wither and moan as I set a steady rhythm. Both our fingers in and out of

her tight cunt. Her arousal dripped, coating our hands as we worked her closer to the edge.

My fingers flexed on her neck, cutting off her air. Kincaid's eyes flew wide as her pussy clenched. "You feel that, my little slut? You feel your cunt begging for the pain? You feel how tight you get when I hurt you?"

Her other hand came to my face. Her thumb brushed my bottom lip, and I responded instantly. Still finger fucking her together, I yanked her forward with my hold on her neck and crashed our lips together. I loosened my fingers to allow her a small amount of air as I feasted on her mouth.

My tongue circled with hers as I drove deeper inside her. I kissed her like I wanted her to become a part of me. Like I wanted to absorb her under my skin. Because I did.

"Now come." I commanded as I broke the kiss and cut off her air. I felt her pulse throb under my fingers in time with the throbbing in her pussy.

Kincaid arched as her hips rocked into our fingers. I dipped my head, capturing her aching nipple in my mouth. The taste of her salty skin making my dick ache. Torturing her was torturing me. I wanted to slam inside her. Take what was mine.

I bit down hard as my tongue flicked the tip. She tensed all over as her orgasm swept through her. I flexed my fingers on her neck to let the rush of oxygen prolong her ecstasy. She moaned as I kept our fingers pumping into her while her walls

tightened and released. I sucked her nipple before popping it from my mouth.

“See *mia amata*. You love it.”

“No.” She whimpered, and a tear fell down her cheek. Maybe I should’ve felt bad. Maybe I should’ve comforted her. But all I felt was rage. Rejection.

I slid my hand out of her pussy and pushed another of her fingers inside. I shoved her back on the bed, my hand still tight around her neck as I wrapped her thigh around my shoulder. I’d broken her once by pushing her to the edge and refusing to let her come. If I had to, I’d do it again.

I slapped her inner thigh, her arousal on my fingers adding an additional layer of pain. Kincaid’s hand stilled inside her as she gulped for the short breaths I allowed.

“Don’t stop. Fucking feel how much you want this.” I bit down hard where her leg met her hip. I could feel my teeth sinking into her flesh; I knew she would be marked tomorrow. The rage inside me calmed slightly.

I would mark every inch of her if that’s what it took. She wouldn’t be able to look at herself without being reminded of what we did. Of what she loved.

I sucked her clit into my mouth as she continued to fuck her own fingers. I stiffened my tongue and flicked the sensitive bundle of nerves as she bucked beneath me. I slapped her thigh again to make her stay still and give her the pain we needed. Each slap was harsher. Each one burned my hand. I

felt the vibrations in her throat where I held her moans of pleasure.

“Say you like it.” I growled. “Say my name. Say you want my cock. I won’t let you come until you do.”

I looked up at her as I loosened the hold. I could see the slight red marks my fingers were leaving on her skin. My cock rubbed painfully behind my zipper. Kincaid pressed her lips together as if to tell me she was done talking.

FUCK!

Why was I here again? Why was I demanding the same things I’d demanded months ago? We were supposed to be past this. She was supposed to be mine already. I was going to destroy everyone person who had done this to her. To us. Who had ruined what we were.

I doubled my efforts. Squeezing her neck. Licking her clit. Slapping her thighs as she pumped inside her tight pussy.

The fingers on her free hand dug into my scalp as she squirmed against me. I growled in approval. She wouldn’t say she wanted it, but she held me like she’d die if I stopped. As soon as I felt her reaching the edge, I pulled back again. I grabbed her wrist and stopped her from reaching her peak.

“Say it.” She shivered as my heated breath brushed her skin. I sank my teeth into the soft flesh of her other thigh as I waited for her answer. She bit her lip to hold in her moan as I left my mark. “*Cazzo.*”

I stared down at her as I undid the button of my pants. My erect and aching cock sprung free into my waiting palm. I groaned as I gave myself one rough pump. I couldn't deny myself the pleasure anymore. I wanted it to be her. But I'd take enjoyment in her watching instead. In showing her what she could have if she just asked.

I brought my hand to my mouth to spit in my palm. Kincaid's eyes flashed as she watched the action. I could see desire spark inside her. I stroked myself again, and she continued to track my movements. I twisted my palm around the sensitive head. I stared down at her as I hissed in a sharp breath.

She was the most erotic fucking thing I'd ever seen. Her creamy skin flushed and damp with sweat. Her cunt dripping and puffy. Her nipples red and swollen. Her white blonde hair disheveled on the pillow behind her. My hand around her neck, controlling her air. Her fingers still pushed deep inside her. It was taking everything in me not to come at the sight.

I shifted my hand on her throat until my thumb pulled on her bottom lip. I leaned forward so I was inches from her face. My hand still pumping my cock. Brushing against her stomach each time I reached the tip. She arched to bring more of her body in contact with mine.

“Open.” She obeyed immediately, her lips parting for me. “That's a good little slut.”

I smiled at her before I spit into her open mouth, mesmerized as it slid to the back of her throat. Kincaid's eyes

widened as she jerked beneath me. Her plump tits pressed into my chest. I gave her more for my weight as I squeezed her neck again, stopping her from turning away. “Do you like the taste of your cum? Swallow.”

Lust burst beneath my skin, and my cock swelled further. Her throat worked under my fingers as she took what I gave her. She kept denying it, but here she was, swallowing my spit. Obeying my commands. She’d swallow my cum if I made her. But she was right that I didn’t want to force her. I wanted to *show* her.

I shifted down until I pushed the head of my cock against her clit. Coating myself in her wetness. Kincaid’s hips flexed as she tried to increase the friction. “You want it, my little slut? Say you want my cock, and I’ll give it to you.”

Her eyes begged me for it even as she pressed her lips together. I placed my mouth next to her ear as I spoke. Relishing the shiver that ran through her. “So defiant. Don’t you remember how good it was? How tight you were stretched around me? The delicious pain while I pounded into your sweet cunt? You can have it again. Just tell me.”

I licked the tear that ran down her cheeks. If I were normal, my cock would shrivel at the sight of her tears. Instead, my balls drew tight with the need to fuck her.

But her refusal pissed me off. The rage fighting with desire, making my blood heat. I pushed back the urge to take what I wanted. To spread her thighs and destroy her perfect pussy.

“Fine. Then you don’t get to come.”

I knelt in front of her and attacked her clit again. I licked and sucked roughly as she bucked beneath me. She pumped her fingers where I wanted my cock as I jerked off. My hand moved easily over my dick, slick from when I’d dragged it through her wetness. Just as I felt her rising again, I moved up her body.

I bit and sucked just above her pussy. I licked the sweat dripping between her breasts before biting her nipple. The whole time I kept my hand on her throat, keeping her in place. Forcing her to experience this with me.

My eyes stayed on hers. I watched as they glazed with pleasure. Watched as they followed me. Followed where my lips closed around her breasts. Where I left bites and bruises.

When they started to close and her body tensed, I released her neck and yanked her wrist. Her lips parted on a gasp as I pulled her fingers from her pussy and shoved them between her lips. Rubbing them hard and deep along her tongue, making her gag. I don’t know if it was instinct or if she anticipated my command, but she sucked them immediately.

With the knowledge that she was tasting herself, the same taste on my tongue, I came. My back tingled, and my balls drew tight as I cursed above her.

I pumped as the first white streak covered her face. Coating her eyelashes. Her cheeks. Her lips. I leaned forward slightly, pumping again as I covered her breasts. White hot strings clung to her nipples. I moved down so the last of my

cum painted her cunt. Our ragged breathing filled the room as I collapsed next to her.

“Lick it clean.” I ordered. I watched as she brushed a finger through my cum and brought it to her mouth. She sucked her finger, and I swear my wasted cock tried to come back to life. I skimmed my hand down her body until I cupped her pussy. I gathered my cum and shoved it inside her. I knew she was still sensitive. Still on the edge because I hadn’t let her come. Her inner walls quivered around my fingers. “Let’s put this where it belongs.”

I pumped into her until she took it all. My lips collided with hers. I groaned as our flavors mixed. I could taste the sweetness of her mouth, her arousal, and the saltiness of my cum. It was an intoxicating mix that made me want to give up this plan. It made me want to please her. To worship at her feet. But Kincaid had always responded to my brutality.

I circled my finger inside her, gathering more of my cum before I slipped out. I traced down the seam of her ass until I pressed against that tight hole. I shoved in; breaching easily with my cum lubing my digit. Kincaid withered and moaned beneath me. I groaned as I pumped in and out of her tight ass.

“How’s that feel, my little slut? Every one of your holes filled with my cum. Exactly how it should be.” I swallowed her reply as I smashed my lips to hers again. My cock jumped, trying to claim her as I so desperately wanted to.

I brushed her clit with my thumb, letting her believe for a second I was going to finish her off. Let her come for me.

Reluctantly I broke our kiss and pulled from her body before gathering her to me. I maneuvered us until I was sitting, resting on the pillows with her back to my front, her head on my shoulder. The same position I always held her in. Kincaid shoved her back into me as she tried to get away.

“Let me go.” She grunted as I tightened my hold.

“No.” I spread her thighs and threw my legs on top of hers, trapping her. I loved feeling her against me. All I wanted to do was close my eyes and sleep with her right here. But I had a feeling she was going to want to talk.

“Why?” She tried to shove me again. I dug my fingers into her scalp tilting her head to look at me and making it impossible for her to get leverage. I massaged her head and hip as I kept her against me.

“Because this is where you belong.” I kissed the top of her head and inhaled her scent. She smelt like her familiar powdery scent mixed with cum and sex.

“No, why didn’t you let me come again?” She whispered as she gave up the fight.

“I told you. You don’t get to come until you admit you want this.”

Me.

My fingertips traced her delicate skin. I was still angry she refused to let go. Refused to remember what we had. What we were. What she was to me.

“You can’t force me.” She grumbled.

I placed a finger under her chin, tipping her face to look at me. Her wintery eyes were tired. There was no anger. No fight. Just exhaustion. A twinge tugged on my chest. Maybe I was pushing her too hard. But I'd given her much worse, and she'd taken it. Beautifully.

“I'm not forcing you, *mia amata*. I'm doing the exact opposite. If you don't tell me you want this then I'm not going to fuck you.” I brushed my lips against hers. It was a whisper of a kiss. “As much as I want to sink deep inside you. As much as I'm dying to feel you come on my cock. To...” I cleared my throat, trying to will myself to open up to her. “Connect with you. I won't do it unless you ask for it.”

Her eyes sparked with anger. “You'll just push me to an orgasm and then leave me frustrated. You'll make me touch myself while you hurt me. You'll coat me in your cum. How is that better?”

“I'll do whatever I have to until you realize you want this. If I have to withhold orgasms, I will. If I have to cover you in my cum every day so you remember who you belong to, I will. And we both know you want the pain. You can't deny how your pussy squeezed when I hit you.”

I cupped the back of her head, pressing her cheek to my beating heart. Trying without words to express what I felt for her. Feelings I barely understood. The fear of losing her. The bone-deep knowledge that she was meant for me. How could she not know it? Not feel it. I felt it everywhere. I knew in my cells she was meant to be mine. “I don't know what happened,

but I lost you. I'll do anything to get you back because you were made for me.”

Kincaid sniffled and shook her head slightly. “You might as well just force me.”

I tensed beneath her, and she shoved at me again. I snapped. I could almost hear the demon opening his cage. She was fucking mine damn it.

Why didn't she see it? I wanted her to be obsessed. To crave me the same way I craved her. I wanted her every thought. Her entire being. Her whole world, to be focused on me. Because that's how I felt about her.

It was sick and twisted. Depraved. It was who I was. I wasn't ever going to love gently. Conventionally. Or partly. I was consumed by her. By how I felt for her. This was my version of love. And I needed her to understand. To feel the same.

I flipped our bodies until she was pinned beneath me. My hands closed around her wrists as I shoved them above her head. I pressed our hips together, holding her in place without crushing her. The darkness inside me spread, whispered into my subconscious. Telling me to wrap my fingers around her throat. But I didn't trust myself not to end it.

Her.

Us.

“Is that what you want?” I growled as I thrust into her. Our slick naked bodies moved easily against each other. My semi-

hard cock rubbed into her sensitive clit. Kincaid let out a shaky breath as she closed her eyes.

“Look at me.” Her eyes snapped open at the anger in my tone. “You want me to take it from you? That way I can be the villain. You can pretend you had no choice. You can act like you hate me. That you don’t want me to touch you.”

I leaned forward, pressing the entire length of our bodies together. Her full tits smashed against my chest. Her hard nipples rubbed along my skin. I could feel the heavy rise and fall of her breaths. “While the whole time your pussy will welcome me. Your cunt will cover my cock in your wetness. You’ll come all over me. Squeeze my cock so tight I’ll barely be able to move. You’ll tell me to stop while in your head, you’ll scream my name. Is that what you want? You want me to take away your choice?”

Her cheeks blushed, and her throat worked as she swallowed loudly. She liked the idea. And another time, I might be open to exploring this kink with her. Maybe we had been the whole time. But I wouldn’t let her hide behind it now. I needed to know she wanted this.

I rolled off her, tucking her into my side. “I’m not going to do it. Contrary to what you might think about me, I’ve never once forced a woman.”

“You’ll just pay them.”

I tried to hide my smile at her sassy response. “Only you, my little dove.”

There was a heavy silence that fell between us. I didn't try to break it. I let her sit in her thoughts and process everything.

“Why?” She asked again. And this time, I knew what she was really asking. Why her.

“It just... is. The same way the sky is blue or the moon rises in the east; you're mine.”

She fell silent again. But I was attuned to her body. I felt the small imperceptible signs as she relaxed against me. Her heartbeat slowed. Her eyes closed.

I stroked my fingers through the long strands of her hair, massaging her scalp each time I reached the top again. I rubbed small soothing circles into her hip until her breathing evened, letting me know she'd fallen asleep.

I stayed awake for a long time afterward, holding her close to me. I felt like I was losing something I'd only just found. She was the light in my life. She kept the demon at bay. I felt calm around her, like she made me sane. Well, as sane as I could be.

She was all the good parts of me. And her depravity matched my own. It kept me from turning that part of myself onto someone else. She could take it. And as much as she denied it, she actually wanted it. I could give her everything she wanted.

She wouldn't have to worry about how she would feed herself or pay her bills. She wouldn't be alone anymore. She would be loved. A twisted love, but love. I would worship her.

I'd show her that living was better than all the dark thoughts that consumed her mind. That told her death was the right choice.

I'd show her that her kinks and love of pain were normal. Maybe not normal, but not wrong. That it was okay for her to want those things. To get off on them.

I needed to convince her she wanted this. I would make her love me because I couldn't live without her.

Kincaid

The walls were closing in on me as I stared at my things in Maddox's bedroom. My clothes in the closet. My shampoo in the shower. My photos on the nightstand. Henry didn't just get a few of my things from my old apartment; he got everything. They'd moved me into the house overnight as if I wanted to be here.

I'd had a life before Maddox invaded it. I'd had a job. An apartment. Maybe it wasn't great. It was horrible in fact, but it had been mine. Now I didn't know what I was.

I needed to leave. The longer I stayed, the harder it was to convince myself I didn't want Maddox. Especially after last night. I didn't want to want him. I didn't want to crave his touch. His pain. But I did. It was there under my skin. Inside my mind, behind the door, I'd kept closed for so long.

The depraved desires that only he seemed to understand. That I only wanted to explore with him. But I wouldn't do it. Couldn't get trapped any more than I already was.

He thought I was his. That I was made for him. My heart wanted it to be true. Wanted to belong to someone even if he

was a psychopath like Maddox. But my mind knew I wasn't meant for this. I wasn't meant to have good things.

Maddox wasn't made to love. He was made to torture. And that's what he was doing to me. Torturing me with the hope of more. With the belief that what we had could be right when I knew it was wrong. Twisted.

I sighed as I pulled a sweater from the shelf and finished getting dressed. Since I wasn't allowed to leave the house, I felt no desire to dress in anything other than leggings and sweaters. I knew looking casual wouldn't stop Maddox from touching me, but I also wouldn't dress up for him. Like I'd done when he first wanted me, I was trying to put distance between us in the only way I knew how.

Henry leaned against the railing, waiting for me as I opened the bedroom door. He seemed to be my personal guard. If I wasn't with Maddox or in the bedroom, Henry was by my side. I didn't mind his company. There wasn't anything for me to do here, so at least I had someone to talk to.

"Is he gone?" I asked as I started down the stairs. Maddox kept odd hours. I never knew if he would already be gone when I woke up or if he hadn't come home yet.

"No. He's waiting for you downstairs." Henry answered as he kept pace with me.

I hated how my body anticipated Maddox's touch. How my heart raced, and my nipples tightened, knowing he was near. As soon as my feet touched the stone floors in the foyer, I turned left into Maddox's office, where he'd be.

Like the rest of the house, everything in here was expensive without being over the top. The walls were a soft gray, and the floors hardwood. The room was bathed in light coming from a large window behind Maddox's desk. To the left were a couch and a bookshelf. Sebastian and Tristan occupied the two chairs in front of his desk.

“Good morning, little dove.” Maddox smiled and motioned for me to come in.

Sebastian gave me a slight head tip in acknowledgment while Tristan only glared. I hated his eyes as me as I walked across the room. I'd never been comfortable around Tristan, not when he saw all women as beneath him.

Maddox pulled me into his lap and gave me a slow kiss that I didn't want to like. But my walls were always weaker when he was sweet. When he softened slightly in only the way he did for me.

“Our friend needs a visit tonight.” Sebastian said as soon as Maddox brought his attention back to him. He rubbed up and down my back as I tried to tune out their conversation. I didn't want to be involved in this part of his life. The less I knew, the better. Just being near him had gotten me kidnapped once already.

Only when Maddox addressed me again that I realize the other two had left.

“There are some things we need to discuss, little dove.”

My heart clenched at the seriousness in his tone. This was it. He was letting me go. It was what I wanted. Except it didn't feel like it. It didn't feel like happiness tightening my chest, stealing my breath.

Maddox pushed a strand of hair behind my ear. His fingers lingered on the pulse at my neck while he spoke, sending a shiver down my spine. "I wanted you to know I paid off your mother's medical debt."

My head jerked back in surprise. "You what?" My brows scrunched. "Why?"

"It was a weakness. I didn't want anyone to use it against you again."

Like he had. It felt like my heart was slowly deflating. Of course, he hadn't done it out of any affection for me because he didn't know what affection was. He'd done it to keep himself safe.

"Come my little dove. I have something to show you."

He placed me on my feet and guided me out of the room and down the hall with a hand on my back. We passed the dining room and kitchen before coming to a room I hadn't been in yet. I thought it was best if I only went into rooms he'd shown me himself. I knew he killed and tortured people; if he did it in his home, I didn't want to accidentally find where.

Maddox pushed open a set of double wood doors to reveal a library. The ceiling was vaulted with a beautiful chandelier illuminating the space. Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves covered

two walls. They were so tall there was actually one of those rolling ladders to climb and reach books at the top.

Another wall held a stunning abstract painting of a couple embracing in silhouette. The final wall was covered entirely in windows. The top few were stained glass, giving the library an enchanting feeling. Bench seats were built below the windows so you could curl up with a book and look outside. There was also a large sectional and several armchairs to sit and read in.

Maddox wrapped his arms around my waist from behind and pulled me into his chest as I stared at the room in disbelief. “I built it for you.”

I didn’t know what to say. It was beautiful. It was perfect. Everything I would’ve wanted if I had ever thought to dream of a library. My dreams before Maddox had consisted of wanting enough food to eat. Wanting to sleep without my crackhead neighbors waking me. Wanting to feel safe when I worked at the club. Something like this would never have been a possibility, not when my apartment was one room and my only furniture was a bed.

“When did you do this?” I’d been living here for two weeks and hadn’t heard a single noise indicating there was work being done in the house. No pounding of nails or the smell of paint.

I didn’t want to like it. I didn’t want to feel the emotions welling up inside me. I didn’t want to think about the planning that had gone into this. The care he’d taken to give me a space

in his house that would bring me joy. A space that spoke to who I was and what I loved.

It was too perfect. It was as if he'd read my mind. My chest tightened as I realized that's exactly how it felt to be around Maddox. As if he always knew my deepest desires even before I was ready to see them.

His lips brushed my neck, making me shiver as he spoke. "The day after I had you for the first time."

The day he said he wanted me. The day everything felt like it had changed between us. When he stopped trying to break me. When I became more than just a toy for him. When he decided I was his.

Even if I didn't want it. I was his.

Kincaid

“**Y**ou know you could read?” I glanced up at Henry as I turned a page in my book. He gave me a small smile and a shake of his head as he went back to his phone. “What do you do on there all day?”

I’d long ago stopped using social media. I knew it was fake, posed, but it didn’t stop the longing. The need to have what other people seemed to...happiness. I didn’t care about the trips or the fancy clothes. I didn’t care about who was married and who had kids.

I used to find myself staring at their smiles, wondering why I never smiled like that. Why instead of happiness I felt darkness? Felt the need to stop moving forward. I knew if I kept looking at them, I wouldn’t. I wouldn’t be able to keep going. So instead, I buried myself in fiction. Was it healthier? Probably not, but at least it didn’t hurt.

“Scrolling through different apps.” He shrugged.

“Dating apps?” I said with a hopeful tone in my voice. I liked Henry; I wanted to see him happy. I knew it couldn’t be easy being gay and living in this world. If they treated me like a whore for how my relationship with Maddox started, I could

only imagine how they would treat Henry when they found out about his sexual preferences.

“Kincaid.” He warned, but he didn’t have time to argue with me because the doors opened, revealing the only person I wanted to see.

“Tessa!” I screamed as I jumped off the couch, my discarded book falling to the floor at my foot. I was surrounded by the scent of lilacs as my best friend hugged me. “What are you doing here?”

She gestured to Sebastian, who stood several steps behind her. “Apparently, I’ve been deemed not a threat and safe to visit you.”

I rolled my eyes as I led her back to the couches. Sebastian and Henry whispered back and forth for a few minutes before deciding to give us privacy. I let out a relieved sigh when I was alone for the first time. Well not alone, but without a guard watching me.

“I’m so happy you’re here.” My throat clogged as I reached for her again. She was the last link to my old life. Not that it had been a great life, but at least I’d had choices. Even if there had been only bad choices, they’d led me here after all, but at least I’d been the one to make them. “I’m sorry you had to deal with Sebastian to see me.”

I felt guilty that my choices were now affecting her. I knew she never wanted to be involved with the mafia life. Not many people would, but Tessa had a particular hatred for it.

“Oh please.” She smirked. “You can send a good looking man to check on me anytime you want.”

I smiled as she used her armor to ease the tension. Her sexuality was the shield she used to keep herself separated from the world, just as I’d tried to shrink into myself and become invisible.

We chatted for the next few hours, keeping our conversation light. Talking about people from Entice, the new manager, anything besides the huge elephant in the room. Until it couldn’t be avoided anymore.

“So why did I have to go through a security check to come see you? And why aren’t you back at your apartment?” Tessa asked.

I ran my fingers through my hair as I let out a deep breath. “Maddox doesn’t think it’s safe for me to leave right now.”

She nodded as she stared at me like she could read a hidden meaning in my words. “That makes sense. But why do you sound so upset about it? It seems like you have a nice setup here. Are you afraid?”

“No. I mean yes, but....” I bit my lip. “I just want to go back to my life. I’m not made to be a mafia girlfriend. I’m not meant to be with Maddox.”

Tessa furrowed her brow as she continued to look at me. I glanced away, pulling on a loose thread from the blanket in my lap. It probably sounded crazy. I could have anything I wanted. Any material thing, and Maddox would get it for me. He was

doing everything he could to keep me safe and protected. Not to mention he was making it clear how much he wanted me. But it wasn't him I was worried about.

It was me. It was everyone else. I couldn't be this girl. I couldn't be his whore. The girl who got off on being tortured by him. If I let it happen again, I wasn't sure I could make my way back out. If I could live with the shame of knowing I liked it. Of other people knowing. I'd already been tortured for it twice before.

“Have you ever wanted something even though you knew it was wrong?” I vaguely asked.

“Umm... you mean like when I shouldn't eat that last cookie because I know it'll go straight to my hips, but I eat it anyways 'cause it'll make me happy.” She smiled.

I rolled my eyes. “You know what I'm talking about.”

“Do I? You're going to need to be more specific.” She stared at me while I focused on the loose thread.

Could I really talk to her about this? She was my only friend, but we'd never been the kind of friends who talked about sex. I knew what happened when you told those secrets. She'd tell someone, and they'd tell someone else, then soon I'd be 'the girl who gets off on being whipped with a belt' to a random group of people I'd never met. I'd be the freak. If I wasn't already.

“Maddox and I don't have a normal sex life. And I'm afraid if we keep going, I'll never have normal again.” My

voice was soft, only admitting as much as I could.

“What’s normal?” She shrugged. “We all get off from different stuff. Some people like control. Some like a little pain. I don’t discriminate.”

“It’s more than a little pain.” I grumbled quietly, not bothering to wonder how she would know that. Or what she was into.

“I mean, I’m not surprised. With the reputation Maddox has. I knew he was into some kinky stuff.”

“How do you know all this?” I asked with a furrow in my brow. “You know who he was that first night. You knew he was in the mafia. And now you know his kinks.”

She stared at me for a long time. Her green eyes assessing like she was trying to figure out if she could trust me. It was absurd. We’d been friends for years. Of course, she could trust me.

“I knew who Maddox was because I frequent the other club the Vancinis own.” Her words were measured as if she was waiting for my reaction.

“What other club? Another strip club?” I knew there were a few in the city; I honestly didn’t keep track. I’d only ended up working at Entice because the hours let me stay home with my mom while she’d been sick.

“Not a strip club. Wicked.” She smoothed down her dark ponytail, bringing her long hair to rest on her shoulder. “A sex club. A kink club.”

Jealousy rolled through my stomach. What if Maddox and Tessa had sex? What if my best friend had slept with my boyfriend before me?

I looked at Tessa. At her beautiful olive skin. Her dazzling green eyes. Her fit body that men fell over themselves to watch as she danced at Entice. I was nothing compared to her. I was petite and simple. She was gorgeous.

I swallowed the bile in my throat before I spoke. “Oh... um... have you and Maddox ever...?”

“Never.” Her answer was quick and firm. “We aren’t into the same kind of thing.”

Relief washed through me. I knew he’d slept with other people, and so had I. I assumed he’d done the same things with them as he’d done with me. His kinks didn’t just develop overnight. He’d told me before that he’d been exploring them since puberty. I could handle all that. I couldn’t handle it if he’d slept with my best friend.

“What kind of things are you into?” I asked.

She rolled her eyes. “This is about your kinks, not mine. So you like pain play?”

I shrugged. Tessa reached out and shook my knee gently. “There’s nothing wrong with that. Plenty of people like it. There wouldn’t be kink clubs if people weren’t there experimenting.” She gestured around to all the books on the wall. “You read thousands of smutty books, and you’ve never come across some pain play. Some BDSM.”

“No.” I tucked the blanket further around me as she tilted her head.

“Why not?” There was no judgment in her voice. No calling me a freak. She just accepted that this was a thing I liked. Told me it was okay. The same way Maddox did.

“I was afraid.”

Afraid that I wouldn't know my limits. Afraid that my dark thoughts would push me past the edge. Taking your own life was hard, but letting someone take it; that was easy. Even if I could get past the labels, the judgment and open up this part of myself, would I know when to stop? Would Maddox?

Or was I destined to die because of him? Or by his hand?

“Having a partner you trust is important.” Tessa said as if she could read my thoughts.

I never got a chance to reply because the library doors opened as Maddox strode in. He tipped his chin at Tessa in greeting as he yanked me off the couch. Our mouths collided as he stole a kiss from me.

It wasn't a sweet greeting or a polite hello. He didn't hold back in front of company. The kiss was deep and possessive. It was everything he was.

When we pulled apart, I glanced at Tessa, who was pretending to fan herself behind his back. She had more bravery than most people when she pushed him aside to bring me into a hug. She whispered in my ear. “I think you'll be okay. If you let yourself.”

“Bash is waiting in the hall to take you home.” Maddox said as he grabbed me from her arms again. “Make sure you have his number. Call him if you need anything.”

She looked behind herself and smirked at Sebastian. “Anything huh? I could really abuse that power.”

I didn’t fail my notice as Sebastian’s eyes watched her swaying hips as he followed her out. There was something between the two of them, but I couldn’t figure out if it was just an attraction or if it was more.

As soon as they were gone, Maddox kissed me again. He fisted my hair and tilted my head to hold me exactly where he wanted as he pillaged my mouth. His hold was brutal; the sweeps of his tongue harsh. There was nothing I could do but take it. I clung to the lapels of his suit jacket as I opened my mouth for his assault. I wished I could say I hated it, but my whimpers proved otherwise.

I was just beginning to wonder if I could really continue to resist him. If I should even bother or if I ever wanted to, when we were interrupted.

“So it’s true.” A female voice spoke from the doorway. I jerked in surprise as Maddox lingered in our kiss for a few more seconds. My eyes widened as he continued to hold me against him until he was done. Only pulling away when he decided.

“What’s true?” He asked against my lips as he barely separated from me. His hand was still buried deep in my hair

as he stared at my face. His thumb stroked across my lower lip as he smiled.

“That you have a woman living with you.” My stomach dropped at the accusation in her tone.

Oh god, what if Maddox already had a girlfriend? What if she was his fiancé? Arranged marriages were a thing in the mafia, right?

“Everything you’ve heard is true, *Occhioni*.” I didn’t know what the word meant, but I could tell it was a nickname given in affection. In the same way, he called me little dove or *mia amata*, which I also didn’t know the meaning of. She had to be someone close to him, or she wouldn’t have been able to just walk into this house. I felt bad for her even as I wished I was her.

“And why am I the last to hear about it?” Maddox sighed as he finally pulled back from me. He tucked me into his side with an arm around my waist.

I was able to see the woman standing with her arms crossed. She was younger than I expected, probably a few years younger than me. She had large stunning blue eyes, which were a stark contrast to her chestnut hair. Her skin was olive-toned, and she was petite; close to my height. She was beautiful.

If I thought I was jealous of the idea of Maddox with Tessa, I was absolutely devastated to think he was with this woman. She had a subtle sophistication about her that I would never have.

To make everything worse, I could see the kindness in her eyes. There was no malice at discovering me. No fake niceness. I could tell she was a truly kind person, if not a little sad. It clung to her like a second skin. But I would be sad too if I found my man kissing another woman like she was his oxygen.

I cleared my throat and tried to pull away from Maddox, but his fingers dug into my hip. “I’m...uh... going to let you two work this out.”

“You’re not going anywhere, *mia amata*.” Rage boiled inside my blood as he threw the nickname out like it was nothing in front of this other woman. I hated myself for being jealous. For thinking I was important to him. For believing I was anything other than a whore he liked to torture.

“I will not stand here while you talk to your girlfriend or fiancé or whatever.” I yelled as I shoved at him. “It’s bad enough that you treat me like a whore in bed. I won’t let you treat me like one in front of her.” Maddox smirked at me as he easily ignored my efforts to get away from him, keeping me glued to his side.

The woman laughed as she watched us. “Oh I like her.” She crossed the room and held out her hand to me. “I’m Alessandra, Maddox’s sister.”

Sister? My face heated with embarrassment as I shook her hand. Up close, I saw the family resemblance. The blue eyes. The olive skin. The shape of their faces.

I called myself a whore in front of Maddox's sister. I wanted a hole to open up in the floor so I could sink right through it.

"It's nice to meet you." I managed to say.

"I'm excited to meet the woman that willingly sleeps next to this psychopath every night." She smiled jokingly.

"Willingly is a loose term." I said. Maddox growled at my answer as he pulled me tighter into his side. His lips brushed the shell of my ear as he spoke so Alessandra wouldn't hear.

"Let's see how willing you'll be when I eat your pussy tonight."

My cheeks blushed further as my stomach tightened in desire. I tried to push away my reaction as I watched Maddox talk to his sister about her college classes. I could see the lightness in his eyes. The softer side of him that was usually reserved for me. It made me wonder if he could truly feel for people. He seemed to care about his sister, at least in his own way.

Could he care about me? Did he? I mentally shook my head. Those were the kind of thoughts that would get me stuck here. Lost in a man I had no business being near. A demon who would twist everything about me until I didn't know who I was anymore. Until I was his.

"Figlio di puttana." Son of a bitch. Maddox cursed as his phone rang. "I can't get five fucking minutes with my little dove without someone bothering me." Alessandra beamed like

the idea of Maddox wanting to spend time with someone was the greatest thing she'd ever heard. "What?" He barked into the phone.

He rubbed up and down my spine as he listened. I tried to pretend it didn't cause goosebumps to break out along my skin. "I'll be there in twenty." He shoved the phone back into his pocket as he turned to face me. "I have to go deal with someone. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Don't worry; I'll take care of her." Alessandra looped our arms together. "It'll give us a chance to get to know each other better."

Maddox flicked his gaze between the two of us before huffing out a sigh and kissing my forehead. It was an oddly sweet gesture from him that I relished. It was always his rare sweetness that disarmed me. "Be good, *mia amata*."

A rush of wetness pooled between my legs at his words. I turned to Alessandra, pretending this whole meeting with her hadn't been a disaster. "What does *mia amata* mean?"

A bright smile broke across her face; it was the first time she seemed truly happy. I wondered if it was just this life that had broken her. That had made an eternal sadness live in her. But I quickly forgot those thoughts as my breath stalled in my lungs at her words.

"My beloved."

Maddox

The warehouse smelt like piss and blood as I pushed open the door. The acrid smell assaulted my senses. Honestly, it could've smelt worse, considering how long we'd kept our captive here. It was clear that whoever he was working with inside our operation didn't give a shit about him. They'd left him here to be tortured and killed by me.

It wasn't a surprise. If they could betray us, a family they'd supposedly worked with for years, what did they care about a nobody they'd hired and made false promises to?

Our captive jerked on his chains as he heard my footsteps approaching him. His head lulled to the side slightly as he tried to lift it and look at me. Cuts in varying stages of heal covered his entire naked body. I'd long ago taken his clothes, leaving him in nothing but a dirty pair of boxers. It wasn't for his comfort; it was difficult to enjoy torturing him while I had to stare at his worthless dick.

I didn't waste time tonight. He was already half dead. I grabbed a knife from the table before walking over to him. I scrapped the tip along the bottom of his bare feet. He screamed as fresh drops of blood joined the pool beneath him.

We should really consider renovating and adding tiles. It was so much easier to clean than concrete. I pushed the renovation plans from my mind as I stepped back to look at him.

My arms hung casually at my side, knife still in hand, as I addressed him. “I hear you’re ready to talk.”

“Fuck, yes.” He grunted.

I chuckled, enjoying his torment. “You know I’m going to kill you either way, right? Talking won’t change that.”

His muddy eyes looked at me. There was a resignation in them like he’d already accepted the end. The end had been written when he’d taken my woman. “Do I look like an idiot? Of course, I know I’m dead. I’m hoping you’ll get it over with if I spill my guts.”

Hmm... spilling his guts? Sounds like he decided how he would die. “If you tell me what you know, I’ll end your life tonight.”

“Good.” He closed his eyes for a second as relief washed through him. “I don’t know the man on the inside who betrayed you.”

“Bugiardo figlio di puttana.” Lying son of a bitch. I grumbled as I headed back to the table. My hands glanced over the weapons until I stopped at a pair of pliers. You’d be surprised how quickly people fold when you rip off their toenails.

“Wait. Wait!” He screamed as I yanked the nail from his big toe. “Oh fuck.”

He panted through the pain as I laughed. I really did enjoy my job. It was especially satisfying tonight since this was the man who'd hurt my little dove. Whatever they'd done to Kincaid had made her doubt herself. Made her crawl back inside her own mind. Made her reject what we had. My Kincaid was strong. She'd looked my demon in the eye and pushed back. I'd help her get there again.

Every time she'd rejected me these past few weeks, I came here. I tortured the person who made her want to pull away from me. It was cathartic. But I wouldn't have this outlet much longer.

“Fuck, it was her father.” He shouted as I reached for another nail. I couldn't have been more shocked if he'd told me the pope had hired him. But I kept the surprise from my features.

“Her father?”

“Yes, Brent Collins.” He grunted in pain as he started to sweat. “He said he had an inside man. That they were working together to bring you down, and she was the key.”

Kincaid's father had hired the men to kidnap her. The man who'd abandoned her. Who refused to pay for her mother's funeral when she didn't have the money. He partnered with the Gallos and one of my men to take Kincaid to hurt me. I knew I should've gotten rid of that *stronzo* when she'd told me about the funeral.

“We'll come back to who he was working with.” I pulled off another nail as I spoke. “But first, I want to know why?”

Why take her?"

Something about her kidnapping made me uneasy. It was a part of our world, especially common with the Russians. They were known to kidnap the daughter or wife of a high-ranking family member. Usually for ransom.

But Kincaid's kidnappers hadn't asked for money when they'd taken her. If it had been the Gallos, it wasn't a smart play. They had to know I would murder hundreds of them to get her back, weakening their numbers. So the question why still lingered in my mind.

"We-we" he shook his head, trying to stay awake. "We were told to break her."

A red haze covered my vision as he talked. "They said she started as your whore. That you paid her so you could hurt her. Except she was the perfect bitch because she liked it. That she was your one weakness."

I took a deep breath through my nose, suppressing the urge to murder him right now. "And then what? Kill her?"

"No, we were supposed to send her back to you in pieces. Make her reject you so you'd be so distracted you wouldn't see what was coming. She'd weaken you."

Cazzo. Fuck!

Whoever this stronzo was, I was playing right into his hands. I *was* fucking distracted. All I cared about was fixing my little dove. But there was one problem with his plan. I

didn't care what was coming. He could burn the whole city. Destroy the family. As long as I had Kincaid, I'd be fine.

“And what did you say to her to make her break?” I ground my teeth together, trying to keep the demon inside me at bay. Ignoring the voice that told me to kill him. The way my hands twitched to do it.

The bastard smiled. Fucking smiled like I wasn't seconds away from killing him. “The truth. That she was a fucked up little whore. That only a psychopath would enjoy getting tortured by you.” He laughed again, and the sound grated down my spine. “Man, was I fucking right. I almost feel sorry for the sweet little bitch. You'll kill her one day. Monsters always ruin beautiful things. Of course, I got the impression that's what she wan-”

My knife plunged into his neck before he could get the next words out. Blood sprayed across my face as I pulled it out and shoved it in again. The wound gushed, coating my hands with the hot liquid. None of it registered.

All I saw was my little dove being tortured by their words. Being shamed and ridiculed. The world telling her she was a freak when she was anything but. She was sweet and innocent. Loving. Kind. Strong.

“*Porca puttana.*” *Bloody hell.* Bash's rough voice sounded behind me.

For a moment longer, all I saw was red. Red tinted my vision. Red coated my hands. Red dripped to the floor.

Red.

Red.

Red.

I hated losing control. Hated not knowing. I didn't know who the rat was. I didn't know how to get Kincaid back. I didn't know how to clear my mind.

I closed my eyes and pulled forward an image of Kincaid. I pictured her the last time we'd had sex the night before she'd been taken. I remembered how she came just from the pain. I pictured her porcelain skin covered with light burns. I could hear her begging and saying my name. I needed to see her like that again. Now before I killed anyone else.

The red haze cleared, and I turned around. Tristan and Bash both stood beside the door. I had no idea when they'd come in. "Let's head back to the house."

I moved through the empty building and out towards my car. My feet pounding the concrete before I ripped the door open. Tristan slid behind the wheel, and Bash took the passenger seat. I stripped off my shirt and pulled a fresh one from a bag I kept in the car. With a job like mine, I often needed to change. I used wipes to clean the blood from my hands and face.

"Call the clean-up crew." Bash nodded to indicate he heard me.

We drove back to the estate in silence. I was lost in thought about what he'd said. About the things, Kincaid was no doubt

replaying in her mind over and over again. I cracked my knuckles. Stabbing him wasn't enough. He deserved worse for torturing her mind.

Tristan slammed the front door closed with more force than necessary. I ignored his disrespect as I walked towards the stairs to see my little dove. Until Bash's voice finally broke the silence, stopping my dismal of them.

"Mad." Bash gripped my shoulder to stop me. "Did you at least get a name out of him before you killed me?"

"He didn't have a name." I repeated the lie he'd told me.

"*Figlio di puttana.*" *Son of a bitch.* Bash yelled. "You can't keep doing this?"

I glared at him as my blood started to boil again. I was the fucking boss in this house. The capo. Not him. Not that I cared about the hierarchy, but I sure as shit cared when he thought he could tell me what to do.

"Doing what exactly?" I kept my voice neutral and my arms at my side. When what I really wanted to do was wring his neck.

"Kincaid!" He shouted.

"What about her?" I ground my teeth together so hard I wouldn't be surprised if they turned to dust.

I wasn't used to holding myself back, but after my failed interrogation, I feared I'd kill Bash if I didn't stop myself. And I'd really hate to lose him. Not because I cared for him but he

made my life easier. He knew my mannerisms and tendencies better than most. He could predict what needed to be done.

“Putting her above the business. Above the family. She doesn’t belong here. She needs to go.” He shouted; his jaw tensed with rage. “You lose your goddamn mind anytime someone talks bad about her. How many people have you killed for her already?”

“I don’t see why you care.” I clenched my fists as I stopped myself from killing my oldest...friend. I guess we were friends. I didn’t really form relationships like that, but if I did, Bash would be a friend.

“You threatened your father! What happens the next time when he’s not as forgiving?” He rubbed between his eyes as if he was trying to stay calm.

“I’m not worried about my father. And you should be more worried about what I’ll do to you if you don’t remember your place.” I shot back.

Bash took a deep breath as he placed both hands on my shoulders. “My place is by your side, the same as it’s been since we were kids. The same place I want to be until the day I die. But I can’t do that if you go off the deep end and get yourself killed first.”

Did I think he was right? No. Nothing would convince me I needed to give up my little dove. But did I believe his anger came from a misguided place of concern for me? Yes. Still, I was in charge. No one told me what to do.

“And my place is by her side.” I made no effort to hide the weight of my threat. He knew who I was and what I was capable of. “Figure out how to deal with that, or I’ll add you to the pile of bodies.”

Bash’s eyes hardened as he dropped his hands. He nodded once. I was about to turn for the stairs, the discussion over, when Tristan spoke.

“She’s a fucking whore.” He shouted. “You’re going to lose it all. All the power. All the money. For a whore?”

Bash grabbed for me, but it was too late. I had Tristan pinned to the wall, the knife deep in his shoulder in seconds. I felt my blood boiling. The rush of it in my ears drowning out everything else. A dozen or so of my guards had come at the sound of our raised voices. No one would save Tristan. This was my house. My word was law.

“She’s not a whore. She’s my woman. You’ll show her the respect she deserves.” I growled as I twisted the knife.

Tristan tried to push me off, but I punched him in the face. My knuckles stinging as the crack of bones filled the air. He slumped slightly on the wall, my body holding him in place. “I’ve spared your life already once in the last few months. When you killed our only source of information to the Gallos, I allowed you another chance. And look what happened. My woman got kidnapped because we didn’t have what we needed. But I let the mistake go. I let you live. But you just keep fucking up. Do you want me to kill you?” I twisted the

knife again, and he groaned. “Uncle will be so disappointed when I bring him your head on a platter.”

“All this for pussy.” He shook his head but grunted in pain when I punched him again. Adrenaline coursing through my body as blood burst from his nose, landing on the tile floor with a sick wet sound.

“You paid her! You can pretend all you want. You can try and make her something more, but she’s a whore. You can kill everyone who tells you the truth, but it won’t change.” Tristan’s eyes were manic as he screamed at me. Emotions I couldn’t identify marring his features. In all the years we’d spent together, I’d never seen him like this. He was always a little crazy, but this was suicide.

“He was right. She’s a freak who likes to get smacked around, and you’re fucking crazy enough to do it. That’s the only reason she’s here.”

I would’ve ended him right then and there, but a sharp inhale sounded behind me. I whipped my head around to see Kincaid standing at the top of the stairs. Her white blonde hair was mussed from sleep. She tugged on the hem of the shirt she wore. My shirt. Her gray eyes widened as she took in the scene in front of her.

It was her worst fears. Her secret desires out in the open.

And me. Holding a knife in someone’s body.

If I hadn’t lost her before, then I just had.

Kincaid

I flew to a sitting position clutching the sheets to my chest. My heart smashed against my ribs as I tried to figure out what had woken me. The sound of the front door slamming and raised voices carried to my ears. I felt around the bed beside me even though I knew he wasn't there. If Maddox had been in bed, he would've been holding me. He was always touching me. I tried to push away the warm squishy feeling that gave me.

I shoved the covers down and stood. My feet were silent on the plush carpeting as I walked to the bedroom door. I wasn't sure why I was compelled to see what was happening downstairs. Maybe because I'd never heard yelling before. Or maybe it was just my sick sense of curiosity.

I opened the door then paused, glancing down at my bare legs. Maybe I should put on some clothes. Maddox probably wouldn't appreciate me walking around half-naked in front of his men. I moved to the closet and quickly pulled on a pair of leggings. As I walked back to the bedroom door, the sound of my name carried up the stairs, and I surged forward. What were they saying about me?

I couldn't stop myself from needing to know. Was Maddox finally going to get rid of me? Was this the end? I hated that my heart twisted in fear. I should want it to be over.

I walked quickly down the hall until I stood at the top of the stairs. No one seemed to notice me as Sebastian yelled at Maddox while he spoke in a harsh tone that left no doubt he'd killed and enjoyed it.

"She doesn't belong here. She needs to go." Sebastian's words filtered up to me. My heart gave a painful tug. I'd always liked him. Well, maybe like was too strong. But I respected him. I knew his job was to watch out for Maddox. He seemed to understand him and wanted to keep him safe. And he'd been kind to me. I couldn't explain the hurt his words caused because he was right.

I watched them argue back in forth for a few minutes. Their voices had lowered, so I wasn't able to catch every word. I glanced around, and my eyes connected with Henry. We'd been spending a lot of time together since he'd been assigned to guard me. His eyes told me he disagreed with Sebastian. He shook his head slightly as if to confirm my assumption.

Maddox's next words floated to me. "My place is by her side. Figure out how to deal with that, or I'll add you to the pile of bodies."

Holy shit. Did he just threaten to kill Sebastian? His guard. His second in command. For me?

I tried to hide the way his possessive words warmed my chest. But it wasn't easy. Even if I knew we shouldn't be together. Knew his life wasn't for me. I couldn't stop myself from enjoying the feeling of being wanted. No one wanted me. My own father had cast me aside.

But Maddox did. He told me every day he wanted me. Told me I was his. It was hard for a girl like me to turn away from that.

From the absolute obsession, he had for me. It might be wrong. Crazy. Twisted. But sometimes, it felt... good. Good to be wanted.

A smile ghosted across my lips but died when I looked up again and saw Tristan staring at me. A lump formed in my throat as a wicked smirk covered his face, but hatred burned in his eyes.

It felt like he saw inside my mind. Like he knew what I'd been thinking. That I was fucked up for liking this obsession Maddox had for me. I blinked, and his expression was wiped clean as he looked at Maddox. Had I imagined it?

"She's a fucking whore." Tristan shouted. Nope. Didn't imagine it. The asshole.

The thought hadn't even finished forming in my mind when Maddox moved. He shoved Tristan against the wall and drove a knife into his shoulder. My mind buzzed as they continued to argue.

About me.

I knew Maddox had protected me before. I knew he killed for me. But I'd never seen it. I could pretend he didn't go out and torture people every night before I let him back into my bed, our bed. But faced with it in front of me, I couldn't deny who he was. His demon had been let loose. He was going to kill Tristan for what he said.

"You paid her!" Tristan said. "You can pretend all you want. You can try and make her something more, but she's a whore. You can kill everyone who tells you the truth, but it won't change. He was right. She's a freak who likes to get smacked around, and you're fucking crazy enough to do it. That's the only reason she's here."

I sucked in a sharp breath. And there it was. The ugly truth. All of it. I had been paid, and I stayed because I was a freak who liked pain. Pain given to me by a murderer. And everyone knew.

My eyes flicked around the room, trying to look away from the truth. Henry met my gaze again. I expected him to look away quickly. To show me the same disrespect Tristan was. Instead, he stared straight at me. As if he was telling me he didn't feel the same. As if it was okay.

"Kincaid." I whipped my gaze back to Maddox. He hadn't looked away from Tristan. "Go back upstairs, little dove. You don't need to see this."

This. He meant him killing someone.

Did I want to turn away? Did I want to keep pretending I didn't know who he was? Was I ready to be so violently faced

with it?

I didn't know. I glanced around the room again as if the answer would come to me. My eyes connected with Sebastian's. I could see the pleading in his gaze as he looked at me. Maddox was off the deep end, and Sebastian thought I could bring him back from the edge. Did I have that kind of power over him? I didn't know. But I had to try.

I ran down the last few steps coming to stand by Maddox's side. He turned to me as if he felt my presence before I touched him. His eyes flicked to mine briefly before focusing back on Tristan and where he held the handle of a knife that was embedded deep in his shoulder.

I should have been disgusted by the sight of the blood, but sadly it had become normalized to me. Blood. Death. Murder. Torture. It surrounded me now. I *was* disgusted with myself for letting it become that way.

I didn't like Tristan. I never had. He'd made me uncomfortable from the moment we'd met. But I also didn't want him to die because of this. Because of me.

Did I like that he saw me in that way? No. Did I like that he shouted it in front of everyone? No. I hated that he'd probably told other people since that information had been used to torture me. But I didn't want his blood on my conscious. I didn't want to feel responsible for his death.

"Maddox." I spoke his name softly. I know he loved hearing me say his name. He demanded a lot of different

things of me when we fucked, but saying his name was a constant.

I brought one hand to his wrist. I didn't try to pull the knife away; I just rested my hands on him. Gently I brushed my thumbs over his pulse. It skipped a beat as I leaned forward to rest my lips on the shell of his ear.

“Maddox. It's okay.” I whispered so no one but the three of us could hear what I said. What had been revealed about me to everyone tonight was bad enough. I brought my other hand to the nape of his neck, brushing my fingers through the thick strands of his hair.

“He disrespected you.” Maddox growled without taking his eyes off Tristan. “He doesn't deserve to breathe the same air as you.”

“No, he doesn't. But he doesn't deserve to die either.” Something happened as I continued to touch him. It started to feel like I wasn't only soothing him anymore, but he was soothing me. Like the jagged edges of my subconscious, the parts that told me Tristan was right were smoothing out. Made normal by Maddox's acceptance of it. By his willingness to kill to prove it was okay.

“He made you feel like a whore.” Blood poured down Tristan's arm as Maddox pressed the knife further into his skin. It dripped onto the gray stone floor. “He's the reason you're pulling away from me.”

I placed both my hands on his cheeks, subtly turning his head to look at me. I gazed into his deep blue eyes. They had

taken on the manic darker color I saw when his demon came out. I wanted the softness. I didn't want to lose him to the darkness.

“I'm right here, baby.” The endearment popped out of my mouth before I could stop it. I hated how right it felt. “Come back here with me. Let's go upstairs.”

I felt like he was staring into my soul, looking for lies. He wasn't wrong. I had been pulling away since I'd come back. I'd tried to leave. I was waiting until the danger was gone so I could go. But in this moment, it didn't matter. Maddox needed me, and I needed him.

I would be lying if I said I didn't want him again. I'd been telling myself it would be better to go without touching him again. But...fuck... I missed it. Missed him. And seeing him defend me was doing funny things to my insides.

I knew it was wrong to want him. It was wrong to want a murderer. It was wrong to want pain. But I did. And I was going to latch onto this excuse to take it from him, if only one more time.

“He needs to be punished.” He tried to turn away, but I kept my hold on his face. I ran my fingers through the stubble on his jaw.

If I didn't stop him, he'd kill Tristan. Not just because of what he'd said; but because the weight of having one of his men betray him pressed down on him.

Humans betrayed. It was in our nature. We clawed at each other until someone was on top. Maybe it was a leftover survival instinct from our ancestors.

It wasn't the betrayal that bothered him. It was the fact that he didn't see it. He prided himself on knowing secrets. On being in control. He'd been blinded. By me. And he didn't know how to handle it. This violence was a direct reaction to those feelings. He wanted to get his control back. Maddox needed a release. And I would give it to him.

I pushed up onto my toes so no one but Maddox heard my next words. "Punish me."

Kincaid

It happened in a flash. One second I was staring at Maddox's face, and the next, I was looking at his back upside down. I yelped in surprise as he started to carry me up the stairs as if I weighed nothing. One strong arm held me across the back of my thighs while the other was all over my ass. I bit my lip to hold in my moan as his touch made my body tingle.

“Bash, deal with Tristan.” He called over his shoulder before we disappeared down the hall.

He gave my ass a sharp slap as he kicked open the door to his room. I thought he would drop me on the bed; instead he turned until we were in the walk-in closet. It was a loose term for what was really a small room. One of the walls was lined with his clothes and one with mine. There were two large built-in dressers in the middle. But I already knew where he was taking me.

Maddox dropped me to my feet in front of the back wall, made entirely of mirrors. It was like being in a fitting room at a store. The light was low, casting our bodies in a dim glow. My breath hitched as I looked into the mirror to watch

Maddox. He circled around me, stalking me like a predator with his prey.

“What to do with you, my little slut?” I shivered as his fingertips skimmed down my back. “You have been a bad girl. Denying you want this. Do you have any idea how bad my cock has been aching to feel your tight cunt?”

My chest constricted as I realized what I’d gotten myself into. I’d spoken the words that would give him permission. He was going to take me tonight. And I was going to let him.

“As badly as I’ve been dying to come.” I answered as I flicked my eyes to his in the mirror.

Maddox smirked as he moved his hand to the front of my body. His fingers dipped into the waistband of my leggings, down the front of my panties, as I spread my legs on instinct. I closed my eyes with the shame of how easily my body opened to him. I could feel his chuckle against my skin as he roughly tapped my clit with his hand.

“Don’t worry. I’ll make this pussy come tonight.” I almost sighed in relief. He’d been torturing me for a week. My body was already on the edge, ready to explode. “After I punish you for making us wait.”

Then his touch was gone. I took a deep calming breath waiting for his next move. Waiting to see how he was going to hurt me. I tried to control the anticipation coursing through my veins.

Finally, it was too much; my eyes flew open. I didn't see him in the mirror. I turned around, but I didn't see him anywhere. I took a step to walk towards the bedroom when a hand closed around my wrist. I screamed in surprise as Maddox yanked me back into his hard chest.

“Where do you think you're going, my little dove?” My heart tried to find a steady rhythm again as his hand collared my throat. He didn't add any pressure. But it was firm, making his dominance known.

“I-I didn't see you.” I turned to glance up at him. “Where did you come from?”

Maddox flipped us around until I was facing a room I'd never seen before. It was the size of a coat closet. The walls on either side were lined with shelves full of all different kinds of weapons. There were guns, knives, ammo, even brass knuckles. There were also fake passports, money in several different currencies, and a computer displaying the security feed.

“What is that?” I asked in astonishment.

“It's a panic room, but I also use it as an armory. Here.” He pushed me forward gently. As we approached the door, he reached up and closed it. I blinked as I stared at a closet wall. There was a row of belts hanging from a rack. I'd seen it a hundred times; it looked just as normal now as it had before. There were no seams to indicate it opened. No telltale signs that something was hidden behind it.

Maddox intertwined our fingers and lifted our joined hands. We brushed the edge of the rack, where I felt a small screw. He applied pressure, and a click sounded as the door opened. "It's bulletproof. The walls could probably withstand a nuclear blast. If the house was ever attacked, I want you to hide in here until I come get you. No one else knows about this room."

"Why not?" I whispered. I was in shock. It was one of those moments again where I was forced to realize who he was. What his life was actually like. He was preparing me for an attack. I shook my head in disbelief.

"Because I don't trust anyone."

I wondered why he trusted me. I could open this room while he was sleeping, grab a gun, and shoot him. The thought was almost laughable. I'd never held a gun in my life. Let alone shot anyone. I'd never even punched someone. I was weak. Too weak to be trapped in this world of mafia and monsters.

"Now, pick one." Maddox said as he closed the door again, and we stared at his belts. He brought our joined hands to skim down the smooth leather. "Which one should I use to mark your pretty porcelain skin?"

I let out a shaky breath as my thighs quivered. I knew I wasn't getting out of this. I didn't want to. One more night, I told myself. I'd indulge in one more night before I let him go forever.

I fingered a few belts letting the smell of leather permeate my senses. Letting it bring back memories. This wouldn't be the first time I'd felt his belt come down on my skin. Much to my shame, I knew I'd like it, as I had then. I selected a black one with a simple silver buckle and handed it to him.

“Good, my little dove.” He kissed my hair before walking us in front of the mirrors again. “Now strip.”

I didn't bother delaying or disobeying. I quickly took off his t-shirt and dropped it to the floor. I slipped off my leggings and boy-cut panties. I stood before him, completely naked. The way the mirrors were placed, I could see every angle of our bodies. I looked so fragile standing in front of him. Maddox was at least a foot taller than me. His broad, muscular frame seemed to be able to swallow me whole. That's exactly how I felt. Like he was consuming me.

His blue eyes ate me up as he took in every inch of my petite build. From my feet to the curve in my hips, lingering on my tight nipples before coming to rest on my face. He gave me a sadistic smirk in the mirror that made my heart race.

I hated to admit that this feeling was addicting. This fear of what would happen next. Or knowing I was here for his pleasure and he could give me mine or without hold it. I'd resisted for so long. It pressed down on me like a heavy weight.

The weight of the disadvantaged life I'd been born with. The life that I was trying to run back to, even though I knew nothing good, awaited me there. It was the weight of having to

make choices. Keep Maddox close or push him away. Accept who he was or fight it.

I didn't want to make the choices tonight. I wanted the one thing he could give me. Blissful silence from the voices in my head.

My breath hitched as Maddox caged me in with the belt. He pulled it tight across my stomach, so my back pressed into his chest. The fabric of his shirt brushed my skin. I didn't want that. I wanted all of him. If we were doing this, I wanted us where we were before I left. I didn't want us back at the beginning.

“Your turn.” My eyes flicked to his in the mirror.

Maddox licked his lips as he cinched the belt across my chest. My nipples ached at the tight pressure. He tortured my body without his hands as I watched him strip. I was entranced by the hard olive skin he exposed as he slowly popped the buttons on his shirt. My eyes lingered on the tattoos covering his chest before I took in the perfect ridges of his abs and the delicious V cut that led down.

He unsnapped his pants; the zipper echoed in the room, mixing with my ragged breaths. He tossed his clothes to the floor with mine as he came behind me again. I tried to hide my disappointment when he left his boxer briefs on. I wanted to see his cock. Maybe it was weird to say, but it was beautiful. Like the rest of him.

He undid the belt, dragging it across my soft stomach. Goosebumps broke out along my skin as I waited for what

he'd do next. He grazed the leather across my nipples before circling my neck and then trailing back down to my wet pussy. "Pick my little dove. Where should I mark up your body first?"

I bit my lip as I gazed at him. This wasn't what I wanted. I didn't want to think. To choose. It was wrong that he was making me. But I knew why he does doing it. He didn't want me to turn away. To continue pretending I didn't want it. He was forcing me to participate. Forcing me to see who I truly was.

"M-my chest." I stuttered as I tried to turn away.

"Good." His breath coasted down my neck. "Now, watch how beautiful you are when you take my pain."

Maddox gripped my chin gently in one hand, forcing me to keep my eyes on the mirror as he wrapped the belt around the other. The swish came through the air a second before the sharp sting hit my body.

I sucked in a loud breath as I arched my chest forward and jerked my ass back into his hard body. Both hiding and seeking the pain. He struck again, hitting my other breast, and I moaned as the burn traveled down my body straight to my clit.

I lost myself in the sounds of leather cracking in the air. In the smack as it hit my flesh. All I could feel was the ache driving my body closer and closer to a release. I couldn't stop my moans and yelps as he struck me again and again until my flesh was red and welted.

The sound of the belt in the air brought a moment of exquisite anticipation before the sting flashed across my skin. Each lash of pain brought a zing of pleasure to my pussy as it begged to be filled. By the time the hits stopped, my arousal had dripped down my thighs, and my chest heaved with ragged breaths.

His hand left my chin to caress my abused skin. I whimpered as the blaze of pain made my core clench. He touched the welts reverently. Tracing each one as if it was a work of art before pinching and flicking my nipples. As if he adored me and the way I took his torture. “Look at yourself. Look how fucking gorgeous you are, red from my touch. You were made to wear my marks.

My face blushed in embarrassment even as his words settled somewhere deep in my chest. It was hard to feel the shame when his words praised me. I could see how happy it was making him. His eyes had softened to a light blue. And as I tipped my hips back, I could feel his hard cock pressing into me. He looked at me like I was his whole world. It was a look I could get lost in. I *had* gotten lost in.

I glanced at my reflection in the mirror. My eyes were glazed with need. My skin red from his abuse and my desire. I didn't look like myself. I looked... owned. Like my body wasn't mine anymore. He controlled it. It was for his pleasure. I closed my eyes so I didn't have to see the truth even as I wanted to lean into it. Become his.

“Place your hands on the mirror.” Condensation bloomed on the cool surface as I braced my sweaty palms to the glass. I arched my back and pushed my ass out, knowing what was coming next. “Perfect little slut.”

“Please.” I moaned. That one word and Maddox’s face broke out into a bright smile I’d never seen before.

My chest tightened in response before the belt swished in the air again, coming down on my ass. My fingers curled against the glass, trying to find support as I jerked from the pain. My head fell down between my shoulders as I tried to ignore my need to come. He did it again and again, not giving me a break to recover between each blow. Knowing exactly how it was making me feel. Knowing I could come from the pain alone.

“Fuck.” I moaned as another slap hit my body with such force I bumped forward, making the mirror rattle. I hated that I loved it. Hated the heat coiling in my belly. Hated that my clit throbbed and my pussy felt empty.

Maddox stopped and ran the belt between my legs as he reached around my body and pinched my aching nipple. I watched as my wetness coated the leather. When the hard leather touched my clit I squeezed my legs together and ground my hips, trying to create the fiction I needed. “Look at this greedy pussy. The more I hurt you, the wetter you get.”

I slammed my eyes shut in shame. In embarrassment. I could feel the horrible words that had been spoken to me

trying to break through my mind. Trying to ruin the euphoria I felt.

“No.” I shook my head.

I knew I made a mistake.

Everything stopped. My breath stilled in my chest as Maddox stood like a statue behind me. He stopped touching my breasts. Stopping running the belt between my legs. I’d been a willing participant, but my denial had changed things.

I wanted to take the words back. To suck them down my throat again. But it was too late. I could feel his earlier rage coming back. I could see the demon coming out to play as I watched his eyes darken.

“You want to act like a lying slut, I’ll treat you like one.” His voice vibrated with fury.

My legs trembled as he slowly unwound the belt from his hand. I swallowed thickly as he pressed the silver buckle to my throat. He looped the end in and pulled. For a moment, we just sat through, staring at our reflections in the mirror. The belt was heavy but not restricting air flow as I waited. A beat. Two.

I wanted to tell him I didn’t mean it. That I wanted to keep going. But a war raged in my head. Between what I wanted and what the world told me was okay. Normal.

Without warning, Maddox yanked the belt tight, cutting off all my air. My eyes flew wide, and my fingers curled on the mirror. I couldn’t remove my hands to grab at the belt without

falling forward and choking myself more. Black dots danced in my vision. I hated myself as I stared at Maddox and smiled.

I smiled because he was doing it. Taking away my choice. It was exactly what I wanted. To be free. To feel alive. My life was in his hands.

This is what drew me to him. I should've been afraid. With my own eyes, I'd seen him plunge a knife into the shoulder of one of the closest people to him. He stood over him and threatened death. Right now, he had that power over me. But I still couldn't summon fear for him.

I had always been able to read people. To pick up on subtle cues. Maddox might be filled with rage. He might want to take it out on me, but he wouldn't kill me. Not today. He wasn't ready to let me go yet.

I sucked in greedy breaths as he loosened the hold. My mind becoming clearer. Wetness gushed down my thighs as I arched back into him. Begging with my body for him to touch me.

"Please." I whimpered as my ass ground into his thick cock.

"You want to come?" I nodded my head slightly. It was all I could do to admit what I needed. His thumb brushed through my center with a gentleness that wasn't enough. I stiffened as he traced the seam of my ass before pressing softly on my back hole. "Of course, you do because you love the pain. You're my perfect little slut, and you're going to come as I fucked this virgin hole."

My nipples tightened, and my core clenched. I held onto his dirty words. Onto the new pain and pleasure, he was going to give me. Maddox pressed gently into my ass. I felt the resistance and sting of being touched in a place I'd never been touched before. It was strange. And dirty. And wrong.

And I wanted it.

I arched back for more as my eyes connected with Maddox's in the mirror. He smiled as he leaned forward and licked the sweat that dripped down my spine, groaning at my taste. I pushed further and moaned as I felt him stretching me. But it fell silent from my lips as the move yanked the belt cutting off my oxygen. I didn't care; all I cared about was the pleasure building in my core.

He shoved two fingers inside me as he pressed his thumb deep into my ass. The pressure was intense, full like I'd never been before. I thrust my hips back, trying to get more; the belt pulled tight, and my lungs squeezed. "That's right my little dove. Fuck yourself on my fingers. Make yourself come as I choke you out."

I nodded my head as I greedily thrust my hips back again. His fingers held still, pressing against that spot inside me that made my legs shake as I rode his hand. I saw black spots again as my movements pulled the belt tight over and over. My lungs squeezed, starving for air as pain bloomed along my neck. All of it throwing my body into a state of hyper sensation. Every touch felt like it was driving me higher and higher.

Yes, yes, yes.

It was a chant in my head as I climbed the peak. It was all I could think about as my mind narrowed to the space between my legs. To the places, he touched me. My movements were frantic, trying to fall over the edge before I lost consciousness.

My vision grayed as the last of the oxygen left my lungs. Just as Maddox curled his fingers, increasing the pressure as he rubbed behind my clit. Colors burst in front of my eyes as my body tightened around him. Electricity zapped through my veins, and then...

Bliss.

Before I floated away into the darkness.

His darkness.

Maddox

Kincaid shook her head back and forth as I lightly caressed her flushed cheeks, bringing her back to me. I undid the belt and tossed it aside as I maneuvered her, turning to bring her to my chest. I gathered her in my arms as I leaned forward, pressing her back into the mirror. Allowing the cold glass to ground her further.

“Come back to me, *mia amata*.” I whispered as I brought a hand to soothe her neck. She would be marked tomorrow, and I loved knowing that. Knowing it was my touch that had done it.

Kincaid was the only person I’d ever taken this far. Twice I’d made her pass out, and both times it had been the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen. She always was.

The beauty was in her letting go. In giving me control. Putting her life in my hands. She was truly becoming mine tonight. Allowing me to give her the pain she refused to say she wanted.

“You’re going to miss the best part.” I whispered as I pressed a kiss to her closed eyes and then her lips.

Her lids fluttered open, focusing on my face. My chest constricted as I waited for her to say something. I might love taking her past the edge of her boundaries, but would this push her further away from me? Would she panic when she realized I'd choked her out?

My chest lightened when I saw her smile. "Hi."

"There you are my little dove." I pressed my lips against hers stealing her new found breath with my kiss. I lifted her roughly by the back of her thighs. The mirror rattled as I pressed her against it. Kincaid tightened her arms and legs as they wrapped around me. We both groaned as my hard cock bumped her clit. I slid easily against her. She'd squirted as she'd come while losing consciousness. She always did when I took her this far because she was made to be treated this way. "I need you with me for this."

"For what?" She asked just before I grabbed her ass and slammed inside her. My eyes closed briefly as her tight heat surrounded me. She literally stole my breath as I tried not to embarrass myself and come inside her before we even started.

I smiled as Kincaid tried to scream at my harsh intrusion. Even when we'd been fucking regularly, she struggled to take my size. And now it had been so long it was like starting all over again. I groaned as her inner walls spasmed around me. I bit her lip as I pulled out and slammed in again. I quickly stopped her head from hitting the mirror as she tossed it back in pain or ecstasy; I didn't care.

“Oh fuck.” I cursed as I continued to pump into her. Not fast, but deeply. Claiming her from the inside out. Her body was covered in my marks, and her pussy would be covered in my cum.

Her walls grabbed me each time I pulled out, begging me to stay. I thrust balls deep, wanting to feel every inch of her. I needed to. I fucking missed her. Missed her tight cunt. Missed the way she screamed. Moaned. Cried. My world had been wrong since she'd been taken, but now it all shifted back into place. It all focused on her. She was the only thing that mattered.

“You feel that, *mia amata*? I'm home.” She squeezed her eyes shut as if she was hiding from my words. But I knew she felt it too.

“Don't hide from me.” I brought my hand from behind her head to collar her abused neck as I forced her eyes to open. I didn't squeeze since a bruise was already forming, but I held her to control her movements. “Feel it. Feel us. This is where I belong. Buried deep inside your perfect pussy. This is what you were made to do. Take my cock. My cum. My pain. No one else. Only you. Only me. You're mine.”

It pissed me off when she shook her head slightly. It pissed me off more that she had a hold over me. I'd been ready to kill Tristan for disrespecting her. I'd reluctantly let him go when she asked to be punished, and now she was resisting. I ignored the pinch in my chest near my heart as I continued to fuck her. I'd fuck the truth into her if I had to.

I pushed her chin with my thumb until she was looking in the side mirror. “Watch us little dove. Watch yourself come all over my cock.” Kincaid moaned as she stared at our bodies. My balls drew tight as I watched my cock disappear into her tight pussy. As I watched her tits bounce with each harsh thrust. I relished the welts on her chest and ass. Marks. My marks. “Watch as I fill you up with my cum. Claim you.”

Both hands went to her ass as I rammed in and out of her. I angled my thrust to rub her clit against my groin and hit that spot deep inside her that made Kincaid moan and clamp around me. Her nails dug into my shoulders as she tried to hold herself together against my brutal claiming.

“*Cazzo.*” I cursed as her pussy gripped my cock, and she fell apart. My lips found her shoulder, and I bit down hard, leaving yet another mark on her skin. I tasted her sweet blood as my own orgasm came racing forward.

“*Maddox.*” She moaned as the pain sent her convulsing around me again.

My name on her lips was my undoing. I jerked my hips, burying myself as deep as I could get as I pulled her flush against me. My teeth sank further into her flesh as my back tingled, and my release shot inside her. I groaned and licked the bruises on her neck as I thrust again, feeling my cum coat her walls as I tasted her blood.

It seemed to go on forever as my world narrowed to her gorgeous face. To her soft whimpers. Her powdery scent I’d dirtied.

My eyes locked with her gaze. Her gray ones dazed and half closed. Lost in her pleasure and my pain. It gut me. She gut me. Ripped apart and rearranged my insides until they were hers.

“Fuck. I love you.” The words escaped my lips as I rested my head on Kincaid’s shoulder, still holding her to me. I was too lost in the high of having her again to notice her body tensing. For the first time since I had her back, I was complete. Satisfied.

No, that wasn’t right. I was...happy. I don’t think I’d been happy a day in my life.

But this woman. My woman. She was what I needed. What I’d been missing to bring out the emotions that lay dormant inside me. She was wrong if she ever thought I could let her go. Dead wrong.

Kincaid

Fuck. *I love you.*

I love you.

Love you.

You.

The words bounced around in my head as Maddox carried me to bed. He loved me. Or he thought he did. Because I wasn't sure if he knew what love was. I wasn't sure I knew what it was.

But I know what it wasn't. It wasn't paying someone. It wasn't coercing them into your bed. It wasn't pain. Whatever we had. Whatever we were. It wasn't love. It was too dark to be love.

Love was supposed to be light. Carefree. Happy. That was always how I pictured it. How I'd read about it. It was small town heroes and wealthy billionaires. It was families and babies. It was safety and warmth.

It wasn't death and torture. It wasn't criminals and demons.

The problem was carefree and happy had never been in my life. Even before Maddox had entered my days, they had been dark. Depressing. Endless. An exercise in how many hits one person could take.

I was jolted from my thoughts when Maddox laid me on the mattress. His warmth left me, and I watched the muscles play in his back as he crossed to the bathroom. I curled my legs to my chest, preparing to get up and follow. As soon as I got a handle on my emotions. As soon as I didn't feel like one look from him would shatter me.

Before I could move, Maddox was back. His fingers wrapped around my ankle. "Open."

I rolled to my back and did as he asked. I didn't know what I expected, but I jolted as wet warmth brushed between my legs. "Relax little dove, just cleaning you up."

His words soothed me as he wiped the evidence of his brutal fucking from me. He tossed the rag into the laundry basket before reaching for a bottle on the nightstand. I watched with a furrowed brow as he squeezed lotion into his hands. He set the bottle aside again before kneeling next to me. I flinched then whimpered when he rubbed the cooling gel into the welts on my breasts. He caressed me until I was practically withering beneath him, begging for something more.

Maddox smirked down at me. "Roll over, *mia amata*."

I obeyed his soft command, rolling to my stomach. I tucked my hands under my chin as I let him perform the same gentle treatment to my abused ass cheeks. Aftercare had never

been something he'd done before. Not when I was a toy he wanted to break. But apparently, it was part of the routine when I was the woman he lov—.

Nope. Not thinking about that. Not thinking about how it warmed my chest. Or how unlikely his words were.

I focused on how his fingers worked into my skin. I closed my eyes and let my mind drift as he massaged the tense muscles in my shoulders and neck. This was almost as good as the pain. I felt almost as light. As buzzed as when he hurt me. My mind cleared the longer I sat here. I let him soothe me into a sense of security, however false it might be.

I must have fallen asleep because I woke with a jolt when Maddox pulled one of his shirts over my head. He lifted me into a sitting position as he dressed me like a doll. I was too tired. Too blissed out to argue. I let him take care of me like I was precious. Because that's how it felt. Like I was a precious item to him.

Maddox lay back on the bed and rearranged my body until my head rested on his chest. His fingers brushed through my hair as we lay there in silence.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I asked.

“Talk about what, my little dove?” He pressed a kiss into my hair before going back to stroking me.

I tightened my arms around him, waiting for the implosion.
“What Tristan said.”

“He’s a *figlio di puttana*, and you should’ve let me kill him.”

“You can’t kill him because he told you the truth.” I whispered.

Maddox fisted my hair and yanked my head back; just the right side of painful. I opened my mouth a gasp as I saw the furious expression on his face. “What truth, Kincaid?”

I licked my lips as I stared at him. His strong jaw was tensed. His perfect lips pressed in a hard line. A furrow creased above his piercing blue eyes. So handsome. Perfection hiding a demon.

“That I’m—“

“If you say anything other than ‘my woman’ or ‘my perfect little dove,’ I will take you back into that closet until your voice is so hoarse from screaming you won’t be able to speak at all.” His blue eyes burned into me, daring me to disagree.

Why did I want to push him? Why did I want to see what would happen if I said I was his slut? If I confirmed what Tristan said was true. It was stupid. It was the depraved part of me wanting to play with the sickness in him.

“It’s not normal.” I said instead. “What we have, how I got here, it’s not how normal people start relationships.”

“Fuck normal.” His voice was harsh as he gave my hair a small tug. “You want to be normal. You want to walk around

like all the other *stronzos* in the world, wishing for a little bit of what we have.”

“Wh-what do we have?” I whispered as I pulled from his hold until I was once again curled into his body. I couldn’t look into his eyes anymore. Couldn’t see that resolve in his expression. The belief that what we had made sense. That we were meant to be together. I burrowed my face against his neck, inhaling his smoky scent as the rumble of his voice vibrated through me.

“Happiness. We’re not bound by what people think. We’re not living to fit into their ideal of what a relationship or sex should be. We’re free to do what we want. To express ourselves in ways that fill our souls.”

When he said it like that, it made us sound passionate. Rebellious. Like we were giving the world a middle finger. Like we didn’t care about their judgment.

I wanted what he said. I wanted to feel free like that. But I didn’t. He might feel like he wasn’t being judged. But I was. I wasn’t free. I was bound. Bound by a world that expected women to act in a certain way. Want certain things.

But did I want them? And if I got them, would I be happy?

Would I be happier with a normal man? Some suit who worked nine to five. Who fucked me quietly and sweetly? Would I miss Maddox? Miss the pain?

I hated that I knew the answer.

My mother had told me to find what made me happy, but I don't think she pictured this. That I wanted a man who was bad for me in every way possible. That his world was dangerous to my very existence. That he was dangerous. To my mind. My body. My life.

"I should've killed them both." Maddox grumbled when I sat silent for too long.

"You can't kill everyone who talks bad about me." I sighed.

Maddox's fingers combed through my hair as he spoke softly. "Yes, I can. And I will. You're my weakness, little dove. What I feel for you...people will try to use that against me. They'll hurt you to bring me down. I won't let that happen. I can't. So I will punish them as an example. The others need to know I won't tolerate disrespect towards you. That to come for you will mean the end of their lives. I'll do what I have to, to keep you safe."

Or you could let me go.

I didn't bother speaking the words, knowing it wouldn't make a difference. Not now. Maybe never.

"Tristan's an asshole." I said instead. "But Sebastian was just looking out for you. He knows I don't belong in this world."

Maddox pulled me closer; I was practically lying across his chest now. "You belong wherever I am."

I was too tired to keep arguing with him tonight. I went to close my eyes when a flash of Sebastian's face came back to me. "You should talk to Sebastian again. I think something is bothering him."

"Why do you say that?" He stroked my hair as I closed my eyes.

"I'm not sure, just a read I got on him. He seems...sad. He wasn't like that before."

"You're very perceptive my little dove." He kissed the top of my head. I tried not to fall into the soft gestures. Into the sweetness. It was an illusion. Maddox was pain, not sweet. "You'd do better in this world than you realize."

If only I could believe him. Believe I could survive. If only I was sure I wanted to.

Maddox

Things had started to settle again. The Gallos had stopped their attacks on our clubs and shipments. They'd never admitted their part in Kincaid's kidnapping, but apparently they wouldn't risk any more of their men to my violence.

I didn't believe them. They'd just crawled back into their holes to wait for the right moment. Carmine Gallo was a cockroach. He was biding his time, luring us into a false sense of security before he hit us again. That's why I wasn't letting my little dove return to her apartment.

In truth, I'd never let her go back. I'd moved all her things to my house. I wasn't sure whether she'd realized that or not. But her requests to leave had become fewer. Not nonexistent unfortunately, but less frequent. At least I could fuck her again.

I was taking wins where I could get them. And today, I would use the relative calm to complete some unfinished business. Business I should've finished long before now. It might have saved Kincaid some pain.

I left Bash in the car as I pushed open the glass doors that led into the lobby of the skyscraper. I bypassed the guard

sitting at the desk, who pretended not to see me. It was good to be me. A Vancini. As much as the Gallos despised it, we ran Sayton City. We always would.

People looked the other way when I walked by. They jumped to do what I asked, hoping it would mean I'd spare their lives. That depended more on my mood than on them.

Today I was in an excellent mood; having only an hour ago made my little dove scream as I fucked her tight cunt while biting her breasts until they bled for me. I had a full heart and empty balls as I pressed the button for the floor I wanted, and the elevator doors closed.

But that didn't mean I'd be sparing anyone. Kincaid might be my weakness, but she didn't make me weak. If anything, she made me more ruthless. There was nothing I wouldn't do for her.

I glanced around at the steel and gold. At the illusion of power, the building presented. The suites housed the city's finest as they worked. Lawyers. Politicians. Entrepreneurs. All shared the space as they claimed to work for the residents. In reality, they worked for themselves, just like everyone else.

The city lights raced by as the glass elevator shot to the top of the building. Top floor. Again displaying the illusion of power and wealth. My feet were silent on the expensive carpeting as I walked down the hall. At this time of night, almost all the offices were empty. One light was on, as I expected.

My research told me he often worked late. Worked being a relative term. But tonight, he was alone. No guards. No assistant. No young thing keeping him entertained at the cost of her innocence.

I didn't bother knocking as I pushed open the heavy wood door. The white-blond hair on his head ruffled as he jerked up to see who had entered. His office was your typical setup. A large desk meant to impress, not unlike my father's. Several chairs and a couch for visitors. Filing cabinets and artwork on the walls. A big screen TV across from a bank of windows that displayed the city lights below. "Can I help you?"

Brent Collins spoke with the air of a man who knew his authority. Or he thought he did. I narrowed my eyes as I noted the similarities between him and my little dove. The same hair color. The same shape of their nose. At least his eyes were brown. I wouldn't have to look at my little dove's eyes as I destroyed the man who'd help create her.

"Maybe." I walked into his office as if I belonged. I casually picked up an orb-shaped paperweight on his desk. "Gift?"

He raised a brow as he looked at me. I confused him, but he sensed my dominance and deferred to it. It was smart of him not to pick a fight this early. "Yes, from my daughter."

I smiled as I threw the orb across the room. It exploded in the wall behind him, raining glass down onto his perfectly tailored suit.

“What the fuck?” He shouted as he reached for the phone on his desk, no doubt calling for security. I ripped it from the wall and threw; it joined the shattered glass on the floor. It was symbolic since security wouldn’t have come anyways.

“Do you know who I am?” I asked, my voice calm, a direct contrast from the violence. I loved to keep them on their toes. It made my prey nervous. I could smell his fear as he watched me, waiting to see what I would do next. Waiting to know why I’d come for him.

Senator Collins worked his jaw back and forth while he contemplated his answer. My blood boiled the longer this pompous prick wasted my time. “Yes.”

“Oh good, we’re not going to start with lies.” I sat down in one of the chairs in front of his desk like I was an invited guest. “Let’s continue with that. Which of my men have you been working with?”

He casually sat behind his desk, but I saw the slight tremble in his hands as they rested on the wood before him. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I mentally rolled my eyes as I moved. I yanked his hand forward, pressing it flat to the surface as I pulled the knife from my pocket. I plunged it into the center of his palm, embedding it deep into the wood below.

Like the fucking weak coward he was, Brent screamed as blood gushed from the wound. I enjoyed the way it poured between his fingers, staining his skin and his perfectly trimmed nails, as I retook my seat.

“You fucking psychopath.” He winced as he struggled to pull the knife free.

“Yes. Now let’s talk about your daughter.” His eyes flicked to the family portrait on his desk. I turned the frame to face me. Brent stood in the middle, his arm slung around a smiling brunette his age and a girl around mine. She was pretty in a ‘too much money, not enough personality’ kind of way. “Cute. I’d bet one of my men could have a good time with her.”

His mask dropped as rage overtook his face. He was no longer the slick politician. He was the *Pezzo di merda* who had his own flesh and blood kidnapped. “Don’t you fucking d—.”

“I meant your other daughter.” I continued talking as if his little outburst had never happened.

“I don’t—.”

I tilted my head to the side in a menacing way as I gave him a sadistic smile. For a second, I let him see what was behind *my* mask. He might be corrupt. A bad guy among men. But I was a monster. “Do you really want to lie to me, Brent? Because it’s one thing to hurt my little dove. It’s another to refute her existence. One answer will destroy you; the other will leave your cute little daughter without a father to protect her. So what’s it going to be?”

He snapped his mouth shut. We both ignored the blood still oozing from my knife in his hand. It was then all pretenses dropped. He cut to the chase of why I was here and what I was after. “I don’t have a name. He approached me through emails and calls from a burner.”

I sighed. I expected as much. I had to give it to whoever this was. I'd obviously trained them well because they were covering their tracks better than anyone I'd ever seen. They were layers deep, hiring other people to be the front. To take the fall. If it hadn't been for Mike, I might not have known I had a rat. All of this would've landed on the Gallos.

"What was in it for you?" I asked as I relaxed in the chair.

"A seat at the table. The Vancinis use Senator Briggs. If you weren't in power anymore, whoever took your place would need someone else."

Power. Money. It was all that was important in my world. I grunted at the notion. We already had enough. There were very few who did this for the reasons I did. For the thrill of the pain. I wasn't sure it made us above the rest, but it certainly made us less corruptible. As long as the family gave me someone to torture and protection for my crimes, I was loyal. I pushed from my chair and crossed to the door again.

"That's it?" Brent called to me. I glanced over my shoulder and raised one brow as I stared at him.

"Did you expect something else?" I asked.

"You're not—I mean— my family is safe? I told you what you wanted to know. You're not going to hurt them, are you?"

Rage filled me as I crossed back to him. This fucker worried about one daughter while he threw another to the wolves. He had her kidnapped and tortured so he could line his pockets. Buy the fancy car. The country house.

Knowing what kind of man I was, he should be begging me for her back. Begging me not to destroy her. Because if she were anyone else, I would have. I would've broken her like I originally planned before my little dove had crawled under my skin and made a home for herself.

My hand closed around his throat as I pushed him into the wall. His scream lighting me up inside as the knife handle tore through his palm while the blade stayed rooted in the wood. Blood sprayed around the room as he cradled it to his chest. I couldn't stop my fingers from cutting off his air.

“You mean, am I going to kidnap them?” I spoke low as venom dripped from my voice. “Am I going to break their bones? Bruise their faces? Force them to sleep in a freezing cold room after I hose them down?”

His face blanched as I lifted him from the wall and slammed him back again. A dent formed on the drywall from how violently I'd thrown him against it. My rage was almost uncontrollable. The blood pounding through my veins. In my ear as I spoke.

“Am I going to put them through what your other *daughter* went through? Abandoned her whole life. Unable to pay for food or to bury her mother. Am I going to torture them psychologically so when they come back to the people who love them, their just a shell of who they were?”

He shook his head, and a choked sound escaped his throat as if he was denying what had happened to Kincaid. As if he wasn't the cause of them. “No, Brent. I'm not coming after

your family. I might be a goddamn monster, but even I have a line. You think about that when you're in bed with your wife tonight. While you hug the daughter, you didn't throw away like garbage. Think about how even a psychopath wouldn't do what you did."

I leaned forward until I was whispering in his ear. I could feel his body shaking with fear. I could smell the desperation. I relished it. Let it fuel me. Sedate some of the rage inside.

"And while you're doing that, I'll be fucking that beautiful daughter of yours. And instead of destroying her, I'll give her all my power. All my money and influence. More than you could ever dream of. If only you hadn't abandoned her. Maybe you wouldn't have needed to become a villain to try and grab what I have."

I tossed him to the ground as I stalked towards the door again, pausing briefly to turn on the TV. A breaking news alert sounded as I walked down the hall.

"Good evening, folks. A disturbing investigation is underway in Sayton City tonight as anonymous sources tell us Senator Brent Collins will soon be arrested for child molestation. Several victims have come forward. Harrowing images were found on his computer, as while as video evidence-"

The sound cut off as the elevator doors closed in front of me. I leaned back against the glass and smiled. There was no greater power than secrets. Than information. There was something poetic about the sweet justice of the underworld.

Kincaid

“Isn’t there a TV in here?” Tessa sighed from her place on the couch next to me. She’d been allowed to visit several times since I’d been staying with Maddox. He didn’t want me to leave for my safety but allowed her to come over whenever she wanted. Much to Sebastian’s dismay.

Men always reacted to Tessa. Whether she was dancing at Entice or walking down the street, they melted in a puddle for her. She wielded her sexuality like a power in a way I never could.

We were alone, Henry waiting in the hall, giving us the illusion of privacy. We sat curled up under blankets in my library. The library Maddox had built for me. I spent most of my days here reading while he was off doing whatever a mafia capo did. Killing. Torturing. Checking on his clubs. I honestly wasn’t sure, and I didn’t ask.

“Yeah. Hold on.” I reached for the remote and pressed the button.

The picture hanging on the wall in front of us slid up to reveal an impressively large TV. I didn’t know much about TV sizes, but by the way, Tessa whistled low; I assumed it was a

nice one. I tossed her the remote so she could flip through the channels. I wasn't much of a TV person, which is why Maddox had installed this one to hide away.

"So how are you doing?" Tessa's voice was soft as she looked away from the TV to glance at me.

I played with a loose thread on the blanket as I contemplated her question. "Honestly, I don't know."

"Talk to me." She gave my knee a light slap as she turned her body to fully face me. I mirrored her position and rested my chin in my hand as I leaned my elbow against the back of the couch.

"He's just so... intense." I said, trying to find a way to describe Maddox. "I know he's only obsessed with me because I'm a challenge, but what happens when that's over? When he decides he's done?"

"Why do you assume there will come a point when he's done with you?" Tessa's question was sincere, and I almost laughed.

I rolled my eyes. "Come on. I don't belong here." I waved around at the expensive house. The guards outside. "Money. Mafia. That's not my life. I'm not cut out for this."

"Why? Because you came from nothing? You told me Maddox was the same when he was younger. I doubt he cares where you come from."

"Because I'm not strong enough for this." I whispered, my throat closing at the admission. I had barely survived my life

before when it was just being poor and helpless. I knew I couldn't survive this. Maddox's world was ruthless. I didn't have it in me to be that way. To do the things I would need to, to stay alive.

Tessa squeezed my knee, forcing me to look at her. "You survived being kidnapped. You survived Maddox when he wanted to break you. You survived almost being raped. Not to mention being alone and starving. You're a lot stronger than you think you are."

I contemplated the version of me she saw. The girl she described sounded like a warrior. Like a badass. But it was easy to say it like that. It wasn't easy to live it. To fight the darkness in my own mind. To decide to be happy even when the world told me it was wrong.

The sound of a breaking news alert cut through the library. Both of our gazes flicked to the TV as the perky blonde news anchor came on.

"Good evening, folks. A disturbing investigation is underway in Sayton City tonight as anonymous sources tell us Senator Brent Collins will soon be arrested for child molestation. Several victims have come forward. Harrowing images were found on his computer, as well as video evidence—"

"Oh my god." I rose from my seat without even realizing it. "That's my father."

"What?" Tessa shouted as she came to stand next to me. "I thought—Collins is a really common last name. Isn't he

married? Like been married to his high school sweetheart since college?”

“Yeah, that didn’t stop him from having an affair with my mom. She didn’t know he was married, and when she got pregnant with me, he threatened to sue her for defamation if she said anything.”

“Yeah, but it’s not defamation if it’s true.”

I waved my hands in the air as if to push the conversation away. “Doesn’t matter. She didn’t have the money for a lawyer and didn’t want to fight with him. He’d have been a shit father anyways.” I gestured to the TV, where the story was still playing. “Obviously.”

“Yeah, wow I can’t believe it’s all coming out now.” She sat back down. “I wonder who these anonymous sources are.”

A dark thought spiraled through my mind. Did Maddox do something? No, why would he? His words echoed in my head.

I’ll do what I have to, to keep you safe.

Did he take down my father for me? How many others had he destroyed in the name of keeping me safe?

“Hey, you said you got a new manager at Entice, right?” I asked Tessa as I stood in the middle of the room.

“Yeah, why?” Her brows scrunched together as she looked at me.

“What happened to Rodney?”

She shrugged. “Don’t know. I never saw him again after the night he attacked you.”

My hand flew to my mouth as I stifled a gasp. No. There was no way. I grabbed my phone off the couch and started frantically scrolling. I pulled up a social media app and located my ex. Chad Albracht.

His page was full of people wishing him well. But when I read a little closer, I realized he was missing. He’d been missing for a while. I switched to Google and typed in his name. A news article popped up instantly. I scanned quickly, latching onto keywords.

Disappeared without a trace several months ago.

Last seen leaving his office.

Never made it home.

Presumed dead.

My phone clattered to the ground. I told Maddox about Chad. About how he and his friends had emotionally tortured me for months. Maddox threatened to kill him. But I’d never given him Chad’s name. How did he find out?

The same way he’d found out where I lived. And my favorite color. And that I loved books. He had a way of finding things no one else did. His job was to know secrets. To use them. Apparently, he’d found my father’s secrets as well.

“He did this.” My eyes flicked to Tessa, who’d been watching me the whole time. I pointed to the TV, where the story was still playing. “He did that.”

“Okay.” Tessa drew out the word. “I don’t understand what the big deal is. Sounds like he deserved it.” I started pacing back and forth. “He destroyed a pedophile. I’d say that’s okay.”

“What about Rodney? Where do you think he disappeared to?” I shouted.

“Creeper who tried to rape you?” She said. “Also, not a loss to society.”

“And Chad?”

“Your douchebag ex?”

“Yes. Keep up.” I snapped, feeling more frantic by the minute.

“I’m trying to, but you’re not making sense. What happened to Chad?”

“Poof. Gone. Disappeared. Presume dead.” I stopped my manic pacing to look at her. She was surprisingly calm. Like all this, death didn’t affect her. “I knew he was a killer. But I didn’t *know*. Like how I know you’re Italian, but you don’t speak it, so I don’t think about it.”

“Being Italian and being a murderer are not the same thing.” Tessa stared at me like I wasn’t making any sense.

“That’s not what I’m saying.” I grumbled.

She stood up, grabbing my shoulders until I was facing her. “Okay, what are you saying?”

“That I didn’t think about it before. I knew, but never like this. Never shoved in my face with bloody clothes and news stories and plunging a knife into someone’s arm. Being kidnapped.” The last words were whispered as if I could stop the memories if I didn’t speak them too loudly.

How was I supposed to be okay with this? Knowing my boyfriend went around exacting his own brand of justice when he thought someone offended me. It certainly wasn’t normal. And it also wasn’t normal to be turned on by it. But shit, I kind of was.

It was something about the strength of his actions. The possessiveness. The feeling of protection. As if the world couldn’t hurt me as long as he was by my side.

And it was wrong. Because the world could hurt me. He could hurt me. The longer I stayed, the more of a target I became.

“How am I supposed to live with the fact that my boyfriend kills for a living?”

Tessa threw her arms up and shrugged. “How do the wives of gun manufacturers live knowing their fancy houses are bought with the death of children?”

Why did that logic make sense?

Because I wanted it to. I wanted to be able to justify my feelings.

“I—I can’t stay with him.” I shook my head, but I didn’t know if I was agreeing with my words or rejecting them. “But

I know he won't let me go."

Tessa pulled me back onto the couch while her lips twisted as if lost in thought. How could I get Maddox to give up this obsession with me? Because that's what it was. He might think it was love, but it wasn't. It was obsession. Dark and twisted. And wrong.

My chest constricted. I wished it was love. I wished I wasn't so alone. But the one person who loved me had been taken from me. I was alone, and staying with Maddox wouldn't change that. It would only feed his obsession until he consumed me. Or his world killed me. There would be nothing left.

"He's obviously very possessive of you." Tessa mused.

"Yes." I had an idea of where she was going with this, and it didn't give me warm and fuzzy feelings.

"If he thought you cheated, he'd probably go crazy. He probably wouldn't want anything to do with you."

"Or he'd kill me." I wished it was an exaggeration, but we both knew it wasn't.

"Unlikely, he's too protective for that. Besides, you don't actually have to cheat." She continued. "You just need to flirt with someone. Make him think you don't want him anymore. Bruise his ego. No guy wants a girl who doesn't want him. Their pride is too soft to handle it."

"It would work." My head snapped up at the sound of Tristan's voice. He stood leaning against the doorframe as he

watched us. I wondered how long he'd been standing there without me noticing. My skin crawled, thinking if there were other times he'd watched me without my knowledge.

He rarely came into the house if Maddox wasn't here, especially after the incident a week ago. In fact, other than Henry, most of the guards avoided me. I didn't know if it was because they, like Tristan, believed I was just a whore. Or if Maddox had threatened them to stay away. I honestly didn't care; with the exception of Henry and Sebastian, I didn't really know any of them.

“Mad is crazy possessive. Especially when it comes to his...women.” The way he paused made me think he wanted to say something besides ‘women’. Tessa narrowed her eyes at him, confirming my thoughts.

Jealousy was a lead weight in my gut. How many women had he been in a relationship with before? I'd foolishly assumed I was the only one. But the way Tristan spoke, it sounded like Maddox had done this often. Dragged woman into his bed. Coerced them. Fucked them. Pretended to love them.

I bit the inside of my cheek to stop the burning in my eyes. I wasn't upset that I was just one of many. It would only make it easier for him to let me go. I'd obviously overestimated his obsession with me. I was only one in a line that would continue when I was gone. I shoved all my feelings aside as I stared at him. I wouldn't be irrational. I wouldn't give him any more reason to believe I was a worthless whore.

“What are you doing in here, Tristan?” I asked, ignoring the entire conversation.

He stared at us both for a moment. I could see the lecherous glint as he glanced at Tessa. I narrowed my eyes at him. He was such a pig. He wanted to call me a whore, but he could barely like a woman in the eyes. He probably saw all women like that. As objects rather than people.

Tristan smirked as he took another step into the library. Something about his stance was predatory. It set my teeth on edge and made my heart beat faster. I knew I’d be stupid to underestimate him. He might appear like a horny asshole, but he was calculating.

“I asked what you were doing?” I snapped when he continued to stare at me.

“I don’t answer to you, princess.” He said as he crossed the room to stand directly in front of us. I was forced to tilt my head back to look into his eyes. There were like Maddox’s. Dark. Cold. “I came to collect your friend. Maddox is on his way back.”

“She’s staying.” I said as I slapped my hand down on Tessa’s leg. “Sebastian will drive her home when he gets back with Maddox.”

I didn’t want her to go because I wasn’t sure if Tristan planned to take her home or if he planned to send another of the guards with her, leaving me alone with him. I didn’t want either of us to be by ourselves in his presence.

“Those aren’t the orders.” He reached out to grab her arm, but I shoved him away.

“I might not be your boss, but we both know he listens to me.” I stood from the couch. I was still at least a foot shorter than him, but I would take any advantage I could get. “She stays. Or maybe I’ll tell him how you upset me. We both know what he’d do if he thought you’d hurt me”

I felt the rush of power wash over me as Tristan’s jaw clenched. We both knew I was right. Tristan might not like it, but Maddox did listen to me. Unlike Tristan, he didn’t treat me like a whore. He respected my opinions and feelings.

Tristan smirked down at me, and my insides twisted. He leaned forward until I could feel his breath on my cheek. He smelt like decay and death. “Let me know if you need help with your little plan. Because you’re right princess, you don’t belong here. This world will eat you alive.”

My guts twisted, and then he was gone.

“What an asshole.” Tessa grumbled next to me.

“Yeah.” I said as I collapsed onto the couch beside her.

He was an asshole. Did he truly hate me that much because I was sleeping with his boss? I think it had more to do with his worry that Maddox seemed to lose it where I was involved. If he became too much of a liability, the family would find a way to pull him back in line. But in the meantime, Maddox’s behavior affected them all. I knew Tristan was ambitious; he couldn’t afford for Maddox to lose his position in the family.

But still, I'd saved his life. He could be a little nicer to me. Maddox was going to kill him, and I stepped in. I was wondering why I had.

Kincaid

I jolted awake when warm arms wrapped around my legs and back. I took a deep breath and relaxed when Maddox's familiar smoky scent filled my nose. "Let's get you to bed, little dove."

"Where?" I grumbled as I burrowed further into his chest.

Why did he smell so good? Why was he so warm and comforting? Demons, murderers should be cold. My body shouldn't respond to him. I shouldn't want to bury myself against him until the rest of the world fell away.

"You fell asleep on the couch with Tessa." He answered. Now I remembered. I'd been waiting for Maddox and Sebastian to come home, so neither of us had to be alone with Tristan.

"I'm perfectly fine to go home." I heard Tessa snap behind me. I smirked against Maddox's body before I wiggled from his arms to stand beside him. I rested my head against his chest as I turned back to the library.

"It's two in the morning. Just stay in the guest room." Sebastian shot back. Tessa and Sebastian were standing about

a foot apart in the library, arguing. Tessa had her hands on her hips, and Sebastian's were crossed over his chest as he stared at her. "Don't be so stubborn, little swan."

"Bash." Maddox snapped. I could tell he wasn't enjoying the scene like I was. He was anxious to get us back to his bed. He rubbed up and down my spine, causing me to shiver. "Let her leave."

"It's not safe." He grumbled as he ran a hand through his short dark hair. I rarely saw Sebastian upset. Except for the one argument he had with Maddox, he was usually stoic. Composed. Something about Tessa seemed to unsettle him.

"Sebastian, would you please take Tessa home?" She turned to glare at me. "I'll send Henry to follow in your car, and he can drive Bash back."

"He doesn't need to do that." She sighed. I could see her digging her fingers into her hip. Whatever it was that made Sebastian lose his composure, Tessa felt it too. Maybe I was a bad friend because I was going to push them together and see whether that feeling between them exploded or imploded.

"Please, Tess." I turned in Maddox's hold, brushing my cheek against his strong chest. "Just to be safe. I'd hate if something happened to you because of me."

It was the truth. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if she was the next to get kidnapped because being my friend made her an easy target.

She rolled her eyes. “Fine for you.” She crossed the room and gave me a quick one-arm hug. She probably would’ve held on longer, but Maddox wasn’t willing to let me go. She glanced over her shoulder to look at Sebastian. I saw the subtle shift in her eyes before she issued her command. “Come.”

I smirked at the obvious seduction and power in her tone. Tessa had always been able to control the men around her. I waited for Sebastian to yell at her. To let her know who was really in charge. Because like Maddox, Sebastian was a man who issued orders. He emanated strength in the same way.

But to my surprise, he followed after her without a word. A small smile on his face as if he’d waited his whole life to take her orders.

“Interesting.” I sighed to myself.

Maddox leaned forward and nuzzled along my neck. His lips brushing my sensitive skin, making my nipples pebble behind my bra. “*Mia amata*, you’re more devious than I thought. Pushing those two together.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” I said coyly as he guided me up the stairs and to his bedroom with his hand on the small of my back.

He opened the door as he gripped my hips, and turned me. I stared into his handsome face as I slowly backed away from him. I could see the desire in his eyes, but I couldn’t do it tonight. Not after everything I’d learned.

My knees hit the edge of the bed, and I tumbled back. Maddox fell on top of me. A hand on either side of my head, caging me in as he smiled. My body hummed with anticipation. For a moment, I got lost in Maddox. Lost in the rare playfulness that showed on his face. Lost in the excitement of what he would do to me. I reached up to unbutton his shirt, and that's when I saw it.

The red blood stark against the white fabric. Everything I'd talked to Tessa about came rushing back to my sleep-addled mind.

Rodney. Chad. My Father.

Pain. Pleasure. Judgment.

My hands dropped instantly like a lead weight. I stared into his dark blue eyes. "Where were you tonight?"

His smile fell as he sensed the shift in my demeanor. "Why? You've never asked before."

It was true. I'd buried my head in the sand. Tried not to be reminded of who he was. Of what he was. Of what he did. If I wanted to get away from him, I couldn't hide anymore. I needed to wake myself up. I needed to face him. Fear him. Or I'd never leave.

"Did you have anything to do with my father?" I took a deep breath, ignoring how his scent settled in my mind. "Is that his blood on you?"

Maddox's eyes pierced me in place as he continued to cage me to the bed. "Yes."

Yes. Yes to both. He'd brought my father down. Why? It didn't really matter whatever reasons he gave himself to do it.

“And Chad? Did he disappear because of you?”

“Yes.” There was no hint of regret in his voice. No softening of his harsh tone. He wasn't asking for my forgiveness or trying to make me understand why. He was telling me he'd done it and he'd do it again. He killed like taking a life was meaningless.

“Rodney?” My voice shook as I stared at his impassive face. At his deep soulless eyes. This time he just nodded his head.

We stared at each other for a beat before panic seized my chest. I pushed and shoved at him. Trying to get him off. Trying to get away. I struggled and grunted. Called him a psychopath. A monster as I pushed and pushed. I clawed and yelled, blood staining my nails as I ripped at the skin on his neck.

Desperation. Rage. Shock. Longing, all twisted in my gut. At him. At me. At what we were. What I wanted us to be even when I shouldn't.

But he didn't move. He pressed his strength into me until I had nothing left. Until I collapsed back onto the bed, panting as he pinned me with his gaze.

“Why would you do that?” My voice was raw from all the screaming I'd done. My limbs trembled in exhaustion. “Why would you kill them?”

“For you.” My heart knocked in my chest so hard I thought my ribs would break. My fingers curled into fists where I was gripping his shirt. “Because they hurt you. Because I love you.”

He pushed one hand off the bed to stroke my cheek. He was gentle as he brushed my sweaty hair from my face. He traced the lines of my features. Slowly across my brows and eyes, cupping my cheeks before brushing my lower lip. Finally, settling a possessive hand on my throat. I could feel my pulse pumping forcefully against his palm.

He touched me like he was memorizing every inch of me. It was adoring. Worshiping. It was intoxicating to be looked at that way. As if his world revolved around me. As if the sun didn't need to rise as long as I did.

I couldn't get trapped in it. Couldn't allow his obsession to consume me.

“That isn't love.” I whispered my words disappearing into the darkness.

Maddox's fingers tightened briefly around my throat as his expression hardened. I could see the rage in his clenched jaw. His lips pressed together, turning white as he tried to control himself. When he spoke, his tone was harsh. Digging into my skin like a knife.

“It might not be the pretty love you read about, but it is love. It's the only way I know how to love you. I'll destroy whoever hurts you. I'll kill anyone that touches you. I'll do everything to push away that darkness that makes you doubt

how important your life is. I'll conquer your demons until the only one left is me. You might not like it, but you'll learn to understand it. Because as much as you're mine. I'm yours. And I'll always stand between you and this world."

My eyes stung as he pushed off the bed, leaving me with only his declaration. The bedroom door slammed shut as I curled to my side, bringing my knees to my chest.

His feelings for me were animalistic. It went to the basic instincts that modern humans pushed away. The need to protect your mate. To bond with them for life.

It wasn't normal today, but it had been at some point. When had society decided it was wrong to feel that strongly for another person? Because everyone else would see it that way. They would see him, us, as crazy.

Maybe they were right. It was obsession, not love. And obsession couldn't last. It would burn out. It would leave me a broken, ruined mess. It would destroy any light I still had left in me.

I hated myself because I wanted it. For however long it lasted, I wanted to be Maddox's to ruin. I wanted to live in his obsession. Let it wash over me. Burn me. Mark me forever.

I couldn't.

I had to get out. I'd been trapped in this cage for so long it was starting to feel like home.

Maddox

“Thank you.” Kincaid whispered as she fidgeted with the hem of her dress. It was purple and tight, clinging to her luscious body from her collarbone to where it stopped an inch above her knee. It wasn’t modest but didn’t show more than she was comfortable with.

Gold thread was woven into the fabric, giving her the appearance of a goddess. Her hair was pulled up, drawing my eyes to the blue veins that ran through her skin. I was already planning what I would do with that neck tonight. It was too creamy. I needed to mark her.

“You’re welcome.” I said as I grasped one of her hands and brought it to my lips. She gasped as I gently bit the pulse at her wrist.

She’d been acting anxious all day, so I decided to take her to dinner. Things hadn’t exactly settled down with the Gallos, but it was calm enough that I felt comfortable with Kincaid leaving the house if I was by her side. Tristan, Henry, Bash, and a few other guards followed behind us.

When she’d asked about her father, I knew she had figured out the rest. I felt no need to hide from what I’d done. I didn’t

regret it. They deserved what they'd gotten, even if they hadn't; it wouldn't matter to me.

I meant what I told her. Anyone who upset her would face my wrath. I'd do anything to protect her, whether she wanted it or not. She'd learn to accept my methods. There wasn't another choice, not for her.

She pulled her hand back into her lap and continued to fidget with the hem of her dress as we parked in front of *Lo Orto*. A valet opened my door, and I rounded the hood to open hers. Kincaid's hand was clammy as she grasped mine and stood.

"What's wrong little dove?" I spoke against her ear as I placed my hand on her low back and led her into the restaurant.

"N-nothing." She stammered as the doors opened. "Where is everyone?"

The high-end Italian restaurant was owned by the family. The space was dim, lit mostly by twinkle lights and lanterns that dangled from the ceiling. The cream-colored walls were accented with vines that scaled up them. Large wood tables dominated the space, with a long bar against one wall. An arched doorway led to the kitchen and another to a hallway where the bathrooms were. It was made to feel like you were eating in a Tuscan garden at night.

"I closed it down for us." I led her to a table in the middle of the room.

“So no one else is here.” She looked around as she sat in the chair I’d pulled out for her.

I ran my fingertip along her neck as I leaned forward to whisper in her ear. “Just us, *mia amata*.”

“Oh.” Why did she sound disappointed? She’d complained before that I never took her out. I told her then it was a security issue, which was more true now than ever.

But I’d gone to great lengths to secure the building so she could feel like we were on an actual date. I was trying to give her what she wanted. Freedom. Or at least the illusion of it. She’d never be free from me, but I also didn’t want to stifle her. I didn’t want her to feel like she had to escape, even if it was true.

“Why?” She asked as she scanned the room again. Heat ignited in my blood as I watched her. Why didn’t she want to be alone with me? What was she hoping for when she agreed to come out? A chance to escape? To get lost in a crowd?

“To keep you safe.” Our appetizers arrived without either of us glancing at a menu. The waiter poured us each a glass of red wine before exiting again. This night was for my little dove and I; I wanted as few interruptions as possible.

I could smell the wait-staff’s fear as they avoided looking at me. My mouth twitched in the hint of a smile. I hadn’t done anything to illicit their fear... yet, but I still enjoyed the feeling of it in the air. So unlike Kincaid when she’d once been my server. She’d fought me. Defied me even then. She didn’t know that was what had drawn me to her.

“And this way, I can bend you over the table without an audience.” I smirked at Kincaid as she choked on the sip of wine she’d taken. “Do you remember that night at the club?”

“Maddox.” She warned, but her pupils dilated as if she was replaying the memory of my hand striking her plump ass.

“You came so hard on my fingers before I coated you in my cum.” My dick throbbed in my pants, and I cursed the fact that we weren’t truly alone. There was staff waiting just around the corner, not to mention our guards. But I could wait to take my little dove. Once I got her home again, I’d strip her naked and make her scream.

“Eat your dinner.” I said as I tried to ignore the images playing in my mind.

I watched as she brought the fork to her lips and hummed at the savory taste of the arancini. I stared as her pink tongue came out to lick away a drop of marina sauce that clung to the corner of her mouth.

I had an obsession with watching her eat. It had started when I realized she practically starved to survive. It had brought back visceral memories of my own lack of food growing up. My obsession had only grown as I watched her close her eyes as she tasted something delicious. Or listened as she moaned when it was especially good.

It was the least depraved of my obsessions surrounding Kincaid and the one I liked to indulge the most. I also enjoyed the way her curves had filled up since she hadn’t been lacking food. I’d never get sick of staring at her luscious body.

“Aren’t you going to eat?” She asked when I still hadn’t taken a bite. I considered telling her how much I liked watching her eat, but I restrained myself. She was already on edge; I didn’t need to make her more self-conscious.

“Are you enjoying the library?” We made polite conversation during dinner. But her mind wasn’t in it. I could sense her pulling away from me. It was in every glance when she wouldn’t meet my eyes. In the tapping of her fingers on the table. The way she shifted in her seat.

My little dove wanted to fly away from me.

I’d hoped taking her out of the house would’ve helped, but it looked like I would have to clip her wings again.

“I need to use the bathroom.” Kincaid stood abruptly, her gray eyes refusing to meet my own. “I’ll be right back.”

She rushed down the small hallway until she disappeared from my view. I nodded my head for Henry to follow her. The restaurant should be secure, but I wasn’t taking a chance with Kincaid’s safety. Not again. A minute passed. Two. And I started to get restless. Henry had already failed to protect her once. Could I really trust him again?

My chair scraped loudly on the floor as I pushed back from the table. I crossed the room quickly, needing to see with my eyes that she was okay. Safe. But nothing could prepare me for what I found.

Kincaid was leaning against the hallway wall, and there with her was Henry. The young kid’s body pressed into *my*

little dove as her hands clutched his white dress shirt. Their faces were inches apart, their lips seconds away from touching. As I watched, she brought her hands up to his cheeks and pressed up on her toes to close the distance.

I didn't think. Didn't have to tell my body how to react. The blood pounded through my veins, making me move. My fingers closed around the back of his neck as I ripped him off her. My vision narrowing to his shocked expression as I threw him.

Kincaid shrieked as Henry hit the opposite wall and crumbled to the ground. I turned towards him, my fist cocked back, ready to bury it in his face. Ready to murder him for touching what was mine.

She was mine.

Kincaid latched onto my arm, pulling me back as she yelled in my ear. I didn't hear the words she was saying. All I could hear was the roar of my blood as a red haze descended over me. A sick jealousy making my stomach burn. All I could see was his body too close to hers. His lips moving towards hers. Her hands on him.

Had he touched her before? Fucked her? For how long?

"Maddox." She shrieked. And that's when I realized Tristan and Bash had joined us.

My eyes flicked to where Tristan held Kincaid around the middle as she tried to reach me. No, not me, Henry. Bash pushed past them and picked up the young kid by the collar of

his shirt. He opened his mouth to speak, but Bash shook his head.

I stared at him, contemplating reaching for the knife in my pocket. Already imagining how it would glide into his skin, piercing him right between his ribs. I could practically feel his warm blood gushing down my hands.

“Stop! You’re hurting me!” My head whipped back to Kincaid as she shoved against Tristan. She kicked her legs and brought her arm back to elbow him. But his hold on her didn’t loosen as he looked at me with a smug smile on his face.

“Let her go.” I growled as I stepped towards them. His smile fell at the fury in my voice, but he didn’t release her. I didn’t care what she’d done; she was still mine. Mine to punish. “Do I have to repeat myself?”

“*Sei serio?*” *Are you serious?* He shouted as she fought against him, her white blonde hair falling around her face. “You just watched as she whored herself out to Henry, and you’re going to defend her.”

Red filled my vision. I wanted to take the pain in my chest and give it to someone else. I didn’t care who it was at this point, but someone was going to break. Someone was going to hurt like I hurt. “If you don’t let her go, I’ll chop your hands off.”

“You’re insane.” He scoffed as he dropped her. Kincaid fell to her knees before me. She looked up, her gray eyes wide in fear. It did nothing to calm the rage inside me. There would be no sympathy from me tonight.

She thought I was emotionless. That I couldn't feel for her. Love her. She was wrong because I felt my heart-shattering at my feet as the demon burst through his cage. Looking for blood.

I roughly grasped the back of her arm and yanked her to her feet. Kincaid stumbled as I dragged her to the door. The car was waiting at the curb, and I didn't hide my rage as I shoved her inside. The second my door slammed shut, she started pleading.

"Nothing happened." She said as she sucked in a shaky breath. I ignored her as I turned the car on and pulled into traffic. "Listen I—."

"Don't talk if you want to make it out of this car alive." She shrank at the threat in my voice. My knuckles turned white on the steering wheel as we raced through the city. It took everything in me not to close my fingers around her pretty neck. Not to rip the life from her body as she ripped the heart from mine.

"Please don't hurt Henry." She whimpered. "He's g—he would never touch me. It was me."

"Really? You're going to beg for your lover's life while you're trapped with me." I said through my clenched jaw. "Nothing for yourself. Oh that's right, you want to die." She flinched like I slapped her. My words landing; a direct hit. "While my little slut you might get your wish tonight."

I reached out and harshly palmed her upper thigh, squeezing possessively. Kincaid's mouth fell open on a gasp as

her legs spread. I'm not sure she even realized she was doing it, leaning into my pain. My punishment.

There was no enjoyment in it for me. Not when jealousy and madness burned hot through my veins.

A second later, she snapped her legs closed and tried to push my hand away. My fingers bit into her flesh, bruising. She reached down and wrapped her tiny hand around my forearm. So small and fragile; she'd never be able to push me away.

But she surprised me by sliding her fingers under the cuff of my shirt and stroking my pulse. Gently she soothed me. Like it always did when Kincaid touched me, my anger cooled, allowing logic to come back in. Pushing the demon back into his cage.

I stared at her face, at the distraught expression marring her features. I considered her actions. Her reasons. She wasn't interested in Henry. He was too sweet for her. She could deny it all she wanted, but she craved the demon inside me. No, what Kincaid had done was put on a show for me.

I replayed the scene in my mind. Henry hadn't touched her. But she had touched him. She'd tried to kiss him in a public place. Somewhere she knew I would find her. She wanted me to find her. The question was why.

"You want me to kill you, Kincaid? Is that it?" I squeezed her thigh again. She wasn't leaving me. Not even death would keep her from me. I'd kill myself and drag her soul to hell with mine. It was mine like mine was hers. Meant to be

together regardless of life or death. “Otherwise, why would you have put on that little show? I know you did it on purpose. You knew I’d see you.”

She swallowed thickly as she crossed her arms in front of her chest and looked away from me. Effectively putting a wall between us. Her words were whispered so quietly I almost didn’t hear her. “Maddox, please let me go. I don’t belong here.”

There it was. The lie she continued to tell herself. The remnants of her old life she clung to.

I was going to show her who she fucking belonged to. She was never going to try and get away from me again. After tonight she’d know who she was made for.

Kincaid

Maddox slammed me against the dining room wall, pinning me in place with his body. My hands shot out, stopping my face from taking the impact as the air rushed from my lungs. My body shivered with fear and anticipation at being back in this room. It held memories of all the things Maddox had done to me before. Back when he only wanted me as a toy. Before he claimed to love me. Being here now scared me.

What did he have planned? Why hadn't he taken me to his bed? Whatever the reason, it couldn't be good. Maybe I had pushed him too far.

"Did you think you could let someone touch what was mine?" His breath was hot on my neck; his tone lethal. He fisted my hair and painfully yanked my head back until I was looking at him. His blue eyes were almost black. Soulless as he stared at me.

I'd always known there was this side to him. It had only been confirmed when I found out all he'd done for me. All the people he'd killed. But he'd never unleashed the demon on me, not truly. Until now.

I knew it was stupid to flirt with Henry, but I needed to find a way out. I needed his demon to hate me, so maybe he'd let me go. And maybe a sick part of me wondered where his limit was. How far I could push him before the monster came for me. Or maybe I needed to know my limits. I needed to fear him so I could finally free myself.

But it wasn't working. It wasn't fear that lit my blood on fire.

“Answer me, Kincaid.” He barked as he used his hold on my hair to pull my head further back, exposing my neck. His mouth latched on, biting until I was sure he would break the skin.

“Yes.” I whimpered. It was an answer to his questions, but it felt like a plea for him to keep touching me. Keep torturing my body. I moaned as his tongue flicked my pulse point. Arousal pooled in my panties as my cheeks flushed. What was wrong with me?

“Why?” His hand left my hair, and it tumbled loose around my shoulders. He pushed it aside as he collared my neck, not squeezing, but owning. Letting me know he had control of my body. That he could do with it as he wanted. He could bring me pleasure just as easily as he could end my life. One movement is all it would take.

And I honestly wasn't sure which I wanted.

“I—I thought you'd let me go.” I needed to know if I was capable of pushing him over the edge. That if I did the wrong

thing, he'd kill me. I closed my eyes, unable to meet his penetrating gaze.

“I'm never letting you go.” He growled. “No one touches what's mine.”

The flick of a knife opening echoed in the empty room. I tried to turn my head, tried to see what he was going to do. But his hold on my neck tightened, keeping me in place.

“Do you know what I'll do the next time I see someone touching you?” I felt the blunt end of the blade as he ran it up and down my outer thigh. Goosebumps broke out along my skin, and my body trembled in his hold.

I wanted to believe it was fear. Wanted to believe he'd finally pushed me too far. But my nipples tightened behind my dress as he continued to scrape up and down my leg. An empty ache pulsed between my legs. The ache only he could relieve.

“I'll slit their throats.” He squeezed my neck tighter, only allowing me to take short, shallow breaths. It was enough to keep me alive, but my mind was dizzy. Drugged on lack of oxygen and him. “Then I'll claim you in their blood. I'll fuck you as they fight for air. The sounds of their death will mix with your screams of pleasure. And it'll be the sweetest thing I've ever heard.”

I should run. I should be falling apart with fear. Instead, my body clenched at his words. His possession.

The ripping of fabric crashed into my ears before his hand released my throat. I sucked loudly, filling my lungs. I was so

distracted by the rush of oxygen I didn't notice as he cut the rest of my dress away. He tore the tattered remains off my body as he grabbed my wrists. Caging both in one of his hands as he spun me and pinned them to the wall above my head.

His other hand still held the knife. His blue eyes burned into me as I looked at him. I'd never seen him this out of control. This crazy. This mad. It wasn't anger. It was madness. Obsession. And it was directed at me.

My heart knocked painfully against my ribs. Why did I like it? Why did his obsession make my blood roar? Intensify the ache between my legs. I'd thought of this plan to drive us apart. To force him to let me go. To force myself to see this part of him.

But now that I was seeing it, it didn't scare me. It felt like I was seeing the real him for the first time. And I wanted it. I wanted him. But I couldn't.

This wasn't me. I was normal. I couldn't be turned on by this. By this craziness. By the fear. By the control.

"Do you understand, my little dove?" He ran the sharp side of the knife along my chest, tracing to each collarbone. The pressure was light, not cutting, but leaving pink lines on my skin. He could easily add pressure and cut me. Make me bleed for him.

The fear was intoxicating, making me feel each touch more intensely. The slight sting of the blade. His hot breath on my skin. His smoky scent. All of it. Everything. Overwhelming me with sensations.

I swallowed loudly as I watched the blade move along my body. He skimmed down my cleavage. A flick of his wrists, and he cut away the straps holding my bra in place. The lace fell, fluttering to the floor. My nipples hardened as the cold blade pressed against them. My skin heated as if I was burning alive, being dragged to hell by a demon.

He traced the blade along my breasts in large circles, outlining them, leaving a pink trail in his wake. He circled closer to one beaded nipple. The anticipation making me tremble. I felt like I couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. I was waiting for him. For Maddox to decide my life.

The blade pierced my skin at the top of my cleavage. I sucked in a sharp breath. The cut was small and shallow, no worse than a paper cut. And the sting was the same. Except it wasn't. It burned and pulsed, making me ache for more. Ache in places he hadn't even touched.

We were both transfixed on the spot as a small drop of blood popped from the wound. Maddox ducked his head. His tongue came out as he licked the red dot away. Licked away the pain.

My body tensed in arousal as I rubbed my thighs together. My pussy clenched as my skin grew hot. It shouldn't turn me on. But I couldn't look away from his lips on my skin. From his dark silky hair. I had to break away.

"I want you to let me go." I whispered. He pushed his hips into me, letting me feel his hard cock against my soft stomach.

My breath lodged in my lungs as I fought the desire to rub further into him.

“I told you. You’re mine.” He sliced through my underwear quickly before throwing the knife aside. The metal clattering across the hardwood floors. I jerked in surprise as his hand grabbed between my legs. “This pussy is mine.” He roughly palmed my breast, twisting my nipple until I cried out in both pain and pleasure. More blood dripped from the cut falling from my pebbled nipple. “These tits are mine.” He gripped my ass, pressing me so tight against him nothing could come between us. “This ass is mine. And soon, it’ll take my cock.”

So quick I didn’t see it coming, he grabbed my throat again. He used his hold on my wrist and neck to pick me up and slam me against the wall. My body jerked in pain. It wasn’t enough to injure me, but enough to make it clear I had no choice. He was taking away my ability to run. I needed to believe that. That I couldn’t go anywhere. Then it would be easier to give in to him. “You are mine.”

He let me go as quickly as he grabbed me. Stepping back until my body shivered with the loss of him. I wasn’t supposed to hate the space. I was supposed to crave it. Space was what I wanted. Needed.

But even I didn’t believe myself anymore.

“On your knees.” His deep voice penetrated my skin, sending electricity racing through my veins. His eyes bore into me as I hesitated a second too long. “Don’t make me ask

again. You're already going to be punished for your behavior tonight."

I dropped before him and looked up through my lashes, just the way he liked. Why was I caving to his demands? Doing it how he wanted? It was like my body was on autopilot. Trained to do exactly as he'd asked.

"Oh, now you want to act like a good girl." His hand cupped my jaw as his finger traced my bottom lip. "After you acted like a little slut." He leaned forward, and his voice dropped. "You're my slut, no one else's. Now open."

My lips separated as if my brain didn't even have to tell them what to do. As if it was the most natural thing in the world. His hand snaked around to my hair, bringing me forward until his cock pushed into my mouth. He didn't take it slow. Didn't ease me in.

He thrust mercilessly into my mouth. The head of his cock smashing against the back of my throat. My eyes water as I was forced to breathe through my nose or suffocate. But my tongue still swirled around him. Still tried to give him pleasure as he tried to kill me.

"That's right, my good little slut. Suck my cock." He groaned as his hips snapped into me again.

I tried to do as he asked, but I couldn't breathe. Tears poured from my eyes, and my nails dug into my thighs. I knew if I touched him, he'd stop. And as depraved as it was, I didn't want him to stop. I wanted to make him come. Wanted him to be happy.

I was sick. Twisted.

Maddox pulled back and thrust in again. And again. Setting a brutal rhythm as his hold on my hair tightened. I moaned as he pulled the strands. I hated myself for liking it. More tears poured from my eyes. I was damaged. How could I like this?

He fucked my mouth as ruthlessly as he handled every part of me. Each powerful push felt as if it was killing me, but I moaned with each loss as he pulled back. My body wanted him even as my mind fought against it.

“You’re mine. This mouth is mine.” He shoved in, and my tongue swirled, tasting his precum. Suddenly he pulled all the way out. My body greedily sucked in air even as I whimpered from the absence of his cock. From the pain he delivered. “Say it. Say you’re mine.”

I shook my head. I couldn’t say it. If I said it, then it was true. And I wasn’t ready to admit it aloud.

“I’ll fuck the answer out of you tonight.” He pounded back into my mouth as he chased his release. I could feel him thickening, and his groans got deeper the closer he was to coming.

My corrupt body craved his release. I wanted to taste him. Know that it was me who’d made him this way. But just before he came, he pulled from my lips. Thick ropes of cum hit my face, my breasts, my stomach as he fisted his cock.

I watched his hard abs flex as he worked himself. He was hauntingly gorgeous, even this feral. His sharp jaw tensed, and his full lips opened on a groan. His beauty was an illusion used to lure in his prey. And it had worked. I was trapped.

“No one will fucking touch you again.” He pumped his hand, and more cum hit my body as he marked me as his. “I’ll cover you in my cum every day if I have to. I’ll fill up that sweet cunt until there’s no room for anything but me inside you. Then I’ll move to your ass. I fill every hole until all you can feel is me.”

His broad chest rose and fell with heavy breaths as he stared down at me. I was afraid to know what he saw. Because I could feel it. I could feel the arousal coating my thighs, the blush on my cheeks, his cum dripping from my needy body. I knew it gave me away. Showed what I couldn’t put into words.

That I was his. And I liked it. I liked this dark side of him. Desired it.

Maddox’s hands smeared his cum over my body, rubbing it into my skin, mixing it with my blood. Claiming me further. He pinched my nipples roughly before moving to my face. His fingers trailed through the cum on my cheek, the sticky substance clinging to him.

He pushed against my lips, and my mouth opened instinctively. He shoved his fingers against my tongue just as he’d done with his cock. His salty taste exploded in my mouth as I sucked his fingers clean. His eyes flared, and he let out a harsh breath as he watched me. He repeated the movement

over and over until my face was clean. Until I swallowed all of him.

Then he jerked me from the floor. He picked me up by the back of my thighs. I didn't want to enjoy his display of strength, but I did. He was so powerful. I knew that power could turn on me at any instant, but in a weird way, it also protected me. My body was only his to torture. He wouldn't let anyone else hurt me. He'd proven that.

He turned until my ass landed on the dining room table. The same table he'd tortured me on a hundred times before. The table where he'd fucked me for the first time. And tonight, we were back here again. On the edge of another cliff.

He grabbed my feet until they rested on the wood, my knees drawn up to my chest. He still wore his suit and had tucked himself back in. I was fully naked, and he was fully clothed. My body was on display for him. For him to take. Use.

I turned my head away as a tear slipped from behind my eyes. He forced my face back to his. For the first time tonight, his eyes softened. It wasn't the kind of softness most people showed. It wasn't true softness, just a lightening from his depravity. It wouldn't even be perceivable by anyone else, but we'd spent a lot of time together. So I saw it.

Saw the subtle change in his emotions. Maddox only showed this side after sex. After he'd used me how he wanted.

His thumb brushed the tears away. I turned into his touch. I needed the softness to know he felt something for me.

Something more than the need to control. It was this softness that had dug its claws into me and wouldn't let me go.

“I wouldn't have to punish you, *mia amata*, if you'd just admit what your body is already telling you. This pussy is dripping for me because it knows my cock belongs buried inside you.” I shook my head again and closed my eyes so I didn't have to see the softness. The darkness might have drawn me in, but the softness made me stay. “Fine, have it your way, Kincaid.”

His fingers stroked my neck before tightening his hold. My hands went to his wrist. I just rested them there, feeling him. I knew it would be useless to try and push him away. My pussy clenched and flooded until it pooled on the table.

His other hand slapped between my legs. My eyes flew open in shock as I looked at him. I wanted to be mad, except the second the pain registered, another feeling passed through me. An intense pleasure roared in my body. He slapped me again, and I would've moaned if his hold on my neck had allowed it.

“You like that, don't you?” He traced his fingertips around my entrance, gathering the evidence of my arousal. His mouth moved against my lips. It was a light brush, and I wanted to press further. But I couldn't. I couldn't give in to the softness in his eyes. His hold loosened, and he stroked my neck.

“No.” I whispered, and tears rolled down my cheeks.

“These tears are mine.” He licked them away. “It's okay to admit you like it. You're not like everyone else, so stop

pretending. You like the pain. You like the fear. Your tight pussy flooded in excitement as I ran that knife over your skin.”

I shook my head back and forth. I didn't want him to be right. If he was right, what did that make me? A freak? A monster? Depraved like him? Maybe I really was his little slut.

“No, I didn't. I'm normal.” I whimpered.

He slapped my pussy again, and this time I did moan as the pleasure set off sparks inside me. I could feel my body tightening, begging for a release. Was I going to come from the pain alone?

“You're not fucking normal.” He slapped me again, and my legs shook with the force used to stop myself from coming. He squeezed my neck again until I looked at him. “Stop denying your true self. It'll only find a way out, or it'll destroy you. You'll turn into a shell of a person. You'll want to die again. Stop letting the world cage you. Stop living for their approval. For their version of normal. Embrace who you are. Live for yourself. Make yourself happy.”

Holy fuck!

He was right. Why was I letting a world full of people I didn't care about, who didn't care about me, stop me from having someone who did? Stop me from feeling...alive. Happy. Protected. Worshiped.

How had this demon cut right to the core of who I was? Right to my insecurities. To my need to please even if it hurt me. To the deep dark places, I couldn't voice out loud. Not

only had he seen them, but he was caring for them. Telling me they were okay. I was okay.

But would he take the acceptance away if I wronged him? Take my life away.

“I’m scared.” I whispered.

His hold on my neck softened, but he didn’t remove it completely. His blue eyes roamed my face searching for answers. “What are you scared of, my little dove?”

“I’m scared that I’m not meant for this life. I’m scared you’ll die. I’m scared you’ll kill me one day. That you won’t want me anymore and dispose of me.”

That was the truth I didn’t want to admit. That I really was his. I’d been his since the first time he touched me. And I feared he’d be taken from me. I feared I wasn’t enough. That he’d get bored of me. That he’d toss me aside like I was nothing. That once I fully committed to him, that once the chase was over, he’d leave. Or he’d end me. Or this life would end us.

“I thought you wanted to die.” His voice was the softest I’d ever heard it. It wasn’t soft compared to other people because he didn’t have that in him. Still, I bathed in his show of sweetness.

It was true I’d once considered ending my own life. There was a time it consumed my thoughts. That was before him. Before he’d exposed all my hidden parts. Before he’d made

me love them. Love myself. Before he'd taken away all my problems.

“Not since you.” I couldn't hide the truth from him anymore.

My hands left the table, and I threaded my fingers through his dark hair, forcing his mouth to mine. My tongue clashed with his. Fighting. Consuming. He was eating me alive, sucking the air from my lungs. His teeth bit my lip, and a metallic taste filled my mouth. I didn't know if it was his blood or mine; I didn't care. I didn't stop.

My mouth warred with his, trying to express the feelings I couldn't voice. He stroked my neck, and I dug my fingers into his scalp, begging for more. Our lips moved together as he swallowed my needy moans. Until he ripped his mouth from mine to stare into my eyes as he spoke. As if he wanted me to truly understand his words.

“I'll never hurt you outside of the pain you crave. I'll never let you go. Dead or alive.” His fingers flexed on my neck. “I'll follow you wherever we go when we leave this earth. I'll drag you down to hell with me. You're mine. Forever.”

It was the closest Maddox could get to a declaration of love. It was obsessed. Depraved. It was raw and wrong.

And perfect.

It called to my baser instincts. It spoke to my very soul. The place where I wasn't held back by other people's beliefs.

The place where I would find my true happiness.

With him.

The world was full of monsters. I'd almost been raped by my boss. Mentally tortured by my ex, a man people had been respected. Who was to say that Maddox was worse than them? That I shouldn't love him. At least he was honest about who he was.

"Say it." He squeezed my neck tighter. His blue eyes burned.

I gasped for air even as my clit thumped with pleasure. He loosed his hold slightly. I looked up at him through my lashes. I let the last of my resistance go. I allowed myself to finally feel for him. Let him love me in only the way he could.

Dark.

Twisted.

Depraved.

The way I craved.

"I'm yours."

He groaned before crashing our mouths back together again. He pulled back before I was ready. "Whose?"

"Yours." I reached for him again, the happiness in his expression making my chest tight.

"Only mine? Forever?"

"Yes. Please, Maddox. I'm only your little slut forever."

“No, you’re my perfect little dove.” He bit my lip before drowning me in his kiss again.

Maddox’s hand roamed my body. Pinching my nipples hard, flicking my clit, but never giving enough pressure to relieve the ache in my body. He was torturing me in a different way now.

“Please, Maddox.” I whimpered. He leaned forward, and his tongue traced my bottom lip. I tried to suck it into my mouth, but he pulled away.

“Please, what?” He latched onto my neck, causing a zap of lust between my legs as if he was sucking me there.

“Please, I want to come.” My voice trembled with need. “Make me come.”

“How do you want it, my little slut?” He placed his hand on my pussy and just left it there. I tried to squirm. To get his fingers inside me. Anything to create friction. To give my body what it needed. But he tightened his hold on my neck, and my movements stilled. I saw the sadistic gleam in his eyes, and fire coated my body. I wanted his sadism.

“I want you to take all of me.” I said as I stared into his eyes. I could see the obsessive love shining back at me. See how my submission pleased him.

I wanted to give him everything. All of me. Wanted to show him what his love meant to me. How it had finally freed after I was caged for so long. I needed to give him every part

of me. Every inch of my body. It was already his. Just like my heart.

“Claim the last part of me. Make me yours.”

His eyes flicked back and forth between mine, trying to understand my meaning. I leaned forward until I was whispering in his ear. “Fuck my ass.”

Kincaid

Maddox closed his eyes as if he was absorbing my words. Revealing in my final submission. I jolted as he hastily released my neck and started undoing the buttons of his shirt. He yanked the fabric down over my head before shoving my arms through the sleeves, dressing me as I stared at him in confusion.

“What are you doing?” I asked as he buttoned the shirt up, concealing my body. My blood stained the white fabric as he picked me up in his arms. My legs wrapped around his waist as he gripped my ass roughly. He easily carried me out of the dining room and up the stairs.

“I don’t want anyone to see you, and your dress is ruined.” I buried my face in his neck as goosebumps broke out along my skin, remembering how my dress had gotten ruined. I rubbed into him, wanting to be close. To touch. I never allowed myself to initiate touch between us. But now I could. Now that I’d set myself free. I nipped and licked, laughing as he almost dropped me. Maddox laughed back.

I loved the sound. It was carefree and light. He rarely let his guard down. I wanted to bottle it up and listen to it every

day. Except I didn't need to bottle it up because I was staying. I could hear it every day if I wanted. I smiled as he kicked open the bedroom door and tossed me to the bed.

I yelped as I bounced once before Maddox followed me down, attacking my lips with his. I gripped the thick strands of his hair and moaned as his tongue dove inside. Tasting every corner as he grabbed my throat possessively.

He fucked my mouth with his tongue. It was a claiming. And I let him take. His hand lingered over the bite he'd given me. Reminding me of what I'd let him do. What I would now allow myself to enjoy. I moaned as he pulled back, licking his lips to savor our taste as he stared down at me.

He was so strikingly handsome. His hair disheveled and curling over his forehead. The sharp lines of his jaw and cheekbones. His deep blue eyes burned into me as I reached for the buttons of his shirt.

Slowly I undid them. One by one. His gaze tracked my every moment. I realized I'd never done this before. I'd never bared myself to him without him commanding it first. It was a subtle move showing Maddox how things had changed. How I was willing to give myself to him now. For my pain. His pleasure.

Once the shirt was undone, he pushed it aside to look at me before leaning forward. I moaned as his teeth captured my bottom lip. "Whose mouth is this?"

"Yours." I answered automatically before parting my lips. Waiting for him. He gathered his saliva and spit into my open

mouth. His hand pressed further into my throat as I swallowed him down.

“Good, my little dove.” Heat pooled between my legs at his praise. He skimmed both hands down my body, making me arch into his touch. He cupped both my breasts as he buried his face between them. I moaned as his stubble scraped along my sensitive skin. He moved his mouth to my nipple, sucking one roughly. I fisted his hair as I pushed my chest further into his warmth.

Suddenly he turned his head and bit down hard, leaving another mark on my flesh. “And who do these belong to?”

“You.” I whimpered as his tongue scraped along the cut his knife had made in my cleavage. A sting blooming along my skin. The pain making me wetter as I rocked my hips against him. He groaned as he tasted my blood. It should’ve been sick, but it only fueled our obsession. Him taking from me in a way no one else ever would.

My fingers left his head as his lips trailed down my stomach, and he dropped to his knees on the carpet before me. I shivered as his fingertips lightly brushed my legs, skimming from my knees to my thighs. “Open wider. Let me see your pretty pussy.”

Oh fuck. The way he talked to me. I couldn’t even think about disobeying. I spread my legs as wide as I could, leaning forward on my elbows so I could watch. His dark hair was stark against my white skin as he leaned forward and licked

the wetness that coated my thighs. I sighed at the contact. Finally, allowing myself to enjoy everything he did to me.

His tongue skimmed along the sensitive skin before his teeth sunk into my flesh again. I screamed and jerked as I felt the bruises form. I had a feeling that when the night was over, I would be covered in his marks. There'd be no doubt who I belonged to. It was exactly what I asked for.

I fell back to the bed as he buried his face between my legs. He thrust in and out of my pussy as he fucked me with his tongue. I withered beneath him as he consumed me. Ruthless. Possessive as he pushed me to the edge. I flinched and bucked as he sucked my clit before flicking back and forth over the swollen bundle of nerves. My orgasm barreled to the surface so quickly it felt like a tide pulling me under. I fisted the sheets and tensed, ready for the explosion, when he pulled back.

“No.” I whimpered as I shot up, looking down at him. A sadistic smirk crossed his face as he licked me from his lips. It was dirty and sexy, everything he was.

“Whose cunt is this?” He rasped like this was affecting him as much as it affected me. When I didn't answer right away, too lost in the pleasure coursing through my veins, he dipped his head again and sucked my clit.

“Oh g-.” My moan was cut off when he growled and bit my thigh again. “Yours.” I screamed.

He devoured me once more. I gripped his hair, pulling hard as I rocked my hips on his face. I didn't care that it made me

seem needy or desperate. I wanted him to know how much I needed him. How badly I wanted him to make me come. How crazy he made me.

“Please. Please. Let me come.” I cried as I chased my release. I groaned as he pushed back from me, only to be lost in the image of him. His abs flexed as he undid his pants and shoved them off. His cock sprung free into his hand. Too big and thick but perfectly painful when he fucked me. He gripped it roughly before grabbing my ass and positioning himself at my entrance.

“Come, my little slut.” His fingers bruised as he yanked me to him. Impaling me on his cock as I screamed. “Give me your orgasm. Those are mine too.” A sharp sting landed on my ass as he slapped one cheek roughly before thrusting deeply again.

I screamed as the pain made my core clench tighter around him. I moved my hips, meeting him thrust for thrust as his balls slapped my ass. He fucked me brutally. The head of his cock dragged across that spot inside me that, made my hips buck, and my head shake back and forth. It was so intense the world around me started to darken. Maddox groaned as the first signs of my orgasm squeezed him. “Flood my cock. Cover me in your cum so I can slide into your tight ass.”

“Maddox.” I screamed as my entire body tightened. My muscles contracted and released as bliss overtook me. I could feel him holding still inside me. I watched as he closed his

eyes and clenched his jaw to stop himself from coming with me.

When my breathing normalized, he slowly pulled from inside me. I whimpered at the loss of him along my sensitive flesh. He groaned as he stared at me, fisting his cock roughly. I wondered what he saw. My skin felt sweaty and flushed. I knew dried blood covered my breasts, and his marks were riddled along my body. He traced the one on my thigh briefly.

“Turn over.” He commanded as he slapped my thigh, making me moan. “Show me that tight ass I’m going to take.”

Hesitation pumped through me as I bit my lip, but slowly I rolled to my stomach. My aching nipples pressed into the bed as my body rose and fell with heavy breaths. Soon anticipation made my blood sing as I waited to see what he would do. How he would hurt me and pleasure me. Claim me. Doing what I asked.

“Maddox?” I whispered when it became too much.

I felt the bed depress beside my head as he rested one hand beside my face. He traced a single fingertip down my spine. My breath hitched as I shivered at his touch. He smoothed his hand over the curve of my ass. I pressed into his touch, wiggling beneath him. Wanting more of what he had been dying to give me.

His touch was too soft. Too reverent. Too loving. It made everything more intense. Made my body desperate for me.

“Do you still want this, my little slut?” He slapped my ass again as I moaned loudly. I could feel his restraint as he rubbed the ache making it burn again while he waited for my answer.

Did I really want to do this? There would be no going back. No turning away from the dark, dirty pleasure he gave me. There would be no more walls to hide behind. There would only be him.

Us.

Free.

Happy.

“Y-yes.” I whispered on a harsh exhale. I could practically hear the smile in his groan.

He pushed off the bed quickly before he yanked my hips roughly, dragging my ass into the air. Exposing me to him. He shoved between my shoulder blades, forcing my face into the mattress before spreading my thighs wide and parting my cheeks.

The cold air in the room pressed down on my heated skin. My body shook with anticipation as I tried to hide the blush of being exposed like this. I was on display for him with nowhere to go. Nowhere to hide. I was vulnerable. At his mercy. And I loved it. Loved that my decisions weren't my own. That he was in control.

“Oh fuck. Look at you.” His voice was raspy. Deep with appreciation. It was intoxicating, knowing someone wanted

me like this. That he was desperate to claim me. Still, he didn't touch me. Making me just as desperate for him. I wiggled my hips again, trying to force him to touch me.

I fisted the sheets and groaned in frustration when his fingers brushed over the curve of my ass with a feather-light touch. His chuckle tickled my skin as he bent forward. His teeth sank into the plump flesh of my ass.

I screamed and tried to crawl away when the pain coursed through me. But Maddox gripped my hips tightly, bruising and keeping me in place. He smacked the bite as his warmth retreated again. There would be no getting away from him now.

"Maddox, please." I whimpered as I thrust my hips back. I couldn't take it anymore. He'd been torturing me since we'd walked in the door. I knew I deserved it. Knew it was stupid to try and get away from him. Every minute he waited drove me insane. I needed to feel him. Needed to come.

"So greedy." He laughed again as another slap came down on my ass. Fuck. Was this his plan? To keep me on the edge all night. Was this my punishment?

Just as I worried I was in for a long night, he stepped between my spread thighs. I jumped at the contact when the head of his cock dragged through my dripping pussy. I closed my eyes.

It felt good, but it wasn't enough. I tried to shift back and take him in. Tried to relieve the ache between my legs. But that wasn't what I'd given him permission to do tonight. I let

out a shaky breath as he pressed against the tight, untouched ring of muscle.

Holy fucking shit.

My breath caught in my lungs, and my focus narrowed to where he was splitting me open. Only an inch, and I felt like I was being ripped apart. I couldn't do this. I tensed when his husky voice startled me. "Tell me why. Why do you want me to fuck this ass?"

This was the softer Maddox. The one that always drew me in. He rubbed soothing circles on my back as he waited for me. It had to be killing him to hold still like this. To not take. Claim.

It made me want him more. Knowing that he could do this for me. That he could be soft. For me. Only me.

I tossed my hair over one shoulder as I turned to look at him. His jaw was clenched; the corded muscles in his neck taut. His eyes intense, burning into me. I bit my lip and took a shuddering breath. "Because it's yours. I want to give you something no one else has ever had. I want you to own all of me. I want to be marked as yours forever."

It was the truth. My obsession was just as deep as his. As much as I was his, he was mine. I was ready to accept it. Own it. Be the partner he needed.

A wicked, possessive smile crossed his face, but before I could smile back, he gripped my hips and thrust. He slid in

another inch easily as I stopped fighting. I pushed back, taking him where no one ever had.

The pain and pressure blurred my vision. But there was also a dark pleasure. A forbidden bliss. My legs trembled, and my breath came in pants as another orgasm built inside me.

“*Cazzo*, you’re perfect.” He thrust again, and I felt myself squeezing around him, trying to push him out as much as I pulled him in. His fingers flexed on my hips with the effort to go slowly. I arched and moaned as he pushed further. “There you go, my little slut. Don’t fight. Take it. Take my cock in your ass.”

I wanted him to claim me. I wanted him to bury himself so deeply inside me that when I moved, all I felt was Maddox. I wanted the pain. The pleasure. I wanted to be his.

“Maddox, please. I want it. I want the pain.” I moaned as I shoved back, pushing more of his cock into my ass. The pain just the right side of being too much.

I could practically hear his control snap as I begged him. Maddox’s fingers dug into my hips as he slammed me back against him, burying himself as deep as he could go. I screamed in pleasure and intense pain as he impaled me on his cock. He groaned as he pulled out and pumped into me again. My hands slipped on the sheets as I tried to find purchase from his brutal thrusts. My moans and whimpers were loud and raw as he frantically fucked me.

His grunts were animalistic as he claimed what was his. As he used and abused my body. Bringing us both closer to our

release. It was exactly what I wanted. Dirty. Wrong. Depraved. Instinct.

No one else mattered. Not my ex, who'd called me a freak. Or anyone else that would judge us. There were no societal expectations. There was only us.

He slammed in again, and my spine snapped straight as I reached the edge of another orgasm. Just as I felt the first tightening of it, Maddox ripped from my body.

“Maddox!” I shouted in surprise. In one smooth motion, he flipped me over and slammed back into my ass.

“That’s right, little dove, say my fucking name.” He growled, feral in his need to claim me. “I want to look into your gorgeous eyes while I take your ass. I want to see you come apart for me like the good little slut you are.”

My eyes flew wide as my lips parted on another scream as he pulled out of me again. It was too tight. Too rough. Tears leaked from my eyes at the brutal treatment. Brutal and perfect. Maddox leaned forward, his tongue coming out to lick away the tears. I turned my head into his, feeling myself fall for him. Needing more of his skin on mine.

“You’re so fucking tight. So fucking perfect.” He grunted as he slammed into me again and again. I could feel my toes tingling. My body tensing. I was going to come. I was going to come while a mafia murderer fucked my ass. And holy shit, I loved it. “You’re mine. Say it.”

“Fuck Maddox! I’m yours.” I screamed as I came.

I felt him everywhere as he buried himself deep inside me. I squeezed around him. My nails digging into his back as I arched and moaned. Colors burst behind my eyes as more wetness flooded out of me. My body tensed and released as the last waves of pleasure washed over me.

Maddox cursed into his own release. I felt the warm liquid gushed down as he filled me with his cum. It dripped out of my ass as he collapsed, burying his face in my neck. He placed a possessive hand on my throat as if he wanted to feel the ragged breaths I took.

For long minutes we stayed just like that. Enjoying the little aftershocks working through our bodies. I relished the feel of him inside me. The feel of his sweaty skin clinging to mine. I traced soft circles on his back. Skimming across the hard muscles in his shoulders. I rubbed my hands there, the hair at the nape of his neck. Maddox touched me just as softly. Rubbing lightly over the bite marks and cuts he'd left on my skin.

It was intimate. Soft.

A contrast to the brutality of the night. To the thorough claiming. My body might crave his pain, but my heart craved this. The way he made me feel special. Precious.

I let out a soft whimper as he pulled from my body. Maddox groaned as if he was just as reluctant to leave me. I watched his perfect body move as he walked into the bathroom, shaking my head at how gorgeous he was.

Tears sprung to my eyes as he came back and knelt between my legs. I tried to hold them back as he tenderly wiped away the dried blood on my chest. Applying a bandage before he skimmed a clean cloth along the rest of my skin. Spending time cleaning his cum from between my legs. He tossed the rags aside but didn't join me back on the bed.

Maddox lingered there, placing soft kisses along my skin. I gripped his hair lightly as he pressed his lips to both knees, my inner leg, my stomach. He worked his way up my body. Kissing both breasts. My neck. By the time he reached my lips, I felt like my heart was going to burst. How could he be crazy one minute, a murderer, a psychopath, and then so sweet the next?

“Let me hear it again.” His lips brushed mine as he spoke.

I smiled softly at him as I threaded my fingers through his hair. His fingers traced my features as he waited for the words. He was so gentle. Adoring. Loving. I wondered what he was thinking when he looked at me like that. How a demon could find anything interesting in a normal girl?

“I'm yours.” I pressed my lips to his briefly. “Forever.”

Maddox

I stilled my hand where it had been ghosting down Kincaid's spine. I listened for the sounds of her even breathing. For the steady rise and fall of her chest to know she was in a deep sleep. Her eyes fluttered under her lids as I kissed her and slipped away. I cracked my neck from side to side as I fought the urge to stay beside her. To curl around her warm body and pull her close. But business needed to be taken care of.

Kincaid was mine. Truly mine. She had stopped fighting her own desires. She'd let go. She was giving herself to me entirely. The constriction in my chest that I'd felt since she'd been kidnapped finally loosened. I had my little dove back.

I dressed in the dark, donning a white button-up shirt and slacks. I stepped into my shoes as I opened the panic room. My fingers skimmed over the knives, putting one in my pocket on my way to pick up a small handgun. A knife would take too long tonight. I wanted to get back to bed. I screwed on the silencer as I made my way back to the bedroom and out the door. Kincaid continued to sleep as I shut it behind me.

Bash appeared as if out of thin air as I started down the stairs. "Where is he?"

“Your office.” His tone was clipped. He didn’t approve, and I didn’t care. “We should move him to the warehouse.”

“No.” I barked. “I want all the men here. It seems I haven’t made my point clear enough.”

I practically ripped the door off its hinges in my rage. It slammed loudly as it smacked against the wall. Henry had the strength not to flinch, unlike some of the other men. A dozen of them stood shoulder to shoulder, leaning against the walls of the room as Henry knelt in front of my desk.

His suit was rumpled, and his long blonde hair had escaped the band he usually kept it in. My blood boiled as I looked at him. I thought he could be something. Thought he’d grow and evolve at my side. Instead, he betrayed me.

I placed the gun on the desk, letting its presence in his line of sight be a threat. I pulled a knife from my pocket, skimming it along his jaw. The blade was sharp enough that it took off the stubble on his face.

“Was touching her your only betrayal, or did you also sell us out to the Gallos?” My voice was cool even as I burned to see his blood spilled. To see him pay for daring to touch what was mine. I knew it was faked, but it didn’t matter. He’d either been fooled by her or played along to her demands. Neither was acceptable.

“I would never betray you. I know the price I’d pay.” He said as his head tilted back to look at me. Tristan flinched at his side as if to attack. I pierced him in place with a glare. Henry was mine to deal with.

“Touching what isn’t yours is a betrayal of my trust.” I crouched before him, using the dull edge of the blade to keep his face focused on me. “It’s a violation of my loyalty. My kindness in bringing you into my home. My world.”

He swallowed thickly as he held my gaze. “I didn’t touch her. I would never touch her.”

He was good. Even seeing it myself, I believed him. There was no hint of a lie in his eyes. I stood again. “Place your hand on the desk.” Henry complied without hesitation. “Let this be an example. No one touches her. In pain or pleasure. No one looks at her. If I found out anyone has harmed her in any way, there will be nowhere you can hide from me. I’ll not only destroy you. I’ll destroy everything you’ve ever loved. I’ll wipe your entire family from this earth until not a drop of your blood remains.”

I gripped his forearm to keep him in place as I dug the blade of my knife into the back of Henry’s hand. A twisted combination of anger and elation pumping through my veins, making my heart beat faster.

Smartly he didn’t try to pull away. He grit his teeth and hissed in a breath as I carved into his flesh. He would be scarred for life. Branded for his betrayal.

I smiled as the letter formed on his skin, blood dripping onto the smooth surface of the wood. I glanced around the room, looking each man in the eyes to confirm they were adequately fearful of my wrath. “Do we understand?”

No one dared to answer. I let out a deep breath through my nose as my finger tightened around the handle of the knife. Maybe I would need to leave a larger mark. Perhaps carving into his face. I pressed the tip of the blade into his cheek just as my office door flew open. I could feel her presence before she spoke. My soulless demon pulled to her light.

“This is cozy.” She said as she sauntered past me and sat on the corner of my desk. Her ass inches from Henry’s bloody hand. I didn’t even glance in her direction, not wanting to be distracted from my mission.

“Kincaid.” I growled. “Go back to bed.”

“No.” She spoke softly but firmly. I resisted the urge to rub between my eyes. She knew who I was, but a part of me didn’t want her in the room to see it. She considered Henry a friend, and it would hurt her to see me punish him. It would take a part of her. Taint her. I didn’t want to do that.

But I would.

If it meant she understood what would happen to her if she tried to get away. Because I was never letting her go. If she tried to leave me again, I’d punish her as well. My cock throbbed at the thought of branding my little dove. She’d look so good with my initials carved into her inner thigh. No one would dare touch her then.

“Little dove, this is not for your eyes.” I continued to stare at where my knife dug into Henry’s skull.

“I’m not going anywhere.” I heard the shifting of fabric behind me, and I imagined she had crossed her arms in defiance.

Silence fell upon the room as they waited to see what I would do. They already knew I had deferred to her once. That I’d held back on killing Tristan at her insistence. I wasn’t worried about that. She owned me, and I didn’t care who knew it. It had been obvious enough when I’d made the city bleed after she’d been taken.

“Tristan, I suggest you get your eyes off me before you end up on your knees next to Henry.” My gaze snapped to Tristan’s at the venom in Kincaid’s voice. I just caught his smirk before he averted his gaze to the floor. Apparently, I wasn’t making my point, not to him, at least.

Unable to keep my attention focused on my task, I turned to her. Kincaid sat perched on my desk, her bare legs crossed, showing a lot of her smooth porcelain thighs. Her arms were crossed over her chest, but it did nothing to hide the way her nipples were visible through the shirt she wore.

My shirt. It was stained with her blood. My cock thickened at the memory of how her blood had gotten there. Of how she’d moaned as I cut her. How I’d taken her ass at her insistence.

“Everyone out.” I barked as I stalked towards her. I was going to punish her for walking around like this in front of my men. She’d done it on purpose to distract me. And I’d allowed

her to win. Because the punishment I'd give her would be so much better than resisting.

"Henry, stay." She said without taking her gaze from mine. I narrowed my eyes as I gripped her hips. Her legs fell open to wrap around me. She didn't even seem bothered by the sharp blade that pressed against her back. She didn't flinch or hide from it. Instead, she leaned into my touch. Accepting who and what I was. Finally.

"Explain." I growled. She only had moments before I ripped her clothes off and fucked her. I'd do it in front of the young guard if only to stake my claim.

"Henry would never touch me." She sighed as she toyed with the buttons on my shirt. Her fingers skimmed across the exposed skin at my collarbone. "He's gay."

"Fuck." Henry's soft curse came from behind me. I released my little dove and turned to him.

Unlike before, he was in a state of panic. Sweat dotted his upper lip and forehead. He trembled on his knees as he avoided my gaze. He ran his uninjured hand through his messy hair as he sucked in a shaky breath. "Is that true?"

He glanced at me briefly before looking away again. His whispered word almost didn't make it across the room to me. "Yes."

Kincaid placed a hand on my shoulder as she spoke. "It wasn't his fault. He never touched me. You saw what I wanted you to see. I grabbed his shirt. He tried to move away from

me, but I wouldn't let him. No other part of our bodies touched."

She grabbed my jaw and turned me to face her. Her winter gray eyes pleaded for understanding. "I didn't really want anyone else to touch me. I just wanted to make you think I did. Tessa and Tristan told me you'd think I was disgusting and let me go if you believed I cheated. I'm sorry."

Fucking Tristan. He was so worried about our position in the family he would do anything to keep me focused. What he failed to realize was that the other capos were too afraid to ever threaten me. This was why he wasn't ready to become a capo himself; he didn't see the big picture.

My little dove did. She'd know Bash was struggling. She'd known Tristan was cunning. She'd figured out Henry's secrets before me. She saw what others didn't. She was made for this life more than she realized.

She pressed her forehead into mine, our breath mingling as she waited to see what I would do. I brushed my thumb along her silky bottom lip, my dick throbbing with the need to shove between those beautiful lips. My stomach tightening at the image. Reluctantly I turned to look at Henry.

"Now that I know you have no interest in my little dove, you can continue to be her guard." I felt Kincaid's exhale against my neck. I pulled from her hold as I turned to face Henry fully. "Clean your cut. But you're not permitted to get stitches. You'll wear the brand for life."

“Maddox.” Her voice was desperate in my ear. She felt bad that her little stunt would cause Henry harm. A part of me cared, but another part knew she needed to understand that she could never do something like that again. That there was nothing that could take her away from me now. She glanced at Henry’s bloodied hand where you could barely make out the ‘V’ for Vancini through the red liquid.

“It’s fine.” Henry nodded. “I always felt there should’ve been consequences when I failed to stop her kidnapping. I’ll take them now.”

“No! That was-“

“Little dove.” I stoked her cheeks gently. “Henry will live and continue to be your guard, but he still needs to serve as an example.”

Her lips pressed into a tight line as she stared at me. I could see the defiance behind her wintry eyes. I held her gaze. I wasn’t backing down. Finally, she conceded.

“I’m sorry, Henry.” She whispered as she pulled me closer. She might be mad at me for how I handled my men, but she also sought me out for comfort. He slowly turned his head to look at her.

“I’m sorry I let them take you.” A ghost of a smile flicked across his lips. “Let’s both stop being stupid now, huh?”

“Okay.” She nodded sadly.

“Stand up.” I sighed as I rubbed my eyes. He scrambled to his feet, no doubt fearing a delay in my command would earn

him another punishment. “You know I don’t care that you’re gay. As long as you keep her safe, you can stick your dick in whoever you want.”

His cheeks flushed as he pulled on the back of his neck. Kincaid let out a soft gasp. Did they really think it mattered to me? He shrugged. “Macho guys. You never know how they’ll react.”

“You’re not wrong. There are some in the family who won’t agree, but I’ll deal with them.”

“I don’t—why?” His brows furrowed in confusion.

“The family owns a kink club which I frequent. Or I used to.” I placed the knife on the desk, longing that I wouldn’t get to use it again tonight. “We’d be stupid to turn away business because of their sexual preferences even if the older generation is still stuck in their ways.”

He didn’t say anything more as we stared at each other. It made me comfortable to know the one guard who’d gotten close with my little dove didn’t prefer her company. It made it easier to know they spent time together.

“Head to the gambling club. Bash has secured a few idiots who owe us a debt. Teach them a lesson and let them get a few hits in.” I sighed. “When the men ask, tell them they’re from me.”

“You’re not going to....” He let the rest of the question hang in the air between us.

I cracked my neck to ease the tension. “No. I believe you’re loyal, and I’d like you to stay that way. The brand is enough.”

Once again, he proved his worth by simply nodding and leaving the room. I could feel Kincaid’s mind turning as she sat on the desk next to me. I didn’t look at her. I knew the questions that were coming, and they had nothing to do with what Henry had suffered.

“How many?” Her voice betrayed her anxiety. I turned and pulled her across the desk until I was once again between her creamy thighs. Her shirt rode up, revealing her bare pussy to me.

Cazzo.

My hands twitched with the need to touch her. To see if she was wet. To feel myself slide easily into her warmth.

“None.” I answered as my fingers skimmed up her legs, heading to my version of heaven. The only version I would ever get. Just as I brushed her pretty cunt Kincaid snapped her thighs shut.

“Don’t lie to me, Maddox.” She shoved my hand away and went to push off the desk. I slammed my large palms on her legs, trapping her with me.

“If you want to know how many people I’ve fucked I couldn’t even begin to tell you. Hundreds.” I felt nothing at the thought of the others. No interest in them as people. No desire to have them again. But Kincaid’s face contorted in pain, made

my chest tight. Pulled forward the emotions I'd never known I had. I brought one hand to cup her cheek. Tracing along her smooth skin. "But not one of them meant anything. They were toys. Fuckable holes. I didn't care about them."

"I was a toy once too." She whispered as she closed her eyes and tried to ignore my gentle caress. Tried to pretend it didn't affect her in the same way it affected me.

"You were never a toy. I wanted to believe you were." I brushed my lips to hers briefly. "You're different. I didn't think I could feel until you came along."

Her eyes flicked open again. She searched mine looking for the truth. "How? How am I different from them?"

I threaded my fingers through her hair, tilting her head back so she could look at me fully. "I never fucked a single one of them without a condom. I've never given them my cum. My spit." Her eyes narrowed. I knew it wasn't enough. She wanted more than sex. And she had it. "No other woman has been in this house. Ever. You're the only one who's slept in my bed. Eaten at my table. You're the only one who's seen me."

I pressed my forehead to hers. She was mine, no matter what. But I wanted her to understand. "I've never claimed another woman. I've never told anyone else I love them. Only you, my little dove."

Kincaid sighed as she pressed her lips into mine. I surged in, forcing her to open for me. I dove deep, tasting all of her.

Claiming. Possessing. Willing her to see us for what we were.
I squeezed the nape of her neck as I pulled back.

“Do you understand? There is no one else. There will never be anyone else.”

“Okay.” She shook her head before kissing me again.

She was the only one. The only one who ever affected me.
Changed me. Made me a part of her. No one else.

Kincaid

I wished I could plug my ears so I didn't have to hear the sound of my vomit as it hit the water. I gagged again before slumping forward and flushing the toilet. My head slipped from the sweat as I rested it on my forearm. My arm clung to the seat. I didn't have it in me to care about the germs, not when I felt like death warming over.

My body shook with the fever even as I wished for a blanket to keep me warm. I groaned as my stomach cramped again. I closed my eyes to try and stop the room from spinning around me, but it didn't help. It also didn't stop the pounding in my skull. I had been like this for hours.

I'd felt fine when Maddox and I had gone out to dinner; he was starting to trust that I wouldn't try and leave again. We'd come home where he proceeded to punish me for every hour we'd been out, and he'd had to wait to fuck me. Afterward, I'd fallen asleep until my stomach pains had woken me up.

Maddox had been gone, no doubt called to one of the clubs or some other unsavory business I was better not knowing about. Henry had come to check on me twenty minutes ago when the repeated sounds of vomiting and the toilet alerted

him to the fact I was awake, but I sent him back in the hall when it became clear he was going to sympathy vomit all over me.

“Fuck.” I mumbled as I dry-heaved into the toilet. There had to be nothing left in there, but I was afraid to go back to bed. The sound of the door opening reached my ears, but I kept my eyes closed. I couldn’t argue with Henry again. If he wanted to risk being in here, that was his problem.

“Oh my little dove.” I didn’t have the energy to lift my head and look at Maddox. “Let’s get you to bed.”

I didn’t protest as he lifted me from the hard tiled floor. I burrowed further into his warmth as my body shivered. The movement made my head spin as he carried me through the room and placed me back on the mattress.

“You’re soaked in sweat.” Maddox said as he forced me to stay seated. All I wanted to do was put my head back on the pillows. “I’m going to change you.”

“No. Lay.” I groaned even as he stripped my shirt off. Chills broke out along my body as he cupped my cheeks and pressed his lips into my forehead.

“How long have you been like this?” He asked as he pushed a strand of damp hair from my face. I didn’t have the strength to wiggle from his touch or care if I smelled like vomit.

“Hours.” I inhaled deeply, taking his smoky scent into my lungs, letting it soothe something inside me.

“*Cazzo.*” He grunted as he pulled a new shirt over my head and let me lie down again. He tucked the covers around me before gently pulling me back against his chest. The steady rise and fall of his breathing and the soft way his fingers brushed up and down my arms lulled me back to sleep.

I didn't rest comfortably. My stomach constantly cramping, and my mind spinning. Even lying down, it felt like the room was moving around me like I was in constant motion. Only Maddox's quiet voice murmuring in my ear kept me from feeling lost at sea.

He forced water down my throat with medicine to reduce my fever. He tested my capacity to hold down food by giving me small sips of fruit juice and bites of crackers. He held my hair back when I got sick again and carried me to bed when I was done.

I didn't know what to do with this version of him. With the softness of a killer. No one had taken care of me. Even before my mother had gotten sick and I became her caregiver, she still had to work multiple jobs to keep food on the table and the lights on in our shitty apartment.

I often found myself alone as a child, doing my best to need as little as possible. I knew how to cook long before I knew how to drive. I would come home from school and make us both dinner. We'd eat together before she put me to bed and went to her next job.

If I was sick, I learned to fight through it. We couldn't afford for her to miss work to take care of me. It didn't change

when I became an adult. If anything, it got worse. There was no one else to help. I only had myself to rely on. If I didn't go to work, there wouldn't be money to pay the bills.

And now I found myself in the arms of the last man anyone should rely on. Arguably the least capable person to take care of someone. But he was. He was caring for me. Gently. Lovingly. As if it was his purpose in life.

Is this what it was to be his? Was this what my life would be like with him? Never having to worry about money again. Receiving expensive gifts like clothes and libraries. Being cherished even when I was sick. Why had I fought this for so long?

Maddox might be a criminal, but he was everything I didn't know I needed.

I felt the mattress lift as his weight left. With a strength I didn't know I had, I reached for him, gripping his wrist. I spoke into the pillow without opening my eyes. "Stay."

It felt crucial for him to stay with me. I've lived my life mostly alone, but I didn't want to be alone right now. I wanted to know he cared about me outside of sex. That he wanted to be here for me if I was sick. It shouldn't matter. I'd already decided I wouldn't leave him. But it did matter.

"I'm not going anywhere, *mia amata*." Maddox's had brushed down my spine. "I called the doctor. He's here to check on you."

"Just the flu." I mumbled.

His lips pressed into my forehead. “It won’t hurt for him to check on you.”

I rolled to my back and kept my eyes close as I heard Maddox talking softly to the doctor. I barely registered him taking my temperature and pressing on my stomach. I was too weak and tired to protest or even help.

“Is it possible she’s pregnant?” Maddox asked from beside me.

My eyes flew open as I stared at him. His face was surprisingly neutral. No expression. He didn’t meet my gaze as he stared at where the doctor pressed into my stomach. I wondered what he was thinking. How he would react if I were pregnant.

I shut my eyes again and threw my arm over them as I spoke before the doctor could. “Pregnant people don’t get fevers and chills.”

“Exactly.” Dr. Mechan said. “I think she has a nasty case of food poisoning. It’ll pass on its own. Try to stay hydrated as best you can.”

He patted my hand softly like a father would with a sick child before I heard him speak to Maddox in a muffled voice and then finally the snick of the door telling me he’d left. I didn’t bother rolling back to my stomach as I was already starting to drift off to sleep again. I sighed as Maddox came back to the bed and gathered me in his arms, resting my head on his chest as he rubbed up and down my spine.

“Do you want kids someday?” He asked.

My body tensed beneath him, my sore muscles protesting. It was exhausting mentally and physically to be sick like this. It wasn't the time for this conversation, but it was probably better for him to know the truth now. Before we got to the point where we couldn't turn back.

“The world is too messed up to bring more kids into it.” I answered honestly. “I've barely been able to keep myself alive. I wouldn't want to throw a kid into the mix.”

Silence followed. I felt like my words hung in the air. Like they weighed down on us. It had never crossed my mind that Maddox would want children. Maybe he was expected to have them. If Alessandra was destined for an arranged marriage, it also made sense that Leif and Maddox would be expected to produce heirs. Sometimes the mafia felt like Victorian England.

“What about you?” I finally asked when the wait became unbearable.

“I might be a psychopath, but even I know I shouldn't have kids.” He turned his face into my hair and inhaled deeply before he spoke again. “Besides, I don't want anything taking your attention from me. Your mine, no one else's.”

It should be horrible that he would be jealous of his own child, but I wasn't surprised. Maddox didn't share what was his. If he didn't have to work, I doubt I'd be allowed to spend time with Tessa and Alessandra since it would take time away from him.

I was surprised by my reaction to his words. To find that I liked it. I liked that he didn't want to share me with anyone. That I was the only one he was obsessed with. The only one he loved.

Kincaid

The book snapped close in my lap as I threw my head back. I was feeling restless. For years, I'd used books as an escape. But now I wanted to live in the world. Wanted to truly live my life instead of letting it drag me around like it wasn't really mine.

I no longer had a desire to leave Maddox. I wanted to be a part of his world. The life I'd agreed to. I knew I could never be involved in his business, but I could stop myself from being a hindrance. A weakness.

I pursed my lips as I looked at Henry, who sat relaxed in one of the armchairs flipping through his phone. We'd managed to move past the whole 'using him to flirt and piss off Maddox' thing. He didn't blame me for the scarring on his hand. He seemed more upset that I had wanted to leave Maddox. It was strange. I couldn't imagine why he'd have such blind devotion to him. But I suppose I might feel the same for the person who'd gotten me off the streets. And I guess I did.

"I want to learn to protect myself." I said, breaking the silence abruptly.

“Ask Maddox.” He answered without lowering his phone. “Not a single guy here is going to risk touching you to teach you self-defense.”

I huffed out a sigh. He wasn't wrong. I doubted Maddox would appreciate it. I'm sure if I asked him, he'd show me. But the tension between the Gallos and Vancinis had risen again. He was gone most days and nights. From what I'd heard, he was fortifying security in the clubs. I didn't want to take away time from that, especially when my best friend worked in one of the clubs.

“There are other things you can teach me without touching.” I sat up to look at him. “You could teach me how to shoot.”

Henry finally put his phone down to look at me. His eyes were slightly widened in shock. “You want to learn how to use a gun?”

“Yes. I—.” I took a deep breath pushing down the memories of being trapped. Of feeling helpless. Or waiting for someone to save me. “Being with Maddox is a risk. I knew that when he made me his. I can't stay in this house forever.”

Anxiety forced my heart to beat faster. It was trying to tell my body to run. To run far away from anything that would put me at risk. But I wouldn't do it. I wouldn't pull away from him again. Not when he was the only thing that made me feel alive. That made me want to live. I didn't have a life to protect without him.

“You have Maddox.” He answered firmly. His lips were pressed into a hard line. He didn’t like the idea of teaching me to kill. Like Maddox, they wanted to shield me from the evils of this life, but that could never happen. “And when he’s not around, you have me. We’ll never let anything happen to you.”

I pierced him with a hard glare. I hated making him feel guilty for my kidnapping. I knew both of them already carried that weight, but if it got me what I wanted, I’d use the guilt. “You can’t promise that. It’s already happened once. Eventually, someone will try to hurt me again. I won’t put his life or yours at risk. I want to be able to defend myself.”

Henry’s hand rubbed the tip of his ear where a chunk was missing. Where the bullet he’d taken for me had done damage. It was an unconscious gesture. A visceral reminder of what was at stake.

He nodded solemnly. “Okay.”

* * *

Three hours later, my arms burned with the strain of holding them straight. With the heft of the weapon in my hands. I ignored the pain, turning to hit the next target. The sound of the plate shattering echoed through the trees.

Henry had taken me to a clearing in the woods near Maddox’s house. We thought it was best if the other guards didn’t know what I was doing. There was still a rat in the house; continuing to appear weak would only make them underestimate me.

I wanted it that way. If I was just Maddox's whore I was safer. There was still a level of protection as someone he cared about. They might be able to kidnap me and distract him. Torture me. Rape me. But they would never kill me. Killing me would mean their deaths. He wasn't a forgiving person. But If I became a threat in my own right, I was as good as dead.

Another plate shattered, glass glittering in the setting sun as it fell to the ground. The ringing in my ears had stopped after the first few shots, the sound of the gun becoming normal. He'd scolded me when I questioned why we didn't have ear protection.

"When you're killing for your life, are you going to stop and put on ear protection?" I shook my head. "Exactly. You need to get used to the sound, or you'll flinch when you hear it."

"Do I have to kill them?" My voice was almost lost in the woods as I whispered. "Can't I just aim for their knees and run away?"

"Sure." He gave me a condescending smile. "Then they can shoot you in the back while you try to escape."

That's when reality had finally set in. Not when I'd actually been kidnapped. Not when I'd seen all the horrors Maddox committed. But in that moment, while I held a loaded weapon in my hands. While I begged to be trained. To be a killer. This was my life. At some point, I would have to kill to defend it.

I just hoped I could.

The next bullet embedded in the tree, as my arms shook from exhaustion. “Good. You’re a fast learner.”

I smiled at Henry as I flicked on the safety and popped the empty magazine from the gun. I reached towards him. “Another.”

He shook his head. “Enough for today. We need to get back before we’re missed. Maddox is on his way.”

I glanced at all the broken pieces that littered the forest floor. There was more glass than leaves on the ground. My limbs trembled as if I could still feel the vibrations of the gun through them. He was right. It was time to go. “Yeah. Okay.”

We walked back to the house in silence for a while. “Could you not tell anyone about this?”

Henry’s steps faltered at my question. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to keep anything from Maddox.”

He was probably right, but I wasn’t ready for him to know. I had questioned for so long if I was meant to be with him. If I could handle this life. I didn’t want him to know until I could prove that I was. He wanted me anyways, but I needed to prove to myself that I could do this. That I could be the partner he needed, not just in bed.

“I want to surprise him when I’m really good.” I spoke as much of the truth as I was willing to admit. I considered Henry, a friend, but he didn’t need to know my insecurities. I couldn’t be more of a weakness than I already was.

“Fine. But if he finds out, I will throw you under the bus to take the punishment.”

I turned to walk backward toward the house so I could smirk at him. My voice oozed with sexual innuendo. “Gladly.”

“Jesus fuck.” My laughter drowned out his grumbles. It was strange to laugh. It felt foreign to me for so long. I hadn’t laughed since before my mother died. There was only one reason to explain my good mood now, and he was standing on the patio waiting for me.

His dark hair curled over his forehead. His perfect lips softening his harsh features. His muscles bulged where his arms crossed over his chest.

My savior. My demon.

Maddox

The water crashed against the dock as fog rolled in off the bay. The inky bleakness of night surrounded the area as a single bulb lit the boardwalk where we waited. Leif stood beside me, Bash and Owen at the end, stopping any unwanted company. Not that we'd find much at this time of night.

It was a risk to meet in the open like this. The warehouse nearby could be housing a sniper looking to take us out. It would be a decent way to trap us and disturb the power balance in the city. But it was a risk we took.

It showed the Gallos we didn't fear them. That we wouldn't hide and cower. They could infiltrate our clubs, steal our shipments, take my woman, but we wouldn't go away. They started a war, and we'd keep coming until there was nothing left of them.

The wood beneath our feet vibrated as a man approached. I couldn't make out his face from this distance, but his stance gave off the aura of someone with power. Strength. A monster always recognized another monster.

"Matteo." Leif greeted him with a handshake. They might be rivals now, but once upon a time they'd grown up together.

Attended the same schools. They used that bond to keep the peace between the two families until recently.

“Leif.” Every strand of his blonde hair was in place as his green eyes pierced me. I held back my smile at the picture he presented. A businessman hid the monster. “Maddox, I wasn’t aware you’d be joining us?”

“And I wasn’t aware kidnapping women was how we did business.” I saw no point in posturing or pretending. I was here to make them worry, not broker a deal like Leif.

Matteo’s nostrils flared in anger. “As I’ve said, we had nothing to do with the unfortunate incident involving Ms. Collins. An innocent woman does not deserve to be pulled into our lives.”

His words seemed to hold more weight than he intended. If it was a slight at me, he could keep his opinions to himself. I cared little that she had been innocent when I claimed her. She wasn’t anymore, thanks to what his men had done to her. Or what I had done. Regardless she was mine to keep now.

“And sending us a box full of their heads was a little over the top, don’t you think?”

I smirked. It was the psychotic things like that that made my job fun. That kept the fear alive. “Come talk to me when the woman you love is kidnapped and tortured; then you can tell me what’s over the top.”

“Love?” Matteo grunted in disbelief. “My sympathy to Ms. Collins for being unfortunate enough to catch your

attention.”

“We’re not here to discuss that.” Leif cut in before I could kill Matteo. I didn’t even want to hear Kincaid’s name coming from his lips. “We’d like to end this war before anyone else dies. We have given Carmine the freedom to sell drugs in our territory. But he still insists on taking over the gambling clubs. Or disturbing our weapons shipments. If it doesn’t stop, we’ll be forced into a bloody war neither of us wants.”

Matteo ran a hand through his hair. One side of his mouth pulled into a grim line; the other turned down from nerve damage. “The war has already started.”

“Because of you!” I roared. I was so sick of the politics. I knew Leif had brought me to scare them, but I didn’t do well with deals. I was meant to make people bleed. The demon inside me rattled his cage wanting to be set free.

Matteo’s fists clenched like he wanted to hit me for my outburst. Good. I hope he took the first strike; it would make it easier to explain his death. “Because of you. You killed half my men in an attempt to find a woman who, as far as I can tell, didn’t want anything to do with you.” He turned to address Leif again. “Carmine won’t deal. Bring the war.” He shoved a finger in my direction. “He came for us; we’re coming for you.”

I reached for the gun at my back but managed to resist the urge to see what his brain looked like. I watched as he gave us his back and walked down the dock again. My fingers glossed

over the smooth metal picturing blood pooling on his fancy suit and tie.

“Let’s go.” Leif grunted once Matteo and his men were out of sight. “*Rincoglionito.*” *Are you out of your mind?*

I didn’t bother to respond as we walked down the docks.

“You couldn’t have kept your fucking mouth shut.” He continued in English, clearly pissed that things hadn’t gone the way he wanted.

I shrugged. I wanted the war to end to keep Kincaid safe, but I didn’t mind bloodshed. I preferred to end it that way. “It wouldn’t have mattered. He was only a messenger for Carmine. That’s our real problem.”

“Start the car.” Leif snapped at his driver as we approached. He turned the full weight of his glare on me. “The problem is no one in this family can see past the red haze. We need to make deals with the other families. What happens if Carmine partners with them first? Matteo and Mila are both unmarried. They could form alliances with the other families through marriage. We need to do something before they do.”

“Fuck deals. They deserve death!” I shouted. “They took her from me. There’s no mercy for them.”

Silence fell after our outbursts. Neither of us wanting to acknowledge that the other was right. A deal would end the war quicker without the loss of life. But we also couldn’t show weakness. We couldn’t let the Gallos or any of the other

families believe it was okay to hurt women or children. Especially our women.

It wasn't just Kincaid I worried about; there was Alessandra too. Her innocence that Leif had protected even as our father counted down the days until he could marry her off to gain more power.

“Mad look—“ but whatever he was about to say was lost to the night as an explosion sounded behind him.

We dropped to the ground as flames and heat engulfed the darkness around us. I could feel the burn of it on my skin as our car jumped several feet into the air and landed with a sickening crunch on the pavement. Bits of metal flew from the wreckage; I flinched as a shard cut into my forearm, where I shielded my face. The smell of burnt flesh and rubber permeating the air. I could hear the sound of sirens in the distance.

Once the metal stopped flying, I pulled the gun from my back and rose. I didn't bother raising it, but the weight of it comforted me as it rested in my palm. Bash and Owen were already standing beside the car. There wasn't anything to be done for the driver, who was a barely recognizable charred body in the front seat. Blood dripped from my arm onto the concrete where we stood.

We stared at the burning metal in silence. I wondered who the target had been. Him. Me. Both of us. Or if it was just another message. Another distraction.

I pressed my hand to my side as a sharp stinging pain ripped through me. I grunted as I felt the chunk of metal embedded into my skin. I drew my hand back, staring at the sticky red liquid. Leif's eyes rounded as I slumped, clinging to his shoulder. I chuckled just before the world went black. "Still think it's time for deals?"

Kincaid

“I can’t believe you read this stuff.” Alessandra laughed as she flipped through one of my romance novels. Her feet were tucked under her small frame as she curled up in an armchair. “It’s so unrealistic.”

I tossed a piece of popcorn at her from my spot on the couch in the library. I’d come to know her well since our first meeting. She was sweet in a way I thought impossible for someone who’d been born into the mafia. But a sadness still seemed to linger with her. It became impossible for me not to notice it the more time we spent together. It was strange to think I had more friends in this mafia world than I had in my life before. “Sorry, not all of us get off on true crime. Let me live in my fictional world where men will give up everything for their woman.”

Tessa smirked at me from where she lounged on the window seat. “Is it fiction, though? It seems like Maddox would fit right into one of your books.”

I laughed. “Maybe a dark romance where she falls in love with a serial killer.”

“Did you?” Tessa asked as she gave me another smirk.

“Did I what?” I swallowed as I crossed my legs beneath me, pretending not to understand her question.

Alessandra rolled her eyes. “Fall in love with him?”

“I—. Yes.” What else could I say?

Of course, I loved him. I wouldn't have stayed for any other reason. Before Maddox, I hid myself. I hid from myself. I could barely make it through each day without wanting to end my life. But those feelings stopped when he found me.

He might be a demon. Might be dark, but he'd changed something in me. He saw who I really was. He showed me how hiding my true nature was killing me. How it was the cause of my darkness. I was drowning. He'd pulled me out of the stifling water and into the air again. Air he controlled, but I didn't mind.

He forced me to embrace who I was and what I wanted. It might be dirty or bad. Depraved and twisted. But it wasn't wrong. With him, I could truly be. I was free.

“You're good for him.” Alessandra said. “I know he's not...normal. He's always been off. And when he cares, it's scary what he'll do for you. But you seem to calm him. Pull him back from the edge a little.”

It was true. Maddox might have saved me, but I also saved him. I gave him a reason to try and tame the demon inside him. I gave him some light in the darkness. His world wasn't as bleak. Empty.

Tessa's smile was a little sad as she looked at me. I knew she had no desire to have a relationship. She wasn't a romantic like me. But living life alone wasn't easy.

"I'm happy for you." She turned away to look out the window. "I've never seen you laugh more. You always used to have this sad energy about you. But with him, it's gone."

I crossed the room to sit on the bench next to her. Alessandra went back to flipping through the book, giving us some privacy. "You know it doesn't change us. You're still my best friend. You're my person."

For so long, she was all I had. I was still that for her. Her one connection in this world. I wouldn't let it break. I wouldn't leave her alone.

She rested her head on my shoulder as we stared out the window. We sat in silence for a while, just watching the leaves in the trees and the guards making their rounds through the perimeter. It was still hard to wrap my head around this being my life. Alessandra had always lived this way. She was used to having security follow her. I was still coming to terms with it. I would probably never be alone again.

The sound of loud voices coming from the front broke our quiet. Alessandra jumped up from her chair the same time I did.

"Wait here." I said to Tessa as I ran from the room. "Henry, stay with her." I barely saw his nod as I rushed down the hall, my socks sliding on the floor. My heart beating faster as the frantic energy in the air reached under my skin.

My chest constricted as Sebastian and Leif came through the door. Leif's arms were covered in small cuts, and soot was smeared all over Sebastian's face. But my eyes immediately went to Maddox, supported between them with an arm around each of their shoulders. Blood stained one side of his white shirt. The metallic scent of it mixed with smoke assaulted me.

"Hey, little dove." Maddox smiled as they veered to the right into his office.

"What happened?" My feet carried me to him as they gently placed his injured body on the couch. I sank to my knees and brushed a strand of his dark brown hair away from his eyes.

"Car bomb." Leif said. "Alessandra, Frank is waiting outside."

She didn't even blink at the dismissal. She just reached up to kiss Leif on the cheek. "I'll call you tomorrow, Kincaid. Take care of him."

I nodded as she walked out the door. I knew from conversations with Maddox that her brothers shielded her from this life as much as they could. She would never be able to leave it, but they wanted her to stay as far away as possible. The less she knew, the less of a target she was; for police or enemies.

"The doctor is on the way." Sebastian said as he started to undress Maddox. My blood boiled seeing his wince as Sebastian moved quickly. I smacked his hands away and did it myself, unable to watch his face contorting in pain. Once his

shirt was gone, I pressed it into the wound, trying to stop the flow of blood that marred his abs.

I felt like a fist was clutching my throat. There was so much blood. Too much blood. His shirt was already soaked with it, where I pressed down. I couldn't lose him. Not when I'd finally found the courage to be with him. Maddox smiled at me briefly as he brought his hand to my cheek. I didn't even flinch as the blood smeared across my face.

"So pretty painted in my blood." His fingers traced my features as his blue eyes softened for me. Another day I'd melt into his soft look and touch. Not today. I needed to see that demon. That fight.

"Shh...no talking." I whispered as I placed my lips next to his ear. "Be a good patient, and I'll let you make me bleed later." I let out a relieved breath when his eyes sparked to life.

"You should leave too." Tristan grunted from the doorway. I turned and narrowed my eyes at him before looking back to Maddox.

"I think you know better than to tell me what to do, Tristan." Contempt dripped from my voice.

His fists clenched as he took a step toward me. I didn't even flinch at the rage in his expression. I didn't care about him right now. He probably felt bold enough to actually hurt me with Maddox incapacitated. "You—."

But whatever he was going to say was cut off when Leif placed a hand to his chest. "Go check the perimeter. We can't

take any chances tonight.”

He might not listen to me or respect me, but he would listen to Leif. His position in the family was too high to defy a direct order. I could feel Tristan’s glare before the sound of his boots stomping on the ground faded down the hall.

“He’s right. You don’t need to be here.” Leif said with more kindness in his voice. “I know you didn’t choose this life.”

“Don’t tell me where I should be.” I snapped at him. My appreciation of his helpfulness burning away at his presumption. Fear and rage tightening my gut. He didn’t get to decide where I should be. I brushed my lips across Maddox’s forehead before I turned back to him. “I did choose this. Him.”

He let out a deep sigh as he stared at us. I could see real pain behind his expression. Worry. It was the same worry I’d heard in his voice when he’d pulled me from that warehouse.

“You lost someone.” It wasn’t a question. His eyes widened as he stared at me, and I knew I was right.

“How—. Did Maddox tell you that?” Leif’s fingers ran through his hair as he avoided my eyes.

“No.” Maddox grumbled beside me, drawing my eyes back to him, but his were closed. “She can read people.”

“Read people?” Sebastian questioned. “What does that mean?”

“It means I know you’re obsessed with my friend.” I said. I didn’t feel the need to prove I belonged here. It didn’t matter

what they thought. But at least it was a distraction while I watched Maddox's blood soak into his shirt. While I tried not to think about how much blood loss was too much.

"I don't know what you're talking about." He crossed his arms over his chest like that could hide all the looks I'd seen him give Tessa.

"Okay. Then it won't bother you to know she's in the library waiting to be escorted home." He took an instinctive step toward the door before he realized what he'd done. I glanced at one of the other guards that I vaguely knew. "Could you tell Henry to take her home, and I'll call her tomorrow?"

He nodded and headed to the door, but Sebastian grabbed his shoulder. I could see the war inside his head. He wanted to go to Tessa, but he didn't want me to know that I was right. So I took pity on him. "She feels something for you too. Even if she won't admit it yet."

I saw the hope flare in his eyes even as he tried to hide it. I didn't know why they were dancing around each other, and I didn't care right now. He whispered to the guard who took his place back on the wall. Then Sebastian left the room without another word.

"That means nothing." Leif said. "It's easy to see attraction."

"Did she leave you?" I asked, wondering about the woman who had hurt such a powerful man.

“She wasn’t meant for this.” He avoided my question. “She was too innocent. Like you.”

“Did she die?” I focused back on Maddox, stroking the hair from his face. The thick strands soft between my fingers. I tried to ignore the fact that he wouldn’t open his eyes. Or the sweat coating his skin. “Is that why you don’t want me here? You’re worried I won’t make it either.”

I gave him a second to answer even though I knew he wouldn’t. I imagined whoever she was; he’d loved her. I wouldn’t want to talk about it, either.

He could have his secrets. I didn’t care. But I needed him to know who I was. And where I stood.

“Before him, I didn’t care about my life. I wanted to die. I thought about it. Thought about how it would feel to slit my wrists and watch my life drain away. I wasn’t really living anyways.” I didn’t need his secrets, but he needed mine to understand. “Until Maddox. You might think I’m like her. But I’m not innocent. I wouldn’t be able to survive him if I was.”

I could hear his exasperated breath. “Mad is... different. He’s—.”

“I know who he is. What he does. I’m not going to run because of it. I’m not going to leave him.” I stared down at Maddox’s pale face. A face I loved even if I hadn’t said it yet. Even if he’s far from who I thought I would ever love. “I want him. All the pieces. Even the madness inside. I won’t let you or anyone else take me away. My place is by his side.”

I finally turned to him, letting him see the truth in my eyes. The fierce connection with Maddox that I wouldn't give up. I wouldn't let anyone try and separate us again. I'd fight.

“Deal with it, or I'll deal with you.”

Maddox

I watched Kincaid with half-open eyes as she tried to sneak quietly from the bed. Early morning light filtered in from the windows making her white blonde hair appear even brighter. She padded softly across the carpet, her feet barely making a sound. I ate up the sight of her bare legs where my t-shirt rode up on her thighs. My cock hardening at the sight, ready to claim her all over again. She left the bathroom door slightly open as if she didn't want to wake me with the sound of it closing.

I stifled a groan as I swung my feet over the edge of the bed. The stitches in my side pulled tight, reminding me it had only been a few days since I almost died. The metal had ripped into my stomach, causing a dangerous amount of blood loss, but Dr. Mechan was able to patch me up. If the Gallos kept escalating, we would be seeing a lot more of him.

Kincaid had followed his orders strictly. Forcing me to stay in bed all day and not for the fun reason. She waited on me hand and foot as if I didn't have people who could bring me anything. She fussed over my every need.

And I let her. Partly because I liked knowing she was worried. And partly because she seemed like she needed it. Like she needed to be useful.

I ignored the pain as I made my way to the bathroom. Kincaid didn't notice as I pushed open the door. My dick jumped to life as I rested my hip against the counter and watched her. The steam from the shower obscured my view as she rubbed soap along her arms. My eyes followed the path of the water as it dripped down her petite figure. I wanted to lick her clean.

Kincaid yelped in surprise as I yanked the shower door open and stepped inside. "Maddox." She let out a heavy breath as her hand went to her chest. "You scared me."

"I thought you weren't afraid of me." I said as I grabbed her slick body and pulled her against me. Her soft breasts crushed into my chest as I buried my face in her neck. My tongue came out, lapping up the water along her pulse point. It bumped up under my tongue as her body responded to me.

And mine did the same. My blood roaring through my veins as I felt her silky skin. My dick throbbing as I inhaled her soft powdery scent.

"You can't get your stitches wet." She struggled to shove me away without hurting my injuries. I'd take a million more gashes to my skin if it meant I could hold her in my arms forever.

"I'll live." I groaned as her hips brushed my hard cock. My fingers dug into her ass, grinding her curves against me.

“No.” She broke from my hold and rushed out of the shower again. I smiled to myself as I followed her out. She would never be able to get away from me.

She was already wrapped in a towel when I backed her into the counter. I caged her in, one hand pressing her ass into the marble as the other threaded through her wet hair and brought her mouth to mine.

I savored her fight as she placed her palms on my chest and tried to gently shove me away. I hadn't been able to fuck her since the car bomb, and I wasn't going to wait another minute to get inside my little dove.

“Maddox.” She moaned as I nipped down her neck before sinking my teeth into the sensitive spot where her neck met her shoulder. I felt the bruise I was leaving as her nails dug into my flesh.

“Fuck. You know I love when you say my name.” I groaned before I gave her a matching mark on the other side. She had my marks all along her skin in various stages of healing. Cuts. Bruises. Bites. She was my mosaic. My canvas to destroy.

“You're not supposed to be out of bed.” She protested again. I could hear the desire in her voice, but it was laced with worry.

I pulled back to look into her wintry gray eyes. They were rounded as if she was pleading with me. A feeling I didn't recognize tugged at my chest. It was strange. Unfamiliar. But not unwelcome.

No one had ever taken care of me. My mother had been too busy shooting up or spending time with ‘clients,’ so she had enough money for drugs. My father had been focused on raising us to be men that could lead the family. There was no time for love or affection.

But Kincaid’s expression bled with all the things she felt for me. Things she’d never said. It didn’t bother me that I’d told her that I loved her and she hadn’t. It didn’t make a difference if she ever said it because she was mine, regardless.

I couldn’t deny that seeing her like this, worried. Concerned for me. Filled some of the void. A twisted part of me wanted her like this. Wanted her to take care of me. Wanted her to be interested in more than my money. My power. More than how I filled her depraved desires.

I wanted her emotions tangled up in me. I wanted her obsessed. In love. Because women in love were willing to overlook a lot of things. They would reason away the worst of their partners. She wouldn’t care that I killed people if she loved me. I would be the only thing that mattered to her. Just like she was the only thing that mattered to me.

“Please.” She whispered. “You need to rest.”

I smirked at her as I yanked her close to my naked body, letting her feel my aching cock on her soft curves. “I’ll stay in bed if you come sit on my cock.” I chuckled as her mouth dropped open. “Or we can do that.”

“No.” She shook her head and closed her eyes as if she was stopping herself from wanting me. “Doctor’s orders. No

strenuous activities.”

“Stopping myself from fucking you is a strenuous activity.” I ripped the towel from her grasp before my hand collared her throat. “I’d rather almost die again than go one more day without feeling your sweet pussy come apart around me.”

I could feel the rapid beat of her pulse under my fingers as her chest brushed mine with her heavy breaths. I could almost smell her arousal. It made me want to drop to my knees and taste her.

“I won’t move a muscle.” My little slut moaned as I bit her lower lip between my teeth. “I’ll just watch you.”

Her pupils dilated with lust. I almost had her when my phone rang in the other room. I rested my forehead briefly against hers before I walked naked to answer it. Whatever break I’d been given to recover had just ended.

“What?” I snapped.

Bash paused as if he was deciding how pissed I really was. “We need you at the warehouse. Leif has a few guys he thinks could be the rat. We’ve kept them on ice all night waiting for you.”

“I’ll be there.” I hung up the phone glancing back at Kincaid, who sat on the edge of the bed wrapped in her towel once again.

“You really need to stay and rest.” She chewed on her bottom lip where my teeth had just been. I wanted to finish

what we'd started, but finding the man who'd betrayed me was more important. Keeping her safe was what mattered.

“Can't *mia amata*.” I made my way to the closet pulling on an all-black suit. It would make it easier to hide the blood.

“Where are you going?” It was the first time Kincaid had asked about my business. The first time she showed any interest in really becoming a part of my life. Her first step in accepting who I was. I knew she could handle what came with my life. But I wouldn't put her at risk by telling her too much.

“Bash and Leif think they might have found which of our men has been working with the Gallos.” I opened the panic room and shoved a sheathed knife into the waistband at my low back. “I'm going to talk to them.”

I tried to hide my excitement at questioning our men. If I couldn't spend the day inside my sweet little dove, torturing people was the next best thing. At least I'd be able to release some of the tension that was building inside me.

I watched Kincaid press her lips together as she turned her back on me. She covered her body with a dress as if she was trying to hide herself from me. Or hide from this conversation. I placed my arms around her and pulled her to my chest again. Her head rested on my shoulder as my hands brushed across her stomach, soothing her frayed nerves.

“You knew this was who I was.” I tried not to show my annoyance in my tone. I didn't like that she'd turned away from me. She had agreed to stay here. To be mine. This was part of her life now.

“That’s not what I’m worried about.” She turned in my hold, bringing her hands to my face. Her soft skin ran through the stubble on my jaw. “Do you really believe what you said to Leif? About me reading people.”

“Yes. It was how you knew I’d never hurt you. You saw what I felt for you even before I knew.” I searched her face waiting for her to tell me what she was seeing now.

She let out a harsh breath. “I think you need to look at Tristan. Something is off about him.”

Maddox

I leaned against the doorway, watching my little dove in her library. She sat on the bench seat by the window. Her back to the wall, and her smooth legs stretched out before her. She looked gorgeous in a simple black t-shirt dress, and her white blonde hair pulled up.

I knew from Henry that she spent most of her days in here reading. She had a few other hobbies that kept her busy, but this was her favorite. Now that I was providing for her, she didn't need to work. She could spend her time only doing things that made her happy. I had taken away her everyday worries. It made my chest ache to know she trusted me enough to give me that kind of control over her life.

It had been a disappointing night of torturing my own men looking for the rat in our house. I knew Kincaid thought it was Tristan, but he wasn't just a part of the family. He was blood. I couldn't see him betraying us. And with certain rules in place, I couldn't torture him for answers. But I wouldn't let her concerns go unanswered. I was having him followed.

So far, I found no answer from that or the torture. The frustration had built to the point that I was afraid I'd kill one of

the men. It wouldn't help family loyalty if I killed without cause. I'd left them to Bash and Leif so I could come home to my little dove. I needed a safer outlet for my rage.

I watched as Kincaid's cheeks started to flush slightly. She fidgeted in her seat, rubbing her thighs together as she crossed her legs. She licked her lips as she turned the page in her book.

Cazzo!

My cock got hard behind my zipper, knowing what she was reading. Knowing if I touched her that, her pussy would be wet for me. I knew when my little slut was turned on. And right now, she was begging to be fucked.

"Did you used to touch yourself while reading at night?" I asked without moving towards her.

Kincaid's hand flew to her chest, and she jumped as she turned to face me. "Shit. You scared me."

My dick throbbed as her chest rose and fell, her breasts straining against the tight fabric of her dress. "Did you?"

"Sometimes." Her blush deepened as she flicked her gaze away from me and closed her book. I smiled as I shut the door behind me and flicked the lock. My gaze penetrated her as I entered the room. Instead of going to her, I sat in an armchair across the library where I had a direct view but wouldn't be tempted to reach out and grab her.

"Show me." Her wintry eyes widened at my request. But I could see the curiosity behind them. She'd never done this before. Touched herself in front of someone. "Lift your dress

up and take your panties off. Let me watch as you touch that beautiful pussy.”

She glanced around the room like she expected someone to come in and save her. But there was no saving her anymore.

Kincaid bit her lip as she reached under her dress. Obsession beat in my veins. Pumped my blood. Knowing she complied to my demands. That she was mine to order. Mine to ruin.

She lifted her hips and slid her black lace panties down her thighs. She dropped them on the floor before pulling her dress up to her waist, baring herself to me.

My cock jumped, pressing harshly against my zipper as I looked at her. Like I expected, her pretty cunt was already dripping wet from whatever she'd been reading. I'd buy her a million more books if she was like this every time she read one. My view was perfect as she spread her legs wide. I groaned as she slowly brought her hands down her body.

I rubbed my cock through my pants, trying to relieve the ache as I watched two fingers flick across her clit. She arched and moaned but never took her eyes off me as she played with herself. Kincaid rocked her hips as she brought herself closer and closer to the edge.

I wanted to drop to my knees and worship her right there. I wanted to bury my face between her legs until she screamed my name. Until she came on my tongue, and I swallowed her sweet flavor.

“Come.” I commanded. Her body arched and stilled as I watched her pussy clench around nothing. She moaned as her orgasm took her.

The heat built under my skin, making my body tighten. My fists clenched at my side as I tried not to run over and bury myself inside her. The demon in me still wanted to play. Kincaid whimpered as her hands finally stilled. “Taste yourself.”

“What?” She squeaked as she sat up straighter. Her legs still spread, but she wasn’t tilted back, giving me the obscene view as before.

“Put those fingers in your mouth so you can see how good you taste.” I continued to stroke through my pants, trying to relieve my aching cock. She hesitated as she swallowed loudly as if she was nervous. My gaze tracked her movement as she slowly brought her hand to her pink lips closing around her glistening digits.

She sighed as she licked them clean. Fuck. I should’ve done that. But the idea of pushing her past her boundaries made fire burn in my veins. I loved the nervous expression on her face. The way she was so responsive as she caved to my depraved desires.

“Strip.” I grunted as my hands moved back to the armrests. I wasn’t going to blow my load without her. My balls tingled with the need. Too turned on by her obedience.

Kincaid stood and whipped her dress over her head, just as eager to come as I was. She reached around and snapped off

her bra, dropping both to join her panties on the floor. Her porcelain skin glowed in the moonlight streaming through the windows. She took one step towards me when my harsh voice halted her. “Crawl to me like a good little slut.”

“Take off your clothes first.” Her voice was breathy even as her eyes burned with defiance.

There had been a time when I would’ve denied her request. She was the only woman who ever saw me naked. I didn’t need to be to get off. But my little dove could have whatever piece of me she wanted.

I stood from the chair, wasting no time as I undid the buttons of my shirt and tossed it aside. I kicked off my shoes and socks. My belt and pants following quickly. I hadn’t bothered with underwear this morning.

I fisted my cock, giving it a rough stroke as Kincaid stared at me. Her cheeks blushed, the red flush creeping down her neck. I wanted to run my tongue along it, feel her pulse beating beneath my lips. I took my seat again and smiled. “Now crawl.”

My blood roared with the need to take. To claim. As I watched her drop to her knees. Her breasts and ass swayed back and forth as she crawled slowly to me, giving me a show. The perfect little slut.

When she reached me, she sat back on her heels and rested her cheek on my bare thigh. My sense of urgency fled as soon as I felt her skin. I brushed the hair from her face before lovingly stroking the rest of her silky strands. For the first time

tonight, I was calm. Relaxed. My world rested beneath my fingers.

But Kincaid wasn't feeling the same effect. She shifted her thighs back and forth. Her eyes focused on my cock as she licked her lips. If she were anyone else, I would've thought she was putting on another show, but Kincaid's body was always honest in her reactions. It was how I'd always known she wanted the pain.

"You want my cock in your mouth." It wasn't a question, but she answered anyway.

"Yes." She whispered as her eyes flicked to mine. She looked at me beneath her lashes, and I almost came. I fucking loved when she was a sweet little submissive for me. Almost as much as I loved her fight and defiance.

"Ask." My voice was deeper than normal. Full of desire for her.

Kincaid liked her lips, leaving them wet and gleaming. Begging for my dick. "Please, can I suck you off?"

I stroked her cheek again before bringing my hand to the back of her head. I fisted her hair and yanked her head back. Her beautiful creamy neck called to me. Begged for my mark. For my fingers to squeeze around it. My cock pulsed at the image, but I ignored the need, for now. "You're such a perfect little slut. Stick out your tongue."

She obeyed my command immediately, opening her mouth and sticking her tongue out. I gripped the base of my cock as I

rubbed the head along her outstretched tongue. Her wet warmth spread across my skin. The need to come already rushing through my veins, making my back tight.

I groaned as Kincaid flicked the slit. I flexed my hips gently as I allowed her to stroke her tongue along my aching cock. I let her feel like I was going to be gentle. Ease her into it. But I didn't have a gentle bone in my body. Not when it came to fucking her.

Without warning, I fisted her hair roughly. I shoved her head down as I thrust deeply into her mouth. Kincaid gagged as I hit the back of her throat. Fuck. She was so tight around me. Her throat squeezing the head of my cock almost painfully as I cut off her air. My eyes rolled back in my head as I held there, feeling her life on my cock. I ignored her frantic gasps for air.

Just as it became too much for her, as the tears started to roll down her cheeks and her frantic whimper stilled, I pulled out. I gave her one second to suck in a harsh breath, the sound only making my balls tense further, before I thrust back in. As far as her mouth could take me. I groaned as she gagged around me again. Her fingers digging into her thighs as more tears poured from her eyes. The vibrations of her whimpers tingling in my balls. But she didn't try to push me away. Didn't fight the way I claimed her. I pulled out and pumped in again.

“This mouth was made for my cock.” I groaned. I fucked her face mercilessly. Rubbing the head of my cock along her

soft tongue before pushing so deep that I stole her air. Feeling the squeeze of her throat as she gagged and choked, but never stopped me.

I watched as she squirmed beneath me, looking for her own release. But in that moment, I didn't care. I didn't care if she breathed or came. She loved that I could choke her as easily as I could make her come. She loved the fear of not knowing if I would bring her pleasure or pain. If I would make her bleed or steal her air. And I loved that she let me.

The rush of controlling her buzzing in my veins. Her life resting between my fingers only making me harder. Fueling my desire.

I snapped my hips into her face a few more times before my balls drew tight. I knew I was close, and reluctantly I pulled from her mouth. She gasped for air as she looked up at me. Tears left streaks down her face. Her lips were swollen and bruised. Her hair was mussed.

She looked owned.

Destroyed.

Fucking perfect.

“Why did you stop?” She moaned.

Instead of answering, I shoved the chair back, the legs scraping against the floor as I dropped to my knees in front of her. I let go of the grip on her hair as I grabbed her hips and turned her around. Man-handling her tiny body with ease in the way she liked. It was mine to do with as I wanted

I took in her scent, my nose running along the column of her neck as I leaned forward, pinning her on all fours. My lips brushed her shoulder as I pulled back. Her skin silky beneath my lips. My teeth closed around the spot between her neck and shoulder, biting down. Marking. Claiming.

Kincaid yelped and thrust her hips back, making me groan as her plump ass bumped my needy dick. The desire to feel her tight heat around me pushed me into action. She trembled beneath me as I shoved her face into the floor. I yanked her ass into the air, giving the pristine skin a sharp slap. My little dove moaned as the sting worked through her body, leaving her cheek red from my touch. I fisted my cock; dragging it through her soaking pussy. Her need coating me quickly.

“Because I want your pussy squeezing me when I come.” I slammed into her tight heat without warning. She screamed as I stretched her. But she was already so wet that there was little resistance. “I want to fill you up with my cum. I want you to feel me for so long; every other man is pushed from your mind.”

I snapped my hips again as I slapped her ass. The force of it making my palm sting as a jealous, possessive rage ripped through me. Quieting again quickly as I saw my hand print on her curvy ass.

I loved how her skin so easily reddened from my touch. Always taking my marks and making them hers. Her fingers dug into the hardwood floors, looking for purchase as I

brutally fucked her. Her harsh breaths created condensation on the surface.

“There’s never been anyone but you.” She moaned as she arched back, meeting my blows. I smacked her again as I pulled almost all the way out of her tight pussy. Leaving only the tip inside her.

“What about those two exes of yours?”

“Boys, not men. Nothing like this.” She wiggled back, trying to take me further into her body where she needed me the most. “Nothing like you.”

“Say it.” I smacked her ass again, the red lingering on her skin now. “What do you want?”

“Please.” She moaned beneath me. “Please fuck me.”

I moved both hands to her hips as I slammed into her. I groaned as her inner walls grabbed onto me. I pulled out and slammed in again. Kincaid screamed as I set the same brutal rhythm I had with her mouth. I fucked her roughly until her knees would be bruised from the floor. Until I felt her pulsing and squeezing around me.

Nothing ever felt as good as being inside her. She was my home. My light. The only thing that could calm me. There would only be darkness without her.

“Who do you belong to?” I pressed our slick bodies together without losing the deep thrusts inside her. My hand came to her clit; circling roughly.

“You. I’m yours. Only yours.” She moaned as her body went tight and taut beneath me. I stilled as her orgasm coursed through her. I rested my head on her shoulder and gripped her hips as I fought off my own. My fingers bruising her porcelain skin as my tongue coming out to lick the sweat from the pulse on her neck. Her salty taste making groan as I went back for more. Licking and nipping her skin as she came down.

As soon as the tremors stopped, I started fucking her again. I pounded in and out of her perfect cunt. She was so tight I could feel every drag of my cock inside her. I could feel when I pushed so deeply I bottomed out.

“It’s too much.” She whimpered. “Oh god.”

My hand settled between her breasts as I moved up to collared her throat. I sat back on my heels and brought Kincaid with me. Her hands dug into my thighs beneath her, trying to find something to hold onto as I controlled her body with one hand on her throat and one on her hip.

“Not your god, little dove, your demon.” I thrust my hips and fucked up into her. The new angle burying me deeper than I’d ever been. I could hear her whimpering at the intrusion. I knew I was a monster when her little panicked sounds only made me fuck her harder. Made me euphoric at her pain. My fingers flexed on her throat. “Say it.”

“Maddox.” She moaned, and her pussy tightened around me again.

This is what she needed. The pain. The roughness. She needed me to take control from her. One more deep thrust of

my hips and Kincaid shattered around me again. I felt her harsh gasp for air under my fingers.

My control snapped at the sound if I'd ever had any control, to begin with. I gripped her hip harder as my thrust turned bruising. How she could make me calm and lose control was a mystery to me. I held her down on top of me as I bottomed out in her over and over again. Her moans were a mix of pleasure and pain, only spurring me on.

“So fucking tight.” I groaned as I bit the sensitive spot behind her ear. “You’re going to come for me again.”

“I can’t.” She tried to shake her head but couldn’t with my tight grasp on her neck. I licked a drop of sweat from her shoulder before my teeth sank into her flesh, leaving a mark. She screamed, and her pussy clenched around me.

“Yes you can because I own your orgasm.” I loosened my fingers. “Now take a deep breath, my little dove. It’s the last you’ll take until you come for me.”

As soon as she did, I squeezed, stealing her breath. I wrapped my other arm around her hips so I could fuck her with everything I had.

There would still be whips and belts in our future. Candles and knives. Maybe even a gun. But there was something about the raw intensity of holding her life in my hands. Of feeling her pulse beneath my fingers.

My back tingled, and my balls drew tight. I was close. I just needed her to push me over the edge. I felt her mouth

open on a silent scream as her pussy clamped down on me like a vice. I released her neck as I buried myself deep and came.

All my senses seemed to narrow and focus. All I heard were her frantic breaths. All I smelt was her arousal. All I felt was her pussy pulsing around me as I unloaded in her. My limbs shook from the force of it.

I collapsed to my back, bringing her with me. I wasn't ready to leave her body yet. Kincaid's back pressed into my chest as we both sucked air into our lungs. Her head rested on my shoulder.

My hand skimmed down her smooth skin. Past her breasts until I was touching where we were still joined. My fingers spread out where she was stretched around me, stroking her sensitive skin gently.

"This was made for me." I pressed a kiss into her damp temple. "You were made for me."

Her hand intertwined with mine. It was both erotic and intimate as together we touched where our bodies connected.

"No. You were made for me."

Kincaid

I jolted as the ringing of the phone ripped me from sleep. I quickly placed my head back on Maddox's chest as he reached over to answer it. It wasn't an unusual occurrence for him to get late-night phone calls. Rarely would he be able to order a command and go back to sleep, but more often than not, he'd have to get up to deal with whatever issue arose. I snuggled deeper into his chest, trying to absorb the last of his warmth before he'd have to leave.

"What?" He grunted as his hand traced soft circles down my spine. I wiggled my hips into him when they brushed the top curve of my ass. Maybe if he stayed, I'd wake up. My skin heated at the thought of a little middle-of-the-night action with him.

My hopes quickly dashed as he bolted upright. "Which club?...The Gallos?"

I pressed the sheets into my chest as I moved to sit next to him. By the way, his eyes flicked to me; I knew it was Entice.

"Take everyone." He ordered as he stood and stalked to the closet. "I'm on my way."

“What happened?” I asked as I followed behind. Goosebumps broke out along my bare legs just below where Maddox’s shirt hit me mid-thigh. I could hear the sounds of doors opening and cars pulling away as everyone headed to the club at his order.

A feeling of unease snaked under my skin. I knew Maddox wouldn’t leave me unprotected. There would still be perimeter guards, and Henry was probably around as well.

“Someone set Entice on fire. Threw a Molotov cocktail through the windows.” He pulled on a pair of pants before moving to open the panic room.

I grasped my throat as I realized it was probably packed at this time on a Saturday night. Jesus, how many innocent people would be hurt in this stupid mafia war? “Tessa?”

Panic clawed at my chest as I gripped his arm. Maddox looked at me with no emotion in his expression. I knew he didn’t care about her. Not that he disliked her, but caring about anyone wasn’t in his nature. To think about others, their feelings, their safety. But something in my face must have spoken to him.

Without another word, Maddox brought the phone to his ear again. “Bash, are you on your way to the club? Tessa—.”

I could hear Sebastian’s deep voice through the line, but I couldn’t make out the words. I felt like my own heart was beating in my ears as I waited to hear about my best friend. The only person I’d had for so long. Maddox cupped my face,

stroking my cheek as if he could sense my anxiety. “Okay. I’ll be there soon.”

He tossed the phone onto the counter next to the security monitors before grasping both my cheeks in his hands. I leaned my face into his warmth. His protection. “Bash was already there. He’s got her.”

“Thank god.” I let out a shaky breath.

I knew Sebastian wouldn’t let anything happen to her. Whether either of them was willing to admit there was something between them. The same undeniable connection I had with Maddox. I wasn’t sure if they’d ever act on it. Not that I blamed them.

Our lives hadn’t allowed us to be open to love. They hadn’t allowed us the weakness of it. I knew how hard it was for me to admit my feelings. To let myself become who I always was so I could be with Maddox. Maybe tonight would bring them together. But something in the air told me tonight didn’t have a happy ending.

I let out another relieved breath as I rested my forehead on his chest. “I don’t like it.”

“What, my little dove?” He pressed a kiss to the top of my head before tilting it back to look into my eyes.

“Why do you seem to be the only target?” I asked. “They bombed *your* car. Set fire to *your* club. Kidnapped *your* girlfriend. If there is a war against the whole family, then why are we the only ones feeling the effects?”

His brows furrowed in confusion like he'd never thought about it. "They've been taking shipments too."

"But that's easy. A lot of the families have shipments coming into the docks. It would be simple to steal a few." I stared into his eyes, trying to push down the churning in my gut. This wasn't the first time he'd left our bed, and it wouldn't be the last. I knew that. I knew what kind of life I was signing up for. But... tonight felt wrong. "I think it's a trap. I don't think you should go. Sebastian can handle it."

He looked at me with longing in his eyes. As ruthless as he was, he didn't like upsetting me. It was a strange turnaround from the man he'd been when I met him. I soothed the darkness in him. "I have to go. But I'll leave Henry and a few guards here to watch out for you."

"I'm not worried about me." I said honestly. His house was a fortress. I'd be fine. I was worried they were trying to lure him out. When defenses were down, and resources strained.

"If you think anything will stop me from coming back to you. You're wrong." He kissed my forehead again. "I'll be back soon."

"Okay." I glanced at the monitors as he moved around the small space grabbing the weapons he wanted for the night. Seeing guns and knives in his hands was another everyday reality. I barely saw them for the deadly weapons they were. They were just a part of him. Of this life.

As I watched the rest of the guards leave on the security footage, I couldn't help the agitation gripping my throat.

Something was coming. I could feel it. Like the winds shifting. Maybe it was the knowledge my friend could've been hurt. Or the memory of Maddox coming home covered in blood.

I tried to push it away. Tried to pretend it was only anxiety from being woken up so abruptly, but then I saw him. I watched Tristan on the screens as he stalked behind one of the guards watching at the front door, looking for any enemy outside where they should've been. Unaware of the danger behind him.

A choking sound caught in my throat as Tristan raised his gun and shot him in the back of the head without giving the man time to pull a weapon. The gunshots were a faint echo to my ears as far away as they were.

“*Cazzo.*” Maddox swore from behind me as the guard's body crumbled to the ground on the screen. “*Traditore.*”

My heart skipped a beat as I watched Tristan climb the stairs. He'd done this. He'd lured most of the guards out of the house to get Maddox alone. He'd been the one trying to kill him. Me.

I spun my hands, clinging to Maddox's still-bare chest. “We have to go.”

We didn't have time to call anyone back, but if we could get outside, we might have a chance. Get to the woods and hide until we could call someone we trust. Sebastian or Leif. We couldn't trust anyone else.

I felt like a clock was ticking down with each breath I took. With each step that brought Tristan closer to us. The time to run was closing. I opened my mouth to tell him again we needed to leave, but his mouth came crashing down on mine.

Maddox gripped the back of my neck to draw me closer. His lips pressing firmly as his tongue tasted every corner of me. He kissed me with a sense of urgency. With a ferocity that made my throat tight. He kissed me like it was the last time.

“No.” I gasped when he pulled back. Pulled away. His warmth left my body as I tried to claw at him. Tried to bring him to me.

Maddox gripped my wrist and pushed me. Not roughly, but hard enough that I stumbled, my hip connecting with one of the shelves.

“Stay here until Bash comes for you.” His blue eyes took on that softer tone that I loved so much. Pleading with me to listen.

“Maddox! No!” I whisper-shouted. I didn’t want Tristan or anyone else to hear us. But I couldn’t hide the desperation in my voice.

“I love you.” His words cut off as he slammed the door shut, sealing me in the panic room.

Cutting off my cry and the sounds of my fists as I hit the wall a second after it closed. Horror filled me as I realized there was no door handle. I knew how to open it from the outside, but not from here. I was trapped. Safe.

No!

It was a roar in my head. A panicked plea.

I wasn't going to let him do this. I frantically felt around the wall looking for a button or a handle, anything that would open the door. My head whipped around to another wall, searching when my eyes landed on the security monitors again. I watched Maddox enter the bedroom and stand facing the door, waiting for it to open.

He'd walked away from the closet, hiding my location. I watched, waiting for him to pull a gun. A knife. Anything to defend himself. Instead, he crossed his arms over his bare chest and waited for his fate. Where were the weapons he was gathering?

My gaze fell to the table, his discarded weapons lying there. He'd abandoned them to push me into the room. He'd given up his only defense. I choked as a sob ripped through my throat.

He sacrificed himself to save me.

Maddox

There was no panic. No fear, as I waited for my inevitable death. My little dove was safe. That was all that mattered. That was the calm stilling my blood.

It made it possible for me to stand here knowing I'd die. Knowing one of the people closest to me had betrayed us all. That I hadn't seen it. That I'd allowed him to stay. Spared his life.

Kincaid had seen it. Had tried to warn me. That alone would've earned my sacrifice. But she was more than that. She was everything. She was the light. And I wouldn't allow my darkness to take her.

I didn't flinch when Tristan threw the door open, barely registering the sound of it smacking against the wall. Instead, I smiled as I took a small step closer to the patio doors, drawing him away from where Kincaid was hidden. As far as I knew no one was aware of the panic room, but I wouldn't risk her life making assumptions.

"Tristan." One brow rose as I acknowledged him. "Still making stupid mistakes, I see."

He threw back his head and laughed. I used the brief window when he wasn't looking to inch back again. I wanted Kincaid to have an escape route. In case she found her way out, I wanted her to be able to get to the door and leave.

“There's nowhere for you to go.” Tristan chuckled again as he advanced on me, forcing me until my back collided with the patio doors. He left his own back exposed, leaving a path from the closet to the bedroom door. Just like I planned.

I refused to raise my hands in surrender to him. “Who said I'm trying to go? You want a fight; I'm here to deliver.”

I cocked my fist back and landed the blow to his face. I felt the crunch of bone and smelt the scent of blood as his head snapped to the side. But he recovered quickly, using the gun as leverage when he buried his fist into my stomach.

The air left my lungs in a grunt as I grabbed for it. My elbow connected with his already bleeding nose. Another blow came down onto my temple as we struggled. My head throbbed as I fought back the black dots that crept into my vision. I couldn't afford to lose consciousness now. Not when I had someone to protect.

We had the same training. Spent our whole lives practicing for this moment. Only I never imagined him as my opponent.

“Brutto fottito topo bastardo.” *Fucking rat bastard.* My foot came down on his as I twisted my body, trying to keep my grip on the gun as I pried it from his fingers. “Betraying your family. Everything we believe in.”

“Enough.” Tristan shouted as he pulled the trigger. The gunshot rang out in the room as the bullet lodged into the floor centimeters from my foot as I jumped back. He raised the weapon and pointed directly between my eyes.

We grew up together. Trained together as boys. Practiced. Sparring. There wasn't a time in my life when Tristan wasn't there. My cousin. My guard.

Those bonds meant little to me since I'd never felt them. But I knew to most it would mean everything. Apparently, not to Tristan, either. Clearly, I wasn't the only psychopath in the family. His hand didn't even tremble as he waited to take my life.

“On your knees.” He ordered.

I spat at his feet. “I'll kneel for you when I'm dead.”

Gunshots rang out as Tristan fired into the mattress behind us on Kincaid's side of the bed. “You'll kneel now, or I'll make you watch while I break her.”

She was my only weakness. And he'd known it long before I had. I was confident he wouldn't find her, but I wouldn't risk her life for my pride. I was dead anyways. She could still live.

I dropped, my knees making a soft thud on the carpeting as I brought my hands to the back of my neck. Stilled but ready to strike if I saw another opportunity. “You know they'll come looking for you first.”

The longer I kept him talking, the more chance someone would come. Bash had to realize I wasn't at Entice. And when he did, he'd come looking. It might be enough time to save me. Or at least enough time to keep Tristan distracted from searching for Kincaid.

“Why?” He laughed. “When she's the one who's been trying to get away. It'll look like your—what is it you call her?” Smug arrogance crossed his face as he smiled down at me.

“Oh yes, you're little dove finally snapped. She's been trying to leave since the minute you touched her. Since you forced her to stay here. Everyone has seen it. No one will question that she stole my gun and killed you to escape.”

I ground my teeth together as he paced slightly in front of me. Now that I could see him for what he was, I noticed the manic energy that had made Kincaid nervous. This wasn't the kid I grew up with. Money and power had eaten away at him.

That's what it always came down to. More money and power. Even though we had enough to last lifetimes. More than even the next generation could spend.

“Your little dove.” His lips twisted into a smile. A look so evil that even the demon inside me was wary. “Dove, so pure. But she won't be when I'm done with her. I'll turn her out just like your whore mother. Without you here to protect her, it'll be easy. By the time I'm done with her, she'll beg for death.”

My fists clenched as my body rebelled the stillness. I wanted to hurt. Make him bleed. I wanted him to be

unrecognizable from the man who stood in front of me. Only the sight of his blood leaving his body would bring me peace again.

I let out a subtle sigh of relief, knowing he'd never find her. That he would never inflict that life on her. She was too strong for that. She might be my little dove, my weakness, but she was far from weak.

“You were the one who was supposed to break her. You were supposed to toss her aside like all the others, but luckily for me, something changed.”

Tristan took a step back from me, still aiming the gun as he walked around the room. Removing my backup weapon from the nightstand, ejecting the magazine, and tossing them aside. My chest tightened as he walked towards Kincaid's side of the bed, his fingers tracing over her things. The book she kept there. Her chapstick. I didn't want his greedy, disgusting hands anywhere near her things.

“She became your weakness. A distraction. Exactly what I needed to move my plans forward.” He lifted her pillow to his nose, inhaling deeply as he stared at me. I jerked as if to attack before the gun was steady on me again, making me shrink back to my knees.

“You were the one who had Kincaid kidnapped.” I snapped, a deep possessive growl escaping my chest. “Why?”

“You were so obsessed with her. You can't even see what's in front of you. The Gallos were never trying to take over. It was all me. I threw them information here and there. Kept you

both looking in the right direction.” He pointed the gun at his own chest as devious pride lit his face. “If you thought the Gallos took her, I knew you’d tear them apart. You’d get rid of them, then I’d get rid of you, and I could take over their drug trade.”

He shrugged and started his pacing again. Drugs? That’s when I saw them; the track marks on his arms. His slow descent into mania made sense. He was frying his brain with his own addiction.

“It was simple, really. It worked even better than I planned. You killed so many of their men looking for her you actually did start a war.”

Leif had been right. Matteo hadn’t taken Kincaid. He hadn’t hurt her. I should probably care that a war had been started over this. But I couldn’t feel guilt for being deceived. Tristan had played us all. If he wasn’t such a fucking rat bastard, he could’ve done well in the family. He could’ve risen. Instead, he’ll fall.

“Except killing you and staying hidden has been harder than I thought. You survived the car bombing. My attempts to poison you.”

Poisoning? I thought back to when Kincaid had been sick, sweaty, and flushed with a high fever. The fucking *stronzo* had almost killed her again.

“Even tonight, you were supposed to be at the club.” His face twisted into a snarl as he once again focused on me. “I

guess I'll just have to do it the old-fashioned way with a bullet to the brain. Nothing can save you this time."

"I should've killed you when I had the chance." My voice was low, menacing. Mad.

I had him. I had the knife in his body. His blood on my hands. And I'd let him live.

"Yes, you should've, but you were too distracted by pussy to pay attention. Mad, who's so above the rest of us brought down by a tight cunt and a pretty face."

I resisted the urge to grind his bones together as he talked about Kincaid that way. The demon inside rattling his cage. Adrenaline bursting through my veins, making my limbs shake.

"I told them all about her, and they tortured her poor little mind. You've been so busy trying to bring her back to you that you didn't even notice me working in the background."

"But I did."

The demon inside me roared and clawed to get out as I watched my little dove walk to her death.

Kincaid

I ignored Maddox as he shook his head slightly. Trying not to alert Tristan as he subtly told me to leave. To escape.

He'd left me an opening. I could've. I could've snuck out behind Tristan. Walked through the open bedroom door, down the stairs, and out of the house. The house I'd desperately wanted to leave once upon a time. But not anymore.

“Ah there's your little dove.” Tristan chuckled, only bothering to glance at me over his shoulder. I wasn't a threat, even with the gun in my hand.

His gaze and gun focused back on Maddox, who knelt shirtless on the floor. His hands resting on the back of his neck as he stared at me. Blood trickled down from a cut on his head, and his handsome face was bruised.

“No. Leave.” His harsh tone cut into me. His turned down. His fists clenched. He acted like he didn't care. Like that would make Tristan spare my life.

But his eyes pleaded with me to go. His eyes were the only thing that gave him away. The only thing that told me that he

feared for me. Cared. Even bloody and bruised, his body was coiled tight, ready to fight. Ready for an opportunity.

“I won’t leave you.” I answered as I raised the gun. Maddox’s eyes closed slowly as if it hurt him to see me here. As if he knew we both wouldn’t make it out. Resigned in our death. “My place is by your side.”

I focused back on my target. I wanted to move. To stand between him and Maddox, but I knew he’d shoot before I took a single step around him. I was determined to make him train the gun on me. But he wouldn’t; he was too arrogant in his assumptions of women.

“You’re not going to shoot me.” Tristan smirked like everything was going as he planned. “You’re too sweet for that. You don’t have what it takes to end a life.” He leaned closer to me as I inched towards Maddox. I could smell the stench of decay coming off him. “To feel that stain on your soul. It’ll never go away. I’ll haunt your dreams.”

His whispered words tried to crawl under my skin. Tried to poke at what was left of the old me. The girl before Maddox had come into my life. The one I had so hysterically clung to.

That girl was gone.

“Let him go, or I will kill you.” There was no hesitation in my voice. No strain in my arms as I held the weapon. But my heart constricted in my chest. Unable to beat when I looked at Maddox. My lungs fighting for air each minute he was on his knees at Tristan’s mercy.

Tristan laughed loudly. Doing what he'd always done; underestimating the women around him. How could a woman hurt him? We were disposable. Pawns for his games. Whores as he so eloquently said before.

“I'm glad you're here to watch him die. Then you'll know what waits for you.” His voice lowered as he licked his lips and glanced at my bare legs. “I could use another whore to make some money. I'm not sure who'd touch you after everything Maddox has done to you, but” he shrugged his shoulders. “I'm sure we'll find someone desperate enough.”

The old wounds tried to come back. Tried to make me lose focus. Feel ashamed of myself. Of Maddox. Of what we did. What we were. I waited for the familiar churning in my gut. The twisting of my heart.

But clarity came with my adrenaline. I wasn't embarrassed of anything we'd ever done. And I wouldn't let a worthless rat, who had more to be ashamed of, make me feel that way.

He's the one who should be wondering what was wrong with him. Wondering how his life had ended up here. Killing his best friend.

“I'll kill myself before I let anyone but Maddox touch me.” I snapped.

Death was preferable to a life without Maddox. It was what I wanted before him, and I would take it if I couldn't have him. I didn't want to walk this earth without the man I loved.

“Don’t worry. I’ll make it easy on you. I’ll get you high first. It’s amazing what a person will do for their next fix. Soon you’ll be begging me to find you a customer. Willing to spread your legs for anyone. Just like your mother, right Maddox?” His eyes gleamed with pleasure as he poked at Maddox’s childhood trauma.

I thought Maddox was a monster. A demon. But that was before I looked the devil in his eyes. It wasn’t Maddox who couldn’t feel; it was Tristan. His eyes were dead and cold, like he felt nothing for threatening his friend’s life. For threatening to rape the woman his friend loves.

“You’re going to wish for death when I get my hands on you.” Maddox jerked forward like he was going to grab him but settled back as if he thought better of it. I know the only reason he hadn’t was to give me time. To get me out. But I wasn’t leaving without him.

I was stalling as much as he was. Hoping Henry or Sebastian or anyone would come before I had to pull the trigger. Before, I had to make the choice.

I would, but I knew it would cost me something. Something I wasn’t ready to lose. The last thread of my humanity. The last piece of the girl my mother raised me to be.

“Empty promises.” Tristan’s face pulled into a sick smile. “You had your chance.”

“I saved your life.” I yelled with renewed rage. It shook through my body, making me fist grip the gun tighter. My voice raw as I spoke. “He let you live because of me.”

“That’s true.” He walked forward to stand next to Maddox. He raised the gun to his temple. “So whose fault is it when I kill the only thing you care about?”

My mouth was dry, my throat clogging with emotion as I watched the harsh metal press into Maddox’s skull. My heart felt like it was breaking my ribs with how hard it was beating in my chest. But even that didn’t stop the cold, clammy feeling spreading across my skin seeing the man I love half naked on his knees, throwing himself into danger to give me a chance.

“Run, little dove.” There was no fear in his voice for himself. Only worry for me. His blue eyes begging for me to listen.

Tristan smiled at what he saw as a weakness. Maddox’s feelings for me that threatened to end his own life. Because I’d distracted him. Because I told him to spare Tristan. And now I refused to go.

“Too late for that.” Tristan chuckled.

The world felt like it went into slow motion. My eyes transfixed where Tristan’s finger curled around the trigger. The slight pressure as he pulled. The gunshot rang out in the air.

I didn’t hear it. Trained to ignore it. A splash of blood covered the gray walls. Tracks dripping down as it marred the carpet.

The smell of sulfur in the air mixed with the acrid scent of blood and death.

I couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. Stuck in the moment that changed my life.

Kincaid

My breath heaved in my lungs as I fell to my knees. The gun clattering as it dropped from my hands. I couldn't pull my gaze away from the body on the floor. From the wide-eyed stare as the life left him. From the gaping hole in his chest where a heart used to be. Blood pooled around him, silently seeping into the carpet as it fled his body.

I didn't fight when arms came around me, lifting me.

Warm. Familiar. Safe.

"You're okay, *mia amata*." Maddox's voice soothed the frayed edges of my tattered soul as he carried me down the stairs. Away from the man I'd killed. The life I took.

I registered the cool leather as he placed me on the couch in the library, wrapping a blanket around my shoulders as my body shook from the adrenaline let down. He knelt in front of me; his hands grasped my face. His fingers digging into my flesh as he forced me to look into his dark blue eyes. Blazing with rage.

"Why did you do that?" His voice rose in anger sending vibrations through me. "You should have run!"

I stared at him in confusion as his naked chest rose and fell with heavy breaths. I could feel his own body shaking where he held my face. Feel his fear seeping into my bones.

I wanted to be mad at him for yelling at me, but I couldn't. I knew what he felt when he saw me standing next to a man with a loaded weapon. I knew the terror that was still clinging to him, just as it was to me.

I softened, leaning my face into his touch as I grasped his wrists. My fingers brushed his pulse as I took long, deep breaths. Maddox followed, his breath mingling with mine. Our gazes collided. Emotions churning between us.

“I chose you. I will never leave you.” I pressed my lips to his. I meant for it to be sweet, reassuring, letting him know I was here. I was alive.

But Maddox gripped the nape of my neck, forcing me forward. My mouth parted on a gasp, and he dove in. Devouring me. His desperation eating me alive. Our tongues warring as our teeth clashed. Whimpers and groans bursting from deep inside both of us.

I clung to him as I took it all. My own body frantic to feel his. To know he was alive. Safe. Mine.

That he hadn't been taken from me. That he was real. Here. I pushed aside the knowledge of what I had to do to keep him here.

He ripped his mouth from mine, leaving me gasping. “Where did you even learn to shoot a gun?”

“I asked Henry to teach me.” He kissed me again ferociously, capturing my lower lip in a harsh bite. I tasted the metallic tang of blood and desperation.

“Why?” He demanded as his blue eyes pierced me. I felt anger rise inside me. My body shaking with it. I knew it was a defense mechanism to delay dealing with what I’d done. But I couldn’t stop it.

“Why? Seriously?” I shouted. “Because you just had a gun in your face. Because it’s not even the first time one of us has been threatened. I knew what I was agreeing to when I became yours, but I won’t be helpless. I won’t wait for you to save me.”

My breath shuddered in my lungs. Fear and anger making the adrenaline course through my veins again. The memories that were still new and fresh in my mind. Memories that would soon haunt my nightmares. I wouldn’t forget the image of the man I love on his knees with a gun to his head. Bloodied and bruised. Seemingly beaten.

“And I won’t watch you die. I won’t walk away. Don’t ever ask me to do that again! Because I won’t leave the man I love.”

My harsh exhale was met with silence. Maddox’s eyes widened slightly as his fingers flexed on my neck. The rest of his body was completely still, as if suspended in time.

We held like that for a moment as I wondered what had happened. Did he really believe me to be weak? To allow myself to feel vulnerable again after what happened to me?

“You love me?” The words were a choked whisper.

And that’s when I saw the disbelief in his eyes. He’d never been loved before. His parents were too heartless to give him that. He probably didn’t even think he needed it. Didn’t think it mattered because he’d never felt it for anyone. He’d never wanted emotions. Connections. Weakness. Until me.

And neither had I. I lived my life alone. Lost in my own darkness. Until I found my matching shadows in him.

“Yes.” I wrapped my arms around him. My heart simultaneously tightening and bursting with affection for him. “I love you.”

Maddox yanked me from the couch as I wrapped my legs around his waist. Both of us needing to be as close as possible.

“You love me.” He stared into my eyes as his hand came to fist my hair. “You killed for me. There’s no turning away now, my little dove. We’re bonded in blood. Forever.”

Blood? I closed my eyes, shutting him out. Processing what I’d done.

There was no regret. No remorse.

I thought I would feel like I was living with a dark stain on my soul. Like Maddox had finally tainted me. Broken me. But I didn’t.

Tessa has been right; anyone can kill under the right circumstances. I didn’t regret killing Tristan. He would’ve killed Maddox and me. He had orchestrated my kidnapping. And who knows what other terrible things he’d done.

I might love a demon, but he had loyalty. Maddox could love despite what he thought. Despite who he was and where he'd come from. Tristan couldn't. Maddox had never lied about who he was. Tristan had hidden his true nature. In a world full of monsters, he was the worst one.

And our world was a better place without him.

“Forever.” I echoed, resting my forehead on his.

Our chests pressed together, our hearts beating in time. Finding a matching rhythm. Whatever it was in me that craved him. That craved his demon, reached out, and took it. Absorbed him into my very being as he consumed me.

There would be no going back. No second guessing. There was only him and I now.

I thought myself trapped in a cage. Forced. My wings clipped. But that couldn't be further from the truth. I was trapped before him. Stuck inside myself. Trapped by the fear of who I truly was. Caged by society and what I was told to want.

Now I was finally free.

Maddox

“Va’ in malora.” Go toward ruin. My father spit on Tristan’s lifeless body, where it still lay on the floor in my bedroom, before striding out. Not another glance for the nephew he’d raised beside us.

“Kincaid did this?” Leif asked as we stared down at the single bullet wound to his chest, inches from his heart. A perfect kill shot. I nodded as I tilted my head to look at the pattern the blood had made in his once-white shirt as it had poured from his body. The fabric was now stained dark red. The carpet would need to be replaced.

I wondered if that would be enough. Or if my little dove would never want to walk back in here. If this room would forever be tainted for her. Filled with the memories of her first kill. Her only kill if I could help it.

I didn’t want my life to mark her soul. I was born without one. I could kill easily, but she would feel the lingering remorse. She would wonder if there was something she could have done. Even knowing the monster he was. Knowing he would’ve killed me and taken her. Broken her beyond repair, she would still regret what had to be done.

Leif knelt beside the body, his forearms resting on his knees as his hands hung down. His face was contemplative as he stared at our cousin. I had already discarded him from my mind. Lost in a sea of men who deserved my vengeance.

But Leif still clung to pieces of his own soul. Pieces his mother tried to hold together. He would grieve the loss. Curse himself for not seeing the traitor among us. For not finding a way to help Tristan before it came to this. I didn't envy his emotions or his position.

All I wanted to do was get through the formalities and rid my home of the body so I could go back to my little dove. Kincaid waited downstairs, unwilling to face the horror of what had been necessary. Bash had brought Tessa to try and calm her nerves. But I knew it would only be my touch that could truly release her from the stress of the night.

Leif rose again, turning to look at me. His eyes lingering on the blood spattered on my chest from my nearness to Tristan's death. They'd been no time to change. I had only just recovered from Kincaid's revelation that she loved me when the family had come bursting in.

"It appears I did underestimate her." Leif said with a hint of pride in his voice. "She might be your greatest strength."

Leif's words struck deep into my bones, settling inside me. I thought Kincaid a weakness. My living, breathing grip on humanity. Light. So easily taken from me. Conveniently available to my enemies to crush. To extinguish.

It didn't stop me from keeping her. From wanting her. From loving her.

But knowing she could take care of herself. Knowing she would defend me. Us. Soothed the demon in me. Calmed whatever semblance of guilt I might have had that told me to let her go to keep her safe.

Leif was right. She wasn't my weakness. She was my strength. My reason. I would never let this life destroy me because I could never leave her behind.

I clapped him on the back as a few of his men came for the body. "Maybe you'll have it one day."

Leif's eyes hardened; all traces of empathy gone from his expression. In its place was the monster who would one day lead the family. "Not all of us have the luxury of choosing the woman by our side."

"Not all of us are illegitimate sons."

My status as a prostitute's son kept me from a fate that Leif had always known would come for him. Like Alessandra, he would have an arranged marriage. His wife would be chosen in a strategic move to form alliances. Tristan's betrayal and death didn't stop the war that had ignited with the Gallos. Leif would soon need to make the deals necessary to protect the family.

Before Kincaid, his sacrifice would've meant nothing to me. All women had been the same. Serving their purpose as

toys and mothers. But my little dove had changed my perspective.

I wasn't suddenly going to believe that true love existed or that I even cared if it did. I'd found what I wanted. What I needed. I loved Kincaid in my way. And I knew the brother in me should hope that Leif found the same. Or at least that his wife would understand her place. That they would have a peaceful, if not a loving, marriage.

Leif gestured to the body being carried out the door. "At least my bride will know what kind of life we live. Hopefully, she'll already have learned the lesson Kincaid did today."

It was true. Anyone Leif married will have grown up in one of the families. She would have already seen death and torture.

Even though my little dove wasn't born into this life, she was bound to it now. She'd made the ultimate sacrifice for me. She'd given away a piece of her soul to keep me alive. But I would make sure it was never necessary again. She belonged by my side because she was my light in the darkness. She was the only one who could make me feel something.

I wouldn't let this world take from her again. I wouldn't let it taint her more than it already had. It was my job to ruin her. Protect her. Love her.

Maddox

The music from the club was nothing but a dull thud as I sat across from Leif in the private room. My body was here, but my mind was on my little dove waiting for me out in the main area. I knew she was well protected with Henry as she watched Tessa dance, but I still itched to get to her. Even after what she'd done to Tristan, I still worried for her safety. She was mine to hurt, no one else.

“Unfortunately, Tristan’s death did not stop the war with the Gallos.” Leif said. “They want retribution for the men Maddox killed.”

“They were the ones working with one of ours.” Constantine scuffed. “They may not have kidnapped the girl, but we would have wanted blood for that regardless.”

“It’s just an excuse to try and take us down.” Dante said.

I agreed. I didn’t believe Tristan had come up with the plan to betray us on his own. He was lured away by the promise of more. Carmine Gallo was power-hungry. He knew he wouldn’t get control of Sayton City while any Vancini lived. He’d found a weak link and exploited it. His attacks would keep coming.

I felt no sympathy for my cousin. It was his own greed that had killed him. He had plenty as a Vancini; there was no reason for him to seek more. His death meant nothing to me. I would feel equally ambivalent to the rest of the Gallos, that would die at my hand. If they were fool enough to question our power, then they deserved a bloody death.

“I’m inclined to agree.” Leif said. “We all need to be vigilant. It’s clear they have no problems exploiting our weaknesses. I suggest extra security for your wives and children. A war is coming.”

Our eyes connected for a second, both of us thinking of Alessandra. I had already added one of my men to her security detail. I no longer trusted my father or anyone else to keep her safe. If the Gallos and Tristan could take Kincaid without remorse, they could take the only daughter of the Vancini boss. She was a much bigger prize. I knew it meant our father would marry her off sooner rather than later, if for no other reason than to get her out of the city.

Our meeting ended shortly after that. I lingered in the room, knowing Henry would bring my little dove to me. But when the door opened, letting in the sound of the club, I glanced up to find Bash with Tessa instead of Kincaid. My body felt heavy with disappointment as they walked closer.

My number two stood slightly in front of her as if he was protecting her from me. I smiled to myself because if I wanted to hurt her, there was no one who could stop me.

Tessa wore a green silk robe tied over her waist. She walked steadily on her extremely high heels as she shoved past Bash to sit at the table across from me. Her body appeared relaxed, but her face was drawn with tension.

“Can I help you with something, Trixie?” I didn’t know if she used her real name while working at Entice, and it wasn’t my business to out her even if our conversation was being held in a private place. I didn’t care about her, but I showed her the respect Kincaid would want.

“I overheard something I think you should know.” She said as she tapped the wood table lightly.

“Overheard?” I raised one brow as I sipped my drink.

Her face twisted into a cunning smile. “Men tend to forget that I’m more than just a pretty face who dances for them. They often speak freely because they don’t believe I’m capable of doing anything with the information.”

I had no doubt she was right. Tristan had underestimated Kincaid until the moment her bullet pierced his heart. “And what did you hear?”

“They’re planning to take Kincaid again.” She bit her lip as the tapping of her fingers increased with the anxiety.

“Did they say that exactly? They said her name?” My glass smacked the table loudly as I set it down. Anger making it impossible for me to contain the energy inside me.

“No.” She scrunched her brows like she was trying to remember their exact words. “I heard them mentioning the

Vancinis. Then they said, ‘we need to find out if she knows and that he’s already proven he’ll go against Leonardo to keep her safe.’”

I processed the words, thinking through all the things I knew. All the ways, I knew Carmine would try to gain power. All the knowledge of him and his men that had taken years to acquire. Knowledge of my own family and their secrets.

“Thank you for letting me know. We’ll take extra precautions.” I finally said. She didn’t need to know what I would do with the information. Or what I thought it actually meant.

Tessa stood from the table but paused before walking away. “I hate your family. But I love her. I want her to be happy. I will kill you if your life affects her.”

Tessa’s dislike for our Mafia wasn’t a secret. It was only because I’d saved Kincaid’s life once that she didn’t hate me personally. As soon as she exited the room, I turned to Bash.

“The Gallos are no longer allowed inside our clubs. I don’t care if it’s Matteo or a foot soldier; we keep them out.” He nodded as his eyes lingered on where Tessa last stood. “Watch her. Keep her safe, but make sure she doesn’t know.”

His eyes flicked to mine, and I wondered if he would question keeping Tessa in the dark. It wasn’t his choice to make. We couldn’t have her walking around with our secrets. Especially when I wasn’t sure if we’d need them for leverage yet.

“Understood.” He said as he followed her out. I would have to watch him closely. I knew better than anyone that love made you do stupid things. The family couldn’t afford for Bash to lose himself over a woman, especially not that one.

My thoughts scattered when my little dove walked in the door. My dick jumping to attention as I took her in. Her silky porcelain skin that showed over the blue veins I loved to feel under my tongue. My mouth watering at the idea of tasting them now.

My skin heated as I glanced down her body, looking at the outfit she wore. A short black skirt that displayed her petite legs and red tank top tight over her perky tits. It was reminiscent of the outfits she used to wear when she worked at Entice, back when I first saw her. When I believed her to be nothing more than a toy, I would enjoy breaking.

Before I broke for her.

Kincaid

Maddox's eyes lightened as he watched me walk across the room toward him. My heart beat an erratic rhythm in my chest, knowing what I had planned for us. The memories in this room only fueling my desire for him. But not yet.

“Why did Tessa want to talk to you?” I asked as I stopped just out of his reach. He licked his lips as his eyes raked my body from my heels to my face.

“She overheard something about the Gallos' plans.” My chest tightened at the idea of my friend being dragged into my life. I didn't want her hurt. He read my expression. “Don't worry, my little dove. I have Bash watching out for her.”

The rough edges inside me smoothed, knowing Sebastian would do anything to keep her safe. “That's good.”

For a beat, we stared at each other. I took him in. The suit he wore like armor. His shirt unbuttoned at the collar showing off his olive skin and tattoos. His strong hands that could give me both pleasure and pain. A dark lock of hair curled over his forehead as his blue eyes looked at me like I was his next meal.

The tension in the room grew, working under my skin and making my thighs wet with my arousal. One look from Maddox and I was ready for whatever he wanted to give me, no matter how depraved it was.

“Is there something I can get you?” I asked, echoing words I’d used what for like years ago. Before I was his, and he was mine.

“You.” The husky tone of his voice made my breath quicken as I moved closer to him. He turned in his chair; his hands rested on the back of my bare thighs. A shiver running through my body at his rough touch. “Take your panties off.”

A thrill ran through me as he repeated the words he’d used. But I wasn’t that girl anymore. I wasn’t the girl who would deny him. Who would try to pull away. Who couldn’t accept what she wanted.

I bit my lip as I placed my hands on his thick forearms, loving the feel of him. “I can’t.”

Maddox gave me his sadistic smile, the one that promised I would enjoy the way he hurt me. “So defiant.”

“I’m not being defiant.” I smirked back as I leaned forward until my lips brushed the shell of his ear. His smoky scent surrounded me as the heat of his body seeped into mine. “I can’t take my panties off because I’m not wearing any.”

“*Cazzo.*” His hot breath tickled my neck as his hands ran up the back of my legs under my skirt until they cupped my

bare ass. My body tingled as he traced the seam of my cheeks. He groaned before his voice lowered to almost a growl.

“You were out in the club like this? I’ll fucking kill anyone who saw your sweet cunt.” His teeth sank into the sensitive flesh where my neck met my shoulder, making my pussy clench at the pain. “Right after I punish you for walking around with my pussy on display.”

My fingers tightened on his arms as I rubbed my thighs together in anticipation. Maddox didn’t miss my reaction. His gaze found mine again as his eyes darkened with desire. “Is that what you want, my little slut? Do you want me to punish you?”

It wasn’t that long ago I would’ve fought him. I would’ve told him no. Back when I was still bound by what other people thought. When I still worried about pleasing others before considering my own happiness. When I craved a conventional life that I would never have. Now I knew I was made for this. Made to be loved by a demon.

“Yes.” I whispered before turning from his grasp and bending over the table.

I jerked in surprise when I felt Maddox stand behind me. His hand caressed from my shoulder to my upper thighs. The light brush of his fingertips made me shiver as he lifted my skirt and revealed me to his gaze in the same way he’d done before. Only this time, there was no fear. Only an eagerness for his touch. His pain.

“Such a good little slut.” His words settled heavily in my chest, making me blush.

I gasped as his sharp slap landed on my right cheek. My body pushed forward with the force making my clit bump into the table, sending a buzz of erotic energy through me. I arched my back in anticipation for the next touch.

“Are you going to do that again?” Maddox asked as I waited. He didn’t touch me, and I couldn’t hear anything over the sound of my blood roaring in my ears. “Answer me, Kincaid.”

“I don’t know what to say.” I answered.

He slapped my other cheek; the sound reverberated through the quiet room, mixing with the sounds of my loud moan as my core clenched. The sharp sting felt like it was heating my entire body.

“What does that mean, my little dove?” He rubbed his palm across my ass, making my body burn again.

“I’ll do it again if I get your punishments.” I gasped as his fingers found my dripping wet pussy. I spread my legs as far apart as I could, my skirt bunching at my waist.

My knuckles turned white as I gripped the table and pushed my hips back, seeking more. I tried to take him further into my body where I needed him the most, but Maddox chuckled and kept his touch light and caressing. Enjoying the way he tortured me. The way my body begged for him before I did.

“You can have my pain anytime you want, *mia amata*. All you need to do is ask.” His words shouldn’t make me happy. They shouldn’t make me feel seen. Like I belonged, but they did. “But you will never show another man what’s mine again. Do you understand?”

He slapped my ass harshly three times in a row, each one lighting me on fire. Making me wither and moan. Making my body tense and tight as the need to come overwhelmed me. “

Yes.” I nodded my head frantically. “I understand.”

Another blow came down as the pleasure started to turn into pain again. I was riding the edge between them both. Living in the perfect haze that made me forget everything else.

“Who do you belong to?” His voice was rough as he smacked me again.

“You.” I moaned.

Maddox wrapped a fist around my hair, yanking me back until I crashed into his chest. I relished the hard muscles as I rubbed my body against him. Begging him without words. “Show me who you belong to. Show me who’s the only one who gets to feel your tight pussy.”

I stumbled forward slightly as he released his hold on me and sat in the red leather booth. I watched as he quickly undid his pants, freeing his thick cock. Frantic to feel him, I lifted my skirt and climbed into his lap. I didn’t have time to prepare because as soon as I was in position, Maddox grabbed my hips and slammed himself inside me.

“Fuck.” I screamed as he stretched me. Tears welled in my eyes at the intense fullness of taking him into my body. I never wanted to get used to it. I never wanted to stop feeling the agony that came when I was with Maddox.

“*Merda.*” His mouth crashed down on mine as his fingers bruised my hips, working me on his cock. I braced my legs against the seat as I lifted and moved with him. My sweat-slick body slipping on the leather. I quickly lost myself in the rhythm. Lost myself in the feel of his cock hitting that perfect spot behind my clit. The drag of him as he pumped in and out. I felt everything. Every sensation intense. A pull of pleasure and pain.

My nails dug into his shirt as I pulled him closer. His hands moved to my ass, squeezing my abused flesh. The pain pushed me higher as I chased the oblivion he would bring. I broke our kiss as I moved faster. Climbed higher.

“Please.” I begged as my inner walls tightened around him.

“What do you need, my little dove?” His words were choppy as he panted, lost in his own pleasure.

“More.” I begged. His eyes danced with sadistic intent as his fingers moved to that forbidden hole only he’d ever taken.

I cursed as he shoved inside, pushing until he was buried in me to his knuckle. My body spasmed around him at the unbelievable fullness. My blood boiled as I thought about what we were doing and where we were. Anyone could walk in and see me half-naked riding his cock. His marks on my body. His finger buried in my ass.

The shame never came. Instead, my orgasm barreled towards me because of the depraved things I let him do. But even this wasn't enough. I wished we were home. That I could feel my blood as he cut me. Or see the black spots dance in my eyes as his hand closed on my throat. But I knew he wouldn't right now. Not when we were in public. Not when he had to keep me safe.

I opened my mouth and tipped my head back. Maddox smiled at me. His tongue warm as he teased me, licking my bottom lip as I moaned. Finally, he gave me what I'd been looking for.; spitting into my mouth. I swallowed greedily, wanting him everywhere. For every part of me to be filled by him. "Such a good little slut taking me in every one of your holes."

My body tightened as his words, and degradation pushed me off the edge. I said his name as my pussy convulsed around him. The orgasm barreling through me as my body tensed and released. I held his gaze even as my vision blurred.

"I love you. You're so fucking perfect for me." He rasped as gripped my ass and fucked me harder through my release. I clawed at his shirt and clenched my thighs around him from the intensity. Trying to hold on as I felt myself climbing again. Felt the heat building as my body tightened. "Say it."

"I love you." His lips found my neck. He bit down, pain coursing through me as he buried himself deep inside my body.

He came at my words as if they were all he needed. As if he had been waiting for them. Waiting his whole life to be loved by me. Just like I'd been waiting for him.

I'd once wished for a billionaire to take me away like in the books I read. To fix all my problems. Instead, I'd gotten a demon. And it was better because Maddox didn't just take my problems away; he destroyed them for me.

There was no end to what he would do to make me happy and keep me safe. He gave me the strength and acceptance to be who I was. To turn away from a conventional world and live in the world of monsters.

Our love wasn't normal. It was dark and twisted.

It was depraved.

It was perfect.

Thank You

Thank you to everyone who took the time to read this book. I can't tell you enough how much it means to me.

If you enjoyed it please leave a review and post on social media. You can tag me on Instagram and Tik Tok as Author Jayla Talbot. As an indie author word of mouth and reviews truly make a difference. We won't be able to keep doing what we love without your support. So again thank you!

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About the Author

Jayla lives in Southeast Michigan with her husband and young son. Her love of romance started in middle school and has only grown from there. When she's not writing you can find her hiding behind her kindle or streaming the latest rom-com.