



EMPIRE OF JUSTICE

USA TODAY BEST SELLING AUTHOR

J. L. BECK

EMPIRE OF LUST



J.L. BECK

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BLURB

I made a mistake.

At sixteen years old, I fell for the wrong man.

Callum Torrio.

Ruthless billionaire. Dangerous villain. My best friend's father.

At twenty-one, I gave up hope he would ever notice me.

He's twenty years older than me, and an arms dealer for the mob.

The smart choice would be to forget he ever existed.

But that's not possible.

His icy blue gaze, sculpted physique, and huge rough hands play a vivid part in my dreams.

Then one night, everything changes.

Every fantasy I ever had, he brings to life.

Dominant and possessive, he praises and worships me.

He makes me feel like a woman when all my life I've felt sheltered and controlled.

But Callum has dark secrets and a past that refuses to let go.

I knew he was a bad man, but I never would have anticipated this...

AUTHOR NOTE

Thank you so much for picking *Empire of Lust* as your next read. I'm thrilled to have you dive into a brand new world with me. However even if I don't want to spoil the story for anyone I do feel inclined to offer a list of triggers for those that might be triggered by material in this book. The hero in this book is not like the hero in any other book I've written. He knows what he is doing wrong and he doesn't care. He's controlling, possessive, over the top and manipulates the heroine into situations that you might find very uncomfortable. If you do not like alpha heroes, very steamy sex, and dirty talk please do not read on. If you're okay with those things this is the book for you. No matter what you choose, please read at your own discretion.

This book contains the following triggers:

Spanking, violence, manipulation of birth control, explicit sex, death, cheating (not between MC's), age gap, grooming, rape, dub-con situations, physical abuse, and emotional abuse.

BIANCA



“Let me get this straight.” My best friend Tatum leans over, her elbow squeaking on the leather seat of the town car while a glass of champagne teeters in her hand. Gently, she brushes strands of her sunshine-blonde hair from her heart-shaped face.

“You graduated from college today, and your boyfriend of five fucking years couldn’t bother to attend the ceremony or hang out with you after?”

I grind my teeth. Does she have to be so honest? Her bluntness is nothing new, even if she’s slurring her words after all the alcohol she’s consumed today. There were five graduation parties at which we *absolutely* had to make an appearance. Her words, not mine.

And sure, it was fun, but it might’ve been better if I’d felt like I was actually there. *Present*. Instead, all I could do was watch everyone else celebrating their next step in life while I remained apart, wondering what was broken inside me.

I guess my absent boyfriend is as good of an excuse as any, even if it doesn’t ring entirely true. There are deeper issues, but I’m not ready to face those yet.

“Unfortunately, he has to work early in the morning.” I feed her the lie he’s given me one time too many. “I can’t blame him for trying to be an adult.”

“An adult would’ve requested the day off. It’s not like he hasn’t known the graduation date for months.” She offers a blithe shrug. “I don’t buy it for a second, Bianca.”

Like always, she's calling my bluff.

All I can do is shake my head.

“The only thing that matters is that it's important to you,” she continues. “If he really wanted to be here, he would be. He's treating you like you're an afterthought, and it's bullshit. If he was a real man, building a future with you would be the most important thing to him. I know you don't want to believe it, but you don't mean shit to him, and that makes me want to slash his tires and tell him what a stupid fucker he is.”

Sigh. I wish I knew what to say, but there is no response that will make her happy with my choice to stay with him. Lucas has burned me so many times it's impossible to see the good that may or may not be left in him. I don't know why I stay.

Maybe it's the fear of being alone? Or maybe I'm hoping he'll come around. The truth is, I don't know. It's not like there's a ring on my finger or a family that we're planning.

I can't spend the rest of the night listening to her say things I've already heard—and told myself—a million times, so I grasp at something to divert her.

“Hey, it's not all bad.” I smile. “Him blowing me off means we got to spend the entire day together and the rest of the night, too. And last time I checked, your devoted boyfriend couldn't be bothered to hang out tonight, either.” I cringe as soon as I say the words out loud. Regret is a shot I didn't prep a chaser for when I see the smug grin on her full lips slip.

“Yeah, well, I guess we're both unlucky in love. He had other things to do, too.”

She won't say what, and I wonder if he bothered to tell her. You would think she has the perfect relationship with Kristoff from how she talks, but the truth is clear, no matter how she tries to spin it to others. It must be the world she grew up in that leaves her wanting to keep things to herself, to put on a brave face and toss her hair over her shoulder like nothing matters. The Torrios deal in secrets, and a powerful man like

her father can't afford to let his true feelings show. I guess the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

Our driver, Romero, turns onto the road that holds the front gate of the Torrio compound and my stomach flutters. Callum Torrio is both dangerous and alluring. A man like him has not gathered as many enemies as he has by sticking to the right side of the law. I know the type of man he is, and so does my father. Which is why he lectures me about how dangerous it is to still be friends with Tatum.

The guard at the gate of the Torrio compound waves us forward as we approach. We continue through the gate and up the long, wide, winding driveway that cuts through the heart of the enormous property.

There's enough land that even Callum's trusted bodyguards live in small homes positioned near the twenty-foot-high stone wall which encloses the compound.

Tatum gulps down the rest of the champagne in her glass and looks at me with glazed eyes. "What were we talking about again?" She taps her chin with a manicured finger. "Ahh, right. Luke the asshole."

I roll my eyes at her not-so-clever nickname. "He's not an asshole, Tatum."

If I tell myself that enough, maybe I'll believe it as well.

"But he is, and you know it. I know it. His mom probably knows it. You can hate me, though I know it's not possible, but it's your graduation day. A once in a lifetime event. He knew how much it meant, and he couldn't bother to even go to dinner with you when your father made it a point to invite him."

That bothers me more than I care to admit, but all I can do is come up with another excuse. "It's not his fault he had to cover a shift."

Her snort fills the cab. "Right. I forgot about his career at his uncle's gym."

Romero pulls around the enormous circular courtyard in front of the sprawling brick mansion.

“The gym he’s going to take over,” I remind her as gently as I can. “It’s a serious investment. If he wants to act the part, he needs to make responsible choices; otherwise, what’s the point of taking over?”

“I’m just telling you... you deserve better. He could’ve got the time off. He didn’t even try, and that means he doesn’t care.” She burps, then groans. “I’m sorry. I just don’t like seeing you hurt, and that’s all he does.”

“I’m not hurt.” At least, not really. Not like I should be. *Would be* if I cared enough about him to let him hurt me.

Romero parks the car, climbs out, and opens the car door for us like we’re royalty. I’ll never get used to the star treatment I receive when Tatum and I are together.

Climbing out of the car, I grab my overnight bag from the seat and give a wobbly Tatum some room to exit.

“Do you need assistance?” Romero questions, his dark gaze taking in Tatum’s swaying body. She’s tipsy but not unable to stand.

Tatum’s glossed pink lips purse, and her green eyes narrow on Romero. “Excuse you, sir.” She jabs one manicured finger into his suit jacket. “My father pays you to take care of me, not judge me, and you’re looking at me very judgmentally right now. Yeah, I had a few drinks. I think I deserve it. I graduated from college today. What did you do?”

Romero rolls his eyes, and I’m so amused by their relationship I can’t help but smile. They’re like gasoline and fire. One match strike away from causing a cosmic explosion. She pushes his buttons, and he pushes right back. Of all the men I’ve seen her interact with, Romero is the only one who refuses to handle her with kid gloves.

“Get her to bed before she makes a bigger ass of herself,” he orders without looking away from her.

I snake an arm through hers, tugging her toward the front door.

“You’re incredibly rude, and I’m going to tell my father to fire you,” Tatum yells over her shoulder.

“That would be fucking great. In fact, do it. I’ve been meaning to take a vacation. I could use a day or two away from your stuck-up ass.”

“You... you’re a fucking asshole!” Tatum struggles in my grip, and I pull her closer, tightening my hold. She’s ready to throw down, but it’s not going to happen. Not tonight.

I give her a little jerk. “Stop. He’s goading you, and all you’re doing is proving his point.” It’s not like we’re children. We’re allowed to go out and drink, but I don’t want to make a scene, and her determination to kick Romero’s ass will definitely make a scene. The last thing either of us needs is Callum coming out to scold us. That is, if he’s even here.

“Why does he have to be such a jerk?” She tries to whisper, but her volume control is drunk too.

“I don’t know. But you don’t make it better. You push back just as hard. If that’s how you flirt, I don’t want to see what it looks like when you fall in love.”

“That was not flirting.” She uses her finger to unlock the door, which she pushes open as soon as it beeps, the lock disengaging. We step into the house and a wave of calm washes over me. Unlike the nights when I’d return home to my father, no overbearing parent is waiting at the door, peppering me with questions. No suffocating anger or fear. Just quietness. Peace.

“I should’ve eaten something,” Tatum pouts while I walk with an arm around her waist. As we approach the kitchen, she leans on me harder. “My stomach hurts.”

“Of course, it does. All you had to eat today was half a sandwich at lunch.” Once I get her upright against the counter, I grab a granola bar from the walk-in pantry and a couple of waters from the refrigerator. Hopefully, it will soak up some of the alcohol.

Then we continue to her room.

Not like I’ve never made the same mistake, but I’d never get this tipsy if I knew I was going home to my dad. Living with Lucas has eliminated the concern of being reminded by

my detective father how easy it is for college girls to get taken advantage of. He's seen a lot of things over the course of his career, but the overbearingness that comes with him is too much.

Callum isn't the same kind of parent, though. Even back in the day, before we could legally drink, he always had a mature attitude toward Tatum's partying.

"It's a waste of time to forbid you, so I'll only ask that you make smart choices—and that you call me the instant things seem to go in the wrong direction."

Of all people, a notorious arms dealer like Callum Torrio knows about the dark side of life as much as any criminal detective would. It's sort of fascinating how their approaches diverge. One fighting crime while the other causes it.

Everything about Callum fascinates me. Since I was a teenager, he's been pulling me deeper into his dark spider web. Tightening his web, seducing me, making me crave him without even realizing it.

Our footsteps echo off the polished floor as we take the familiar route to Tatum's room. Almost as if she can read my mind about her father, she answers my question without me even having to ask.

"He's working. Always working," she whispers, "Said he had important stuff to do tonight. I doubt he's even home yet."

He always does. After lunch, he told Tatum he'd be home late, so she's probably right. I can't imagine the amount of work that goes into running an operation like *Torrio Explosives*. The business is legit on the surface, but the family's mob dealings are shrouded in so many layers of protection there's nothing for law enforcement to do but stand back and let him get away with it. Which is infuriating to my father.

Once we reach the bedroom, I help her into the attached bathroom and place her on the closed toilet lid so I can wash off her makeup. Her lids are half open, but she smiles up at

me, probably thankful she won't wake up with a streak of mascara on her cheek. "I don't deserve you, B."

"Don't say that." I pour some makeup remover on a cotton ball and swipe at her eye. "We deserve each other. That's what friendship is, holding the other one's hair back while they're vomiting."

Her lips pull up into a sheepish smile. "No vomit tonight."

I smile back and finish cleaning the makeup off her face. Then I help her change into pajamas and get her into bed before changing into my sleep shirt.

"It would be smart to eat something before you..." I pause with the granola bar in my hand and turn around to find her sleeping, her soft snores filling the room. I set the bar on the nightstand along with two Advil from the bathroom. Knowing I'd have to take care of her the way she's taken care of me in the past kept me on the straight and narrow tonight. Unfortunately, it also meant having no excuse to obliterate my vague but persistent dissatisfaction with my boyfriend in the form of binge drinking.

With her asleep, I use the restroom, wash my face, and brush out my long, brunette waves. The only form of light is the moonlight streaming through the windows, and I let out a long breath. I crave the dark, of not knowing what's hiding in it.

Tatum stirs when I climb in on the other side of the bed. "It's just me," I whisper.

"I know. I'm not that drunk." She rolls to her side, facing me, bunching a pillow under her head. "I'm sorry."

"For not being very drunk?"

"For giving you shit about Lucas. You're right," she admits with a sigh. "Kristoff isn't much better. I don't even think he likes me sometimes."

It's rare for her to let down her guard, and the fact she just confessed that out loud tells me it's been weighing on her for a while.

“I’m sure he likes you,” I console, tucking hair behind her ear before patting her cheek. “What’s not to like about you?”

“You know what I mean. He goes from hot to cold out of nowhere. Sometimes... it’s like he’s two different people.” She bites her lip, her smooth brow creasing. “One minute, he’s sweet and affectionate, then out of nowhere, he treats me like I’m an inconvenience. He can be really mean, and I don’t understand it.”

Concern for her churns in my gut. “How long has this been going on?” Kristoff has always been very standoffish. Quiet, considerate, and *almost* perfect. But if he’s hurting her or treating her like shit, something needs to be done.

She looks away for a long moment before focusing her attention back on me. “Not long. I’m thinking he might have somebody else.”

“Somebody else?” I’m almost flabbergasted. This is the first time I’ve ever heard her mention this. “I don’t think he’s stupid enough to throw away a diamond like you, and if he is, then maybe it’s for the better.”

“I’m hoping the trip to France will make things better.” Her eyes slide shut as sleep threatens to take hold. “A whole month together.”

“Everything is going to be okay,” I murmur, while wondering if spending a month so far away with a disinterested boyfriend is the best idea. I’d hate to see him abandon her in another country, and if he hurts her. *Jesus*. I can only imagine the wrath of her father and Romero.

Now that I have that weighing on my mind, I know sleep will be impossible. That, and I’m still buzzing off the chaos of driving from one party to another, the socializing, and the fact I graduated from college. *I did it*. I smile at the thought, prouder than ever of myself. That’s as far as it goes, though. Part of me thought if I hit this goal, I’d be happier, fuller, but if anything, I feel emptier, sadder.

I worked hard, got good grades, applied for internships, and went to all the interviews. My father practically glowed all

day and couldn't stop bragging at dinner about the job I'll be starting in a week.

"You're very lucky to have found a job so soon."

The problem is, I don't feel lucky. I feel trapped. Like my life is a train set on a track with only one direction to go. No future of venturing off the tracks. Otherwise, I'd risk derailment. It's why I chose a career in economics.

It's safe. Safe job. Safe boyfriend.

Safe. Safe. Safe.

I'm in control of my life, but it's all a well-constructed performance. I can only speed up or slow down. There's no changing course and no turning around. Letting out a sigh, I reason with insanity. I'm only making myself miserable thinking about this. Tossing the covers back, I shove out of bed, moving slowly, so I don't wake Tatum. Maybe some tea and a snack will quiet my brain.

As soon as I step outside of Tatum's room, my thoughts shift. I try not to think of Callum, where he is, or who he might be with. Whenever I think of him, it's usually in fantasy, since he has no idea of the crush I've harbored for years. *And he never will.* Nothing will ever come from my illicit thoughts about my best friend's much older, but incredibly sinful father.

Like a slap to the face, my thoughts return to the reality of my life. Callum will never know my true feelings. I have Lucas and my *safe* job. I know I should be happy, but I'm not. Is it wrong to want happiness when it can be so fleeting? It can dissolve like cotton candy under a sprinkle of water. You would think I should know better than to seek it out. It makes more sense to study in a field that's always going to be in demand and get a stable job with a good company—my father's mantra for as long as I can remember.

"Happiness comes after the basics are met and then some. It comes from security." I can practically hear his deep, robust voice in my ear.

I've got a boyfriend who has a job. A degree and a job of my own lined up, and yet I don't want it. None of it. Don't ask

me what I actually want because I have no idea. There's no concrete image in my mind. Whenever I imagine what my happiness would be, only one word comes to mind: *passion*. Living a life that leaves me eager to get out of bed in the morning. For new experiences, new places, and new people.

But who knows? If I had that, I might crave a mundane life as an economist with a boyfriend who likes sex a few times a week and a favorite Chinese takeout joint at the end of the block. Maybe some people aren't wired for passion and excitement. They only think they are because it's something they've never experienced.

I wish I could believe that was the case for me. I can't shake the sense of there being something bigger and better out there, yet it's still out of reach.

The kitchen is dark once I reach it, but the patio lights that shine through the sliding glass door leading outside cast enough of a glow that I'm able to navigate my way to the fridge. There isn't any sign of Callum, and I almost frown at the thought. *Get a grip*. He doesn't even know I exist beyond being Tatum's best friend.

Pulling the fridge door open, I find it stocked with an assortment of veggies and fruit. I forget the idea of tea when my eyes land on a pre-made yogurt smoothie, and while I'd rather have something gross and greasy to fit my mood, I grab a bottle before perching on a stool at the island in the center of the room. The house, if you could call it that, is beautifully decorated in grays and blues with dark wood accents. It's sleek but homey. The kitchen houses high-end appliances, white marble countertops, and dark wood cabinets. It's a far reach from the two-story cottage home my father owns.

I twist the cap off the smoothie and down half of it. Mid-gulp, the contents get stuck in my throat when a woman's voice meets my ears.

Nope. That's not a voice. It's a moan. Actually, *moans*, to be accurate.

Scanning the patio and pool beyond for a source of the noise, my first thought is maybe it's Tatum, but that's not

possible. She's dead to the world at this point. And these aren't pain-filled or nauseated moans. They're passion-filled. Hot.

MOVEMENT DRAWS my attention to one of the lounge chairs arranged at the edge of the pool. There are lights beneath the water, embedded in the concrete walls, and they cast just enough of a glow to reveal what I missed when I first sat down.

Twenty feet away are Callum and some nameless blonde. He's on his knees at the foot of the chair, the woman splayed out before him like a feast. My cheeks burn, and I know I should turn away, but I don't. I watch as he peels away the bottom half of her bikini and lowers his face to her center. *Oh my god.* He's eating her pussy, and I'm sitting here like an idiot watching. But I still can't turn away as she arches her back and sinks both hands into his hair, holding him in place.

Pressing a hand to my mouth, I stifle a gasp at the way he feasts on her, his strong hands wrapped around her thighs. Desire for something I have no business wanting bubbles low in my belly. Callum has always been the sexiest man I've ever met, a man who's inspired countless filthy fantasies, but I've never seen him naked or even without one of his hand-tailored suits on. He's always friendly but distracted by work. Fatherly, but fair-minded—he's never treated either of us like kids. Commanding. Powerful. And even a little scary with his intensity.

Now, I stare at him, drinking in the sight of his bare torso, inked arms and shoulders in a new light. The thick, corded muscles glisten. They've been swimming, his trunks still dripping water onto the concrete.

Bitter jealousy presses against my chest and grows like a forest fire as the woman writhes beneath his mouth. I can only imagine what his tongue feels like, the roughness of it as he flicks her clit. *My clit.* I bet he's the type to swallow every drop of her release. It's clear she's enjoying herself, given the throaty moans entering the kitchen.

"Oh god! Callum. Yes! More!" she begs.

Callum is an experienced man. He's older and patient, and I know he could make me explode in seconds.

My cheeks grow hotter. I'm sure if I looked in the mirror, my neck would be flaming red. *I should go.* It's wrong—and neither of them knows I'm here. I need to go back to the room, remember my boyfriend and mundane future, but my feet won't move.

The scene playing out on the patio unlocks a fantasy I didn't even want to acknowledge. The desire and excitement of being caught or seen. I wish like hell I was her, having him take me beneath the stars, too eager and hungry for each other to bother waiting until we get inside.

I watch with bated breath as he grinds his face against her, his huge hands reaching across the length of her writhing body to pull down the skimpy cups of her bikini top. His hands quickly swallow her gigantic tits. *His huge, veiny hands.* Saliva fills my mouth. Fuck, what the hell am I doing? I'm so turned on by the scene before me I can feel the heat of my desire soaking my panties. Licking my lips, I watch with desperation as he massages her breasts, rolling the pink nipples until she lets out a greedy cry of pleasure, her legs closing tightly around his head as if she can't stand the pleasure.

“Fuck. It feels so good.”

My heart shudders in my chest. I need to get out of here before they see me. Right now, they're busy, but that could change and I'd die of humiliation if discovered.

Then move, you idiot.

And yet, my stupid feet stay rooted where they are. My eyes refuse to leave Callum's body. My nipples become stiff peaks that ache as they rub against the cotton of my nightshirt. I've been turned on before, but I've never experienced something like this. The sudden, all-consuming pleasure filling my core, all without a single finger touching me.

The mystery woman continues moaning while Callum commands her body. Her legs now rest against his shoulders,

and he continues feasting. He must be legendary at eating pussy since she's practically wailing.

"Callum... yes. Yes! Yes!" she purrs, her voice thick with desire.

I tell myself this is no different from watching porn. I'm not doing anything wrong, right? He's only my best friend's father.

Pressing her legs to her chest, he pulls back and releases her breasts in favor of snaking a hand between her legs. The way he has her bent, her pussy exposed, leaves nothing to my imagination. I pant. Another gush of arousal escapes my core, and I'm surprised I haven't made a mess on the seat.

Lucas has never touched me the way Callum's touching her, the way he's dining on her like she is the last meal he'll ever have. He presses two thick digits into her pussy, and I watch as they disappear inside of her, stretching her. If I stare long enough, I can almost envision him sinking those same fingers into me. I can almost feel their thickness stretching me, commanding me. I look from her pussy to his face. His gaze is dark and focused on the same spot I was watching.

The urge to touch myself, to make myself come, is consuming, and when he leans forward, diving back between her legs, I bite my lip to stifle a groan of pleasure.

I'm dripping—lost and helpless—caught up in my desire for a man that is completely out of my reach.

I shift my legs, the movement causing my thighs to rub together. The ache refuses to dull, and the only way to make it stop is to give in. *But I can't. It's wrong.*

The patio lights gleam off Callum's thick, dark hair, his bare shoulders, and chest. Callum is always intense, stony, like an immovable slab of marble, but now it's more noticeable as he pumps his fingers into the moaning blonde whose tits bounce with every thrust.

How many times have I had this same dream?

Except, I was the woman he was fucking, taming, taking pleasure from. I wonder if the rumors are true? That he fucks

as dirty as he fights.

It should be me.

My body he's touching, licking, kissing.

My clit he licks while his thick, strong fingers pummel my pussy. I wish I could see his cock, but he's still clothed from the waist down. In my fantasies, I've imagined his cock to be immense, his girth thick, thanks to the tempting outline in his suit pants.

I can't count how many times I've caught myself staring at him. All I could think was... would he break me as he pushed inside? His massive cock becoming too much for my little pussy to handle. I shudder, the pressure in my core too intense to be ignored. The sight of his body, the moans of the woman he's feasting on. It's wreaking havoc on my fragile libido.

Oh god. I shouldn't. It's wrong. Very wrong. I know this, but I never claimed to be a good girl, did I? The ache of desire becomes almost painful, and I need to extinguish the fire. Even if it's wrong, I need this. Snaking a hand beneath my nightshirt, I roll one of my nipples between my fingers the way Callum is doing to the blonde with his free hand. Pleasure zips through my center, and I crave it with a soul-filling desire. I envision my fingers as his, the rough texture of them scraping against my tight peak.

The temperature of my body rises as all my attention turns to his other hand, the one pounding into her. The forbidden aspect of it, the wanton need claiming every inch of my body, makes me wetter. Instinct tells me to run, but I couldn't, even if I wanted to.

Spreading my legs wider, I prop one foot on the stool while I slip my other hand beneath my thong. My lips part, and my tongue darts out over my bottom lip as I dip them into my wet heat, pretending it's his fingers there instead of my own.

This is so wrong. Filthy. What is wrong with me?

I've fought against my infatuation for five years, and I know this could end up ruining my friendship with Tatum. *But*

I can't stop. I don't want to, not when it feels so good to fuck my clit and pretend I'm the girl the infamous Callum Torrio is driving to the brink of insane pleasure. Right now, I just want to feel good, and if I can do it while watching a man I've spent years fantasizing about, then I will.

"Don't stop!" The blonde pants, getting closer. "Ooh, fuck, baby... that's right, just like that! I'm gonna come! Please, don't stop!"

Tossing her head back, her lips part and a silent scream escapes before she falls against the chair, her body heaving in an orgasm so intense it possesses her body, leaving her convulsing. Fuck. I'm jealous. I've never orgasmed like that.

It's because of him. Callum. He could make me come like that if I was lucky enough. If he noticed me or saw me. My body tenses, my clit throbbing, and the thundering of my heartbeat fills my ears. Shit. I'm going to come. I can feel my arousal slipping down my thighs. My pussy is crying for a man I can't have. *Faster. Faster.* I rub the little nub faster, the pressure and friction just right. God, I need to stop... this is wrong. I can't come while watching my best friend's father eating another woman out, but... oh god. I'm going to come, and it feels so fucking good.

I'm cresting, my entire body ready to split in half. Every muscle tenses. Oh, fuck, oh god. My eyes flutter closed, goosebumps erupting across my flesh, and my hips lift, my pussy ready to be filled with cock. A second later, I shatter. The air stills in my lungs, and euphoric pleasure explodes, entering every cell in my body. I clench around the air and wish so badly it was Callum's cock coming inside me.

A single forbidden name falls from my lips on a gasp. "Callum..."

It's nothing more than a whisper. He can't hear me. *He can't.* There's no way. I'm safe in the darkness. Still, as my lids slowly open, I see his head snap up. My heart beats even faster, my orgasm continuing on, the tiny sparks leaving my core spasming. In the darkness, our gazes collide, though I'm sure all he can see is the sliding glass door.

The floor falls beneath me when his gorgeous full lips twitch upward into a smirk. He knows. He can see me, but how? It occurs to me then that we're locked in this moment together, him and I, the way I've longed for, for so many years.

My legs are jello, my chest is still heaving, and my fingers are soaked with my release. The evidence of what I've done. The terrible, forbidden thing I've done with my best friend's father.

I should be ashamed of myself. But how could I ever be when it feels so good? When it still feels amazing to have Callum's gaze on me.

He can't see me. *He can't.*

But it feels like he can.

And the knowing smirk on his face tells me he likes it.

CALLUM



*M*y eyes must be playing tricks on me because there's no fucking way I just witnessed what I think I did.

What a naughty, dirty girl.

Bianca isn't as innocent as I assumed. All this time, I had this vision in my mind that she was a good girl who got perfect grades, went to bed at a decent time, and followed the rules. The sweetheart with a shy smile and a body men would mortgage their entire lives to possess.

TO THINK I thought of her as a sweet angel when she's really been the devil in disguise all along. I can't tell you the amount of times she's been on vacation with us or spent the night in this house, tempting and taunting me from afar.

It's fucked up to acknowledge how many years I've spent reminding myself she's my daughter's best friend, not to mention the fact that she's way too young to even consider touching. There have been many times over the years when those reminders are the only thing that kept me from throwing her to the floor and fucking her unconscious.

Where Bianca stands, my patience is razor thin. Sweet, beautiful Bianca with her luscious brown hair begging for my hands to sink into it. And damn, those big, innocent blue eyes, so full of kindness and sincerity. I've pictured them so often filled with tears that streaked her cheeks as I shoved my cock to the back of her throat, making her gag.

God, the restraint it took, the reminding myself that she's too innocent to be tainted and defiled by a man like me. But now, none of those things matter. Before, there was a line in the sand, but now it's been obliterated. Because there she is, sitting in my kitchen, playing with her pussy, touching her tiny clit, making herself come the same way the girl still clenched around my fingers has barely finished doing.

I know Bianca thinks I haven't noticed how she's looked at me before this, that I haven't noticed her pretty blush when our eyes meet or when I occasionally catch her checking me out.

As if I could fucking miss it. As if she hasn't commanded my attention for the last five years. There's not a man alive who wouldn't feel gratified by that attention, even if it's nothing more than a fantasy that can never come to life. But I'll be damned if we haven't come dangerously close tonight.

Her chest heaves, and I'd bet if I looked in her eyes right now, I'd see her desire shining. Words can't describe how fucking turned on I am, knowing she finished herself off to the sight of me finger fucking Chelsea. When I withdraw my fingers, her pussy drips, her juices glistening against my skin. But it's Bianca's juices I crave. It's Bianca I want out here with me, mewling and whimpering in the aftermath of pleasure.

And it's enough to turn my desire into something closer to anger as I stand and pull my rock-hard cock free from my trunks. I angle myself enough to give the girl hiding in the shadows a show. I know she's wondered about my size so many times. Is it as big as she imagined? As thick?

Yes, sweet, innocent Bianca. My cock is big enough to split you in two.

Fisting myself, I roughly stroke my thick cock and tug Chelsea upright until she's sitting at the edge of the chair, her face level with my crotch.

"It's your turn to make me come," I mutter to her while really speaking to Bianca, since my gaze is still trained on the kitchen.

How fucked up is it that while I'm presently getting pleasure from someone else, all I can see is Bianca? *What a naughty girl*. I imagine her tight pussy quivering all over her hand. I wonder if she's a squirter. If she could take my entire length at once, or if she would beg me to go nice and slow, the fear of me fucking her hard enough to hurt, keeping her on the knife's edge of pleasure and pain.

I watch her intently. She's still there, hiding. Safe and protected by the dark. She hasn't moved except to withdraw her hand from between her legs. What I wouldn't give to lick her fingers clean before shoving my tongue up into her cunt, drinking up every drop of her release. I bet she tastes like honey, and I'm fucking starving.

"Mm, yeah," Chelsea agrees before I cut her off, shoving my entire length past her glossy lips and deep into her throat. I'm not a selfish lover. I give, but I want the same pleasure when I receive. Chelsea lets out a choked groan, but it barely meets my ears. I'm too consumed by the sensation and the unbearable connection to the walking temptation still watching me.

Is this how you'd like it? Fuck. It's not the woman sucking me that has me harder than I've been in my life. It's the one in the shadows, the shy, timid one. Growling, I take Chelsea's head in my hands, controlling every aspect of the experience. Holding her in place, I thrust my hips into her; the head of my cock hits the back of her throat, drawing soft cries of dismay the faster I fuck her face.

In my mind, it's Bianca's face I'm fucking. Bianca's pussy I still smell, thanks to the juices drying on my lips. For the first time, I'm giving in to the fantasy, allowing myself to visualize every aspect of the temptation that's tormented me for years.

I imagine her body still quivering in the aftermath of her orgasm, her nipples peaked, her pussy slick and ready. How much does she wish she was in this chair, choking on my cock? *Fuck*. My balls tighten. The pleasure builds at the bottom of my spine. It's rare that I'm so amped up that I'm ready to explode within minutes, but I've never experienced something like this.

“Fuck, your mouth is perfect,” I praise, but it’s Bianca I’m speaking to. “Suck me hard and deep.”

I press against Chelsea’s face. My balls rest on her chin, and I hold myself there, relishing in her struggle for control. After a moment, I show mercy and pull back, giving her a chance to catch her breath, all the while keeping my gaze on Bianca’s. Those sweet, innocent blue eyes peer back at me. I want to see them fill with tears. I want to see her cheeks hollow, her lips swollen and wrapped around my cock while drool and cum dribble down her chin. The swirling thoughts are enough to push me over the edge.

I pull out of Chelsea’s wet mouth with a pop and take my cock into my hand, stroking myself faster. “Fuck, open your mouth and stick your tongue out. I’m going to come on your face.” It’s not a question but a demand.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Bianca, the dirty little girl, sinking her teeth into her bottom lip. That’s what tips me over the edge. What sends a final surge of pressure through my balls and leaves me exploding. The muscles in my stomach tense, and my toes curl into the concrete under my feet. All I can see in my mind is Bianca. Innocent. Sweet. Her pretty face painted in my cum. God. I’m going to corrupt her so fucking good.

“Fuuuuuck,” I roar, as ropes of cum shoot from the tip, splashing across the face of the woman before me. Every drop of fluid belongs to the angelic creature in the kitchen, who unwittingly has revealed her true nature.

“Mmm...” The moaning near my knees pulls my attention away from Bianca. I would’ve forgotten about the blonde in front of me if it hadn’t been for the sound she just made. I came seconds ago, and my usual response sits on the tip of my tongue.

No matter what I do or how many dates I go on, I have yet to find a woman who doesn’t bore me. The moment I identified Bianca’s presence, everything else ceased to exist. I can’t leave Chelsea as she is, though. That would be a dick move.

“Wait here. I’ll get you a towel.”

There’s a stack by the pool, and I grab one to help her wipe her face. My gaze darts back to the house and there’s no sign of Bianca now, and that leaves me reeling. With a smile, Chelsea pulls on the light cotton dress and sandals she wore to the house before I take her inside so she can finish cleaning up in the bathroom.

I’m not even a little surprised that Bianca fled the kitchen. I can’t help but stare at the spot she sat as I pass through and show Chelsea to the powder room. While waiting for her to finish, I text one of my drivers to bring a car around.

Most of my awareness, though, is still on Bianca. I’m sure she’s lingering in Tatum’s room, staring at the door, wondering if I’m going to come and accuse her of watching me. Laughter threatens to escape me. I imagined they’d be out all night, stumbling in closer to dawn. It’s what I would’ve been doing at twenty-one years old.

If I had known they’d return home so early, I might not have been so quick to fuck by the pool.

Knowing how responsible Bianca is, I’m sure she’s the one that decided to come home. Responsible, sweet, and naive. It wouldn’t take much to corrupt her. Though I never could’ve guessed she’d be the type who likes to watch.

I wonder what else she’s into. She would benefit from an older, more experienced partner who can show her what she’s capable of.

Oh, fuck, the things I could show her... the things I could do to her...

“There’s a car waiting for you outside,” I tell Chelsea as she walks out of the bathroom.

“I was thinking maybe we could have another drink. Sit, converse, and get to know each other a little better.” She flashes her white teeth at me, her features hopeful. Yes, she’s pretty with her long blonde hair, perfectly painted face, and slim body with perky tits, but that’s about as far as it goes.

She's trying to stop the inevitable, but this night isn't going to end how she wants, which is with her in my bed, my cock deep inside her.

"I don't want to be an asshole, Chelsea, but you know the deal." I try not to sound like a jerk, but there isn't any way not to.

"I guess I was hoping this time would be different," she mumbles under her breath.

I don't respond because what's the point? Nothing I say will change the outcome. I don't stick my dick in anyone, not anymore. I learned a long time ago that when you're rich and successful, they can use even your semen against you. Nobody wins as big as a woman trying to pin a baby on you.

Thankfully, she takes the hint and leaves without another complaint. I close the door behind her and forget she was ever here.

Women have their place, and I send them on their merry way once I've had my fill. It might make me an asshole, but at least I get them off first.

I run a hand through my thick hair, a heavy sigh leaving my lips. I'm sure that's what would happen if I ever lost the years-long fight with what's left of my conscience and finally fucked Bianca. The thought of sending her on her way like all the others. I wouldn't want that—not for her, but especially not for my daughter.

How could I look her in the eyes and tell her I fucked her best friend and put her out by the curb like yesterday's garbage?

I pad barefoot through the first floor, my swim trunks clinging to my muscled thighs.

Go to her. I almost obey the thought without thinking of the consequences. My body is screaming *yes* while my brain tells me *no*. It's not enough for us to have our dirty secret, which, no doubt, we'll both pretend never happened, at least for Tatum's sake. I can only imagine how she would react if she knew what transpired tonight.

My daughter never needs to know, but Bianca is in for a rude awakening if she thinks I won't call her out on what happened. Now that I've seen the girl beneath that sheltered, sweet exterior, there's no going back to the way things were.

I'm consumed with desire, but I let my brain make the final choice and enter my study instead of continuing down the hall. The first thing I do is head for the bar and pour myself a drink, hoping to cool my overheated libido. What I need more than anything is to dull my senses and calm the desire threatening to harden me once again so soon after coming. Images of fucking her and filling her with my cum, of claiming her completely, filter through my head.

The first sip isn't enough to rid me of the mental image of a pregnant Bianca, her body swollen, thanks to the life growing inside her. The life I placed there. It's too enticing to dismiss that image, and I allow it to percolate in my imagination as I sip my scotch and pace the room.

Sweet, trusting Bianca. Glowing, radiant, carrying my child. How perfect would that be? The very idea spreads warmth in my chest that has nothing to do with the drink in my hand. A pleasure that goes beyond the physical.

If I didn't already know I was going to hell for the things I've done, I'd certainly earn a spot thanks to the direction my thoughts are running. The girl is twenty years my junior. She has her entire life ahead of her.

A future. A fucking boyfriend. I grit my teeth at the last thought. I want to kill the bastard. He doesn't deserve her. *Yet he's the one who has her.*

And here I sit, imagining myself claiming her. Owning her body, impregnating her, allowing her to carry the evidence of my claim for the world to see. There is no worthwhile excuse for that.

I focus my attention on the grounds beyond the picture windows behind my desk. It's dark and quiet, but that doesn't mean there aren't eyes watching for any sign of trouble. One of the conditions of my world is the insistent need for guards on the premises at all times. Not so much for myself, but for

my daughter. She doesn't deserve to suffer pain or worse, because of what I do.

Again, my thoughts circulate back to Bianca. How could I consider bringing her into this life? She's a child compared to me. Could I trust her to guard my secrets or to listen and obey me for her own protection? Could I open myself up to her and trust her? I've trusted one other woman in my life, and it's been a disaster ever since. It makes me wonder how I can look at Bianca and picture her pregnant. That's my biggest fear, a nightmare brought to life, but I still feel the need to claim her and make her mine burning in my veins.

The answer is simple. *I couldn't ever trust her.* But that won't stop me from entertaining the idea of storming into my daughter's bedroom to find her. Dragging her down the hall to *my* bedroom so I can tie her to the bed and make sure she can't escape while I feast on her pussy until she passes out.

No doubt she'd seize up in fear, terrified at the prospect of the big, bad, dangerous villain she's secretly lusted after finally giving her what she's desired all this time. I can almost hear her sharp, rapid breathing in my ear. The tiny gasps and barely stifled moans she'd make while I woke her body with my hands, lips, and tongue.

She would learn how dangerous it is to play with fire, to confess to the dark desires she's entertained. It would've been better for both of us if she'd walked away tonight.

It's too late now.

I'll never forget the way she looked right fucking through me into the deep confines of my soul as she creamed on her fingers.

Fuck, my cock is hard all over again. I fall into my desk chair and set my drink aside in favor of pulling myself from my shorts. How long has it been since anyone or anything has excited me enough to get me hard so soon after coming? I honestly can't remember. I'm that jaded, not to mention no longer as young as I used to be.

The ringing phone on my desk startles me, and unnecessary guilt pierces my chest the instant I identify the number on the screen. Of all the times for my ex to call. It's like she knows I'm enjoying myself and wants to bring an end to it.

Sometimes, I wonder what I saw in her. How could I have been so blind? How did I miss the emptiness in her? An endless cave of screaming misery which she disguised with a tight body. I fell for it. Pussy will do that to a man, I suppose. A lesson I learned the hard way.

"Amanda," I growl, cradling the receiver between my ear and shoulder. "To what do I owe the dubious pleasure?"

She's silent long enough to make me wonder if she's on the other end before muttering, "Oh, hello. I didn't expect you to answer."

I blink slowly. What the fuck? "You called at two in the morning, assuming I wouldn't be awake to answer, huh? Why? So you could leave a voicemail like a coward?" It's all too predictable. "Don't you know better by now than to underestimate me?"

"How's the weather up there on your high horse? I had a busy day and only now had the opportunity to call. I imagine Tatum's still out celebrating. How did the graduation go?"

"You realize you could've witnessed it for yourself, don't you? She set a ticket aside for her loving mother to attend the ceremony."

The silence on the other end of the call speaks volumes. My ex's mind is not the mystery she wishes to believe it is. It infuriates her, knowing I find it easy to read her thoughts—or at least the selfish motivations at the core of her behavior.

While she silently scrambles for a worthwhile excuse, I prompt, "Let me guess. You forgot about it."

"And what if I did?"

"If so, you would need extensive amounts of professional help, considering our daughter reached out to you on multiple occasions."

“Do you have any idea how many—”

“If I can remember an event with everything else on my mind, you sure as shit should be able to.”

“Did it ever occur to you it was you I wanted to avoid?” She’s a master at turning any situation around and making herself the victim. *Is that sniffing I hear?* Yes, she sprinkled one in there. Typical. Did I mention she’s fucking great at manipulating situations?

“If I’m able to put the past aside for the sake of Tatum’s happiness, I know you can.” When she sputters more of her pitiful excuses, I cut her off with a growl. “Forget it. As usual, Tatum didn’t need you there today. I’m sure she’s realized she can’t count on you by now.”

She snorts. “Wow, and you’re the perfect father?”

Not even close. I’ve fallen short in more ways than I can count. I’m not the loving, touchy-feely father from one of those sitcoms that were so popular when I was a kid. That could never be me.

But I like to think my daughter could come to me if she’s in trouble. That she knows my only interest is her well-being and happiness. I do my best to keep her out of the darker aspects of my business, the way so many parents do when their work isn’t exactly decent fodder for conversation. I can be a good parent without the mushy heart-to-heart talks.

“I’m a damn good parent, and we both know it, and even if I wasn’t, at least I’m trying.” Silence fills the receiver, and I continue a moment later. “And since your memory seems to have slipped so badly, allow me to remind you of something that might come in handy.”

Lowering my voice to a threatening snarl, I say, “We both know you hid out today to avoid discussing the paperwork you’ve conveniently forgotten to sign. Let me share this little tidbit of knowledge with you. It would be easier to have you killed than to deal with your bullshit stall tactics. Do you understand?”

“Is that a threat?” She snickers, but I’m not fooled. I hear the tremor in her voice, the fear leaking through her words. She knows I’m not bluffing, not entirely. If anyone knows what I’m capable of, it’s her. When it comes to protecting our daughter and my businesses, I’ll go to any lengths. Even illegal ones. Ones that could get me put behind bars for a long time.

“A reminder,” I murmur. “Do you hear that ticking in the back of your head? It’s not your biological clock, though, that must be banging like a gong at this point. It’s the ticking that began the moment those papers arrived at your front door. The very generous offer I made isn’t going to get better. This is your only chance. Sign them, or else you’ll learn how big of an asshole I can really be.”

“Ooo. I’m shaking,” she taunts.

“The clock is ticking,” I remind her again, ignoring her childish attempts at luring me into a fight. Next thing I know, she’ll tell me she’s rubber, and I’m glue.

No, I have better things to do than question why I ever bothered with this woman. That’s why I end the call without another word and head to the private bathroom attached to my office to take a piss. Amanda is history, an unfortunate mistake that I can’t entirely write off because she gave me the greatest gift of all. Tatum.

But she’s in the past.

Immediately, my brain asks: *does that mean Bianca is the future?*

I stare at myself in the mirror. Hot water runs in the sink long enough to steam the glass while the angel and devil on my shoulders fight it out. The lines etched between my eyebrows speak of the struggle I face.

This is entirely wrong, on a level much deeper and more profound than the wrongs I’ve committed up till now.

Somehow, there’s no getting Bianca out of my head. No ridding myself of the notion of having her. It was difficult

enough to keep my hands off her before I watched her watching me.

Now? The word *impossible* comes to mind.

BIANCA



Tatum: Sorry, running late. Long story.

She could be running late for several reasons, but knowing her like I do, it probably has more to do with Kristoff than herself. He probably picked a fight or tried to brush off the plans we made, and Tatum takes no shit from anybody and never backs down from an argument. Part of me wants to tell her to leave him behind, but that's not what a good friend does.

Me: I'll be waiting. :)

I add a smiley face for the sake of keeping it light, when what I really want to add is how eager I was to meet up with them once I arrived. Only my certainty that she'd call me paranoid and laugh it off keeps me from mentioning the eerie feeling I had on the way here. Like somebody was following me, watching me, making the hair on the back of my neck stand on end.

I'm safe now, surrounded by people. There's nobody watching me. If I attract attention, it's because I'm a girl sitting alone in a club. That I can handle.

Breathe in, breathe out. You're being paranoid.

It's fairly quiet in the bar right now. A few customers are seated at the sleek bar, and a handful at tables dotting the perimeter of the wide dance floor. The balcony surrounding the room on three sides is also sparsely filled at the moment. Things won't pick up for another hour, at least, which is why I wanted to get here early. With Tatum leaving on her trip to

France in two days, I thought it would be nice to catch up and actually hear each other speak before the voices and music could drown us out.

At this rate, she'll never get here. Then I won't see her for another month. I frown and stare down into the glass of wine.

“What's with the long face?”

The question drags my attention from the troubled thoughts I can't help but entertain. It's not my unseen and probably nonexistent stalker trying to chat me up, but instead, the bartender. He's cute in a typical way, with deep-set dark eyes and a winning smile that brings the dimples out in his cheeks.

“My best friend's going to the south of France for a month, and I don't know what I'm going to do without her.” I lift a shoulder when he winces. “Yes, I know life could be worse but...”

“It's a bummer, yeah,” he observes while stacking glasses in an impressive arrangement.

“Yeah, it is. I'm going to have all this free time and nothing to do with it.”

Lucas, like always, is busy and couldn't join us tonight. That won't change with Tatum's absence. It often feels like I live alone, but the dirty laundry he leaves lying around the bedroom is an ever-present reminder of his existence.

The bartender props his elbows up on the bar, his brows lifting. My gaze is drawn to his biceps, which his T-shirt's tight, short sleeves show off to perfection. “If you're bored, they're always looking for help around the club.”

“Oh, really?” I retort.

“Yes, I could use a hand back here.” His grin shifts into flirting territory, and he winks at me. “You'd be a perfect fit.”

I can't help the warm flush that spreads through my stomach, even if I'm not single and shouldn't encourage flirting with some random guy I've never met. I don't know why his arms draw my attention like they do, either. *Actually, I*

do. I wonder if that's why I spied on Callum a few nights ago, because I'm feeling neglected and lonely?

"I'd have to check with my boyfriend," I murmur, and his slight nod tells me the message was received before he moves on to attend to a new customer taking a seat a few stools down.

Tatum would threaten to smack me upside the head if she were here and had witnessed me turning down a cute guy. She doesn't know what it's like to be with somebody for so long. To invest so much time and energy into a relationship. I don't want to think that time was all for nothing. Besides, relationships take patience. They have their highs and lows. They take work and effort from both parties.

Who am I trying to convince?

A deep sense of dissatisfaction washes over me, and I toss back the rest of the wine. I hope this isn't what life's going to look like in the future. Me convincing myself I'm safe and secure and should settle for what I know rather than... *What?* Leaving Lucas. Or quitting my job before I've started it. There are no alternatives.

I've never been the girl that takes chances. I want to be. I wish I could be. But it's not in my nature, I guess. Plus, I've had a lifetime of being reminded how uncertain the world is. How things can change on a dime, and how important it is to be prepared for whatever's coming. *Thanks, Dad.*

It isn't irritation with him that begins simmering low in my belly—he's only ever done his best, especially after Mom died. No, it's an irritation with me. *What am I really afraid of?* It's not until my jaw aches that I realize I'm clenching it. My heart speeds up at the memory of what I did the other night.

I took a chance then—with Callum. It was thrilling. Intoxicating. For once, I gave into the unsafe bet, rather than fighting what I wanted. Sure, I feel embarrassed now, but mostly because I know it was against the rules.

Not because I didn't like it.

It was the sort of thrill I could become addicted to. Taking what I want no matter anyone else's opinions.

Maybe I've had too much wine.

Sober Bianca would not be thinking about these things.

I check my phone again to see if Tatum replied. No such luck. Sighing, I look up from my phone, and that's when I spot her standing in the center of the dance floor.

Like always, she looks fantastic in a short black dress with a halter neckline that leaves nothing to the imagination. It shows off her curvy body to perfection, and there's nothing a man likes better than a pretty body on display. I wish I had that type of courage to wear something sexy, to show myself off.

Always a good girl.

But not always, right? Not when a certain sexy billionaire is involved.

"Hey!" I call out, waving an arm above my head until she spots me. My smile slips when she fails to return one. I figure she'll head straight for me, but she scurries across the floor, ducking down a narrow hallway that leads to the restrooms. *Fuck.* That Kristoff is nowhere to be found gives me a vague idea of what's going on. *What an idiot.*

I rush after her to the bathroom. I'm barely through the swinging door before she's defending herself and trying to laugh off the devastation that's bleeding through her features.

"Too short. My dress is too short. Did you know that?" She tosses her blonde curls over her shoulder, blowing out a tremendous sigh.

Hello to you, too. "Is that what you were fighting about?"

"We weren't..." she mutters, her voice softer, her resolve crumbling. "Actually, yes, that's what we were fighting about. Like I need him to tell me how to dress. The guy would walk around in socks and sandals if I didn't complain about it. He acts like my father, but one dad is enough for me. I'm a grown-ass woman. I don't need his approval."

She's not wrong. He's sort of hopeless. He's also a dick who wants to control her. "I'm sorry he's being an asshole, but for what it's worth, you look hot."

She frowns at her reflection before meeting my eyes in the mirror. "Yeah?" I'm not used to seeing her this insecure. It kills me to know he has the power to break her like this.

"You know you do," I assure her with a smile. "I'd rather have you to myself, anyway. We need a girls' night before you abandon me for a month."

Stepping behind her, I wrap my arms around her middle and give her a hug. "If I had a thing for girls, I'd totally steal you from him."

"And I wouldn't stop you." Her grin is genuine, and there are no longer tears shining in her eyes. "Let's get drunk."

"That's more like it." I'm laughing as I open the door, prepared to pour my energy into picking her spirits up. Only the floor falls beneath me when I'm greeted by the last person I expected to see here. His familiar, dark eyes widen with shock once he realizes who he's looking at.

"Lucas?" Tatum bumps into my back, but I barely feel it. I'm too busy staring at my boyfriend. He's out of place. He shouldn't be here. "I thought you were working."

I once caught him jerking off to hardcore BDSM porn with a pair of my panties wrapped around his dick. The look on his face now is a lot like the one he wore that day—a man at a complete loss, shock and guilt competing for control.

He scrubs a hand through his short, sandy hair, probably trying to find an explanation. "What are you doing here?" I demand. "You said you had to close up the gym tonight."

His eyes light up. "I got out early and came to surprise you," he explains with a chuckle.

"I would believe that, but I didn't tell you where we were going." I fold my arms across my chest.

"I overheard you talking with Tatum about it." He shrugs, grinning in a way I used to find sexy. Now, it nauseates me.

“Surprise?”

No, this isn't a surprise. That comes two seconds later when the door behind him opens, and a pair of arms snake around his waist.

“Mm, that was fun,” a woman purrs, leaning over and craning her neck to look up at him. “But next time, let's take it someplace more private than the men's room.”

From what I can see of her, she's a petite, curvy redhead. She's pretty. I've never seen her before, but she's clearly someone my boyfriend knows. My choked groan brings her attention to me. You can practically see the puzzle pieces aligning in her mind. Her gaze ping-pongs between us.

“Oh, shit,” she breathes, her brows pinching together. “I didn't know. I swear.”

“Son of a bitch,” Tatum growls. “You stupid fucking prick.”

“No!” Lucas whines, his face becoming as white as a sheet. He shakes his head profusely, like he can sense the impending doom that lies ahead. “No, it's not what you think, Bianca.”

The nameless redhead frowns. “I'm really sorry. I had no idea. I'm not...”

I could be mad at her, but that would be the easy way out, because none of this is her fault. Even if she knew and still slept with him, the only person at fault is my boyfriend. For him to even consider sleeping with someone else, for not having the impulse control to keep it in his pants, this is all on him.

“Please... you don't have to explain yourself,” I tell her, and her cheeks grow redder with embarrassment. She nods and slips past us, heading onto the dance floor.

“You lied to me.” I keep my voice low.

“I told you, it's not what you think. It's all a misunderstanding. You know I love you.”

He's trying to soothe me. In the past, it might've worked, but not this time. There is an endless ocean of anger and disappointment between us. I can't believe him, not when I've seen with my own eyes what really happened. He reaches for me, and I slap his hands away before he can make contact. Never again will he touch me. My heart feels heavy in my chest, like someone tied a brick to it.

"All this time. All these years, and you do this to me? Things have been hard, and I haven't been perfect, but..." I can't even make sense of what I've witnessed. Yeah, things weren't great between us, and we were headed toward ending things, but cheating on me was never necessary.

"You're right," he's quick to agree. "All these years spent together. Do you want to throw away what we have all because of something like this? Something so small."

Nothing about this is small. Only he would assume cheating on me is a small thing. Only he would expect me to accept it and ignore the bright red flag waving in front of me.

"You're damn right, she does," Tatum snaps.

Lucas rolls his eyes. "Why don't you mind your own fucking business for once?"

"Don't talk to her that way." My voice is cold and stony, just like the wall I'm putting up between the roiling inferno of my emotions and the outside world. I will not break down here. *I won't*. An icy chill sweeps through my bones, and beads of sweat form against my brow. Something in my gut twists, digging the knife of betrayal deeper. Forcing air into my lungs, I tell myself that I won't lose it in front of this cheating prick and a bunch of strangers.

Lucas softens, shoving his hands into the pockets of his pants when I flinch away from another attempted touch. "Bianca. Please. I'm begging you. I love you."

I blink back tears. For once, I can see clearly. The sun has pushed through the clouds, shining a light on the things I refused to see or admit. Before me stands a complete stranger. I don't know him anymore. It's a mystery what I saw in him.

A low simmering rage builds in my belly, replacing the fleeting anxiety I was feeling. I want to scream and claw his eyes out at the same time. It's ridiculous how easy I made it for him to betray me.

"I don't think you know what love is, Lucas, but that doesn't matter because we're over," I growl, trembling with barely restrained outrage and disgust. "We're done, finished. I have more respect for myself than to stay with you, knowing you're sleeping with other women. So when you leave here, I want you to go back to the apartment we shared and pack as much as you can carry in your pathetic hands and find another place to stay. Because if I get there and you aren't gone, I'm going to call the cops. You know, the people in blue who know me. The people who respect my father and employ him. I'm sure you can figure out what will happen after that."

"Better hurry," Tatum crows. "Maybe I'll call my dad, too. Just 'cause I'm a bitch like that."

His mouth opens like a fish gulping for air. It's clear he wants to offer another excuse, or maybe beg for forgiveness. I'm not sure, and I don't care. Thankfully, he thinks better of it and presses his lips into a firm line. I watch with a breaking heart as he walks away, and it's only once he's out of sight that I lose my strength.

Tatum wraps an arm around my waist to keep me from crumbling to the floor. "I'm sorry, B. I'm so sorry."

"You were right." Shock. That's what this is. I feel nothing but cold inside. Empty. Even the pain in my chest is dull. A sob catches in my throat. "He was never worth it. How could I have been so stupid? So fucking blind that I couldn't see my boyfriend was cheating on me? I thought he was working this whole time, but he was fucking some random woman." The words spill out of me like an overflowing riverbank.

"Come on." She steers me down the hall, and I let her, even if I want to hide in the bathroom until closing. I don't want anyone to see me like this. Will they be able to tell how stupid I've been just by looking at my shell-shocked expression?

“Where are we going?” I question, the tears in my eyes making it hard for me to see.

“To get fucking wasted, that’s where.” Once we emerge from the hall, she signals the closest server. “We’re going to need a private table and a bottle of champagne. Keep them coming.”

“What are you celebrating?” the girl asks, smiling brightly.

Tatum eyes me, her mouth set in a wry smirk. “My friend here just lost a lot of weight. Like a hundred seventy-five pounds of worthless asshole.”

* * *

BOTH TATUM and I jump a little, when Romero opens the car door and leans in. “It’s all clear,” he reports, his dark gaze roaming over Tatum and then me. “Some drawers are hanging open in the bedroom, but otherwise, the place is empty. He’s cleared out all of his stuff. I doubt he’ll return, but I’ll send one of the men over to replace the locks, just in case.”

“Thank you,” I whisper as he hands me back the key. “I appreciate you checking it out.”

“No problem.” He offers a hand, and I take it, letting him pull me out of the car. As soon as I’m standing, he reaches back inside to help Tatum. “Let’s go, princess. I don’t have all night.”

“You’re such a prick,” Tatum mutters, stumbling out of the car. “I don’t need you to drive me home in the morning. I’ll call someone else.”

“I’ll be here at eight. Don’t even think about wasting someone else’s time, or I’ll tell Daddy you’re refusing to follow my directions, and your safety is at risk.” He sneers at her condition, the total opposite of how kind he’s treated me. “You better be ready, princess, or else you won’t like what happens.”

“Blow me,” she whispers, walking alongside me to the front door of my apartment building. The tension between

them is thick, and by that, I mean she wants to stab him with a knife, and he wants to strangle her.

He waits until we're inside before pulling from the curb, leaving us to climb the two flights of stairs slowly. *Clumsily*. After a few minutes, we arrive on the second floor. Thankfully, my apartment is right around the corner. We stop outside the door, and Tatum sags against me.

"Cardio was not a part of the plans tonight." She huffs. I couldn't agree more.

The keys rattle in my hand as I take one between my fingers and shove it into the lock. When the lock disengages, I twist the knob and push it open. I hold my breath, my aching heart heavy in my chest.

"I hate him." Tatum's still fuming as she stumbles into the kitchen for water while I walk tentatively inside. Memories of our time together filter through my mind. Movie nights, arguments, sex. Feelings of despair overwhelm me. There were good memories here, yes, but more than anything, there was loneliness.

"Romero?" I murmur, only half listening.

"Well, yeah, who else? Oh. Yeah, him too. They're both assholes." She raises her glass.

We've agreed multiple times tonight that I'm better off without Lucas. He was a comfortable part of my life. If anything, discovering him cheating saved me from having to build up the courage to end things with him.

"I suppose I'd better pack my shit," I muse while kicking off my shoes. I could barely afford this place with Lucas paying half of the bills, and without him? No way.

"I don't want to leave for France now." Tatum pouts and leans in for a hug, but ends up falling against me when she loses her balance in her towering heels. "Of all the times that asshole had to break your heart, he chooses a couple of days before I leave."

"It's okay. It was going to happen, eventually," I remind her. "Take your shoes off before you break an ankle and end

up spending your trip hobbling around on crutches.” As usual, it’s easier to take care of her than to focus on myself.

I already cried my eyes out in the town car after Romero picked us up. It wasn’t just about our relationship ending. It was deeper than that. It was about the lies and betrayal. I put in so much effort to be with him that I lost sight of who I was and what I wanted. I lowered my standards for someone who didn’t give a damn about me, and I had to find out in the worst way.

Tatum’s eyes light up with excitement.

“I don’t like that look,” I confess.

She grins. “Of course you don’t, but I don’t care because I have the best idea I’ve ever had.”

“Carry on.” I gesture with my hands.

“Okay, so hear me out.” Insert dramatic pause. “You should come with me to France. It would be better than staying here and dealing with the douchebag. We could go shopping, to the beach, and eat every pastry available until they have to roll us out of the place.” She clasps her hands over her chest, eyes shining.

My lips turn up into a smile because how could I not smile? For one breathless moment, I can see it happening.

Then reality pops the bubble of illusion. I wish I could give in, even if it means spending a month with Kristoff—because, of course, she isn’t going alone. Fleeing the country for an entire month, putting Lucas and everything else behind me, sounds like a grand idea. Something new. Something to spark a little passion in my life.

A battle of wits takes place in my mind. Reality isn’t so simple. All the working-class ethics drilled into my head while growing up rear up and slap the idea down in an instant. *Ugh, being an adult sucks.*

“I can’t. I start my new job soon, and I don’t think calling in for the whole first month is a good way to start. Plus, I need the money. Going forward, I’ll be paying for everything on my

own.” The words threaten to clog my throat, but I force them out.

I’m reminded again that I’ve wasted five years of my life on some asshole who turned around and stuck his dick inside someone else.

She scowls. “You know, I could help with that—”

“No.” The strength of my response surprises me. Her eyes widen with shock. I let out a deep breath before continuing. “It wouldn’t be right. This is my life. It’s my responsibility. I’m an adult, and I need to pay for things myself. I do, however, love you and appreciate you wanting to support me.”

“What are you going to do, then? Where are you going to live?” She’s worried about me, probably more than I am myself. Her chin wobbles and the fear of leaving me here to fend for myself reflects in her eyes. “I can’t leave the country without knowing you’re going to be comfortable and safe. What if he tries to do something stupid?”

“I’ll be fine,” I assure her. “There’s always the option of going home. I’m sure my dad would love to have me move back in.” I want to make her feel better, but there’s no disguising the disappointment and dread that fills my voice at the thought.

Sure, I could grit my teeth and get through it for a while. It wouldn’t take long to save enough money to find a decent apartment, and I know my father would welcome me back with open arms. He’s been begging me to move back in since the day I moved out. The problem is, I barely made it out once.

I don’t know if he’d let me leave again. Not that he would lock me up, but he’d find ways of convincing me to stay. Reminding me in every way that I’m safer with him. There’s not a doubt in my mind that he’d recount every example of girls getting assaulted in their apartments by psycho stalkers. It was one thing for me to live with a man my father trusted, but alone? Yeah, no. He’d never let that happen.

“You know how it would be, right? No offense, but your dad is way overprotective. How can you take a step backward like that after you’ve lived on your own all this time?”

“You aren’t helping,” I admit with a grin.

She finally kicks off her shoes, then snaps her fingers. “Ooooooh. I think I’ve got it.” Walking into the bedroom, she unzips her dress.

“What now?” I ask, following behind her.

My gaze sweeps the room. Romero wasn’t kidding. Lucas didn’t bother closing the drawers or picking up the empty hangers he left behind. I guess I should be thankful he didn’t destroy or break anything.

When Tatum doesn’t respond, I click my tongue. “Hey, what’s this grand idea of yours?”

She laughs, clearly distracted by her own thoughts. “Oh, yes. So what if you stay at my house, in my wing, while I’m gone?”

Whoa.

I pause while I search my dresser for clean pajamas for us both. “I don’t know about that...”

“Why? It’s perfect.” She plops down on the bed after brushing hangers out of the way.

Our bed. I cringe. I need to stop thinking about him, about us. It hurts too much. How long was he cheating on me? Did he ever bring anyone back to our place? Jesus. I’m going to vomit if I continue thinking like this.

Tatum’s still talking, excitement bubbling out of her with every word she speaks. “You would have the entire wing all to yourself. My dad’s always busy with work, so I doubt he would care, and living there would mean you could take your time finding an apartment. You could save all the money you need so you wouldn’t have to settle on a place. There’s also the option of staying permanently. The house is enormous enough for all of us. We could keep to the one wing and be roommates.”

On the one hand, it seems like the perfect solution. I'll have somewhere to live, free of charge, while I get my feet planted at work and search for a new home. On the other hand, even with the alcohol in my veins, I can't be convinced it's a good idea. Living with Callum without Tatum there sounds like a terrible idea. A temptation. Before, it was merely a crush. I had Lucas, and I was content. But now I have no one. And my attraction to Tatum's father is the last thing I need to be acting on.

I chew on my bottom lip nervously and consider the option in front of me. There are a million reasons I shouldn't do this, but the biggest one is pressing down on my chest, making it difficult to breathe.

Did he see me? Did he know I was watching him?

I try to tell myself he didn't actually see me watching him on the patio with that woman. That it was all fantasy. That he does not know what I saw, so in his eyes, I'm still his daughter's best friend. A kid. Nothing more. But what if he did see me? Wouldn't he have confronted me about it by now?

That's not my only problem. The other is living so close to the man I've crushed on for years. It might be sort of exciting. The possibility of crossing paths would add a little thrill to my day. I mean, outside of that, there isn't much left for me, and I don't want to spend all my time over-analyzing my breakup with Lucas.

"It's better than moving back in with my father," I admit by way of agreement. I love my dad, and he's done the best he could, but he's been different since my mother's death. And not in a grief-changing-you kind of way. He's angry, hate-filled. They never discovered who killed her, and I know that haunts him to this day.

As a police officer, he has an uncanny need to solve every crime, so I can't imagine the craziness he feels. I'm at peace with that part of things. I'm sad my mother isn't here. I wish she could see me now, see how far I've come and what I've accomplished. I think she'd be proud. I realized a long time ago I can't do anything to bring her back. That the only thing I

have is the future. My father is still stuck, refusing to move forward.

Yeah, staying with Tatum is becoming more appealing by the second.

“We would have to make sure your dad’s okay with it.”

“Please.” She snorts on her way to the bathroom, satisfied with the belief that she’s solved the problem. “I doubt he’ll even know you’re there.”

My throat tightens, and I’m reminded of the intense look in his eyes as he came. The lust and feral need. This is a bad idea. A very bad idea.

Because that’s the thing.

I want him to know I’m there.

I want him to experience the same frenzied need I do. I want him to see me as more than Bianca, his daughter’s best friend.

CALLUM



“That’s right, baby. Spread your legs wide. Let me see how wet you are. Show me what’s mine.”

Fuck me. A soft growl rumbles in my throat as the fantasy plays out in my mind. It doesn’t matter where I am or what I’m doing. At the moment, I’m seated at my desk, preparing for a meeting that will take place in thirty minutes. Not that I care, even if the subject has to do with the status of a half-dozen new cargo planes recently purchased to prepare for expanding my shipping network.

This plan has been in the works for months and has required countless hours of research, vetting, and inspection. We’re close to finalizing the deal with the current owner of the small air fleet, and somehow, all I can do is sit here and do everything in my willpower to resist the ache in my cock.

She’s sitting in front of me, her thighs spread wide to reveal the pink, shining slice of heaven between them. Fuck, business is the furthest thing from my mind, my tongue craving each drop of sweet nectar that will inevitably leak from her perfect pussy by the time I’m done with her.

Bianca. You have no idea how much more difficult you’ve made my life.

A sharp knock at the closed door is the equivalent to pouring a bucket of cold water over my head.

I clear my throat, sitting up straighter before calling out, “Come in.”

The door opens, and Romero walks in, his steps heavy. His face is masked, cold. A mask worn as armor, I suppose. He has a habit of letting no one see too deep inside, even if parts of his mask are cracked and chipped.

“I assume everything is in place for the meeting?” I ask, chastising myself for letting my thoughts roam yet again. I cannot afford to fuck this up. There’s far too much time and money invested in this. My head needs to be clear. I need to be conscious and alert, not dreaming about fucking someone completely out of my reach.

“I sent the link to the parties involved, and everyone has copies of the contract.”

“Excellent,” I praise, though I’m hardly surprised. If there’s one person I can count on, it’s my most trusted second-in-command. I’ve known Romero since he was a little boy. His mother begged me to take him under my wing, and he’s been by my side ever since. There are few men I trust with my shit and even fewer with my daughter. He’s proven himself to be a valuable asset.

Which, of course, reminds me. He’s had a special assignment as of late. “Do you have any information to share?”

If he finds anything strange about me ordering him to keep tabs on Bianca, he shows no sign of it. I’m sure after working together for so many years, he’s learned to expect the unexpected.

He presses down into the leather chair across from my desk and unbuttons his suit jacket, settling in. “She’s moving. I’m not sure where, but she spent the day taking boxes up to her apartment and then loading them into her car.”

“She’s moving?” I tap my jaw with my finger.

“Yes. She broke up with her boyfriend the other night at the club. They were talking about it when I took them back to her place, and when I say talking, I use the term loosely. It was more Tatum telling her she deserved better, that the guy was a

twat for cheating on her, and that it wasn't her fault. Bianca started crying, and it got worse from there."

A sudden flash of white-hot rage threatens to consume me before I get a hold of it. What a stupid bastard. Someone that dismissive of the perfection he was so fortunate to partake in doesn't deserve her. He tossed a diamond in the garbage for a piece of trash. I want to beat the hell out of the fucker, but there's no point. His punishment is losing her and watching her find happiness elsewhere. *With me.*

Suddenly, my thoughts go to a very bad place. *No.* This means nothing. It doesn't affect me in the slightest, yet the barrier crumbling before me is at the forefront of my mind. I lift the water glass to my lips to combat the sudden dryness in my mouth.

"Are you certain she's moving?" I can't afford to give away the depth of my interest—it's a good thing I'm practiced in the art of concealing my true thoughts, even from my closest confidants.

"From the amount of boxes she had, yes. Either that, or she is doing some serious decluttering, but I doubt it. When I dropped them off, she had me go up to make sure the place was clear before she went inside, and there wasn't a lot there. I sent Mark over to change out the locks in case her ex comes back."

Good. This strange, unexpected need to protect her presses against my temples. It's not the normal type of protection. There is nothing fatherly about my thoughts toward Bianca. Indecent, tempting, and possessive are more like it. I want to protect her from anyone and everything but myself.

"Okay, so we have no concrete idea on where she's moving. Has Tatum said anything?"

"Nope, but I'll continue surveillance."

I shake my head, waving a hand. "Don't worry about it," I assure him, even if I'm really worried about it. There's this incessant need to know everything barreling at the back of my mind. Where is she going? Is she safe? What can she possibly

hope to afford straight out of college? Is she going to move back in with her father? The thought of that man makes me grit my teeth. It's none of my business, and logically, I shouldn't give a fuck, but I do.

Romero's features give nothing away. "Should I be concerned? I can send one of the other guys over for surveillance if you'd prefer I don't do it."

As usual, his instincts are sharp, even if he's misread my concerns. "There isn't any concern right now, but if that changes, I'll let you know."

Romero nods, and thankfully, we've finished talking because the door to my office flies open. There is one person in this world, only one, with the balls to barge in on me unannounced, and that would be my daughter. Tatum saunters into the room, a leather tote bag slung over one arm, her phone in the other hand. She's beautiful, courageous, and sassy. The one and only perfection in my life. She tosses her blonde hair over her shoulder and scowls at the sight of Romero sitting across from me.

Sneering, she directs her words at Romero. "I need a minute with my father."

He remains in place, an unmovable boulder, as he gestures a hand for her to continue. "By all means. Speak."

A heavy sigh escapes her, and she folds her arms across her chest, a flash of impatience in her eyes. "Alone. Without you in the room."

Romero remains sitting, and I can feel the tension between them. Their interactions are strange enough, but I don't have the time to look deeper into it. Knowing Tatum, she's tired of dealing with Romero's shit. He's been her bodyguard since she was a teen.

Shooting him a look, I murmur, "Give us a minute."

He makes a point of glaring at her as he stands, buttoning his jacket once again. It's like he wants to make sure she knows he's leaving because I told him to and not because she did.

“What’s going on? Why are you still here? I thought you would be on your way to the airport by now.”

“That’s the nice thing about flying privately. The plane can’t leave without you.”

She knows I don’t appreciate her flippancy when it comes to the ease my wealth has awarded her, and I growl my disapproval.

“But seriously, there was one more thing I had to do before I left.” She plops a ring of keys down on the desk. “My house set.”

I lift a curious eyebrow. “Do you plan on staying in France? Isn’t this something we should have discussed before now?”

She treats me to a patented eye roll before explaining. “They’re for Bianca.”

If only my cock wouldn’t twitch at the mere mention of her name. Not in front of my daughter, for fuck’s sake. Good thing I’m seated, or else I might have some explaining to do. “Why would she need them?”

“Please don’t get on my case,” she begins, which does not bode well. “But I may have forgotten to talk to you. She broke up with Lucas a couple of nights ago and needs a place to stay. I told her since my wing of the house would be empty, she was more than welcome to stay here. At first, I tried to convince her to come with me, but she refused. Something about responsibilities and being an adult. You know as well as I do she won’t be any trouble. I’m sure you won’t even know she’s around.”

What a charming, naive thing to say. I suppose that’s a good thing, really. Tatum is entirely oblivious to my dark, sinful fantasies. And it’ll stay that way.

Unfortunately, I find myself in a catch-22 situation. I can’t refuse, and not only because she’s springing this on me at the last minute. It would be cruel to turn Bianca down when, for all I know, she could be on her way here as we speak. And there is no way for me to explain to Tatum what a bad idea this

might be without admitting to things I would prefer she never finds out. First on the list: that night on the patio, less than a week ago.

“You know I hate it when you spring things on me.” I narrow my gaze. “I don’t like being put on the spot.” It’d be smarter to cut my hands off to prevent the inevitable. I know what will happen if I allow Bianca to stay here. With Tatum gone, there’s nothing to stop me. I’ll have to invite a parade of women to the house to satisfy my cravings and keep myself from kicking down Bianca’s door. If I can restrain myself from claiming her in the first place.

“DAD, it’s Bianca. She’s family. And what else was she supposed to do? Move back home? You know her dad is overbearing and controlling. It would never work out. She’s not a bird that needs to be caged; she’s a phoenix that needs to fly.”

But she does need to be caged. Inside my arms. In my bed. With my cock jammed so far inside her, there is no way to tell where I start and she ends.

Tatum crosses her arms over her chest, a small pout on her lips. “Besides, I feel like hell leaving her at a time like this. It’s not what friends do. I’ll never have a good time knowing that she’s here suffering, worrying if Lucas is trying something with her.”

At her core, Tatum has a warm, generous heart. She did not inherit that from me. Rather, it’s the cool exterior in which she wraps herself that comes from my blood. She can turn it on and off at will, as I can, but I never instructed her in the art of putting on a face for the rest of the world. It comes naturally.

I can’t fault her for wanting to take care of her friend, even if it puts me in a painfully awkward situation that I know is going to cause trouble. Bianca being alone with me while my daughter is halfway around the world. No boyfriend in sight. Nothing holding me—or her—back. It’s a terribly dangerous idea.

Because I can't help myself and need to confirm, I ask, "You said they broke up? What were the circumstances?"

Her pout quickly turns to a smirk. "What, you're suddenly interested in gossip? I didn't think you'd care about something as stupid as that."

"Be snide all you want, but I'd like to know if there will be an ex trying to break into the property to win her heart back."

Her eyes darken, and her jaw tightens. "That cheating bastard better not try to talk to her."

Just as Romero said. "Well, I'm sorry. I hope she is doing okay?"

"She's taking it pretty well, but who knows? Once all the excitement of moving is over, she might break down. At least with me gone, I know she has somewhere safe to stay." The screen of her phone lights up, and she checks it, a grimace filling her features. "Ugh. I wish I could stay and talk longer, but I needed to be gone, like five minutes ago."

Father mode activated. I stand, enveloping her in a hug. "Call me the minute you land and then again when you arrive at the rental. This will be your first time without a bodyguard. If anything seems even slightly off—"

"I know, I know." She rolls her eyes, wearing an affectionate grin, standing on her tiptoes to kiss my cheek. "It's not like I'll be alone. Kristoff knows how to handle himself and can protect me if need be."

"I'm not going to stop being a worried father anytime soon, so you may as well stop wasting your time trying to get me to change." Kissing the crown of her head, I usher her out into the hall. I don't let my arm fall from around her shoulders until we're at the front door. "Have a good time, but be cautious, and if you have any problems, call me immediately. I'm only a flight away."

"You know I will. Nobody messes with me." She growls, her brow lowered, and all I can do is shake my head. If I thought she was kidding, I'd be able to laugh it off, but I know

there's more to it. She truly believes herself to be untouchable. The sort of headstrong confidence only the young possess.

I watch as she skips down the walkway. Kristoff is waiting for her behind the wheel of his Mustang, and I lift a hand in acknowledgment. He waves back, his gaze unwavering. He strikes me as a decent kid from a good, well-connected family. I had Romero do all the snooping he could on him and his family when they first started dating. If I had a doubt in my mind about him, there's no way I'd agree to this trip. She might be a grown woman, but I still subsidize her lifestyle, and I'll kill anyone who thinks to hurt her.

As soon as she's tucked away in the car, I shut the door and head back to my office. I pause at the window, letting my gaze fall over the grounds. Pride swells in my chest as I regard my empire. The work I've put into nurturing my network of associates. Earning their trust while always looking over my shoulder, since I don't trust them. Business is business. You can never know if someone is a friend or foe.

The evidence of my accomplishments shines back at me. I have eighty acres surrounded by thick, high walls manned by my most trusted guards. Numerous cars, a boat, a private jet. The ability to go anywhere and do anything, all while knowing damn well the cops can't do a thing about it. I wrap everything I do in layers of obfuscation until my business appears perfectly legal.

Sometimes, I think they envy me a little. That I've earned the grudging respect of the detectives who've never pinned a charge and made it stick.

"Boss?" Romero's footfalls ring out behind me. "It's almost time for the call."

I grunt my thanks and continue to my office. It's almost possible to forget the unshakable yearning that has me in its grip. The anticipation of what's coming up around the bend. Sweet and innocent Bianca under my roof. Under my control, without a single thing standing between us.

* * *

“THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME, and I expect to see the signed contract in my inbox by the close of business tomorrow.”

The seller grunts his agreement, as does his legal counsel, while Romero invites them to reach out with any questions they might come up with.

Formalities, all of it. I’m offering twice what the planes are worth, knowing they’ll result in a thirty percent increase in profits within the first handful of shipments. At times like this, I’m willing to be generous. He’d be a fool to turn down numbers like the ones I’ve presented.

Romero’s knowing grin tells me he agrees.

“Nice work,” I tell him, loosening my tie once the video call has ended.

“Want a drink?” he offers.

I shake my head. “I’m going to grab some coffee from the kitchen.” Eyeing him as I stand, I add, “I know you’re a workaholic, but you should take the rest of the night off. You’ve been putting in too many hours.”

He shakes his head, bewildered. “Since when is there such a thing as working too many hours?”

Since I’m now waiting for a special visitor and would rather not be interrupted. I’m still not sure what I’ll do once she shows up here. Do I confront her about how she watched me? Do I give into the temptation and ravage her, knowing it’s what she wanted that night she watched me? Tatum didn’t give me a specific time for her arrival, so every moment is more tense than the one before it. She could show up at any point, and I’d prefer it if Romero wasn’t here when that happened.

“If I need you, I know where to find you.” His house is a mere minute’s walk from my front door, a quaint little row house right here on the compound grounds.

Nearly as an afterthought, I pause near the kitchen before we part ways. “Oh, and Tatum offered to allow Bianca to stay here in her absence. Now we have our answer to where she is moving.”

The mention of my daughter’s name furrows his brow. She does her best to get under his skin, and I know it, but if anyone can handle her, it’s him. So long as he doesn’t badmouth her in my presence, we’re fine. “She didn’t mention that to me.”

“Me neither. She told me as she was leaving. She’s full of surprises.” I sigh. “At any rate, I wanted to inform you, so there’s no surprise should you find her on the grounds.” Not that any of the men would so much as blink at her appearance. She’s around enough that they expect her presence, but with Tatum gone, there might be some questions.

“I’ll spread the word,” he offers, and I grunt my thanks before continuing to the kitchen.

Sheryl, our longtime cook, lifts her brows at my entrance.

“Just coffee,” I assure her as she wipes her hands on her apron. Sheryl may appear to be a sweet old grandma, but the woman has a red-hot tongue and can wield a knife better than some men I know.

“Callum, if you do not eat, you will wither away into nothing. Coffee is not a sustainable food option,” Sheryl scolds, her hazel-colored eyes narrowing further.

I don’t know who told her she’s my mother. She may be old enough, but that grants her no such liberties. Yet even though her concern can sometimes set my teeth on edge, I appreciate a woman who seems to give a shit whether I live or die.

“Somehow, I doubt that, but if you’re really worried about me, I’ll make sure I dig into one of the meals you prepared before I go to bed,” I assure her with a smile.

She crosses her arms over her chest. “You better because if I return and those meals are not gone, I will slice much more than vegetables.”

I almost laugh. *Almost*. She's not much taller than five feet tall, her graying hair is tied back in a bun at the back of her nape, and her weathered skin makes her appear frail. In my eyes, she looks like a doting grandma. And yet, she's threatening me.

I chuckle. "Your threats do not frighten me."

"They should. If only you knew the mayhem I caused back in my younger days." She winks, her response leaving me shaking my head.

Truthfully, my appetite is almost nonexistent no matter how delectable Sheryl's cooking happens to be. Every cell in my body feels as if it's electrically charged. I'm a kid waiting for Christmas morning, and I was already having difficulty sleeping thanks to the ever-present longing for forbidden fruit. It will be a damn near miracle if I make it the month without collapsing from starvation or exhaustion.

I can't make my brain or body stop reacting to her. Fuck, she's an angel brought to life. Perfection. Innocence. All the wonderfully good things wrapped up in a gorgeous package. A warning goes off in my mind.

She's also a woman. Like any other.

No wonder I can't eat. My heart and mind are raging war against each other. Torn to pieces, I'm battling between what little conscience I have left, my jaded views of women, and the ever-present craving that's slowly consuming my entire existence.

A craving that magically materializes as a stunning young woman who appears at the other end of the hall. *Bianca*. Her shoulders are turned inward, her body facing away from me. I can't make out her face from this distance. Then, like a misty fog, she disappears and ducks into my office. My legs threaten to carry me to her without thinking through what might happen next.

Fuck, I don't trust myself enough around this girl. *How unfortunate, then, that she's staying here while your daughter is gone.*

With a single look, I can strike fear into the heart of the hardest, most brutal men. Certainly, I can handle this little girl, no matter how enticing she is. It doesn't matter that we shared one dirty secret. Yes, it was wild and hot as fuck, but it was a onetime thing. She probably assumes I didn't see her anyway. It's not a big deal. We were both caught up in lust. No doubt that's how she's chosen to brush it off.

The desire to confront her pulls me forward. As I walk the length of the hall, every step bringing me closer to her, the animal lust flaring to life low in my gut leaves me wondering if I should fuck her and get it over with or at least eat her pussy the way I've been longing to do since that night. Business wise, it might mean getting her out of my system. The way such acts typically leave me bored and uneasy almost as soon as I've finished, prepared to show the woman in question to the door and promptly forget we ever met.

Bianca is different. I can't forget her. She's part of my life, part of Tatum's.

She's also too young for you.

I fight my subconscious. She's a grown woman.

She's your daughter's best friend.

Tatum never has to know.

My insides are wound tight by the time I cross the threshold. I pause in the doorway, and surprise and concern slam into me all at once. Quiet sobs fill the space. Bianca's shoulders shake with every breath she takes. She's fragile like glass, and so very breakable. Sitting in the chair behind my desk, her small hands cover her face. Is she ashamed that she's crying? She has no reason to be ashamed. Protective instinct clouds my judgment, but lust lingers at the forefront. Both fight to see who will win.

I want to fuck her, but I want to comfort her as well.

No matter what, one thing is clear: I feel too strongly about her to brush her aside. I can't pretend she's nothing but a nuisance or temptation when the sight and sound of her sobbing pushes me to kill whoever hurt her.

Whoever hurt what is mine.

Clenching my fists, I feel the distinct rush of blood in my ears, the need to destroy. Fuck, I've never felt so territorial over a woman. I've never wanted a woman like I want Bianca. Dammit, I can't stand here and let her continue to cry; the sound is enough to crack me wide open.

BIANCA



*D*ammit! I told myself I wouldn't do this again. That I was done feeling sorry for myself, but here I am, sitting at Callum's desk with fresh tears racing down my cheeks. I should've fought the emotions until I reached Tatum's wing of the house. When she told me her father had the keys, I figured I'd slip in, grab them, and go back to the bedroom. That didn't happen. As soon as my fingers closed around the keys, the voices of all my failures came rushing back.

Everything I kept at bay during the wild rush of packing and making arrangements with the landlord came pouring out, and of course, once the tears start, there is no stopping them.

The reality of it is almost suffocating. All that's left now are feelings. *Despair. Anguish. Heartbreak.* The hole in my chest cracks further the more I think about it. Yes, things with Lucas were going downhill, and we were probably going to break up eventually, but those thoughts don't lessen the pain. He was my first relationship, my first love.

My despair turns to anger in a flash. I don't want to feel. I don't want to think, but that's all that's left to do. Another uncontrollable sob rips from my chest. My life is imploding around me, the pieces scattering in the aftermath. I can't move fast enough to pick them up.

The stupid organ in my chest beats louder and louder. Every choice I made up to this day puts me where I am now. Homeless, squatting at my best friend's house. I'm a fucking charity case. At this point, I could die from shame.

I swallow another sob in my throat. In this room, I'm more vulnerable and weaker. I need to leave his office now. The thought of Callum finding me crying. *God*. I'd have to explain myself, and then...

"Excuse me." That deep, gravelly voice I only hear in my dreams fills my ears.

Oh, shit. So much for escaping without him seeing me.

I forget sobs in favor of embarrassment. This nightmare is never-ending. I slap the tears on my cheeks away, then drop my hands to my lap like that's going to make it appear like I wasn't crying. I'm sure my cheeks are blotchy too.

Callum's large, powerful frame fills the doorway. He stares back at me, his face a mask of fury, and for a moment, I forget to breathe. Is he angry at me? I'm acutely aware of my mistake, and the need to apologize overwhelms me.

"I'm sorry!" I croak, swiping at my cheeks once more. My hands shake with anxiety. All I was supposed to do was get the keys from him, not use his office like that of a therapist. "I didn't... I didn't mean to. Tatum told me you had the keys, and I came and grabbed them, but then the tears and..."

Jesus, this is a mess. I am a mess. A complete dumpster fire.

"Whoa. Wait, hold on. I left them there, but please don't apologize. It's okay." He inches inside and sets the cup in his hand on a small table near the door before crossing the room.

His gaze is fixed on me. A lion stalking a gazelle.

He says it's okay, but the feral look in his eyes makes me think twice. As he gets closer, the warmth in my belly intensifies. The crush I've had on him since I was a teen blooms with a new life. He hasn't even touched me, but I know I'm weak for him.

His perfectly sculpted body fills out his tailored suit in a way that makes my mouth water. He's so tall. *Have I never realized how much bigger he is than me before this point?* I can't look away, and I definitely shouldn't be fantasizing about what he looks like naked beneath all that fabric. I drink him in,

my eyes painting a photographic picture in my mind to save for later.

Sharp, strong jaw. High cheekbones. Firm, full lips. A few age lines crease his forehead as his brow furrows, but he doesn't look a day over thirty-five. His dark hair is thick and styled in a sexy, no fucks given way.

I let my gaze drift down to his crotch, recalling the vivid memory of his thick, veiny cock. *Jesus*. I'm grateful for my flushed skin and tear-stained cheeks. It hides the furious blushing I'm doing for a completely different reason.

He comes to stand beside me. Maybe I should feel uncomfortable. That would be a normal reaction, but nothing about this is normal. I feel safe beside him. *Guarded*. I crane my neck back to look up at him; his masculine features are masked, but his green eyes are bright and bold.

I could stare at him for days. In my mind, he's always been a *Gerald Butler* lookalike. I suck a choked breath into my lungs, and cinnamon and coffee cling to my nostrils. The spicy scent makes me want to lean into him, but I stop myself. He's so close now that I can feel the heat of his skin radiating against mine.

I'm so caught up in his presence and my body's reaction to him, I don't realize he's reaching for me until his hands close around my hips. I can feel his searing touch through the fabric of my clothes. He lifts me from the swivel chair with all the effort it takes to lift a feather and sets me down on the edge of the mahogany desk. My head spins when he drops into the leather chair in front of me, his knees nearly touching mine.

Putting aside the fact that his touch is short-circuiting my brain right now, my mind races in a vain attempt at figuring out what the hell is going on. We've never been this close, not in all the times I've visited the house. He's never touched me beyond a pat on the back in passing or a hug, and that's rare enough.

"Tell me what happened?" He sounds like a concerned father. This is good. How he should be acting. With all the drama and my emotions swirling, I almost forget to worry if

he's going to ask me about that night. God, I hope not. I can only pray it was all a figment of my imagination. That he didn't really see me because if he did...

Shit, he asked me something.

"Tatum didn't tell you?"

He releases a sigh. "She did, but I was hoping you would offer more details. Tatum was in a bit of a hurry when she stopped by to let me know you'd be staying."

There's a tinge of annoyance in his voice. My mental state is fragile enough at the moment. I don't need to bother anyone else.

"I'm... I'm sorry. I don't want to put anyone out. I can go stay with my father if you would rather have me do that."

"Stop," he growls like a dog protecting a bone. "I asked you to give me more details. I did not ask you to leave."

The depth of his voice gives me goosebumps, and I force a ragged breath into my lungs. "My boyfriend. Well, now, ex. He cheated on me. And yes, I know he doesn't deserve the tears, but my stupid heart doesn't care." The words are hard to make come out. "After everything we had been through, all the moments we shared, he cheated on me. I doubt I'll ever know how many times."

"What a fucking idiot. I hope you understand this doesn't have anything to do with you," he says, that sexy voice of his dripping with venom. "Men are not always smart. Sometimes, we make choices we cannot come back from."

"I know." My warped thoughts remind me that this is what he has to say. What a concerned father should say. It tells me he sees me as a child. In a last-ditch effort, I grasp onto that knowledge and ignore the heat in his gaze and the way his tongue darts out over his bottom lip.

"Then stop wasting your tears on him." His voice grows softer, with almost a seductive edge. My breath catches in my throat when his thumb grazes where a tear lingers on my cheek before he brushes it away.

Holy shit. My heart is hammering so hard against my ribcage I think it might break free of my chest. This can't be happening. I must be misinterpreting things. He's being nice—fatherly—because he feels bad.

The problem is, there's nothing fatherly about the way his voice has deepened or the soft growl running through his words. If I didn't know better, I would think he was angry and revengeful for me, but not in a way that says he wants to protect his daughter.

No, this is different. This is a touch-her-and-die vibe.

“Has anyone ever cheated on you?” I have to laugh at myself before he can answer. “Of course not. Not you.” *That was such a stupid question.*

A smile plays at the corner of his sensual mouth. “Why not me? Am I really so elusive that you think no one would cheat on me?”

“I don't think any woman would be dumb enough to cheat on someone as handsome as you.” *Shit.* The filter between my brain and mouth must be gone. I just told him he's fucking handsome, and here I am, telling myself to forget what I witnessed, so it doesn't make things awkward. Then I blurt out something like this.

His sharp laugh doesn't hold much humor. “Trust me.” There's that growl in his voice again. “I've got plenty of scar tissue left behind from the burns I've sustained. The difference is you can't see them. Nobody is immune to heartbreak. Some of us are just better at covering it up than others.”

Was she blind, or just plain stupid?

At least I keep the question inside my head instead of blurting it out. Another tear cuts down my cheek, and once again, Callum catches it on his thumb.

My skin burns where he touches me. It's nothing more than a simple caress, but desire tingles in my belly. This time, he doesn't pull his hand away and cups my cheek with his palm. *Soft. Warm.* I'm frozen in time, too wrapped up in the pleasure of his touch. If this is a dream, I don't want to wake

up. In fact, because this is a dream, I lean into him. I'm weak for this man, and he doesn't even know it.

"No, little bird." His breath is shallow, and the intensity of yearning in his gaze pins me to the desk. "The only time tears should leak from your eyes is when you're choking on my cock like a good little girl."

Pleasure zings through my core, and warmth engulfs me completely. This has to be a dream because there is no way Callum really just said what he did. It's painfully obvious he saw me watching him. My brain is already overwhelmed from the breakup and the move, and now I'm imagining things.

Only I'm certain I'm not dreaming. I'm very much awake—the desk is firm beneath my ass, and my skin is tingling. I inhale his spicy scent deep into my lungs once more to remind myself that this is real.

"Excuse me?" Of all the ways I could respond.

The pressure from his fingers, the way he strokes with his thumb while never breaking eye contact. I can feel it deep in my bones. *He wants me.* I'm not a child in his eyes.

"You heard me. We both are well aware of what happened the other night. There's no point in denying it. I know you got off, and I know you watched me get off." His lip ticks up at the side. "Or maybe you thought I didn't see you."

"I..." My brain is melting into a puddle of mush. I've always played it safe. I've always done what was expected of me. Maybe I don't want to do that anymore.

"Tell me, little bird, because I'm curious. Have you touched your pussy since that night?" His rough, deep voice echoes through me. The nickname. He said it again. I want to ask him what it means, why he calls me that, but my tongue refuses to work.

It's one thing to have fantasized about this moment, but another to have him between my thighs, trapping me on the desk. While I'm still reeling from the shock, a tiny voice in my head cuts through the frantic confusion. It speaks only two small words, but their impact is formidable. *Why not?*

“Don’t be shy, Bianca.” His whisper of breath on my cheek pulls me back to the present. “There’s nothing to be ashamed of. I’ve touched myself since that night. Many times. Over and over, and over again.” Fuck. His voice wraps around me, tugging me deeper into him.

“Yes.”

“And what were you thinking about while you touched yourself? Me stroking my cock. Or were you wishing for my tongue and fingers to be inside you? Were you jealous, Bianca? Jealous that it was her pussy juices soaking my chin and not yours?”

Oh god, we should not be doing this. My pussy should not be clenching like this. Shame burns my cheeks.

I try to turn away, but his strong fingers grasp onto my chin and force me to face him. “I know that look. The guilt. Shame. There’s no reason to feel any of those things. I loved it. I was watching you every second. Nothing we did was wrong.” His nostrils flare, each breath louder and more ragged than the next. “I have a confession to make. It was you who got me off. Not her. All I saw was you on your knees, your pretty lips parting for my cock, your gags and moans in my ear.” His pink tongue darts out over his bottom lip, and it’s all I can do not to lick my own lips. “And I’ve never come so fucking hard, not without touching someone.” I can’t breathe or think when he’s saying these things. “Imagine how explosive we would be together.”

Even though I know this is real, I still can’t let myself believe it.

“I know what you’re thinking, Bianca.” His voice dips low again, and I press my thighs together to ease some of the ache. “This is wrong. We shouldn’t be doing this. It can’t possibly be real. But it is. And I want more, need more. I know it’s what you want too.”

He’s teasing me, daring me to cross the invisible line of morality. Because he knows that’s all I’ve wanted since I was old enough to see him through a woman’s eyes.

“Tell me it’s what you want,” he orders. “Or better yet, tell me you don’t want me so I can forget that night. So I can pretend like it never happened.” His jaw clenches. It’s clear he’s been torturing himself over the memory as much as I have.

Make the right choice.

You’re a good girl.

But I don’t want to be good. I don’t want to make the choice everyone expects me to make. I’ll never learn to fly if I don’t escape the cage.

“Yes,” I whisper. “I want you.”

“Fuck. You have no idea the mistake you made admitting that to me.” A smile slowly twists his lips, and his perfectly straight white teeth shine through. “I need to see you. See how you made yourself come, how you touched your pussy until your cunt was wet and needy, wishing it was my tongue and fingers inside it.”

Oh, fuck. I want to, but this is entirely wrong. In every way. Tatum’s face appears in my mind. What if she found out? I must hesitate too long since the next thing I know, an animalistic growl fills my ears, and his fingers release my chin and drop to the waistband of my leggings. All I can do is gasp, the swift movement jarring me forward when he tugs them down my legs. The cool air kisses my heated skin, and a shiver rips through me.

He tosses the leggings to the floor and directs his attention back to me. It’s only when he covers my knees with those big hands that I finally manage to speak. “What are you doing?”

He pauses, and uneasiness flickers across his face. “What am I doing?” I don’t know if he’s asking himself or me.

Some of the heat sizzling between us cools. My heart sinks in dismay. I don’t want him to stop. I want his hands on me. I want to be cherished and cared for. I want to fall apart in his arms.

My thighs part on their own, my body giving up the fight. “Please,” I beg, holding his gaze. The flames of desire fan

between us, and I know the moment we touch, an explosion will take place. “Touch me.”

He weighs his options for half a second before leaning back in his chair. I watch his grip on the arms of the chair tighten. I can feel the weight of his gaze on my pussy, and I like it. “Lie back, take off your thong, and touch yourself.”

I don’t dare question him. I want this bad enough that I’ll do anything. With trembling hands, I grip the band of fabric and tug my soaked thong down my legs. I’m completely bare and at his mercy. I let my eyes flutter closed, shyness overtaking me. I try to sink into the moment while I slip a hand down my slim belly to alleviate the ache in my core.

“Open your eyes. I want to watch you and look into your eyes when you shatter. Now, show me how you made your pretty pussy come.”

I can’t believe I’m doing this. The crotch of his pants stands straight up for me. He could have any woman, like the hot blonde from the patio. Yet, it’s my pussy he’s staring at when I part my legs wider to give him a better view.

He doesn’t say a word. Then again, he doesn’t have to. The deep, vibrating groan that slips out gives everything away. And that’s all the courage I need. Holding a breath in my lungs, I drag a fingertip through my wet slit. Rivulets of pleasure zing along my spine. Callum’s gaze darkens, narrowing in on the movement, and his angular jaw tightens.

“Were you this wet for me that night?”

“Yes.” The words are tight with desire, excitement, and wonder. I watch with amazement as he comes undone, his white-knuckle grip on the chair telling me he would rather touch me.

“You’re just as perfect as I imagined. Did you play with your tiny clit? I bet you rubbed it furiously, wishing it was my tongue flicking it and my fingers in you. Didn’t you? You wished I was finger fucking you until you creamed on my face. Show me. Make yourself come.”

My body is a live wire; tension cracks in the air, ratcheting up with every stroke of my fingertip against my throbbing bundle of nerves.

He's watching me. His dark gaze penetrates the deepest confines of my soul. The desire in those depths makes it hard for me to breathe.

I don't think I have a choice to come or not. My pussy is tightening, my fingers coated, and wetness pools under my ass cheeks and down onto his desk. The tension is unbearable, and my heart is going to explode if it races like this much longer.

I need to come. I need to.

He's watching me.

“Fuck, you're making a mess of my desk with your pussy juices. But it's okay. I'll lick the fucking desk clean as soon as you wretch every drop out of yourself. Come for me, beautiful.”

“Oh, god.” I groan, my muscles tightening. I'm walking a tightrope of pleasure, and the end is in sight. Adding more pressure, I rub faster. The friction is enough to push me over the edge. “I'm close!” I gasp, whining. I'm needy, grinding my hips, beckoning him to take me.

“Stop.”

The singular word rings loud enough that I freeze with my finger against my clit. Just a little more pressure and I'd explode. Every muscle in my body grows taut. *Did I do something wrong?* Before I can timidly ask, he wheels himself flush with the desk and wraps his arms around my open thighs.

My gaze catches on the rapid rise and fall of his chest and his cheeks, which are tinged pink. “If you're worried you did something wrong, you didn't. In fact, you did everything right. I'm just a selfish prick with a need for control.”

I want to tell him he's not, but I can't make the words come out. I'm still caught up in the fact I was just cock-blocked.

He gives me a smile that I imagine the devil gives those who sell their soul to him. “Continue... you’re going to come for me, but only when I tell you that you can, and only for me. No one else will get to see this pussy, touch it, or lick it. If I find out anyone else has been inside you, touched you, or even thought about it from now on, the consequences will be grave. Do you understand?”

What wouldn't I agree to now?

“Yes.” The word comes out as a pant, my heart beating so loud I wonder if he can hear it.

Lowering his head slowly, he inhales deeply through his nose. I want to cringe, but there’s no way to escape him. His fingertips press into the flesh of my thighs, forcing me open. “Fuck. Just like I knew it would be. I wonder if you taste as sweet as you smell?”

All at once, the world explodes in light, and all it takes is the brushing of Callum’s tongue against my clit. His hot breath against my skin. His fingers press deeper, with bruising force, holding me in place, forcing me to take the pleasure he’s so eager to give.

It’s never been like this for me. Callum is shameless as he devours my pussy like his life depends on it. Like he’s tasted nothing so exquisite. His grunts, and heavy panting, drive me as wild as the friction against my clit. Every slap of his tongue over the bundle of nerves sends me higher, and I’m almost to the point I was before he stopped me.

He hasn’t told me to come, but damn it, I’m going to.

“I’m... I’m coming... oh, god. Please, don’t stop. Please, don’t stop.” I suck a ragged breath into my lungs, and my entire body goes rigid. “Callum!” I scream and let the shudders of pleasure ripple through my core.

His mouth disappears from my clit, but I don’t care. I’m coming; blissful shockwaves ripple through me. I’ve never come so hard in my entire life. Breathing erratically, I’m only vaguely aware of him pushing away from me to stand.

It's finally happening.

He's going to fuck me. I need him inside me. I'm ready. Ready to take his cock. I know he's big, bigger than Lucas or any man I've ever seen, but I can handle it.

"I shouldn't have done that. I shouldn't have touched you. Tasted you." The regret in his voice is so thick it almost chokes me.

I blink, confused by what he's saying. "What..." I start but then stop, the orgasm from moments before forgotten while I fumble my way through sitting up. The desk is wet beneath my ass, and I slide against the wood, nearly falling. "I don't understand."

"This never should've happened." I can see the war waging in his eyes when our gazes clash. I can't imagine how I look right now. A cold sweat breaks out over my skin, and I watch while he gathers my thong, leggings, and flats.

His expression goes from conflicted to ice cold once he's face to face with me again. Pressing the items into my hands, he directs his gaze at the floor. "Put your stuff on and get out of my sight."

I'm too stunned to move. I don't want him to regret what we just did, and that's what this sounds like. Red-hot regret. "Please—"

"Go." His voice is strained, drenched in darkness. Before I can beg him to turn around and help me understand what is happening, he gives me a warning glare. "Don't talk. I didn't ask you to speak," he growls, his face twisted in a mask of rage so unlike his lustful expression from a minute ago.

Fear, unlike anything I've ever felt before, makes me lock up.

What happened? I have no time to think it over. I need to get out of here before he loses what's left of his withering control. Hopping off the desk, my legs are weak. I almost trip over my own feet while I hastily pull on my clothing. I'd sprint out of here stark-ass naked, but I'm not taking the risk I'll run into someone.

I'm still putting on my shoes when I reach the hallway, and once they're on, I race over the shining floors all the way to the other side of the house.

When I'm alone, I blink back tears again. I doubt I could run fast enough or far enough to outrun my shame. I don't know what hurts worse: the way I gave in so easily or the way he turned against me. *He regrets what we did.* His arousal was there, the lust. He wanted me as badly as I wanted him, so why did he push me away?

Now there is this darkness between us, the unknown. How am I supposed to forget how good it felt and how much I wish he'd do it again? What a foolish mistake on my part. I wasn't good enough for Lucas, and I'm not good enough for Callum either.

Which makes me wonder... am I good enough for anyone?

CALLUM



The last few days have been a clusterfuck. Sheer willpower is the only thing that's stopped me from crossing over into the other wing of the house to claim Bianca. To make up for my asshole behavior. As soon as I said the words, I wished I could take them back. It was the last thing she needed after her piece of shit ex cheated on her. I'm such a dick, and yet it's not unlike me to behave the way I did.

It would've been fine had it been any other woman but Bianca. She's different. I know I shouldn't want her. I know we shouldn't continue what happened that night and that pushing her away was the right thing. She probably thinks the worst of me, and I don't blame her. Logically, I'm old enough and wise enough to know better, but I don't care. I just don't fucking care.

I didn't regret a single thing we did. But that didn't mean it was right. I'm not stupid, though. I know no matter how much I push her away, no matter what I do, she will inevitably become mine.

"The funds have been wired, and I have confirmation from the seller. The planes are yours and thank fuck. We're already getting questions from the suppliers out in Miami. They need to offload their latest shipment."

Leaning back in my chair, I swirl the scotch around in my glass and release a satisfied smile. "Good. We'll send Carlo and Tony down there to inspect the shipment."

Romero quirks an eyebrow, looking up at me from his tablet. “You think they’ll be okay with that? I’m normally the one who goes.”

“I have other work for you to do. Carlo and Tony know what to look out for.”

Romero appears suspicious. “What type of work?”

“I’m still ironing out the details.” I trust Romero with my life. We’ve been through hell and back together, but his question sets my teeth on edge. “Since when do you question me?”

“It’s not about questioning you. You know I like to be prepared.”

Of course, I know that. He didn’t mean anything. There’s no reason for my skin to feel uncomfortable. My feelings right now have nothing to do with him. No, this has to do with something else entirely. I’m an addict who promised himself he’d go cold turkey because it seemed easy at the time. *My addiction?* Bianca and everything about her, the taste of her pussy being at the top of the list.

A normal man might be able to deal with it. Not me. I’m on edge, and I have access to too many guns for this to end without somebody taking a bullet for looking at me the wrong way.

“I’ll fill you in when the time comes.” I don’t bother apologizing, and he knows better than to expect it. “For now, get the boys up to speed on the details about Miami.”

He nods and, thankfully, doesn’t question me further. It’s been torture, wanting more than anything to make it up to her while forcing myself to steer clear at the same time. The wounded expression she wore before running from the office still haunts me. I’m a fucking asshole. I scrub a hand down my face, my frustrations mounting. I have more important shit to be worried about, an entire fucking company to run. Putting distance between us is the right thing, but somehow, it feels like torture.

Romero returns to his task list, murmuring to himself as he makes notes and delegates duties while I turn my attention to the security feed playing across my laptop screen. I'm setting myself up for failure by watching like an obsessed stalker for her to return home.

She usually parks her beat-up Corolla in the front courtyard, but it's been gone since this morning. *Where does she go?* From what I remember, her job doesn't start for another few days.

Irrational rage eats at my insides. She'd better not be disappearing to escape a run-in with me or worse, to be with another man.

Could you blame her if she did?

My hand closes around my glass hard enough that my joints ache, and the pain forces me to take a breath. A man in my position can't afford to fall apart, not even over a pussy whose taste and aroma have claimed ownership of my soul.

It's her soul I'm fighting for now. She doesn't need my darkness destroying her light. Every degrading thing I'll have no choice but to do to her once I've started. There will be no going back once I've claimed her fully. I won't be able to stop myself.

Leave her alone. Do the right thing for once.

No matter how I fight to keep it together, my chest tightens at the sweeping of headlights over the dark courtyard. She's home, and it feels like I can breathe again. *Pathetic.* I never felt this pull with my ex-wife or any of the nameless women I've fucked before now, so I'm out of my element here.

Bianca's turning me into something I hardly recognize, my heart thumping against my ribs all because a car's pulling up to the house. At least Romero doesn't notice—yet, that is. I keep it up, and it won't take long.

As I watch, she parks the car, then sits behind the wheel for a minute. If I were a betting man, I'd say she's afraid to get out.

Afraid of what? Of my anger or of coming close to the crackling temptation between us? I made the right choice ending things where I did. I was on the cliff's edge of control, ready to tug my pants down and sink my cock deep inside her.

And most likely destroy her friendship with my kid. A friendship that means the world to both of them.

Fuck. Everything's stacked against me getting what I need. Like trying to do the right thing for Bianca's sake isn't difficult enough to live with.

I hold my breath as she opens her door. She's in workout clothes, which only adds fuel to my raging anger. She knows damn well we have a gym here, yet she'd rather go elsewhere. It's not the fact of her going somewhere else that bothers me. It's that she's doing it to avoid me, and while I can't blame her, I don't like it.

She needs to be punished. The mere thought makes all the blood run straight to my cock. It's hard in seconds, begging to slide deep into her clenching pussy. So tight and sweet. I can't wait for her to milk me.

Cross that line, and you can't go back. Break her spirit, and there's no putting the pieces together. Can you live with that? Can you live with yourself?

Fuck. I'm losing it.

I stare at the screen harder, ignoring my throbbing cock. Look at her, almost tiptoeing to the front door, using the key since her fingerprint hasn't been programmed into the security system. She's hiding. Like that's even possible. Like I couldn't kick down her door any time I please.

My hand moves over the hard wood of the desk, touching the place where her glistening juices pooled. Juices I need to either taste again or die. But first, to deal with a little girl who honestly believes she can run away from me.

"That'll be it for tonight," I decide, pretending my cock isn't hard as steel under the desk.

Romero makes a big deal of checking the time on his wrist. "Turning over a new leaf? This is the second time this

week you've called an early night."

I grind my teeth, trying to keep the beast at bay. "If you must keep working, then do so at your cottage. I want to take the night off and relax."

"Whatever you want, boss." He gives me a single nod. Message received. His footfalls echo down the hall in no time, leaving me panting in anticipation of what's coming.

I've spent too many sleepless nights obsessing over what I told myself I could never touch or taste again. Look where it got me. She believes she can escape, that sneaking around is enough to keep me away. I know I was an asshole, but I didn't expect her to retreat further into herself. No matter the outcome, I refuse to let that happen.

Outrage pushes me from my chair and out the door. My wingtip shoes slap against the floor as I head to the opposite wing. Such a fucking brat. She's going to get what's coming to her.

I'm through telling myself it isn't right. What does it get me, trying to be decent for once? It gives her the idea that it's possible to avoid me. It's clear that it's time to set a few things straight.

My right hand clenches and unclenches in time with my quick stride, aching to be put to use on Bianca's ripe ass. She won't make the mistake of avoiding me after tonight.

I pass Tatum's brightly decorated office on the second floor, then the closed door of the room she uses as a walk-in closet and dressing room. The bedroom comes next, and since she assumes she'll be alone in this wing, Bianca has left the door open.

How naive, thinking I'll stick to an unspoken agreement to leave her alone. Like this isn't my house. Like I can't come and go as I please. There are so many lessons I've neglected to teach her. That ends now.

The shower is running, and light spills across the floor, thanks to the bathroom door being left ajar. Rather than barge in, I take a seat on the edge of the bed in that beam of light and

smile to myself when I imagine her surprise turning to dread once she discovers me sitting here.

There she is, humming as she washes up, thinking she got away. Keeping herself from me. Part of me thought she would be stronger. That she would push back and fight against me for what she wanted. She didn't, though. My rage obliterates all the longing and the guilt and the craving. She thinks she's in control here, and I can't forgive that.

The water cuts off, and my anticipation turns into something more urgent. It sets off a throbbing drumbeat in my ears while my cock threatens to break my zipper by the time her towel-clad form appears in the doorway.

“Oh!” She jumps back, squealing. Her hands clutch the towel closed while her pretty blue eyes reflect fear. Her slim body trembles, and her dark brown tendrils appear almost black, the strands sticking to her skin.

That's what breaks me. The way she tries to hide even now, covering her dripping body from me. A body with the power to make me forget what I came here for. I was enraged seconds ago, but I can barely remember why. Because, holy fuck, she is perfect. So innocent and entirely at the mercy of the primal lust that has swept my rage aside.

Take. Claim. That's all I want now.

“Why... why are you here?” Her chest rises and falls erratically, and she backs away like she wants to put another closed door between us.

The sight of her reaching for the knob breaks the fog of desire that's left me speechless. “You think a closed door will stop me? You're supposed to be a smart girl.”

“I—I don't understand.”

“Then let me explain.” I lift an arm, curling my fingers in a beckoning gesture. It's this or charge across the room and ravish her on the floor. I'm barely in control of myself. My gaze darts over her, taking in every inch of creamy flesh. I follow a bead of water as it rolls down her chest, soaking into the towel, barely covering the swell of her tits.

Will she run? Part of me hopes she does. I'd chase her down, and fuck her hard against the floor, just to teach her a lesson. She only hesitates a moment before taking the first step. That's the hardest part, taking the first step into the unknown. But it's not really the unknown that gets you; it's the fear of leaving what you know, what you understand.

Now she's mine.

She's made her decision.

She chose to obey, and now she is mine.

"What I really came here for was to punish you," I murmur as she crosses the room and stumbles over her feet at the announcement. "Don't worry. That's not what's on my mind now."

"What is?" Her voice cracks, matching the fear in her eyes.

"Come here, and I'll show you."

Somehow, she trusts me enough to carry her the rest of the way to the bed. Her smooth brow furrows in confusion just the same. "Callum... I don't... we shouldn't. What's already happened between us was wrong."

"Since when do you decide what happens and what doesn't?" She flinches at my tone. "I came here to punish you, but I've reconsidered. I could change my mind again if you would prefer my hand to redden your ass instead."

She shakes her head, eyes wide.

"I thought so." My hand clenches into a fist again, only now it's a need to touch, not to strike. I need that towel gone. I have to see her, to drink in her milky flesh.

I trail a fingertip down her arm. So soft, I almost wonder whether she's human. "The other night, I was cruel to you in my office. I shouldn't have ended things the way I did, and you deserve an apology for my asshole behavior."

"You have nothing to apologize for, and even if you did, you don't have to apologize."

I close my hand around her wrist, tight enough to make her wince. “I know I don’t have to, but I *want* to. And since I’m feeling merciful, I’ll warn you I’m not the type of man that will be told what to do, so in the future, keep that in mind.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, averting her gaze. It’s almost too easy to break her down. Her natural submission makes me want to bend her to my will.

Taking the hem of the towel, I let it slide between my fingers. “It’s rare for me to apologize for anything, but I’m not so prideful that I won’t admit when I’m wrong. And I was. I’m sorry for being an asshole. For scaring you.”

Rising from the bed, I tower over her trembling form. *Delicate. Fragile.* She brings out every protective instinct I have. “But don’t think that means you can fucking avoid me again. That’s what almost got you spanked until you couldn’t sit for a week. No more hiding from me. Understood?”

She hesitates for a split second. But that’s all it takes to shatter my resolve. One quick tug and the towel drops to the floor. A gasp escapes her parted lips, but she doesn’t try to cover herself. She knows better than to hide from me.

The air in my chest stills. Every inch my gaze lands upon is more perfect than the last. Rosy nipples stand at attention on her firm tits, begging to be sucked. A taut stomach and slim waist that tapers out gracefully into hips that are used for fucking. To hold her in place while I claim every hole in her body.

“Understood?” I grit out, almost too consumed to speak.

Her white teeth sink into her plump bottom lip—sensual, uncertain—but it’s the lust swirling in the depths of her blue eyes that steals my breath and hardens my cock further. “Yes.”

“Do you see what you do to me?” I rub my hand over the almost painful erection she’s caused.

Her gaze darts down, then back up again, and the flush on her cheeks tells me what she’s thinking. I doubt the piece of shit she dated had the first clue what to do with her or how to treat her.

“I’m afraid I need something from you,” I murmur, stroking her downy cheek. Her eyes drift shut, and she leans ever so slightly into my touch.

“Hmm?” She’s already lost under the spell binding us together.

“I’m going to need to see your pretty mouth full of my cock.” She exhales softly at my words, followed by the brushing of my thumb over her lips. They’ll feel like heaven parted around me. “I need to see your pretty mouth struggle to take every inch of my cock while I fuck your throat.”

A soft whimper sends warm air across my thumb. “Do you want that?” I whisper, watching in fascination as her nipples tighten and goosebumps pebble her flesh. It’s almost too easy.

Her cheeks turn crimson before she nods.

“I need you to say it,” I prompt, barely holding onto the last shreds of self-control. “Tell me, Bianca.”

I don’t know what the fuck I’ll do if she denies me.

“Yes.” Her lips form the word, but hardly a sound comes out.

It’s enough. It’ll have to be. I can’t wait another minute. “Prove it to me. Get on your knees.”

She wastes no time, and her eagerness leaves precum soaking into my boxers. The anticipation threatens to stop my racing heart. “Now, take my cock out,” I croak, stroking her wet hair tenderly, watching her trembling hands work my belt.

“I’m sure that stupid piece of shit ex of yours never fucked your throat the way I’m going to,” I mutter as she continues, turning to my fly once the belt is open.

She makes the briefest eye contact in the heartbeat before her small hand closes around my shaft. I suck a strangled gasp between my teeth when the sensation explodes from that point of contact, tickling my balls and shooting up my spine. Nothing in the world compares to this. The control. The promise of using her for my pleasure.

“Fuck, yes,” I grunt, my fingers tugging her strands. “Take me out. Open your mouth and let me slide inside.”

“I don’t know if I can take all of you,” she replies innocently.

Fuck me. I’d laugh if I didn’t know she meant it. I’m sure I’m bigger than the pathetic piece of shit she had before. “Be a good girl and try. Make me happy. Work my cock into your mouth and suck it good.”

Her tongue peeks out from between her lips, moistening them before she leans in to take her first lick of my swollen head. Sheer lust flares to life and threatens to burn me to ash. Jesus. I could come right now, but I won’t.

“More,” I grunt, my teeth gritted against the urge to thrust, fill, and take. “I want you choking on me. I need to hear your gags and see your tears.”

When she hesitates, there’s no holding back. Not when her lips grip me so firmly, snapping my control in two. I press my hips forward, shoving myself past her lips and halfway to her throat.

Her blue eyes bulge, and she emits a strangled choking noise, but I’m far too gone, savoring the wet heat enveloping me, to care. If anything, her reaction adds to the thrill. Still, the thought of terrifying her, of hurting her, leaves me unsettled.

“Relax your throat. You’re taking it all.” I inch deeper and deeper. I can see her panic building. Her crescent-shaped fingernails dig into my still-clothed thighs. “Just like you always dreamed of. You did, didn’t you? You dreamed about choking on my dick. I know you did because I dreamed about fucking your throat, and let me tell you, the dream doesn’t even fucking compare to reality.”

I try to work myself into her slowly, but I’ve already reached my breaking point. By the time I’m balls deep, she’s groaning around me, struggling to contain all of my girth, fighting to suck in air with her nose buried against my base. “Such a good, eager girl,” I whisper in praise. “You look so

pretty on your knees with my cock in your mouth. I've never seen anything prettier."

I give her quick, deep strokes until tears slip from her eyes and slide down the apples of her cheeks. "I'm only giving you what you've craved," I remind her as she fights to adjust to my pace. "I've seen you looking at me, and I know what you think about at night when you're alone. Don't you dream of this while you touch your pussy?"

She tries to nod, groaning her affirmation, earning a thrust deep enough to make her gag.

"So beautiful with your mouth full of cock." Her head fits perfectly in my hands, and I cradle it while I pump my hips forward. "With your lips stretched out and your cheeks hollowed. I love seeing you struggle to take me deeper, to swallow more of my cock." And I do. The pleasure builds brick by brick at the base of my spine. It's sheer bliss. Her choked cries, the saliva that dribbles out of her mouth and down my balls. The complete control she so willingly hands over.

"Is this making your pussy wet?" I drive myself deep enough to make her groan. I want to see the imprint of my cock in her throat. "I bet it's weeping with jealousy. Is it dripping down your thighs? It wants my cock, too. Doesn't it?"

"Mm-hmm." She grips my thighs, bracing herself as if she expects—wants—more.

"Show me how much you want it. Take it all. Suck me hard." The pressure from her mouth increases until the pleasure already building in my balls reaches its peak. "Fuck, you're going to suck the cum right out of my balls."

My words only encourage her, and she sucks harder, and that, with the friction of her warm mouth around my cock, shatters me.

"I'm gonna come," I rasp, my hips pumping erratically in the final stretch. "Have you ever swallowed before?"

She shakes her head, and the elation that fills my chest is indescribable. “Good, that’s what I wanted to hear. Now, get ready because you’re going to swallow every drop I give you.”

My grip on the back of her head is firm enough that she’s going nowhere. She has no choice. She’ll take what I give her.

“Every drop you miss, you’re licking off the floor,” I hiss through my teeth.

The last of it is barely out of my mouth before the release overtakes me. A blast of cum explodes from my balls straight down her throat. Spurt after spurt fills her mouth, and I grunt in relief, my muscles tightening until there’s nothing left to do but withdraw my softening cock from her flooded mouth.

I watch with adoration as she obeys, her throat working to swallow what I gave her. She didn’t miss a drop, either. Sagging against me, she appears relieved.

“Good girl.” Taking her chin in my hand, I raise her head, smiling down at her with pride. “You did so fucking good.”

She glows from the praise even as she fights to catch her breath.

“And so beautiful,” I marvel, stroking away the tears that linger on her flushed cheeks. She trembles and gasps for air, tits rising and falling with each shaky breath. “So exquisite.”

When she offers a trembling smile, something inside me breaks. Something I doubt I’ll ever be able to put back together—if I even want to.

“And you’re mine,” I add, meaning it with every ounce of me.

No matter what it means, she is mine. There’s no going back now.

BIANCA



*H*is. What does that mean? Does he only want to fuck me, or is this more? Is he mine too? I'm tempted to ask him, but I can't handle more turmoil. It already feels like I set foot on a new planet.

It was never like this with Lucas—Callum was right. As scary and uncomfortable as it got when I gagged on him, it was exhilarating, and every praise and thrust drove me further to please him. I wanted to make him happy, to see him get off. To be the reason.

The salty tang of his cum still lingers on my tongue. Before now, I had never swallowed. It wasn't half as bad as I expected. If anything, I feel closer to him than I ever did before. Even through the worst of it, we were in it together. He pushed my boundaries, but I wanted it.

My thighs rub together, the insides slick with the juices of arousal by the time he helps me to my feet. *Another first.* Just having him in my mouth, listening to his grunts and the filthy things he said, was almost enough to make me come. And the way he used me so roughly, holding me in place, forcing his cock into my mouth, it made my pussy drip just like he said.

That was then. Now he's tender, sweet. I can almost forget how brutally he treated me only moments ago.

He cups my cheeks in his palms, studying my face. I wonder what he is searching for. Whatever it is, that's what I want to be. "You are the best kind of torture, Bianca." His

voice is full of wonder, as he gazes at me as if I'm the most precious thing in the world.

My heart swells and warms, and I hope it's not something he'll regret later.

"I shouldn't have touched you," he admits, a wry smirk tugging the corner of his mouth. "God knows I should've walked away. I should've stopped what I was doing the night I saw you in the kitchen."

His chest rises and falls in a sigh. "But I didn't. I couldn't even if I tried." Pulling me closer until our breaths mingle, he whispers, "There's something about you I haven't been able to turn away from. That I can't let go of, that I don't want to lose."

"I know what you mean." That was tough to admit, but the raising of his brow—like he's happy to hear it—makes it worthwhile and gives me more courage to continue. "I've been telling myself it's wrong, and I should stay away from you. I knew it was wrong that night when I found you on the patio, and then everything fell apart that night on your desk. But ever since then, I couldn't stop myself from thinking about you."

Now that I've started, it's easier to tell him everything I've been bottling up all these years. "I've wanted you for so long, but... I always told myself you would only see me as a little girl."

There is a tinge of regret in his chuckle. "I only wish I could see you like that. It would make all of this a lot easier."

My heart's ready to explode, my pussy dripping, and all he's doing is touching my face. I'm gripped with confusion; my questions, doubts, and yearning swirl around until I don't know which way is up. I trust Callum. I want him. So badly. But I'm still conflicted. We need to talk about his reaction from the other night. Was it fear, or was he trying to push me away?

Suddenly, the vulnerability hits me, and I'm overcome with the need to hide myself, like that will protect me from the intensity of what we're exploring. I reach around him,

grabbing for the nightshirt I left on the bed before getting in the shower.

He waits until I've pulled the oversized shirt over my head and thrust my arms through the sleeves before speaking. "Whose shirt is that?"

I should lie. I don't want to ruin the moment we're having by bringing Lucas up, but the tone of his voice bridges no excuse. I'd only make it worse by lying.

"It's *his*, isn't it?" he answers for me. Disgust drips from his voice—and anger, which gets my heart pounding all over again.

I nod, gulping. "I should've gotten rid of it, maybe burned it, but I was in such a hurry to pack everything and get out of there. I had to get away from the memories. I didn't think to throw it out."

I can't believe how guilty I feel when I haven't done anything wrong. "And I always use big T-shirts as nightgowns," I add, like that's going to help things. "It's just a shirt."

The silence stretches between us, and I shiver beneath his gaze. Callum is completely still, down to his stony expression. *Damn, Lucas*. He finds a way to ruin everything, even when he's not a part of it.

My heart's on the verge of giving out by the time his hand shoots out like a striking snake. It curls around my throat and lifts every hair on my body with the slightest pressure.

"I am going to destroy that shirt." He speaks slowly, carefully enunciating, while his grip tightens.

I don't know what game this is. I only know it's unnerving and exciting, the way he slides out of one mood and into another out of nowhere. I never know what's coming next. I yelp in surprise when he releases my throat and wraps an arm around my waist, lifting me and placing me over his shoulder. At first, I imagine him throwing me onto the bed, but he marches toward the door instead.

“Where are we going?” I squeak out as he carries me down the hall.

I really hope nobody sees us, like his guards or his cook. Tatum can’t find out. No matter what happens.

He doesn’t seem to care about any of that as he continues carrying me through to his side of the second floor. “Our bed.”

Our bed? “What does that mean?” My head is already spinning, thanks to hanging over Callum’s shoulder and how suddenly this is all happening. He had to go and add a twist that makes my heart race and my breath come short. Our bed.

I barely get a good look at the large, masculine room with its dark wood furnishings before he sets me on the king-size bed. The silk duvet is soft against my bare legs, and the scent of his spicy cologne hangs in the air. I want to wrap myself up in it.

Fear and anticipation singe my nerves, and it freezes me solid when he takes the neck of the shirt in both hands—tearing it open, shredding the thin cotton. My heart jumps, and my nipples pebble when the cold air hits them.

But he’s the real reason, just as he’s the reason I’m wet enough to squelch a little when I clamp my thighs together.

His eyes are almost black by the time he pulls the ruined shirt from my body and crumples it in his fist. “If you want an oversized shirt,” he growls, “you’ll wear one of mine. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” I gulp.

A look of deep satisfaction washes over his face, softening some of the sharp edges. “Good girl.”

Hearing him say that does something to me. All I’ve ever wanted is for him to see me, notice me, want me. Knowing I please him is like the cherry on top.

The shirt falls from his fist and hits the floor. “Do you trust me?”

There’s only one answer he wants to hear, and it’s the only answer that makes any sense. I do trust him, even when he

keeps me on the edge of my seat with all his mysterious mood swings.

“Yes.” I mean it with all my heart.

Without another word, he walks to the foot of the bed and reaches down for something at each corner. I swear I forget to breathe. Watching, waiting. The anticipation has the power to kill me.

At first, I’m not sure what I’m looking at. There are black ropes with wide leather cuffs attached to the ends. I can’t figure it out right away.

Not until he pulls out a third rope near the headboard. And a fourth.

Restraints.

No wonder he wanted to know if I trusted him.

My pulse takes off at triple speed. He’s going to tie me to the bed.

Oh, god, yes. He’s going to tie me to the bed.

I’m not afraid. I’m impatient. Tied to Callum’s bed. No way of stopping him from doing whatever he wants. Being at his mercy. My brain tells me no, but I want this. Want him.

“Lie down.” There is no disobeying, especially when his jaw is clenched so tight his mouth barely moves. He’s a man holding on by the skin of his teeth. Something dark and dangerous strains inside him, threatening to break loose and wreak havoc on me.

It’s easy to lie back then and give myself to him. I want it. Whatever it is.

“That’s right,” he mutters, wrapping the cuff around my left wrist, cinching the metal buckle until I wince from the pressure. “You need to learn, and this is the only way I can teach you.”

I’m as confused as ever, even though my body’s all-in. Blood racing, skin flushed, the ache between my thighs so

intense I could cry. If he doesn't touch my pussy soon, I might die.

“We need to break down those walls you've built around yourself,” he continues in a deceptively smooth voice, cuffing my left ankle, then my right. “You've spent your entire life telling yourself not to go too far. Haven't you?”

I nod, watching him test the strength of the restraints with a sharp tug. He's efficient like he's done this before. I guess if he has restraints lying around like this, it means he's experienced.

If I could pick anybody to introduce me to these dark delights, I'm glad it's him. That thought eases the tension in my shoulders and back, making it easier to settle against the pile of pillows behind me.

The final cuff cinches tight around my right wrist, digging into my flesh. I test the strength of the leather with a tug that does nothing but make the edge dig deeper. At first, it appears to be enough for him to stand back and stare at me. Goosebumps cover my skin everywhere his gaze lands.

“Think about everything you've denied yourself. All the pleasure you could've enjoyed.” He continues his slow study of my naked body while unbuttoning his tailored shirt, then opening it to reveal his inked chest and torso. Deep hunger unfurls in my core, and my fingers twitch at the thought of tracing every line until I know each tattoo by heart.

“I'm the man who's going to tear down those walls and show you everything you've missed.” He kicks off his shoes, then slowly lowers his pants to reveal the bulge behind his boxers. I was already hot and wet, but his little strip tease leaves me soaking the sheets.

When he takes his huge, thick shaft in one hand, I tense from head to toe. My mouth waters. He came minutes ago, but he's already rock hard. He looks chiseled from marble, his body covered in corded muscle and smooth, tanned skin. More beautiful than I ever imagined. And I did a lot of imagining.

This is no dream. This is real, no matter how unbelievable it seems.

Slowly, he climbs onto the foot of the bed, between my spread legs. His half-lidded eyes zero in on my exposed pussy and stay there while he strokes himself.

“Look how wet this pretty pussy is.” His words are like magic, making me shiver even though there’s a furnace burning in my core. “I bet you’d feel like hot silk wrapped around my cock. Squeezing, begging for my seed.”

Why don’t you find out? I don’t know what’s happening to me or who I’m turning into. I almost said that out loud. This must be what he means by the walls around me. The way I hold myself back.

I lift my head, watching with my heart in my throat as he lines his bulbous purple head up with my flooded cleft. All it takes is the slightest pressure against what is already swollen and throbbing to make me lift my hips as much as I can.

“That’s it,” he croons, brushing the head of his cock through my swollen folds. “Give in to what you want. Don’t stop yourself.”

“It feels... so good...” My head rolls from side to side, and the sweetest sensations ripple through me. “More. More.”

“Are you on birth control?” he asks when his head slides dangerously close to my entrance.

I strain against the ropes holding me still.

I’ve never been this needy, but nobody has taken me to such a pleasurable place, where it feels like my life hangs in the balance of whatever comes next.

“Yes, the pill,” I grunt, struggling to get him inside. There is nothing standing between us. Why is he hesitating?

”There’s too much risk,” he mutters, seemingly to himself, his brow furrowed like he’s struggling. “I’ll have to settle for this.”

“Oh, my god!” My cry echoes through the room when he presses his head against my needy hole but goes no further.

Nerve endings sizzle and dance, the tension strong enough to drive me out of my skull. “More! Please! Please, I need you to fuck me.”

“Just the tip,” he mutters over my cries, teasing me before moving back to the folds around my clit.

It’s not the same, but it’s just as good—maybe better, since the friction he creates, combined with his grunts of pleasure, sends me racing toward the edge of the cliff. My body doesn’t care about right or wrong. All it wants is more.

Jerking his hips, he drives himself up and down the length of my sopping pussy. “I can’t even describe how beautiful you look tied to the bed at my complete mercy.” He’s breathing hard, losing himself the way I am. “Give it to me. Give me that orgasm, Bianca. Come for me.”

I’m going to. I’m so close, my muscles contract, my body tensing until I seize up—then shatter, screaming wordlessly in the wake of my release after so much tension. Waves of bliss wash over me while I writhe helplessly and croak the only word I can think of. “Callum! Callum!”

A rush of warmth startles me out of my haze. I open my eyes and look down the length of my torso to find him coming again, this time on my stomach. He’s coating it in his sticky fluid.

I don’t understand the swell of pride the sight brings me. How right it feels for him to mark me with his release. Like he owns me.

He does.

He swipes a hand through his cum, and I watch with amazement as he rubs it in like lotion all across my pussy. Marking me further. Making sure there’s no cleaning him off me.

Our eyes meet, and he offers a ghost of a grin. “Mine. All mine.”

I nod, caught up in the moment. Fascinated by him. Wanting him all over again.

“Such a good girl. You trusted me. Turns out I might make an obedient girl out of you after all.” His smile warms me to the tips of my toes.

I wish I could let his voice soothe me into relaxation, but now that the crazy rush of yearning has passed, there’s nothing but cold, hard reality in its wake, and I’m reminded of my betrayal. Tatum would kill me if she found out. This would destroy our friendship.

“Are you sure this is right?” I hate myself for asking, but I have to. I can’t pretend we’re the only people in the world.

His lips gather in a thin line of what has to be disappointment. I brace myself for his anger—I should’ve waited until he untied me—but all he says is, “Stop doubting yourself. Are you an adult, Bianca?”

“Yes.”

He keeps rubbing, almost massaging his jizz into my skin. “Do you want this?”

I don’t have to think about it. “Yes.”

He nods slowly before meeting my gaze, unblinking. “Then it doesn’t matter whether this is right or wrong. All that matters is what we want.”

I mull it over while he unbuckles my restraints. All that matters is us. Is that true? I can’t believe how much I want it to be.

“How do you feel?” He takes my chafed wrist in both hands and rubs it tenderly, his thumb tracing the pink line the leather left behind. “Does this hurt?”

“Not really, no.” I smile.

“Fucking perfect.” He presses his lips to my wrist before leaning down and, to my surprise, brushing his mouth against mine. His kiss is gentle and sweet, but enough to set my soul on fire. He sinks his hands into my hair and cradles my head, his tongue sweeping the seam of my lips, tantalizing but stopping short of plunging inside.

“Let me hold you,” he whispers, peppering tiny kisses over my mouth. “Please.”

Our eyes meet, and we share a smile before he pulls back the duvet, and I scurry underneath it. He follows, stretching out on his back and holding his arms out to me.

Nothing in the world could stop me from settling against his firm chest, resting against him, and closing my eyes as his arms encase me. Arms as strong as I knew they would be. For the first time in days, it’s easy for me to relax. As much as I want to stay awake and savor every minute of this, the sleep I’ve missed out on since the breakup catches up to me all at once and pulls me under.

The last thing I hear is Callum whispering my name. “Bianca. My sweet Bianca.”

I’m smiling when I fall asleep.

* * *

I’M ALONE when I wake up.

Not abandoned, though. When I sit up, looking around with a sinking heart, I find a tray of food waiting on the nightstand. How did he bring it in without me waking up? I probably needed more sleep than I thought.

There’s something else besides coffee, muffins, and fruit for me to discover.

I can’t help but grin at the sight of a neatly folded gray T-shirt on Callum’s pillow. The memory of what happened to the old shirt leaves me hanging over the edge of the bed, looking for it on the floor.

It’s gone.

He wants all evidence of Lucas gone without a trace.

I bite my lip, stifling a smile as if it still feels wrong to be this happy. And that’s the only word that comes close as I pull the soft shirt over my head. It smells like him—a little spicy,

woody, with a hint of musk. I hold the fabric to my nose and breathe deeply.

I can't recall the last time I was this happy. I was so busy convincing myself my life was fine as it was that I lost sight of the basics. There's so much lost time to make up for.

I'm thinking Callum's the key to that.

Right or wrong, it doesn't matter when we're together.

I gobble down the food on the tray and sneak back to Tatum's side of the house. Nobody sees me, thank god. Then I send him a text.

Me: Thank you for the shirt.

"And I got the message," I add in a whisper, smiling and biting my lip. *He doesn't want anybody in my life but him.*

CALLUM



*I*t's official: I am the world's biggest asshole. The ultimate fuck-up. A hopeless case. Why did I do it? The question plagued me the instant I woke before dawn to the sweet weight of Bianca's head against my chest. The soft, rhythmic breathing. The sweet fragrance of her shampoo, her hair tickling my nose.

For one millisecond between sleep and awareness, I was as close to happiness as I've been in as long as I can remember. Utterly at peace, lacking for nothing. I was holding the world in my arms. What else did I need?

You stupid son of a bitch.

I'm growling at myself by the time I step onto the treadmill in the gym on the lowest level of the house. I need a good, hard run to gain clarity in a murky situation.

I've only made it murkier. This is all on me.

I program a five-minute warm-up, starting slowly to wake my muscles before picking up the speed. Maybe I can outrun my guilt.

What was "complicated" yesterday morning is now a complete and utter clusterfuck, thanks to my lack of impulse control. Not to mention my talent for talking myself into taking what I want, even if I know it's a mistake.

Though I can't bring myself to think of her as a mistake. Not when she soothes my troubled soul and silences the voices in my head. I slept better last night than I have in ages.

That still doesn't make it right.

Romero strolls in from the locker room, meeting my gaze in the reflection of the mirror across from me. I didn't even know he was down here. Most likely, he plans on getting in a workout before the long day ahead of us. He inserts his AirPods into his ears before sitting down at the Nautilus station, and I'm grateful he's not somebody who needs to talk during his workout.

In my mood, he wouldn't want to hear anything I have to say.

There's nothing worse than the morning after when the blood filling your dick has returned to your brain, where it belongs. Everything looks different in the cold light of day.

Not that I don't want her just as much as ever. No, I want her *more*. I'm greedy for her now, craving her presence even as I punish my body in penance. It isn't enough to make her come once or twice. I need her screams, her pleas. I need the sound of her moaning my name in helpless abandon.

Fuck. This isn't helping.

Gritting my teeth, I increase the speed on the belt, then bump up the incline percentage until my calves burn. Sweat rolls off me, soaking into my shirt, but I push through and grit my teeth in grim acceptance of the pain.

Will determination be enough to keep me away from Bianca? If not, the thought of my daughter will have to do. I can shrug off Bianca's fears all I want, but I won't lie to myself. My headstrong, fiery daughter will flip her shit if she ever finds out.

Certain things you just don't do. Like screwing around with your daughter's best friend, a kid half your age.

If she ever found out and if she lost it, I couldn't blame her. There is no defense for what I've done and what I long to do again.

Your daughter is more important than pussy. I told myself that before, and it was always true. But those were

meaningless one-night stands. Sometimes, it was an excuse to make sure things didn't go further than they should.

The thought of my daughter, my priority, will not work this time because Bianca means more than a one-night stand. I can't kid myself into thinking of her as mere pussy.

The girl is imprinted on my soul. No matter what happens after this, there will never be a day I don't want her.

Run. Push. Don't stop now, you pussy. Right, because now is the time for self-discipline. Not last night, when I should have left her alone instead of being hell-bent on punishing her for hiding from me.

What happens now? Eventually, I'll pull my usual bullshit once my feelings for her activate every one of my fears. The old betrayals, those scars I told Bianca about. She thinks I'm beyond getting burned? She has no idea what I've withstood.

And those scars—the fears and distrust that came from them—are what will break her heart. They'll make me push her away. Sure, she'll try to hang on for a while because it's the sort of person she is. She doesn't give up.

Then I'll push harder until she has nothing left to hold on to. Eventually, I'll win because I always do. And I'll be just one more piece of shit who used her and threw her away. Even if that isn't how I'll mean it, that's how she'll see it.

My feet pound against the treadmill, sweat flying, my fists clenched tight in determination. Catching sight of my reflection in the mirror, my lip curls in a snarl.

Run, you stupid fuck. Does it hurt? Good. It's what you deserve.

Because you're going to hurt her, and you fucking know it, but it's not enough to stop you.

Selfish.

Careless.

Weak.

I punch the *Stop* button not a moment too soon, my legs close to giving out after so much punishment, my body pushed to the limit.

The belt slows, and so do I, until finally, the machine comes to a stop. My chest and shoulders heave, and I step off and bend at the waist, hands on my knees. My lungs are on fire, and my muscles are screaming.

The exertion did nothing to clear my head.

“I’m glad you stopped.” Romero hands me a bottle of water. “I was starting to worry about you up there.” He tosses me a towel, which I snatch out of the air with one hand.

We fall in step on our way to the coffee station outside the locker room, where I set up an espresso pod, hoping to guzzle a latte and focus my out-of-control thoughts. It normally does the trick, though my hopes aren’t high. This isn’t a normal case of distraction or overwhelm.

“I noticed you added another item to today’s itinerary, but didn’t include a description.” So that’s why he’s up my ass. I should’ve known it had to do with work.

“That’s what I was talking about yesterday,” I explain. “The work I needed you to stick around for. A contractor who’s been gathering intel for me is coming to visit today.”

When he winces, I add, “I’m not squeezing you out. I needed somebody who wouldn’t be recognized.”

“By whom?”

I growl softly at the suspicion in his voice. “I’m not talking about it right now. If it makes you feel any better, I want you around for the meeting.”

All he does is grunt, telling me he understands my reasoning but doesn’t have to like it.

I don’t pay him to like it. He gets paid to do a job.

I can’t bring myself to care about his bruised ego when my obsession with Bianca weighs on my mind. Commanding my attention, my every thought. Knowing she’s here, so close, and that all it would take is a visit to my room to wake her with my

kiss and touch. I could indulge myself again in everything that makes her irresistible, and she would thank me for it.

Fuck. I need to give her up. I need to stop this before it goes too far.

Like it hasn't already.

But then I'll have no choice but to stand back while one loser after another, who thinks he's good enough for her, shoots his shot.

I'll have to suffer through knowing another man is touching her. Spreading her legs, claiming what's already mine. Believing he's worthy of her. Wiping out the memory of me.

One hand tightens around the edge of the counter, my coffee cup in the other. Everything around me goes hazy, my chest tightening while the rapid thumping of my heart fills my ears, fills the world, blocking out everything else. No. I can't let that happen. Never. I'll kill the fucker. I'll kill every single one of them. Nothing comes between me and what's mine, and Bianca most definitely qualifies. There is no fucking way I'll let her belong to anybody else.

“Boss!”

It's Romero's surprised shout and not the splash of hot coffee that startles me out of the tunnel vision of rage. I look down to realize I've squeezed the plastic travel cup hard enough to crack it, and now my latte is dripping off the counter and onto the floor.

“I'm fine,” I mutter, grabbing a handful of napkins to mop up the mess I caused. One more mess to add to the pile.

“Are you sure you're okay? You're a little...” My eyes cut his way in time to find him grimacing like he wishes he hadn't said anything. “Distracted.”

“Like I said, I'm fine. I do, however, need a shower.” My drink now ruined, I abandon the idea in favor of heading for the showers.

Men like me don't believe in love, but possession? *Fuck yes.* And Bianca is mine. There's no doubt in my fucking mind as I strip down and turn on the shower. I will never allow another man to touch her now that I've marked her.

I'm caught between lust and the need to keep her at my side. I can't hurt her like the others. I won't. Tying her to me needs to be the next step if I hope to avoid a very bloody, very murderous future.

She is going to be mine in every way that matters.

* * *

"MR. TORRIO, this is an incredibly generous donation." Commissioner Ramsey stares at the check I've handed over, one with many zeros involved. "We're all speechless."

"I'm not asking for an acceptance speech, Commissioner," I remind him with a bland smile, reaching across my desk to shake his hand. "Only your acceptance." Along with an unspoken caveat: *Leave me and my men the fuck alone.*

Not that I have anything against charitable causes, but funding the city is one of the worthiest causes in my estimation. If I can kill two birds with one stone, though, so much the better.

"You certainly have that." His grip is firm, but he can't stop glancing at the check like he wants to be sure it's real.

"I'm sure the city can put all those millions to good use."

"No doubt. This is enough to fix many of the problems within the city."

"It's nothing. I'll do whatever I can do to help." I stand, buttoning my jacket and rounding the desk while Romero opens the office door. "Please, let me know if there's more I can do. I'm always eager to be of service to you men and women in blue."

He turns his face away from mine, but not in time that I miss his knowing smirk. We're not kidding each other. We

both know what this is all about. Money is money, and the city needs it. There isn't a principle in this world strong enough to overcome the power of cash. Corruption is everywhere. You just have to look between the lines.

I sit down while Romero sends the commissioner on his way, guided by one of my guards. What a relief to have that over with. I can drop the pretense of friendliness, when I'm feeling anything but friendly.

"It looks like your next meeting is a few minutes early." Romero stands close to the desk, lowering his voice while glancing through the open door. "Marco told me a Joe Smith is waiting to see you."

His name isn't Joe Smith, but we both know that. It's too obvious a pseudonym to be anything. "Show him in."

"Are you going to tell me who he is, or do I have to find out on the fly?"

Fair enough. "I have him watching Amanda."

Understanding washes over him before he squares his shoulders and strides toward the door, gesturing for the man to join us.

We've only met in person once, years ago, but he made enough of an impression to stick in my memory. At first glance, he could be any middle-aged dad wandering a home improvement store in his straight-leg jeans, polo shirt, ball cap, and white sneakers.

Immediately, I have to respect his reasoning. To be an effective investigator and hitman, you don't walk around looking like a villain. You want to make yourself as unmemorable as possible.

I can tell Romero doesn't quite know what to make of him while patting him down, which Joe takes in stride before taking an offered seat on the opposite side of my desk.

"Would you like coffee or water?"

"No, thank you. I'm sure you have a busy day ahead." He clears his throat before diving in. "I've got info. Over the past

few weeks, she's stuck to her regular routine. Visits to the gym, the nail salon, the spa. Brunches with girlfriends on the weekend, dinner out a few nights a week. There's been nothing promising."

"Fuck. I was afraid of that," I muse, sitting back and tenting my fingers under my chin.

"In a situation like this, I normally recommend one of two courses of action." I nod for him to continue. "One, we place temptation in front of her. There are a handful of willing young men I use for jobs like this. You want to get her in a compromising position; you can't go wrong with that."

"And the other?"

"You give me the go-ahead, and I'll eliminate the problem. Easy. Simple."

Romero's grunt reveals his surprise.

"I don't want to take it that far," I decide, ignoring his reaction. I'm surprised Joe would leap to that conclusion so early in the process of attempting to blackmail my ex, but I can't fault him for it. I asked him for options. "My daughter would never forgive me if she found out. All I need is material strong enough to get her to sign those damn papers."

"Fair enough." I know I must be imagining what seems like disappointment in Joe's voice. He wants to kill her. Well, I can't pretend I've never entertained the thought.

It's a quick meeting, and his efficiency is one more thing to appreciate.

Once we're alone, Romero turns to me, and for once, he doesn't bother keeping it professional. "What the fuck?"

"I told him not to kill her."

"This is how far it's gone?"

"Of course, because it's what she wants." I snarl. "If she would let me pay her off to keep silent about the things she knows, this would all be a lot easier. But she's holding out on me, and you know it. I can't leave this loose end hanging."

Romero shakes his head. “So you hired a hitman?”

“You’re acting like you’re innocent. Let’s not pretend we haven’t both had blood on our hands.” He has no comeback for that. “I’m not in the mood to discuss morality. I have to do what I have to do.”

And that’s a good thing, since my phone buzzes with a text from Bianca. Morality has nothing to do with our interactions.

Bianca: Thank you for the shirt.

Immediately, my thumbs poise over the keyboard, and I’m prepared to demand a photo of her without the shirt on, but I pause. The last thing I need is physical evidence of what we’re doing.

Her purity stands in complete opposition to the discussion she interrupted. There’s no need to pay her off for her silence. She wants nothing from me but my dick. It’s the simplest relationship I’ve ever known. And therefore, because I’m fucked in the head, the most complex.

BIANCA



*H*ere I am, driving downtown to meet up with my new boss over lunch, where I'll sign my contract and the HR paperwork before starting my new job on Monday.

I've been looking forward to this since they offered me the position. At least, that's how I felt at first. The job was a symbol of my success. Some people in my class were still looking for jobs by the time graduation rolled around, but I was ahead of the game. As always, the good little bookworm who does everything according to the rules.

I should be grateful and happy my life is on a good course. Not wishing I was with Callum. Questioning whether last night was wrong and hoping Tatum doesn't find out and end up hating me. Forget Lucas. Tatum would be the tragic breakup I might never get over. She's the sister I never had. Is she worth losing, even for somebody as incredible as her dad?

Incredible and hot and oh, so good at making me burn for him. Hours later and miles from his bed, my pussy moistens at the memories of last night. I was helpless against the feelings he evoked in me. In his arms, I felt warmth and happiness.

I already wanted him before, but knowing how much he's wanted me in return makes it impossible to think about anything but him. I even second-guessed taking a shower this morning, because I didn't want to wash his scent off me. I'm that far gone. It's almost sick.

And I love it, crave it. There must be something wrong with me. Why didn't I ever feel this way with Lucas?

Stupid question. Everything was always about him, all the time.

As I slide into an empty parking spot on the lowest level of the garage, I sigh. What's the use of being so happy about Callum if everything else in my life is going down the shitter? I was already dissatisfied as it was, but it's harder than ever to pretend otherwise. I don't have many options. I need to shake this off fast. I can't skip the meeting, and I can't turn down the job. All those things are career suicide that would leave me broke and begging my dad for a place to live. Never mind how disappointed he would be, and there isn't much I hate worse than disappointing him.

The phone's sudden ring makes me yelp—I was that zoned out.

“No way,” I whisper, my eyes widening at the word DAD flashing on the screen.

If I was superstitious, I would swear he could read my mind. Not like I haven't wondered whether he could throughout my life, but especially after we lost Mom. He knew what I was thinking before I thought about it, always watching, listening, and anticipating.

He lost his wife and couldn't handle the idea of losing someone else again. My face goes hot, and my stomach drops like on the way down the first hill on a roller coaster.

He can't know about Callum and me. There is literally no way he knows about it. And somehow, my hackles have risen. I need to get a grip before answering, or else I'll end up making him suspicious. I've never been a good liar, and he's a detective for a reason.

At least I have an excuse to get off the phone quickly.

“Hey, Dad,” I say after accepting the call and turning on the speakerphone. “You caught me on my way in to sign the last of the paperwork at the firm.”

“Don't let me keep you.” Pride resonates in his voice and echoes through the car. “I only wanted to check in and see how you're doing and if you're excited about the new job?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be.” And why not? I’ve spent the past four years preparing for this next step in my career.

“Your mom would be so proud of you,” he murmurs.

The man has a talent for knowing just what to say to make me feel like a complete piece of shit. Even if he doesn’t mean to or realize it.

“I hope she would be,” I whisper, closing my eyes before touching the back of my head to the seat. Of all times, the memory of being tied to Callum’s bed pops up.

She wouldn’t be so proud if she knew about that.

“Is everything okay with you?” Because I need to change the subject. It’s already tough enough to be the single shining star in my father’s life, feeling like there’s a spotlight on me at all times. I know I’m lucky—some people don’t have any sort of relationship with their parents, much less a loving one. It’s just that there have been more times than I can count when his love has felt more like smothering.

“Just fine.” I can almost see him at his desk, which I’d bet anything is covered in used coffee cups from the truck down the street from the station. He lives on caffeine, especially when he’s deep in the middle of a case. That would explain how tight his voice sounds.

He’s not much better at lying than I am.

“It doesn’t sound so fine. You sound tired and stressed.”

An irritable sigh tells me I’m right. “Eh, you know how it is. Sometimes you spend weeks or months on a case and get nowhere, then something breaks, and you’re fighting to keep your head above water when all the new information comes pouring in.”

“That sounds like a good problem. It means you’re on the right track.”

“Yes. Yes, it does, and I think I am.”

“Don’t let me keep you from it,” I joke, eyeing the door leading from the garage into the building. “I’d better get moving. Can’t be late before I’ve even started the job.”

“Get in there and show them what you’re made of.”

“I’m signing papers, Dad. Not actually starting.”

“Then use good penmanship.”

I’m laughing as I end the call, and even though my stomach sank at first, I’m glad his timing worked out like it did. Before I pulled into the garage, I was feeling lower than I realized. And I don’t know why. I have everything to feel happy and hopeful about.

Even the breakup, which I now realize I didn’t confess to Dad. *Great.* He’s going to take it the wrong way when he finds out it took days to tell him my longtime relationship ended.

Note to self: find a new apartment ASAP. When I tell him, it’ll go easier if I already have a place to live. Less chance of him trying to move me into my old bedroom.

He would never understand this temporary arrangement, so it’s best if I don’t try to explain it to him. It won’t matter to him that I live in an entirely different wing of the house. I’m staying under the roof of a man closer to his age than mine, and Tatum’s in Europe, so we don’t have a chaperone or whatever. His brain might explode if he finds out.

So he can’t. Ever.

The clock is ticking, so I hurry out of the car and into the building, pep-talking myself the entire time. Out of the elevator pours a group of people around my age, probably on their way to lunch at one of the cafes peppering the business district.

I’ll be one of them soon.

I feel nothing but boredom at the idea. No exhilaration, no eagerness to get started. *Shake it off, damn it.*

Once I reach the tenth floor, I step up to the desk across from the elevator doors. “I’m here to see Eric Adams. We have a twelve-thirty appointment.”

Once the perky girl behind the desk announces me through her headset and offers me a seat while I wait, I take a slow look around the open, sunny reception area. People walk past,

carrying folders and tablets. A couple of guys discuss last night's baseball game while they wait for the elevator.

They'll be my coworkers in a few days. I wonder if they ever question their choices. Everybody does, I guess, but we get through it. We honor our choices, and this was my choice. I need to follow through with it.

Twenty minutes later, sitting in Eric Adams' office—the largest corner office on the floor, even nicer than Callum's office at home—I have to grind my teeth together to smile through the anecdotes about recent studies and reports by the firm's managerial team.

“You need to have a sharp eye and a quick mind,” he points out over his loaded salad. “But you've proven you possess both. I truly think you're going to do great things here. And certainly, you'll have all the support you need to fulfill your potential. That's one thing we pride ourselves on.”

It's when he slides a thick folder full of benefits details my way that I see he's not kidding around. I already knew the firm had a great benefits package, or else I wouldn't have accepted the job. That was another reason I knew I'd be an idiot not to snap up the chance.

Now, with everything in front of me in black and white, I could kick myself for the vague sense of disappointment still clinging like a cheap perfume.

“As you can see, we offer four weeks paid vacation, a minimum of one week of sick time with an additional day for every six months employment. Your medical insurance is fully covered from day one. We offer 401K matching, as well as a profit-sharing program once you've reached three years with us.”

“This is really impressive.” I flip through, scanning the pages, before coming to the section on maternity leave.

He notices and clears his throat. “Somewhere down the line, that might be of interest to you. Then again, what do I know?” His laughter is friendly, if awkward, as he pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose. He seems like a nice,

middle-aged man, if socially clueless. But it's not like we have to be best friends or anything like that.

“Six months paid leave?” It sounds too good to be true.

“And you can use your vacation time along with that to extend it.” He shrugs at my surprise. “We offer onsite daycare, too. We have a tuition reimbursement program if you want to continue your education. The sky's the limit. We believe in taking care of our people.”

I'm too overwhelmed to do much more than laugh. “I can see that.”

And I'm a complete moron. I'm sitting here with a job most people would kill for. I won't have to worry about anything. The pay is great. I could get my master's on their dime. And when the time comes to start a family, I'll have their support.

Do I want to sign the contract? Not really.

I'm supposed to be mature and always level-headed. But the stories he tells about analyzing numbers on a spreadsheet bore the hell out of me. If he didn't seem so excited by them, I might not care as much. There must be something wrong with me if I can't see what makes this job so interesting.

Maybe there's something I'm not getting yet. Maybe I need to get started before seeing what makes it special. If not, it'll be a matter of adjusting my attitude.

Oh, no. My heart sinks when the truth hits me in the middle of another boring anecdote. It's like Lucas all over again. I'm talking myself into it.

But this isn't the same as convincing myself to stay with a boyfriend who doesn't make me happy. How many people are actually happy with their work? That's why it's called work and not play.

It's childish of me to think I'm special.

When he slides the contract my way, I pick up the pen and sign my name before doubt can stop me. This is for the best. Feeling bored but secure is better than being unemployed and

too stressed to enjoy my life. That's what I need to keep in mind, and it's what helps me smile genuinely when I stand and shake his hand. It's a lot easier to be happy when you've got money in the bank, and you know you won't lose your job if you get sick.

This is real life, not some fantasy world where everybody gets what they want.

Though I did get Callum, didn't I? Even though it won't last, at least one secret dream came true. I guess good things don't have to last forever to matter. Is this a life lesson or something?

For the second time today, my phone rings at exactly the wrong time. In this case, I'm heading back to my car, goosebumps beginning to cover my arms and legs when I think about getting back to the house, back to Callum. I know he'll be busy, but what happens tonight, when it's just the two of us alone in that big house?

Looking at my phone, I realize it isn't Dad calling to make sure I remembered how to spell my name when the time came. The guilt rises when I discover Tatum's name on the screen. I should be happy to hear from her. It's the first time she's called since she left for France, even so, I'm afraid the slightest tremble in my voice will give me away. Who could have imagined how much would change over the course of a handful of days?

I can't think about that now.

"Bonjour!" I chirp, forcing myself to forget my guilt for her sake. "How many pastries have you eaten so far?"

"Too many," she confesses. "I'm going to need a juice cleanse when I get back."

I can hardly believe how glad I am to hear her voice, even if she sounds distracted. "That sounds like a wonderful trip to me."

Once I slide into the car, I set the phone down and turn on the speaker before starting the engine. "How is everything? You haven't sent me any pictures. You haven't even updated

your Insta.” I thought for sure she’d be posting nonstop, but the last images date back to her sitting in the jet.

“Are you stalking me?” A laugh meets my ears, but I don’t buy it. It could be paranoia, assuming everybody has a secret to hide since my secret is big enough to consume my every thought. But I’ve known Tatum long enough to hear the difference in her voice. There’s a distinction between when she’s happy and when she’s pretending to be happy.

All I can remember is how upset she was when she got to the club after the fight with Kristoff. Maybe I’m being overly concerned.

“How am I supposed to survive if I can’t live vicariously through you from pictures on social media?”

“I’ve been too busy to even think about it.”

Lie. It’s a lie. I know it, and she knows it. I don’t want to get into a fight, so I won’t challenge her.

“Well, stop being so busy. I’ve been dying to get a tour of your rental. Anyway, is everything else okay? I want something pretty to look at when I start the cubicle phase of my life.”

“Shit, you were supposed to go in today, weren’t you? I forgot all about it.”

“You’re on vacation—that could have something to do with it, and I’ll save you the boring stuff. Everything went well.” Even if I already regret signing on the dotted line. She doesn’t need to know that, along with a lot of other things.

“Outside of your boring job starting soon, how are you? I hope my dad isn’t bothering you too much.”

A fist squeezes my heart until I’m sure it will burst. I don’t know how much more guilt I can handle. “Everything’s good.”

I woke up in his bed this morning. Last night, I fell asleep in his arms. I swallowed his cum. But yeah, everything is peachy.

Christ, how am I supposed to live with this?

There's noise in the background. Kristoff's voice. It gets muffled—she must put her hand over the phone—but I can hear the tension. He's being pissy as usual. Even on another continent, he's acting like a whiny baby.

And he's the reason she sounds so weird. I feel it in my bones.

“I need to go,” she says in a rush. “I'll call you soon.”

She hangs up before I can say goodbye. It might be for the best since I'm afraid I'll end up saying something she doesn't need to know. Let something stupid slip. She's too smart to miss it. So, it's better if we don't talk right now, but that can't last forever. I need my best friend, and it sounds like she needs me too.

CALLUM



What the fuck is taking Bianca so long to get home from work?

Okay, it's an irrational thought. One physical encounter, and suddenly I think she owes me an answer to every single thing. I'm an idiot.

The past few days have strained my self-control to the breaking point. The push-and-pull, the fight between wanting her more than anything and wanting what's best for her, means unbearable tension between us. Knowing how easy it is to bend her to my will has me struggling not to take her against the counter every time we cross paths in the kitchen.

Every time I resist, she consumes more of my consciousness. I can barely think of anything but her.

Today was her first day at her new job, but there's no reason for her to stay late. It takes half an hour to get from town at this time of night, yet the beat-up Corolla she drives is still missing.

And I'm ready to rip some fucking heads off.

"Romero!" My bark brings him from his smaller office across the hall in record time. "How many overdue accounts are still on the books?"

He frowns, tablet in hand. "I don't know off the top of my head." His finger flies over the screen.

"Go find out. I want a list of names by the end of the day." Because I want an excuse to hurt somebody. I'm ready to

crawl out of my skin, and cracking skulls always does the trick of calming me down. Grinding my molars, the question lingers. *What's taking her so long?*

Has she met somebody? Did some douchebag kid offer to take her out and give her the lowdown on office politics? Once Romero's on his way across the hall, I blow out a shaky breath and stare at the security feed on my screen like it will somehow bring her home. I need her home. I'm obsessed. Why am I so obsessed? Fuck, this is only her first day on the job. I don't know how I'm supposed to get through this torture every single day.

My gaze lands on the cell sitting on the desk. I could text her and tell her to come home. She always responds well to being told what to do. Why am I torturing myself?

Relief floods me when headlights sweep across the courtyard. I hate how weak I am for this girl. I hate how everything suddenly seems better, brighter, sweeter now that she's where she belongs.

Still, I pick up my phone.

Me: Report to my office immediately. We have some things to discuss.

I won't make it the rest of the night without touching her and breathing her sweet scent into my lungs. The hours spent apart are like a knife to the chest, and that only makes me want her more. She is the only thing that can ease the pain.

I pour myself a drink while waiting and enjoy the first sip of scotch, letting it warm me from the inside out. It isn't long before soft footsteps ring out down the hall. She might as well be running, and all because of a text. Only we know the truth. That it's me she belongs to, that she's rushing to. Nobody else.

Rounding the doorway, her perfectly pouty mouth pops open like she's about to ask a question. I hold a finger to my lips, and she snaps it shut. So eager to do as she's told. My cock hardens.

"Close the door and lock it," I order.

She twists the lock into place while I return to my desk and place my glass on the surface.

“Come here now,” I murmur, and as she joins me, I take in her simple black dress and sweater. She’s covered from tits to knees, so I can’t accuse her of tempting a lowlife intern with her body.

Her gaze fills with apprehension. She does not know my irritability has to do with my desire for her and the fact that she was gone for so long. “What’s wrong?” she finally whispers as she sets her purse down. “Is Tatum okay?”

I wish she wouldn’t bring her up at a time like this. “What took you so long to get home?”

Her eyelids flutter. “There was traffic.”

“So you weren’t hanging out with your coworkers?” Before she can take a breath, my hand is skimming halfway up her dress. “Or flirting with some intern who only wishes he could do this to you?”

The sweetest sigh falls from her lips, and she presses against the desk when her legs go weak. Power fills every cell in my body. This is what my touch does to her. She’s melting like butter in a hot pan. Only I can do this to her. Nobody else, and I won’t let her forget it.

I work the fabric up around her waist before setting her on the edge of the desk, then I move between her thighs. Fuck, she is so beautiful and ready for me. I move her white panties to the side with my fingers and am greeted with a flood of arousal. She’s drenched, her bare pussy glistening. The juices coat her lips, and my mouth waters. I trace the seam of her pretty pussy, wanting to taste her. I need to touch her. I’m fucking gone for this woman.

“Have you been thinking about giving this pussy to anybody else?” I whisper, savoring her gasp when I slide a finger deep inside her silky heat. Her cunt grips it, greedy for more.

“No.” She sighs.

Such a fucking pretty pussy. I can't help it. I add a second finger, stretching her tight channel. Her helpless moans are like music washing over me. She fights to hold them back, her lips pressing together to hide her pleasure.

“None of those little boys in the office?”

“Never.” Her head falls back, and her chest heaves. “Never.”

“You're fucking right. Because this belongs to me. You belong to me.” Her pussy is dripping, her arousal coating my hand.

“Yes. I do.” I'm not sure if she knows what she's saying. She's too deep in what she's feeling. It's her pussy doing the talking.

It doesn't mean she's wrong. She's mine.

Her pussy rocks to meet my strokes. “Oh... Callum...”

“Shh.” Leaning over her, I press my palm to her mouth while I continue to finger-fuck her with the other. “You don't want anybody to know our little secret, do you?”

Giving her head a light shake, her eyes bulge a moment before they roll back. All I can do is smile. She's under my complete control. I know what she needs. She needs a man to dominate her. Nothing gets her wetter than being told what to do and how to do it. She seems to like it best when I take away her choices and force her to accept what I'm offering. She fucking loves it. No wonder she's always been drawn to me.

The way I've been drawn to her.

“Come on my fingers,” I whisper, running my tongue over the sensitive flesh below her ear. “Get them good and wet so I can lick them clean.”

She lets out a pitiful whimper, jerking her hips faster. Chasing her high, working herself closer and closer to the edge. I can feel her tightening around me, and I wish like hell my cock was inside of her right now, getting ready to feel her explode.

“Fuck, your pussy is so tight. My cock is envious of my fingers right now.” I work my fingers faster and harder, rubbing that sweet spot and scissoring the digits.

“Boss?”

Fuck. My heart lurches in my chest, and I go still. Romero, of all the fucking times. My fingers are still inside her, gripped by her clenching muscles. She was so close. “Yeah?” I grunt.

The knob rattles. “What’s going on? I have those names you wanted.”

“Can it wait?” I croak. Bianca’s gone still, her orgasm forgotten. She’s too busy staring up at me, looking to me for direction. The fear of being caught shines in her eyes.

“You said you needed these names by the end of the day. Now it’s okay to wait? Are you sure you’re okay?” He tries the knob again. *Fucking bastard.* He’s not going to stop until he sees me.

“Under the desk, quick,” I whisper, backing away while wiping my fingers on my pants. I’m pissed I didn’t get to lick them clean like I wanted.

“What?” she whispers, but I’m already shoving her beneath the desk. After hesitating a second, she crawls on her hands and knees until she’s disappeared. I toss the purse after her. There’s no evidence she was ever here.

Meanwhile, Romero hasn’t given up. The doorknob continues to jingle. “I will kick this fucking door down.”

“For fuck’s sake, give me a minute!” Once she’s set, I cross the room and unlock the door, but leave it closed. “Jesus Christ, give a man the chance to get his shit together before you break the door down.”

“You don’t normally lock the door.”

I sink into my chair, then ease it partly underneath the desk. There’s more than enough room for both my legs and Bianca. She squeezes between them, sitting like an angel.

Is she thinking what I’m thinking? My cock thickens again after only just going soft. She’s shown me a side of her I didn’t

know existed. How far can I make her go?

Romero's eyes dart around the room before he comes to a stop in front of me. "Everything okay?"

"What's with the concern? I needed a little privacy. Privacy that you invaded, by the way."

"Understood." Though he looks unconvinced. "I've been going through the accounts like you asked."

My molars grind together at the touch of small hands on my thighs. She can read my mind, after all. "And?" I grit out as her hands creep higher. There I was, thinking she was a good girl. My little bird likes to play dirty.

"And you were right. There are more than a few that need settling." He passes me the file. "Printed are the names and balances."

"Overdue?" I can't concentrate on numbers when soft hands are stroking my inner thighs, teasing my growing bulge. This little minx.

"These are the guys we gave a warning to last month. I think we should pay them another visit and collect what we can."

I glance up from the names and addresses. Romero's stone-faced, the way he should be. This isn't the first time we've had this conversation. But it is the first time we've had it with Bianca hiding under my desk, playing with my cock. She rubs her palm over my dick, and blinding pleasure zings through me. I can hardly breathe for wanting her mouth on me.

"Possibly," I grunt. "We can decide on that later."

"Later?" His brows furrow. "We're talking about a lot of money. Two of them, we already gave extensions. They knew what they were doing when they borrowed—"

"Enough!" I growl, my voice booming. Bianca's touch freezes while Romero's head snaps back. "Since when do you tell me how to manage my business? Thank you for bringing me the info I requested. That is your job. It is not your job to tell me how to handle things after that point."

“Pardon me if I’m overstepping, but any other day you would usually be halfway to the car, ready to blow some brains out if they didn’t pay up.”

Bianca’s hands settle like lead on my legs. She hasn’t moved. *Motherfucker*. I’ve spent years doing everything in my power to keep Tatum out of this. She’s not a stupid girl—far from it—but I believe she’s in the dark on the finer points of what I do. That’s blown to shit now that Bianca has heard what Romero said. My chest tightens, and my vision goes hazy. I’m going to lose my shit if this conversation continues.

“We’ll need to talk about this later,” I mutter, glaring at him. I’ve always been able to rely on him to know when it’s the best time and place to discuss these things and to pick up on when I’m not in the fucking mood to talk. I’m surprised he would choose this very moment to let me down.

As if intuition has finally hit him, he mumbles, “Fair enough. Let me know what you decide, and I’ll be ready.”

I give him a tight nod and watch as he walks out of the room.

I back the chair away from the desk, staring at the wall across from me. “You can come out now,” I mutter, careful to keep my voice low. She wouldn’t flip her shit over this. I need to believe she’s got too much sense.

She’s in no hurry to crawl out. I bet she’s afraid of me. *Who could blame her?* There are lesser men that I’ve made piss their pants. And after what she just heard, I’m positive her view of me has changed.

My gut goes tight once understanding settles in my bones. She keeps her gaze on the floor, leaving her hair hanging in front of her face like a curtain. By the time she gets to her feet, she’s trembling.

“I…”

When she doesn’t continue, my resolve hardens. This, whatever we’re doing, is a mistake. Not only for myself, but for her as well. I can’t drag her into my darkness. I can’t taint

her. I'd never forgive myself if something happened to her because of me. Protecting Tatum is hard enough.

"Well, now you know." I lean back in the chair, folding my arms across my chest. "You know the monster staring at you, the one who just had his fingers deep inside your pussy."

She winces and folds her arms across her stomach. "But you don't actually do stuff like that, right? You just get mad and threaten people until they give you what you want?"

I almost laugh but bite it back. So fucking naive. I can't believe she thinks all I do is threaten people. "Who do you think I am?"

For the first time, she glances at me through the curtain of hair hanging alongside her face. "What?"

Sometimes you have to rip the Band-Aid off. It's time she faces the facts and sees me as the man everyone else sees me as. The man I am. Maybe then she'll run far enough away that I can't touch her.

"Did I mumble, Bianca? Exactly who do you think I am? Do you think this is a game? That I sit here behind a desk all day and shuffle papers and send emails and run the business you read about in financial magazines?"

"I know who you are."

"Then why do you look so surprised? And why would you ask such a silly question?" When her brows lift, I remind her. "You asked if I actually do things like that and assumed I don't. What if I do?"

When I propel myself from the chair, she backs away, bumping against the desk, sliding along it, trying to get away from me. That's exactly what I need, fear, even if it's the last thing I want to see on her delicate face.

"Where are you going?" My hand shoots out, grasping her throat, holding her in place against the corner of the desk. I loom over her, bending her back as she gasps for air. My fingers flex against her slim throat. It wouldn't take much effort to end her. Now that she knows the truth, she's a liability. Killing her isn't an option. But I can scare her.

I have to do this, even if my heart says otherwise. Here I am, with hundreds of thousands of dollars owed to me and heads I need to crack open to get it, and I sat here caring more about her overhearing my business details. She's a distraction. That's all.

But she's not; she's more. My subconscious reminds me I care about her, her safety, and what she thinks of me. Instead of the fact she could expose the truth to Tatum. It's something I hadn't thought about before. I grit my teeth, my jaw tense. We can't continue this. It has already gone too far.

You can't stay away from her, asshole. You're obsessed. I ignore my inner monologue.

"You wanted to be close to me?" I snarl, smiling when her features pinch with pain. "You wanted to know me? Congratulations, this is me. You got what you wanted."

Her blue eyes well with tears, and her chin trembles, but all that does is make me tighten my grip. I have to ignore her tears, ignore her pain.

"You wanna know the truth? If you weren't here, I would be on my way to visit those fuckers who owe me money. They knew what they were getting into when they borrowed from me. They knew the terms, and like everyone who needs money in a pinch, now that it's time to pay up, they don't want to live up to those terms."

"You're hurting me," she croaks, bracing herself against the desk, using the other to push at my hand. *I have to.* Her nails sink into my flesh, leaving behind little crescent-shaped marks. I relish in the sting of pain that follows.

"That's right. Because that's what I fucking do." I lean in until our noses touch. There's so much fear in her eyes. I think she's finally waking up, finally seeing the monster beneath the expensive suit. "I hurt people. And I don't stop there, either. Do you want to know how many men I've killed, Bianca?"

Tears spill over her lashes and roll down her cheeks.

"I thought you wanted to know me," I whisper when she doesn't reply. "Wasn't that what you said? You just want to be

close to me. Well, this is who I am. Sometimes, you need to be careful what you wish for, because you might get more than you bargained for.”

“Let go of me,” she grits through her teeth. The strength in her voice causes an ache to form in my chest.

“Which is it? First, you want me, then you want me to let you go. You need to make up your mind.”

Her lip lifts in what might be anger, but I recognize the growing terror. She’s afraid she’s heard too much. That I might have to silence her for good. “I asked you to let me go,” she croaks.

That’s exactly what I need to do. To let her go, now and forever. She’s the worst thing to come into my life. The biggest liability. I can no longer kid myself. She’s wrong for me, and I’m entirely wrong for her, even if my treacherous cock and body refuse to see it.

“By all means.” I release her with a shove and sneer down my nose at her. “Get the hell away from me, and if you’re fucking smart, you’ll make sure you never find your way back into my office. Because no matter how tight your pussy is or how pretty and tempting you are, one of these days, it might be you I end up having to settle accounts with. And you won’t like how that ends. I can promise you that.”

This is it. No way will she want shit to do with me now. It’s for the best. Even her fear and her trembling chin are for the best. For both of us.

Yet, instead of running like anybody with a brain between their ears, she only stares at me, raising a hand to rub at her throat. “It isn’t true.” Her voice trembles along with the rest of her. “It isn’t.”

“Now you’re going to tell me what is and isn’t true? I gave you the chance to get the fuck out of my face—”

Her head swings back and forth. “I don’t think you want to hurt me. You’re just saying that.”

She may as well set a match to a powder keg.

I don't know what pisses me off more. How wrong she is about what I'm capable of or how she reads my mind where it pertains to her. I only know I have no choice but to grab a handful of hair and yank her head back, glaring down at her while reaching for the gun resting against my lower back.

"You're still that deluded?" I snarl, holding the pistol up for her benefit.

Her already tear-filled eyes bulge, focusing on it. She's near hyperventilation with her quick, shallow breaths. "Please..."

"Please, what?" I touch the muzzle to her cheek, and she whimpers, then shudders as I drag it over her jaw and down her neck. "Please, don't blow my brains out? It wouldn't be the first time I've done it. And accidents happen all the time. You could just as easily disappear without a trace."

"Please, don't," she pleads in a tiny squeak of a voice.

"Maybe you'd rather have it someplace else." I trace the curve of her tit, the flat plane of her stomach. She's shaking harder, her breaths coming in sharp gasps. "Is that it? You want to feel it in your pussy?"

Once I reach the hem of her dress, I work the fabric up, pressing the steel against her thigh. She goes still, and her breath catches. "What? You usually cream your panties when I touch you here."

It's like studying a work of art, watching terror take hold. I stare into her eyes as the pupils dilate until there's hardly anything left but black emptiness gazing back at me from her ghostly white face.

"I know what this is all about," I whisper in mock surprise. "You can't stand the thought of being away from my cock. That's it, right? If you really want it that bad, I could bend you over the desk and claim your sweet pussy right now. Would that make you happy?"

She remains silent, and it's not her silence I want. I tug her hair harder, forcing her to answer. "No."

"No? No to what? You don't want me to fuck you?"

“No.” Her voice is a little stronger now, but just barely.

I pull her closer one last time. The impulse to kiss her is almost too much to resist. Even now, I want her enough to make me hate her. “Then why the hell are you still here? This is your last chance. Go.” I release her again, hating myself even more.

I know she got the message loud and clear this time. Like a lamb running from the wolf stalking her, she hustles out of the office. Once she’s gone, I can breathe. The tension in my muscles releases, and I fall back into the chair, scrubbing a hand down my face. I need to get over this, to get away from her. We can’t be together or do whatever the fuck it was we were doing.

If she hates me, she hates me. That’s how it should be. How it needs to be. I’m too old for her. Too dark. Too dangerous. And I doubt she could hate me more than I hate myself right now, anyway.

BIANCA



*M*y stomach churns as I roll through the front gate, like it has every night for the past few weeks. The guards let me in without question. Everybody's used to me coming and going by now, though it's not like I was a stranger before this. They all seem happy I'm here, like this is where I belong.

Everybody except for one person, who I've barely set eyes on since that awful night in his office. The one person I can't get out of my head.

The scene replays in my mind as I stare at the house, looming larger with every turn of the wheel. I would call it a gilded cage. Only I can leave whenever I want. Dad would let me move in with him in a heartbeat, no questions asked. But that would mean exchanging one cage for another, and at least this cage gives me space and freedom... even if the freedom is an illusion. Callum might not ask a million questions and monitor my every choice, but I still feel his presence looming over me. Everything's a trade-off in the end.

Living here, I can come and go as I please without having to explain to anybody what I'm doing. *If that's the case, why do I always head straight back here after picking up something for dinner?* I could hang out with some of the people from the office. I could stop at Dad's for dinner. He's been dying to catch up on how work is going, and it's been a while since I've checked in on him. Sure, he manages to get through his days, but I have the sneaking suspicion he'd live on coffee and fast

food if there wasn't somebody around reminding him to eat a green vegetable every once in a while.

So why don't I? I could see a movie, go shopping. I could do whatever I want, and yet I choose to come straight here.

Because even though Callum has avoided me as much as I've avoided him, I can't shake the sense of being watched. Like now, as I get out of the car. The hair on the back of my neck rises. I can feel his gaze on me. Watching my every move, wondering what took me so long to get here.

Or maybe I'm just going crazy.

Around the office, I've been able to pretend that everything about my life is normal. No one has to know I spend my free time locked in the empty wing of an enormous mansion. They don't know I scurry into the house with my head down, eyes trained on the ground, before dashing to the bedroom and locking the door behind me.

They don't know I eat dinner alone at the desk in Tatum's office. Or that every night I lie in bed, staring at the ceiling, wondering if this is the night Callum comes for me. He hasn't, and maybe he won't. Maybe he was serious about wanting nothing to do with me anymore.

It would be for the best if he was. As exciting as he is, there's a difference between the sort of danger that makes my heart race and my nipples hard and how he spoke to me. The way he touched me and threatened me with that gun.

Even now, my blood runs cold at the reminder. There was a second when I thought for sure he was going to kill me because I was a liability. He wouldn't want Tatum to know for sure the sort of things he does, so I was certain—panicked, confused, horrified—he would want to shut me up permanently.

He might have calmed down since then, but I can't forget the way it felt. The terror in my veins. There was a monster staring down at me with no light in his eyes. No life. I hardly recognized him. Deep down, I knew I was in the presence of

the real Callum Torrio. A man so used to violence and intimidation that it meant nothing to threaten me with a gun.

So leave, then. God, how many times have I told myself that? There's nothing keeping me here but pride—which is ironic, considering I don't have enough pride to leave after he threatened to kill me. The more I think about it, the more confused I become, and the angrier I get with myself.

It's easier just to sit down with my salad and binge something on my laptop and wait until it's time to go to bed. My life is sleeping, going to work, and coming home to a handful of beautiful rooms that aren't actually mine.

It's not like I haven't been looking for a place. I've spent a few lunch breaks checking out apartments in the area, but my heart sinks a little further with each one. The one I looked at yesterday featured an oven that looked like it might have come from the Reagan administration and rusty bathroom fixtures even older than that. I don't think it's being picky to hope for something that will not break down on me. Another place sat between two abandoned buildings covered in graffiti. I didn't get the safest feeling, and no way could I ever have Dad visit. He'd have a stroke.

I'm doing my best to see the good in a situation that seems terrible. It'll be better once Tatum gets back. She offered to let me stay longer before she left. There's plenty of room, and I won't be alone then. It's not a permanent solution, but it is better than nothing.

Oh god, what if she expects me to spend time with her and Callum together? All it takes is a question like that to make me break out in a cold sweat. She'll want to know why things are weird, and I don't know if I could answer that question without giving away all the things I don't want her to know.

In other words, there's a speeding train bearing down on me. The horn's blare is a little louder every day, and the lights shine a little brighter the closer it comes. I wish it didn't feel like I'm tied to the tracks.

Tonight's my least favorite of the week. I used to look forward to Friday nights and having a whole weekend

stretched out in front of me. Now, there's nothing to look forward to except doing my best to avoid Callum for two days.

The windows on this end of the house look out over the grounds, but no matter how I crane my neck, I can't get a look at the driveway or courtyard. There's no way to know if he's left or not.

I guess I could always ask one of the guards who sometimes walk the halls in this wing whether Mr. Torrio is in, but I wouldn't want word to get back to Callum I'm asking about him. I'm in the middle of a chess game, basically. Always looking a few moves ahead.

It's exhausting, but it would be even more exhausting to live under Dad's roof again. I need to believe I'm making the right decision here, so I remind myself how overbearing and protective he is while I take a shower after finishing dinner.

I hesitate before opening the door leading out to the bedroom. My fingers close around the knob, but I can't bring myself to turn it. Am I afraid Callum will be waiting there for me? Or am I secretly hoping he is? I wish I knew how to feel about him.

I wish I knew how to feel about myself and the way disappointment rings in the back of my mind when I find the room empty. Nobody's waiting to punish me... or to hold me.

I pout. Does he really plan to ignore me for the rest of our lives? I could kick myself for believing he ever cared about me on a real level. How could he have if he could so easily avoid me like I never existed?

Sure, I'm avoiding him, but that's different. I didn't threaten him with a gun, for fuck's sake. It's plain stupidity to want to see him after all of that. It's bad enough I'm still under his roof, letting him provide shelter for me. I already know I have no pride. But to want him, to hope he pays me a visit in the night. It's fucked up, so fucked up.

* * *

BY SUNDAY MORNING, I can't stand it any longer. I don't feel like going out to pick up breakfast yet again, and I'm going stir-crazy. I'll scream if I have to stare at these walls for another minute.

That's what forces me out of the room and how I find myself tiptoeing across the house. Callum's usually in his office every day of the week. I doubt he'll know I left the wing. That's if he even cares.

The sunny kitchen is a tremendous improvement, and the aroma of coffee lightens my mood. I go to the cabinet and grab a mug. I'm about to pour myself a cup when the pantry door opens, and I nearly drop the carafe.

It's only Sheryl, the family cook, who looks as surprised as I am.

"Oh! I imagined you'd left by now," she says with a soft laugh. "I was checking to make sure the pantry is stocked with Miss Tatum's favorites."

"No, I'm still here. I've been spending a lot of time alone."

She arches her eyebrow. "Have you been eating?"

"I pick things up here and there," I offer with a shrug.

She scowls, but I don't think she means it harshly. "A young person like you should save your money, not waste it on cheap junk and overpriced coffee."

I laugh. "You sound like my dad."

"Your father is a wise man. Now, there's no way I'm going to let you leave this kitchen without fixing you something to eat. What would you like?"

"Scrambled eggs, maybe? I'm simple and don't want to be a pain."

"Nonsense. It's what I'm here for, and with Miss Tatum on her trip, and Mr. Torrio in and out at all times of the day, I don't have nearly enough work to keep me busy."

"Okay. If you don't mind, I think I'll take it back to my room." Because even now, I can't shake the feeling that I'm

taking a colossal risk. He could come strolling in any second, or I might run into him on my way back. Why was it such a big deal for me to come out here? I can't even remember anymore.

How long does it take to cook eggs, for god's sake?

By the time she slides the plate my way, I'm ready to run. "Thank you so much," I murmur with a tight smile before turning away and starting out for my room. This is ridiculous. I can't believe how my heart's racing, and my skin's flushed and sweaty, all because I didn't want to spend the entire weekend behind a locked door.

These had better be some damn good eggs to make it worthwhile if he finds me out here.

"Bianca."

It's not Callum's voice calling out from across the central hall that separates the two wings, thank god. Otherwise, I'd drop my breakfast all over the floor and maybe pee myself.

How can I still want him, even though the idea of running into him terrifies me? I need help.

Romero is at the other end of the hall. I wouldn't say we're friends, but I've always seen him as a decent guy. I know he's just as bad as Callum—the only difference is he's never been mean or threatened me, and he looks friendly enough as he approaches. It's Tatum he has a problem with, not me.

"How are things going?" he asks, eyeing the plate in my hand before meeting my gaze. "Is there anything you need?"

Interesting. I'm not surprised he sent Romero to do his dirty work. I don't know if I'm flattered or hurt that he wouldn't come to me himself. It's clear he cares enough to want to know if I'm doing okay. I don't know why I'm complaining. His presence would only overwhelm me. Distance is good. At least I can think clearly when he isn't around.

"Why can't he ask me himself?" I whisper, looking around him, expecting to find his boss lurking in the shadows.

“He’s very busy.”

“Sure.” I sigh. “Let him know I’m fine, and everything will be in place when Tatum returns home in a few days.”

His scowl keeps me from walking away like I want to. “She’s not coming home. I assumed she told you.”

“What? Why?” I whine, sounding like a toddler on the verge of a tantrum. I’ve been practically counting the minutes.

He rolls his eyes, smirking the way he usually does when she’s involved. “Kristoff wants to stop off in Milan to visit with family, and they’re going to swing through Rome. Her words when she spoke to Callum earlier today.”

And she didn’t call me. What if she somehow found out, and she’s mad at me? Maybe that’s why she’s avoiding coming home, because of me.

My chest hurts, and my appetite is a distant memory now. “I’ll have to call her.”

“I don’t know. She might be too busy running around the world with Daddy footing the bill.” He blinks rapidly, the lines between his brows smoothing out. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“It’s okay.” Compared to some things I’ve witnessed him saying to her, that’s nothing.

“You’d better go and eat your eggs while they’re still hot.” He offers a tight grin before backing away.

A door further down the hall swings open, and this time a familiar, breathless voice rings out. “Romero? I want to check the—”

Shit. He stares at me, his gaze cold, but there’s a trickle of something else there. My heart doesn’t freeze, as I had expected. It feels like it’s about to split open.

I only thought I knew how much I missed seeing him and hearing his deep voice. All it takes is a glimpse of his sculpted body, dressed in sweat-soaked workout clothes, and I’m imagining throwing myself at his feet and begging him to forgive me. Touch me. Want me.

Why do you hate me? What did I do?

Rather than beg him for answers, I waste no time running away from that look in his eyes. Whatever I did, he can't forgive it.

And I have no idea how much longer it will be before Tatum comes back. There's nobody to rescue me. I'll spend the rest of my day going through rental listings. Right now, I'd be happy to take four walls and a ceiling that doesn't leak. Anything, so long as it means never seeing that look in his eyes again.

A look that makes me think he wishes he'd gone through with killing me.

CALLUM



I knew there was no getting Bianca out of my head. My almost non-stop jerking off the last three weeks has done nothing but make me want her more. There isn't a workout intense enough to make me forget her, no amount of work on my plate crucial enough to wipe my mind clean.

There's never a moment when I don't crave her scent. The fresh, sweet taste of her skin. The musk of her pussy—fuck, what I wouldn't give to bury my face in it now, endorphins pumping after damn near killing myself in the gym.

She's right in front of me, with that scared rabbit look on her face. Wide eyes, slack jaw. Something about it only deepens my need, making it impossible to fight the impulse to take her in my arms and reacquaint myself with her body. Here and now.

Watching her on the security feed is one thing. It's painful enough to see her without being able to touch her, but it's the safest way to get my fix. Most of the time, I have no choice but to pull out my dick and stroke it to the sight of her getting in or out of her car.

It's fucking pathetic, but it's how things need to be. No matter how it kills me. No matter how much sleep I've lost. Every instinct screams at me to go to her, to cover her mouth with my hand and sink my cock deep into her tight, silky heat. No, better yet, I'd want to hear her. Every whisper, every whimper, every time she'd moan my name.

And she would. She'd moan my name until she went hoarse. Until tears rolled down her cheeks and her cum soaked into the sheets.

Discipline might be the most critical quality for a man in my position to possess. I couldn't have gotten this far without it. Nothing has ever tested me the way this girl does. I don't know where this hold she has over me comes from.

I don't even know for sure whether I want to break it. It's torture to want her, but the thought of being without her is unbearable.

It's enough to make me hate her, this hold she has over me. She exposes every weakness, even those I didn't know existed. I hate her for that, too.

Good thing she walks away when she does, or else I might have to make her pay for what she does to me. *Run, little rabbit, run while you can.*

Romero turns, quirking an eyebrow. I doubt he knows anything about Bianca and me. When I asked him to check on her earlier, I phrased it casually, like it was one of his normal tasks. I'd just gotten off the phone with Tatum, too, so I played it off as a stream-of-consciousness sort of thing.

I was looking forward to having her home. One more reason to stay away from Bianca, one more layer of protection. I can't fuck around with her while my kid is here. I should never have fucked around at all.

Now, her return date is vague at best. She's a pro at double-talk, running around in circles. I'll have to think about her later when I'm not so close to blowing a gasket.

"What?" I demand of Romero when he stares at me.

"Nothing. She looked scared." He glances in the direction she fled before shrugging. "Did she piss you off?"

I only shake my head. "Forget it." My throat is so damn tight, but not as tight as my shorts. It was that scared look on her face. It does things to me.

“She’s fine, if you were still wondering.” He heaves a sigh while following me to my office. “What were you going to ask when you first came up? You wanted me to check something.”

I hardly remember saying a word before seeing her. She has a way of wiping everything else out of my mind. “I want you to check on the shipment that was due to leave from the harbor overnight,” I tell him once I remember. “I didn’t receive confirmation, and they always call.”

He sighs again, only this time, there’s an edge to it. “I already called over since I didn’t get confirmation, either.” He’s so efficient. It’s almost scary.

“And?” I demand before gulping down some water.

“It didn’t go out. They called it a mix-up with the barge schedules.”

“That shipment was going down to Miami, for fuck’s sake.” My rage grows with every word until I’m sure the top of my head’s going to blow off. That shipment means a quarter of our earnings this month, not to mention the goddamn relationship with the Florida families. “Do you know how long it took to establish those relationships?”

“I was here when you established them,” he mutters. “I know. What do you want to do about it?”

“Is the shipment still down at the warehouse?”

“Supposedly, yes, and ready to go out tonight.”

I didn’t plan on doing damage control today, but that’s the nature of the job. You can’t assume when you wake up in the morning that your day will go as planned. “Let me call down to the Miami contacts and explain this. We head for the warehouse after that.”

I’m on the phone before I’ve left my office and have completed one call by the time I reach the shower. It’s not more than another twenty minutes before I’m dressed in a fresh suit and on my way out the door. Romero’s been waiting in the car for me the entire time.

This is what I needed today. Something to distract me. It's a momentary problem, nothing serious, and still early enough in the day to give them the impression we're on top of things around here, that I don't leave my partners hanging.

It's the principle of the thing that has me boiling over, ready to shed blood.

"I offered to swallow a percentage of the payment, but they denied it," I tell him as he drives us down to the harbor.

"We'll swallow it anyway," he concludes because he knows me. I'd rather lose a small percentage now than every shipment after this. I'm not about to kill the goose laying the golden eggs, and the deal I hammered out with the Florida families makes them a big fucking goose.

Even though I know we'll work this out, I'm seething. "These lax motherfuckers," I mutter, cracking my knuckles as the scenery outside the Mustang changes from spacious, tree-filled suburbs to the lower middle-class area between our side of town and the harbor area. "It's been too long since I've cracked heads."

"That's beneath you now, isn't it? The general doesn't do the work of the infantry."

His choice of words makes me laugh. "You want to take a shot at them yourself?"

"Why the fuck not?" The leather squeaks when he tightens his grip on the wheel. "It's been too long for me, too. I wouldn't mind a bit. Motherfuckers think they can do whatever they want, whenever they feel like it. Reminders need to be issued sometimes."

Of all times for Bianca's face to flash in front of my mind's eye. No matter how I want to punish these stupid, careless bastards for fucking with my revenue and reputation, I want to punish her more. She's fucked with my entire life, invaded every thought, and turned me into someone I hardly recognize.

And I still want her. With every fucking molecule in my body, I want her.

I can't have her.

My phone buzzes a few minutes from the warehouse. I expect to find one of the sons of bitches from the warehouse on the ID, but the number comes up as unlisted. "Yeah?" I grunt on answering. With the mood I'm in, I almost hope it's a telemarketer to curse the fuck out.

"Mr. Torrio. It's Joe."

Of course, a professional hitman would call from a burner phone. "Joe. Good to hear from you. I had planned to reach out sometime this week." Romero looks my way from the corner of his eye.

"I didn't want to keep you waiting." As usual, he jumps headfirst into business, and as usual, I appreciate it. "I have little to report. Our friend has been around town with a kid young enough to be her son, but that's the only recent development."

"That young?" I'm gritting my teeth hard enough that my jaw aches. Amanda, with some kid, running around in public. "Who is he?"

"I wasn't able to get a decent shot of him. It was too dark. But they were out in public, nothing sneaky, and it didn't seem romantic. I thought you'd want to know, though."

For lack of anything better to tell me, in other words. "You haven't found anything else in weeks?"

She's with a kid. A fucking kid.

Bianca is practically a kid, too.

"She's a slippery one, Mr. Torrio." He pauses, then adds, "If you feel my services have been less than satisfactory, I respect your decision."

The warehouse is in front of us now, with Romero pulling into the lot surrounding it. Between these fuckers and the fucker on the phone, I'm a hairsbreadth away from a murder charge. My chest is so tight I have to fight to draw breath.

"We'll discuss that later. I'm on my way in to a meeting. For now, stay the course." Even if the course is looking like a

pointless waste of time and money.

My phone bounces off the dash and lands on the floor while I growl out my fury. “Either this guy’s reputation was a bunch of shit, or she’s a hell of a lot smarter than I ever gave her credit for. How can he come up without a single scrap of evidence against that bitch?”

“She’s smart, like you said,” Romero muses as he puts the car in park, then reaches into the glovebox for his Glock. “Slippery. Clever.”

Yes, she is, like so many women are. There’s always something going on beneath the surface. Something they’re trying to hide. Some angle they’re working.

Not Bianca. Damn it, what the fuck am I doing thinking about her at a time like this? And what makes her any different from the rest of them? She’s nothing unique. It’s my cock that makes me want to believe that.

Ruined my life and turned me into a weak piece of shit addicted to the smell of her pussy in days. I knew it would end up like this, but I’m the stupid bastard who walked in with both eyes open.

With a furious grunt, I throw the door open and burst from the car. Normally, I’d take things easier and come in with a level head. Let them think I’m not coming in to blow their heads off for fucking me over. I don’t have it in me to pretend today.

Romero’s hot on my heels as we walk in. The sight of us causes two jean-clad men to end their smoke break out by the dock and jog into the office. Their tense whispers as we cross the warehouse floor tell me there’s no guessing why we’re paying this visit. They’re scared out of their minds.

“Chuck!” My bark echoes in the cavernous space. Looking around, I spot our crates waiting to be loaded. “What, you can’t come out and greet me? I thought we were better than that.”

The pot-bellied warehouse manager I made the mistake of putting on my payroll lumbers out of his office, mopping his

forehead with a bandana. He shoves into his back pocket before holding both hands up in surrender.

“I can explain.”

“You’d better.”

When Romero takes a step forward, I hold out an arm to bar his way. No. This one’s mine. I need this. I need to hurt someone.

Chuck’s eyes widen when I remove my jacket. “Well? Start explaining.” I hand the jacket to Romero, never taking my eyes off the man in front of me.

“It wasn’t his fault,” one of the other men offers, though he doesn’t sound like his heart’s in it. “Our software glitched or some shit, and we lost the schedule.”

“You don’t have a backup? Some safeguard in place?” I shake my head in disbelief while rolling up the sleeves of my shirt. “When we first embarked on this arrangement, you gave me every assurance there’d be no fuckups.”

“And there hasn’t been until now.” Beads of sweat roll down the man’s face. “Please, Mr. Torrio. It’ll never happen again. I swear.”

“What if they seized the crates during the extra day they’re sitting here?” I take one slow step after another while Chuck backs away. “What then? Whose ass would be on the line?”

“They’re safe!” he blurts out, his back hitting the wall.

“And how the hell do you know that?” Fisting him by the shirt, I haul his pathetic face close to mine. “You working with the Feds? Is that what you’re trying to tell me? Because that’s the only way you’d know for sure.”

The rancid stench of fear rolls off him. This pathetic, weak piece of shit. I’m sick of weak links. Empty promises. Sick of the future of what I’ve built being in the hands of those I can’t trust.

Pulling my fist back, I savor the hopeless certainty in his eyes before smashing it against his cheek hard enough that his

head snaps to the side. His men flinch but stay in place. They know better.

“Please! Please, Mr. Torrio!” Chuck’s cries fall on deaf ears. I’m oblivious, thanks to the rush of relief that first blow brought me. This is what I should’ve done all along. Beaten the shit out of someone until the beast inside me settled.

The beast, which now demands I hit him again. *Again.* He drops to his knees when I release him, and I drive my knee into his nose, sending him sprawling onto his back. His men are anxious, wringing their hands, but one look of warning keeps them in place.

“Do you motherfuckers think this is a game?” Chuck’s ribs crack when the heel of my shoe presses down on them. I can’t express how satisfying that cracking sound is to me. He rolls onto his side, curling into a ball, and I settle for kicking the hell out of his back until he squeals like a fucking pig.

“Please!” he screams from behind his crossed arms, which only adds fuel to the fire of disgust and outrage driving me. Another solid kick, and he’s on his back again, hands raised in surrender, his face a bleeding mess.

I’m hardly out of breath as I pull him up by his shirt collar. He’s the symbol of everything that could’ve gone wrong, that has gone wrong. The sense of losing control over myself, my thoughts, my life.

“Now you know,” I snarl in his face. “You do not fuck with me or my shit.” When all he does is blubber and weep, I slam the back of his head against the concrete floor.

“Boss!” I hardly hear Romero as I repeat the motion before releasing the unconscious man and push into a standing position. “We should go.”

Chuck’s breathing, but barely, lying motionless on the floor. When I back away, one of his crew crouches beside him. “We need to get him to the hospital!”

“Now,” Romero urges, pulling me by the arm.

“Let’s see if any of you fuckers forget who you’re dealing with again.” I pull my wallet from my back pocket and

withdraw a stack of bills.

“There you go.” I throw a handful of cash and watch as the bills scatter across his bloody, broken body. “That should help with the hospital bills. Next time, you’ll be leaving in a body bag.”

The last thing I see before I give in and let Romero pull me out of the warehouse is the blood soaking into the bills, the dark red spreading across green. I’ve heard it called *blood money* before but never considered the term literally.

“I thought you were leaving the kicking ass part up to me?” Romero questions, tires squealing as we peel out of the lot.

I flex my hand, my knuckles aching, Chuck’s blood already drying on my skin. What would little Bianca think if she saw me now?

Looking at Romero, I say, “Some things the general has to do himself.”

BIANCA



*M*y coworker, Josh, lifts his beer in my direction while we stand around the bar. “To the end of your first month. You survived.”

I lift my glass along with everybody else, laughing a little, even if the unhappy thought of Callum is always close to the front of my mind. How he hates me, wants to hurt me, can’t stand the sight of me, and how I stupidly still want him.

“You make it sound like there was ever any doubt,” I joke, forcing a smile while trying to push thoughts of him aside.

I wasn’t sure at first whether I wanted to come out for Friday’s happy hour. I was afraid of what would happen if I got home, and he was waiting for me, demanding to know where I went. But I’d already turned them down so many times.

Now I’m glad I said yes. I needed this. It’s like stepping out of a cave and into the sunshine. The warmth of the sun feels good on my skin.

Without the nagging feeling I’m being watched hanging over me, I can even enjoy myself while sitting in the same club where Lucas cheated on me. Well, where I found out about it. I doubt this is the only place where he fucked some random girl. I almost said no when I found out where we were heading but stopped myself at the last second.

That’s the past, and I need to think about the future. The weeks without Lucas have only reminded me how little there was between us in the end.

Stephanie, who sits on the other side of my cubicle and is always up for gossip, taps her martini glass against mine. “Now, I can tell you. The past two analysts who started before you left before the end of the first month.”

Blinking rapidly, I look around again, waiting for one of them to laugh. It must be a joke.

When nobody reacts except to share knowing expressions, I ask, “For real?”

Micah, who sits across from me, rolls his eyes and shrugs. “I guess they figured analyzing spreadsheets would be more exciting than it is.”

Josh bursts out into laughter. “Yeah, people only think they can handle the excitement before they get started with the job.”

Strange. I’ve been telling myself I need to get with it since everybody seems happy to be there and happy in their work. Like there must be something broken inside me if I can’t get with the program.

Now, the truth is coming out. I see it in the way they snort over their drinks.

If anything, their honesty eases some of the arguing I’ve done with myself. Telling myself I should be grateful, that if everybody else seems happy to work there, I should be happy, too. There’s nothing wrong with living a quiet life and having a steady job at a firm run by good people who care about their employees.

What does it matter if it still feels like something is missing? It’s not like my judgment has been great lately. I’m obsessing over a man who’s murdered people and threatened to do the same to me. Did I mention I’m also staying under his roof when I should stop at nothing to get away from him?

I’m probably having a midlife crisis twenty years too early.

“Hey, it’s you!”

It takes me a second to realize the bartender is talking to me, and then another second to realize what he means. The

cute guy with the nice arms and dimples. To think I didn't flirt with him because I had a boyfriend.

"Oh, yeah! Hi!"

"I didn't recognize you at first," he explains. "You're not as dressed up."

"You didn't say you were a regular," Stephanie teases while flashing a wide smile that tells me she wouldn't turn him down if he started flirting with her. I wish I had that kind of confidence.

"I'm not, but I was here a while ago." And he remembers me. I don't know what to think about that. Tatum has always been the memorable one while I tagged along behind her. It's different; people liking me for me.

"And he remembers you?" She purses her lips and looks me up and down like she doesn't quite believe things were that innocent.

"We chatted once. No big deal."

She glances his way, and I recognize the interest twinkling in her eyes. "So, there's nothing going on between you?"

"If you want to flirt with the guy, go ahead. Shoot your shot." It's nice that she wants to be sure she's not stepping on my toes. The fact is, I'm not interested in him.

Not when Callum exists. I don't know what it says about me that I can't help comparing every man in the world to him. He's violent and terrifying, and he hates me. He still hasn't spoken a word to me since that night. A month at my new job. A month without him.

Why can't I move on? Hell, I've already moved on from Lucas, and we were together for five years. But I can't shake Callum, and not only because I'm still living in Tatum's part of the house. I can't help but hope every single night that he'll come to me and explain everything away.

"Come on. Let's dance." Jenna and Stephanie tug the guys onto the floor despite their protests.

“I’ll order another round,” I offer, waving them off. I’m not exactly in the mood for dancing, even if it would be healthier than sitting here wondering what Callum’s doing and if he’s figured out I’m coming home late tonight.

The guy behind the bar winks when he notices me waiting. “So, you found a way to fill up all that free time?”

I can’t believe he remembers our conversation. Maybe he does actually like me. *Sorry, but somebody else got to me first and sort of ruined me for all other men forever. The fact he wants to kill me is irrelevant.*

“Yeah, I’ve been at this new job for a while. It’s going well.” A glance over my shoulder reveals the girls coaxing the guys into at least mimicking the idea of dancing. They’re... trying.

He snickers, watching them along with me. “Whatever it is you do, I hope it has nothing to do with having coordination. Or rhythm.”

I shouldn’t laugh, but I can’t help it. “No, they wouldn’t last long, would they?”

The phone behind the bar rings, and he turns away to answer it, grabbing the vodka bottle as he does. “Yes?”

Instantly, his head turns, his gaze aimed at a tinted window on the upper level. It sits smack in the middle of the wall, flanked on both sides by tables for guests. “Okay. Yes, of course. Will do.” He hangs up and begins pulling our drinks together without looking back my way.

I glance up toward the window, wondering what that is all about, but there’s no seeing what or who is on the other side. The owner’s office, I suppose. Maybe they don’t like the employees getting too chatty when they should be working.

The hair on the back of my neck stands on end, and I shiver involuntarily. I’d swear whoever is up there is watching me. *You’re turning into a paranoid weirdo.* Tatum would laugh herself sick if she knew how jumpy and anxious I’ve become. I wish she’d come home, but there’s no end date in sight, and it’s impossible to pin her down long enough for a

conversation. She can only talk for a short time when I call her. I text her and get no response. I'm really worried about her, but I have no proof or reason to be.

A burst of laughter startles me into shooting a look toward the entrance. It's just one of those things you do. Somebody screams or laughs loudly out of nowhere, and you turn to see what the big deal is.

Turns out, the big deal is my ex-boyfriend, surrounded by a bunch of his gym buddies. I recognize them from his uncle's gym. He's hung out with them before, and I recognize the swagger he puts on when he's trying to impress them.

Why did he have to hang out with them tonight, and even worse, why did it have to be here? Why does it have to be while I'm dressed for Casual Friday and not for a night out? I angle myself away from the door and hope he didn't see me.

"If I didn't know better, I would think you're here hoping I'll show up." He's right behind me, like he was purposely headed this way.

I speak without turning his way, staring pointedly at the bottles lined up behind the bar. "Do you really think my intention of being here was hoping to run into you? I know you're not the best at being honest with yourself, but come on, you know better."

"You don't have to be such a bitch," he mutters.

Do not take the bait. Don't give him the satisfaction.

"I'm here with friends from work, same as you are."

"It's a shame you didn't like to have fun when we were together. I might have stuck around more nights."

I spin on my heel, my face burning and my heart racing. No, I didn't think I'd get lucky enough to never see him again but could I maybe have gone a little longer without having to come face to face with him?

"Is this guy bothering you?" Jenna appears out of nowhere and steps right up to him, arms folded, while Stephanie steps in line beside me. I didn't realize they were paying attention,

but I am so glad they were. Not because I'm scared, but because I'm afraid I'd have to smash a bottle upside his head if I didn't have them to back me up.

"Not anymore," I tell them, staring straight into the eyes of a stranger. Because that's what he's always been. I never really knew him—I wouldn't let myself know him or let myself see the things I wanted to ignore because it would mean admitting I had wasted all those years.

"No, she's got somebody else bothering her now." That smug, superior grin of his makes my stomach churn. "Don't you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." And now I wish the girls hadn't come to my rescue because I don't like the way he sounds. Like he knows something or thinks he does. They don't need to hear whatever bullshit he's going to spew.

"You sure about that?" he taunts, snickering. "How's your living situation treating you?"

If it wasn't impossible, I'd think he knows about Callum. There's no way that's possible. "Just fine, thanks."

"Yeah." His already dark eyes go nearly black, his voice deepening to a growl. "I bet it is."

I've called him a lot of names in the past, but *creepy* was never one of them. Something's off, and it makes my pulse take off at a dizzying rate.

"Can you girls grab the drinks?" I ask before walking away without waiting for them to answer. I can't spend another second in his presence, especially when he's acting so weird. Maybe this wasn't their first stop tonight, and he's already drunk.

The problem is, I don't know where to go. I can't just leave. I won't let him win by running me out of here. I have just as much right to be here as he does.

I'm about to turn the corner at the hall leading to the restrooms—because where else does a girl go when she's trying to run away from a strange guy at the club—when a broad, hard chest gets in my way at the last second.

I rebound off it but am saved from falling backward by a pair of large, strong hands that take me by the arms. I know these hands. I know the scent of the cologne on his clothes and skin. Spicy. Warm.

I know this man.

And now my insides feel all hot and shaky, and my lungs forget how to work. Callum is here, and he's holding me upright, and now I have no idea how to feel. I was trying to escape Lucas, only to end up in the grip of a man who might be the devil himself.

I chance looking up at him, and I wish I hadn't. His expression is murderous, holding onto me while glaring over the top of my head. I shrink back from the rage burning behind his eyes. Rage I've seen while he was pointing a gun at me. I should scream and fight to get away, but fear—and sick, twisted excitement—hold me in place.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

He's the man I've gone out of my way to avoid and the man I've wished night after night would kick the door in and ravish me. I don't know whether to weep in dread or relief that he's finally touching me again.

“The better question is, what are *you* doing here?” he growls in return, still shooting daggers across the room while his fingers bite into my flesh. “What do you think you're doing, letting some stranger flirt with you?”

“Huh?”

The weight of his stare settles on me, and I flinch. “What. Do you think. You're doing?” he demands, his voice shaking.

Instead of waiting for me to answer, he pulls me along with him to the rear of the room, past clusters of strangers who shoot curious glances our way but don't seem to care enough to ask.

“What the fuck are you playing at?” he growls as we go. I stumble along behind him, fighting to keep up with his long strides.

“I’m here with friends from work. I can’t leave them.” I’m talking to myself for all the good it does.

“Does flirting with a bartender have anything to do with those friends?” At first, it looks like he’s touching his hand to a random spot on the black-painted wall. Like magic, a door swings inward. I would never have known it was there, and I guess that’s the point. Beyond it sits a narrow, metal staircase.

“I wasn’t... I mean... how do you—”

He gives me a shove, sending me toward the stairs. I take hold of the railing and turn in time to find him swinging a hinged bar into place, which I guess serves as a way of keeping outsiders from opening the door. “You weren’t flirting? Laughing at that asshole’s jokes? Why did you hang around the bar when your friends were dancing?”

I can’t keep track of everything coming at me at once. There’s only one thought that rings out in my overwhelmed mind.

He was watching. My intuition was right.

“Go up the stairs.” His jaw works, his words grunted through clenched teeth. “Now.”

Instinct tells me to move my ass, but I wonder what would happen if I didn’t. Would he throw me over his shoulder and carry me up the stairs? I wish the idea wasn’t so appealing.

This is a very dangerous man, but right now, the only danger is slipping on what’s soaking through my panties.

At the top of the stairs is the office I imagined sitting behind the tinted window. It’s sleek and masculine, with a large desk like the one at home and a leather sofa sitting along the opposite wall. The window takes up almost the entire wall opposite the door and allows the perfect view of the bar and dance floor.

It’s sort of like playing God. I can see them, but they can’t see me. Everyone from work is down there, drinking their drinks. My martini is sitting untouched on the bar, but nobody seems too concerned with my disappearance.

Callum could hurt me, and no one would even know. I know fear is something I should be feeling, but that's the last thing I feel.

"As I asked earlier..." Callum presses me against the window, his body pinning me to the glass. He's breathing heavily, and his breath hits my neck in hot bursts that make me squirm. "What the fuck do you think you're doing, flirting with another man?"

"I wasn't," I whisper, my thoughts racing almost as fast as my beating heart.

"I should blow his fucking brains out."

Cold nausea washes over me as I stare down at the bartender, chatting with his customers while he pours their drinks. I'd laugh it off if I didn't think Callum meant it. But I know what he's capable of now.

"He didn't do anything." It took way too long for everything to come together, but then again, I'm a little overwhelmed right now. "Is this your office? Do you own the club?"

"And I would gladly shut it the fuck down this minute if it meant there wouldn't be another man setting eyes on you within these walls." His hands find my hips, fingers pressing in before they inch my dress higher. I wish my body wouldn't go weak at his touch. It's been so long, and I've craved his touch embarrassingly.

"Then I had to see that son of a bitch talking to you," he snarls. "Your ex. I recognized him right away."

I close my eyes and bite back a sigh when he rakes his fingernails along my thighs. "I didn't want it to happen."

One of his hands closes around my throat, his grip firm but not cutting off my air supply. "Are you sure about that? You didn't call him and ask him to meet you here?"

"Fuck no!" I very much want *this* to happen. Too much. I didn't really believe we were over. That we should be, yes. But no way were we both going to be strong enough to continue this charade.

“Shhh, little bird. I believe you, but that doesn’t mean I like it. He doesn’t deserve to breathe the same air you do.”

I let my eyes fall closed again, melting against him. Desire sizzles its way down my spine, the sensation spreading through my core and heating what was already scorching. The dress is up around my hips now, his knowing fingers stroke bare skin, and my knees threaten to give out on me.

“You belong to me.” His erection presses against my ass, and I’m certain he’s making sure I get the point. Like this is proof. “I can’t stand up here and watch you talking and smiling while other men try to flirt with you. Not when you belong to me. I should kill that bastard behind the bar for speaking to you when you’re mine.” He punctuates his statement by grinding against me until I moan, my breath fogging the glass. He’s obsessed, but so am I.

“I’m sick of this bullshit.” He presses his lips to my ear. “I’m going to fuck you, Bianca. No more of this cat-and-mouse game. I need you. It’s pathetic how much you consume my thoughts. I’m obsessed with your body, your scent, your every fucking move. I need you, and I know you need me. Now tell me, do you want me to fuck you? To give us what we both crave?”

My legs are about to give out, and I’m surprised my arousal hasn’t made a puddle on the floor at our feet. That doesn’t matter so much once I let the doubts trickle in.

He hurt me once before.

He threatened me.

He’s a ticking time bomb, ready to go off.

None of those red flags seem to impact me. I want him so much it’s painful. Pitiful. My desire for him is all-consuming.

“Yes,” I finally admit. I’m ashamed, but I can’t lie to myself. I’m weak for this man.

“Have you ever been fucked?”

“Yes.”

“No. You haven’t.” The strain in his voice hints at something about to shred. The last bits of his self-control. “I doubt that boy you were with had the first idea how to fuck you properly. The way you need to be fucked. He couldn’t treat this body the way you and I both know you need it. Could he?”

I train my eyes on Lucas as he strolls up to the bar again. What did I ever see in him? What would he do if he could see me right now?

“No,” I whisper, staring at the pitiful loser in question. “He couldn’t.”

“That’s right. But I know that already.” His rough hands work the dress up over my ass, and he palms my bare cheeks. Goosebumps pebble my skin. All that matters is his touch. A chuckle fills my ears as I press my greedy bottom against him. “Fuck, Bianca. You make me crazy with need.” His fingers dig into my flesh, and I need his cock inside me like I need my next breath. “When I run my tongue through your slit, what will I find? How wet will you be for me?”

I shiver at the onslaught of images that appear in my mind. “It’s okay, you don’t have to tell me. I think I already know the answer,” he growls, his fingers sliding between my cheeks, pulling the thong aside.

There’s no time for my brain to conjure up an excuse. Despite all the confusion, I still want this more than I’ve ever wanted anything.

I am his. There’s nothing I can do about it. Right or wrong, I belong to him.

“Now,” he whispers, teasing me with featherlight strokes. “Let’s see how much wetter we can get you before I claim you once and for all.”

The air leaves my lungs, and all I think is: *finally*.

CALLUM



*R*esisting Bianca is like resisting the need to breathe. Her existence is a liability in my dark world, so no matter how desperately my body craves hers, I need to resist. I know this, but still I'm drawn to her. The invisible hold she has over me is dangerous.

Time and time again, I've come close to giving her the blade to cut me wide open, and I know that's what will happen if I let this go too far. She will slice my heart open and watch as I bleed out. Only she has the power to destroy me, my life, my family—everything I've worked so hard to build. I already know how this is going to end. I will destroy her. I know it in my bones.

Yet what we're doing is inevitable. Nothing could stop our collision course, no matter the barriers we put in front of each other. The second I saw her down there—chatting with her friends, flirting with another man, laughing at his jokes—the truth ceased to exist, blown away in the face of a deeper, primal truth.

I might be strong, but I'll be damned if I let another man take her when she was born to be mine.

That was what finally broke me, what made me storm from this room and down the stairs, prepared to slaughter anyone who stood in my way. Ready to forget every reminder I've clung to for weeks, hoping to break my addiction to her.

I'm weak.

So fucking weak.

I can't fight it any longer.

I'm not strong enough. Now I know that.

I refuse to let her wander the world without me, to leave her to the so-called men eager to taste what I've tasted and touch what I've touched.

No one can have her.

No one can touch her.

She is mine. Every breath, moan, smile. Every attribute and imperfection... mine. I know it to be true when she so willingly melts in the heat we create together. When touching her instantly soothes the burning torment I've suffered all these weeks. The frustration, the yearning, the constant questioning of who she's with and what they're doing. It all disappears now that my hands are on her, and she's so eager to submit to me. Everything else becomes white noise.

I was a fool to think there was any other way, and I'll destroy any man or woman who stands in the way of me owning her completely.

Her body shudders, and the glass in front of us fogs with every breath she takes. There's an edge to what we're doing. We can see everyone downstairs, but no one can see us, which heightens the pleasure, the need.

"What would your coworkers or your piece of shit ex think if they knew you were about to get your pussy fucked just on the other side of a thin piece of glass?" I ask while my fingertips dance along the curve of her ass.

"They... they can't see us, can they?" The tinge of worry in her voice can't be ignored.

"Could you see up here when you were looking? And yes, I was watching," I remind her. "I saw everything. But you couldn't see me, could you?"

My hand around her throat holds her in place while I lean in and brush my lips against her ear. I'm tempted to mark her flesh. To use her skin as a warning sign to any man that might

show interest. “Unless you want them to see. Is that what you want, little bird? Do you want them to watch me claim you?”

“No!” she says, but I feel another truth in the way she leans back against me, her thighs spread a little wider, and the way she coats my fingers when I drive them deep inside her up to the knuckle. “Oh, my god...”

“All those men down there,” I mutter, staring down at the floor while pumping my fingers inside her lazily, teasing her. “Every one of them would die to be in my place right now. There’s only one difference between them and me... do you know what that is?”

“No,” she purrs, and I love the way she needs me, the way she clings to the pleasure I’m giving her.

“Well, little bird.” I nip at her ear, and she startles. “Only I can claim you this way. Only I can make you this wet. Only I can stretch your pussy, forcing my cock inside you. They only wish they were man enough to take you. To claim you like I can. But they won’t. Can’t.”

She gasps at the pressure of my cock against her ass. He’s eager and ready to go, but first, I need her to beg for it. I have to hear her whimper and plead for what she needs. She’s going to forget every other man in existence before I impale her on my cock.

“No other man has the power to make you feel this way. Not that stupid ex of yours or the mediocre bartender trying to flirt with you. Do you know why that is? Why we’re so explosive, and why we’re the worst and best combination? Why the temptation is so great?” I run my lips over the smooth column of her throat, and she tips her head back against my shoulder. I watch as her chest heaves with every ragged breath she takes.

I add a third finger, stretching her pussy, knowing if she’s taking my cock, she’ll need to be properly prepared. Her silky channel tightens around my fingers, and I grit my teeth. I’m ready to snap, rip away my pants, and shove inside her, forcing her to take every thick inch of me, but I restrain. *Barely*. I’ve waited this long. What’s five more minutes?

“It’s because we were made for each other, Bianca.”

Her entire body strains and her ragged breathing becomes a high-pitched whine as her body climbs higher and higher. “Callum,” she whines, and it’s the sweetest fucking sound.

“Such a good girl.” I fuck her faster, my fingers slipping in and out of her with such ease now. “I know you’re ready. You’re going to come on my fingers while everyone below us continues doing what they’re doing, oblivious to the filthy things I’m about to do to you.”

“Oh... my...” Her entire body bows, her cunt squeezing my fingers to the point of pain. The tension breaks, and the rippling of her muscles begins, drawing my fingers deeper into her channel while she shudders helplessly, her hips jerking, and tits heaving with every gasp for air.

And the whole time, the crowd below us dances and drinks, unaware of the ecstasy I brought her.

She mewls softly, and I ease her away from me and push her against the glass again, this time unzipping her dress. She stiffens, appearing nervous, but the brush of my hand against the small of her back soothes her. “Relax. You’re safe with me. I might have threatened you in the past, but that was only to scare you away. I can’t think straight with you.”

She lets out a sound that makes me think she’s not sure she believes me. That’s fine. She doesn’t have to believe me, at least not right now. The dress pools at her feet, and I turn her in place, groaning at the sight of her tits encased in a sheer bra. Leaning down, I take one of her nipples between my teeth and nip hard enough to elicit a gasp, but the moan that follows reminds me again how perfect she is.

She was made for this, made for me. Pain and pleasure combined. The things I plan to show her. The ways I plan to corrupt her.

“Now, let’s see about this pussy.” She stiffens again at the touch of my hands on her hips before I peel the soaked cotton from her pussy lips. “Afraid? What are you afraid of?”

“Them. This. Us. What happens if someone finds out?”

“No one can see anything, and who cares what anyone else thinks? If we want this... if you want this, that’s all that matters.” When she tries to turn her face away, I take her delicate chin in my hand and adjust her, so we’re eye-to-eye. “Don’t hide from me, little bird.”

I lower her thong to the floor before savoring the smooth silk of her legs and the way she shudders and sighs beneath my touch. She loves every filthy moment we share, but at heart, she’s still a good girl. Naive to the dark world surrounding us.

Something inside me rises to the challenge of breaking down every one of her fears. The stupid walls she’s built up around herself.

I’ll start my descent into hell with my mouth. Skimming along her thighs, I lap up the juices that have leaked halfway down her legs with my tongue, groaning in helpless abandon as the last of my resolve melts away.

How the hell did I ever think I could ever live without touching her again?

A ragged cry escapes her mouth, and her hands find the back of my head and spear through my hair. I glance up at her, chuckling to find her head hanging back, her mouth open in abandon. Everything in my life is dirty and ugly, but then there is Bianca. A beautiful flower rising out of the concrete. *Mine*. Nothing and no one will take her from me. Not even my misplaced sense of right and wrong.

I plunge my tongue between her swollen, glistening lips. She grinds her hips, and her fingernails rake over my scalp as she rides my face, holding me in place. Using me. I fucking love the way she so easily comes undone and how eager she is to sink into sensual pleasure. How many times did she wish a man would take her this way? None of that matters because all she’ll know is me going forward.

“Callum...” A needy moan fills the air, and it’s almost drowned out by the thumping bass of music playing downstairs, the sound reverberating into the floor. It’s so loud the glass behind her rattles.

I ignore it all in favor of focusing on her clit, lavishing it with long licks, and she rewards me by erupting. Her juices coat my chin and lips. The musky scent and honey taste are intoxicating, and before long, I have to reach down and pull out my cock for fear of it snapping in half behind the zipper. This is what she does to me.

It's times like this I wish I had a camera in here. I would love to look back and watch us—Bianca's naked ass pressed against the glass, her fingers running through my hair while I kneel between her spread thighs and eat her like it's the last time I'll ever taste something so delicious. Taking my cock into my hand, I stroke myself, getting off on the little sounds she makes and the knowledge that no matter what I do or say, she can't fight what her body wants any more than I can.

“So good... Oh, Callum, you're so good...” Her voice becomes strained while her flesh ripples under my tongue. I struggle to hold back in the moments before she comes again, coating me in a flood of nectar sweeter than any honey and more addictive than any drug. I'm the luckiest son of a bitch alive, the man with the pleasure of licking her clean.

“Oh, no, too much. It's too much...” Even when she tugs on my hair, trying to pull me away, I keep going, teasing out every bit of sensation, shoving my tongue into her cunt to scoop out every drop of what still rushes from her.

I lift my head long enough to set her straight. “I decide when it's enough.” There's nothing for her to do but moan helplessly as I continue feasting on her juicy cunt.

A sudden buzz from somewhere near my knees startles me into finally giving up. “What the fuck?” I grunt, prepared to murder whoever the hell is interrupting me.

She abruptly comes down from her haze, peering around at the floor. “My phone. It was in my pocket.”

I see it, half hidden in fabric. I'm ready to ignore it until I catch sight of the name that flashes across the screen.

Lucas. That was her boyfriend's name, wasn't it? He's lucky I brought her up here rather than beat his face in the way

instinct first tried to get me to do.

“Why is he calling you?” Even my dripping erection gets pushed to the background while I get on my feet, holding the phone up for her to take a closer look. I know I’m acting irrationally, but the thought of her meeting another man here... makes me want to kill. “Did you tell him to call you? What is this about?”

She brushes her hair back from her flushed face with shaking hands. “I told you. I didn’t want to see him. You think I want to talk to him after what he did to me?”

The ringing stops, replaced a moment later by a beep signaling an incoming text.

Lucas: Where did you go? I want to talk to you. I want to settle things.

He thinks she wants to talk to him?

I can’t hold back my sinister grin. I’m already going to hell, so why the fuck not?

“We better give him what he wants.” I drop my pants with one hand while gripping her phone in the other.

Confusion fills her features. “What do you mean?”

“I’ll show you.” Taking her by the hips, I turn her so she’s facing the window again. It barely takes a flick of my wrist to unhook her bra, which I work off her even as she tries to cross her arms.

“Don’t hide yourself from me,” I remind her.

“But...” She looks at me over her shoulder, her eyes swirling with a mixture of fear and lust. Yeah, she might be afraid, but something close to excitement glitters beneath those emotions.

“Don’t pretend you’re not enjoying this.” I place a kiss against her shoulder, then another, until she finally loosens up and releases a loud sigh. Why does she bother trying to fight me? I’m always going to win.

“It’s just you and me,” I whisper into the shell of her ear while I take myself into my free hand and drag the mushroom head of my cock through her sopping slit. She sucks in a gasp through gritted teeth, stiffening at my touch against her sensitive folds.

“Is your pussy hungry for my cock?” I taunt, teasing her opening. It’s fucking torture, having to hold myself back, but her frustrated groans make it worthwhile.

“Yes. Yes, please!”

“Please, what? What do you want me to do to you?” I lean forward, pinning her to the glass, flattening her tits against it. “Say it. Tell me what I want to hear.”

“Please,” she nearly sobs. “Please, fuck me. Callum, please.”

“Are you sure that’s what you want? Even with all those people down there?”

“Yes! Please, oh, please, I need you. Please, fuck me.”

Her begging breaks my resolve. With a single thrust of my hips, the head of my cock slides inside of her. Our height difference makes it difficult to get the perfect angle, so I bend my knees a bit and slide even deeper.

“Oh...” Her hands splay against the glass, looking for something to grasp onto. I can feel her entire body tense. I doubt she’s ever taken a cock as thick or as big as mine. “Callum... you’re too big. It hurts. So... *big!*”

“Shhh,” I soothe, my lips against her shoulder. “If I have to spend all night working myself inside you, I will. I don’t care how long it takes. I won’t stop till I see your cunt swallowing every inch of my cock.”

Bianca’s body shivers against mine, and some of the tension eases out of her. I encircle her hips in my grasp and lift her to make it a little easier for her to take me. She’s so small and tight. The last thing I want to do is break her, but no matter what, she’ll take all of me.

Her muscles flutter around my length, and the pleasure makes my eyes roll to the back of my head. “Your pussy is perfect, so tight and warm,” I praise and inch a little deeper.

She whimpers, and I know I should stop to make sure she is okay and tell her everything will be alright, but I’m too far gone. It’s taking everything I have not to fuck her hard and fast. She’s struggling to take me deeper, but I’ll make her if I have to.

“You’re so big, it hurts. Please tell me you’re all the way in,” she whines at me over her shoulder, and her blue eyes look even prettier with tears shining in them. My chest swells, knowing that she’ll feel me for days after today.

“Almost, little bird,” I grit, knowing I still have four more inches to go.

Her walls grip me tighter, and I thrust my hips further, earning another precious inch inside of her. The heat of her body, her sweet floral scent, and the squeezing of her walls leave me unhinged. I can’t help myself. I need to be inside her the rest of the way. She can take the pain as long as I reward her with pleasure. Gripping her hips tightly, I press forward, stopping only once my balls press against her ass, and there isn’t a single inch of space between our bodies.

“I’m so fucking consumed by you, Bianca. I don’t know what’s up or down. I don’t know what’s right or wrong. I don’t care about a fucking thing except you. You’re under my skin and inside my head. I’m worried that if I don’t get another hit of your scent or taste of your body, I’ll die.”

“Fuck!” she whines and tenses all at once. “Callum.”

“I’m crazy for you, little bird. Absolutely mental.” I’m not sure how it’s possible, but her fluttering muscles draw me deeper. So wet and warm. I could fucking die inside of her. I pause, allowing her to adjust to my size, but I can only hold out so long. I’ve deprived myself long enough.

“I’m sorry, little bird, but I can’t be gentle with you. Not now.” I growl, and before she can reply, I’m moving. I pull out and thrust back inside her. The pleasure of my movements

radiates down my spine—*finally*. I've never felt something so perfect. "Do you feel that? The way your muscles quiver around me? The way you struggle to take all of me?"

"I've never felt so full. I... I think... fuck, it feels like..."

Like a faucet on full blast, she erupts, and I feel the gush of her arousal as it coats both of us, dripping down onto the floor. "Fuck, you just squirted."

"I've never done that before." She pants, and I thrust into her a little harder, wanting her to do it again. The head of my cock presses against her g-spot, and I follow that motion a few more times until she tenses again, her channel spasming.

"You take my cock so perfectly. I can't wait for you to see it yourself."

"Callum." She screams my name, and I'm rewarded with another gush of fluid that floods our joined bodies.

I grin. I've unlocked something new and exciting in her. Bianca might be innocent and sweet, but with my cock stretching her pussy, she becomes a filthy little slut seeking a release that only I can deliver.

Balls aching, I know it won't be long till I explode. It's been a long time since I've been inside a pussy, and I need to get my fill.

"Is this how you imagined it? Is this what you dreamed of?" I release my hold on her hip, leaving her to press up onto her tiptoes. My gaze catches the mess we've left on the floor, and I thrust forward. She's so fucking helpless. A little bird that can't escape the trap she's found herself in. One hand grips her by the throat, holding her head in place. "Look out there. Is this how you imagined it? Watching all those people with my cock inside you?" All she does is moan like she's hanging on the line between the buildup and release.

Which makes it the perfect time to place a call to the asshole who drove her into my arms. I'm fucked up. I don't need to be told it. I press the green call button and listen as it rings.

“Hey!” Lucas shouts into the phone when he answers. The pounding bass coming from his end of the call lets me know he’s still here, even if we can’t see him out there. “Where are you?”

“Moan for me, baby,” I whisper to her, grinning when her lustful moans fill the room. Then, into the phone, I growl, “She’s with me, you idiot.”

“Who the fuck is this?” he demands.

I look down over her shoulder, gazing across the dance floor, hoping to find him in the crowd. “Me? I’m the man who is currently balls deep in your ex-girlfriend. I’ve already made her come twice, and we’re going for number three now.”

“Bullshit. Put her on the phone. I don’t believe you.”

“If you insist.” I hold the phone closer to her, then growl into her ear while thrusting my hips faster. “Do you like that? How does my huge cock feel inside your little pussy?”

“Good. So fucking good,” she sobs, moving against me, fucking herself on me. “Please, don’t stop. Please, don’t stop!”

And just like magic, I watch as his form appears out of the corner of the dance floor. He works his way through the crowd, approaching the bar with one hand over his free ear like he’s straining to hear. Not that he’d have to try hard. Even with the music thumping, she’s practically shattering my eardrums.

“What the fuck are you trying to prove?” His head swings back and forth. Even from this distance, I see his expression of anger and confusion.

Bianca races to the finish line, crashing against me, and my muscles burn as sweat beads against my temple. I’ve felt nothing so fucking perfect. “Oh, yes, right there. Right there.”

“Your pussy likes that?” I release my grip on her throat and slap one of her perfect globes, and her moans turn louder than before. “Who the fuck do you belong to?”

“Oh, fuck. You!” she shouts, her body jerking against me.

“Is this some kind of fucking joke?” Lucas cuts back through the crowd, and I can’t help but laugh while I pound into her harder than ever. We’re both racing toward the finish line.

“Look around all you want, but you won’t find us.” I pant. “I see you, though. You are pathetic. I should thank you for underwhelming her so many times. Now she knows what it means to be fucked by a real man.”

“Fuck you,” he spits in the phone.

“Too late. Already getting fucked by this tight pussy.” Bianca almost screams when I slap her ass again, and he cringes, pulling the phone away from his ear, glaring at the screen like he’ll get any answers that way. “Enjoy knowing what you’re missing out on, you pathetic fucker.”

“I’ll fucking kill you!”

“Don’t waste your breath,” I tell him with a laugh that cuts off once Bianca’s sheath tightens. “Uh-oh, she’s getting close. Better go before you have to hear her come again.”

I end the call and drop the phone, delighted by the rage coloring his face and the profanity he’s so clearly spewing. “I think he’s jealous,” I murmur in Bianca’s ear. “Wishing it was him that was fucking you. I doubt he ever made you squirt or explode like I’m about to.”

“No, never.” She pants. “Harder. Please, fuck me harder!” She’s possessed now, determined, maybe because she remembers all the times she wished he’d fuck her this way. All the nights she went unfulfilled. I don’t need her to describe it. I understand without being told.

I forget about Lucas, about everything. My attention focuses solely on giving her what she needs. Taking her by the hips, I pound into her mercilessly until her ass bounces against my groin and she shrieks and claws at the glass.

I’m mesmerized, watching as her soft hair falls down the gentle slope of her back. All that can be heard are the slaps of our skin and the heavy pants and moans we both expel.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck. I’m...” Her entire body freezes, and then her pussy ripples, sending a rush of warm wetness over my shaft and balls. A broken cry of pleasure falls from her swollen lips. I don’t have it in me to wait another second. I’m so close, there’s no holding my release back.

It’s habit that makes me pull out, grab her by the shoulder, and force her to her knees while she’s still in the grips of her release. She offers no resistance. In fact, she kneels in front of me, her eyes lust-hazed, her pink tongue out, and her beautiful face prepared to take whatever I have to give.

“Get ready,” I whisper, my fist moving in a blur over my length. “Ahhhhh...” The groan of pleasure rips from my chest. Bliss. Sheer bliss.

It rocks me to my core as spurts of cum jet out of me. Each one coats her tongue, then her chin and cheeks. I aim the rest at her tits, painting them until cum drips down her skin. She’s a masterpiece. Smiling, proud of herself, eyes glowing in adoration.

My biggest weakness. The only temptation I could not resist.

“You’re such a good girl, letting me mark you with my cum,” I praise, dragging my thumb along her chin to catch my cum before pressing the digit past her plump lips. She sucks greedily, her tongue swirling, licking me clean.

Fuck, I am in trouble.

She isn’t like the others. How many pearl necklaces have I given to women whose faces I forgot minutes later? I can treat her like them, but she’s worlds away. It hits me square in the chest, right over the thumping organ.

I help her to her feet, and only one thing appears in my mind. I have to tie her to me for good. It isn’t enough for her to promise, even if she means it.

“Are you okay?” The question is foreign to me. I’ve never given a shit about the woman on a deeper level than getting my cock wet. “I didn’t... are you hurt?”

Fuck me. I should've taken it easier on her, given her more time to adjust.

She shakes her head, her face flush. "I don't think so. I feel sore, but that's all."

Something close to relief surges through me. "Good. Hold on a minute." I mumble to myself and walk into the bathroom to grab a washcloth. I twist the tap on and wet it, then ring out the excess water.

When I return to Bianca her face is still flush, and I nudge her legs apart. I alternate between watching her features, and gently cleaning her pussy. *My pussy*. She watches me, almost as if she is shocked by my actions and I spend a little longer than necessary making sure she's squeaky clean.

"I'll take you home." I announce, and walk back into the bathroom tossing the washcloth in the laundry bin. "Let me wash my hands."

"Okay, yeah." She replies. I'm not trying to get rid of her and I hope she knows that. I quickly wash my hands and reappear a few moments later, smoothing a hand down my shirt.

"Ready?" I ask and she merely nods. I lead the way down the stairs, then out through the private exit beneath the staircase. The narrow alley running alongside the building is dimly lit, and quiet compared to the raucous noise inside. In the light from a single bulb hanging over the door, her tentative smile cuts straight through my heart, but fractures of fear linger.

Sweet little bird. So hungry for my touch but afraid to hope.

"Are you afraid of me, little bird, or are you afraid of what my touch can do to you?"

She gives her head a shake. "I'm not afraid of you. I'm afraid of what this means, of what could happen."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Yes. We need to talk. Clear the air between us."

She doesn't look convinced—and I can't blame her after the way I've treated her, which she obviously doesn't understand. There is no way for her to fully understand my need to push her away. Tangling herself in my web means many things, even death, and I don't want that for her. I don't want my enemies to become hers by association.

Taking her by the hips, I pull her in, my hunger for her stirring to life. *Already*. Every possessive instinct I have sinks its claws into my skin when she looks at me the way she is now. Like I'm the superhero that's come to save her from the villainous monster. Doesn't she know by now I'm the bad guy?

"I thought if I didn't see you or talk to you, maybe I'd forget you existed. I'd forget how much I wanted you, but it's impossible." I trace her jawline with my fingers before tipping her chin upward, aligning our mouths. "I'm obsessed with you. Your essence, the air you breathe. You are mine. Nobody else's, ever."

Anything she wants to say is silenced as I seal my lips against her tentative ones. I kiss her softly, because I might have to take her against this grimy brick wall otherwise, and even I have my limits. I'd rather get her home and unwrap her beneath the silk sheets. She deserves more than to be fucked in some dirty alleyway.

One of the drivers brings the SUV around, and I help her inside before climbing in behind her.

"I still can't believe we did that," she whispers once we've pulled away from the curb. In the glow from streetlights, her flushed cheeks are clearly visible.

"You're always going to be a good girl, aren't you?"

"I don't know. You're stripping her away a little at a time." Her teeth sink into her lip before she looks out the window, away from me.

"What's the matter? There's no way anybody saw us." I can joke all I want, but this is real for her. She's still so inexperienced.

“It isn’t that.”

I rub her bare knee. “Remember, I don’t want you hiding things. Whatever it is, you can tell me.”

“Him.” She turns her head in time for me to see the way she rolls her eyes. “I don’t want to say his name. Maybe we took it too far.”

I know better than to think this has to do with lingering feelings for him. She couldn’t possibly want him now that I’ve been inside her. “He treated you like shit. He deserves worse than a phone call while we’re fucking.”

“I hate to think of him retaliating somehow.” She releases a heavy sigh. “And just because he was a piece of shit boyfriend doesn’t mean I want to sink to his level. Rubbing it in, you know? That’s not me.”

This would piss me off to no end if it wasn’t for her kind heart being the reason she’s concerned. Despite everything he put her through, she cares about his feelings. To think, this angel is mine.

“He’ll get over it in time,” I insist, pulling her close. “We won’t rub it in again. Does that help?”

“It does. I don’t want to think about him anymore.” She won’t get any arguments out of me. Besides, I have more important things on my mind, such as how I’m going to keep her with me forever.

Once at the house, she goes to her room for a shower while I tag along behind, practically salivating at the sight of her swaying ass.

“Be right in,” I promise, loosening my tie and kicking off my shoes while she steps into the bathroom. When the sound of the shower greets my ears, I start my search.

She’s on the pill, or so she told me when I asked. Where would she keep them? Somewhere nearby, somewhere she won’t forget. A quick look through the purse she left on the dresser leads nowhere. I go to the nightstand and open the drawer, blocking it with my body in case she comes out.

Jackpot. Inside are three small, rectangular packages, one stacked on top of the other. I open the one on top to find her pills inside, then reach for my phone to take a photo that I send in a text to one of my contacts.

There's something to be said for keeping a disgraced doctor in my circle. You never know when you'll need a favor, and this guy has a talent for scoring anything I could dream up.

Me: I need a supply of sugar pills. Here's the brand name we're replacing. Three months' worth. ASAP.

By the time I've finished stripping out of my clothes, my cell pings with an incoming text.

Him: Give me till the middle of next week.

"Callum?" Bianca's voice floats my way through the closed door. "You coming?"

"Be right there," I call out while quickly typing out another message, almost as an afterthought. The buildup of rage at the thought of another man possessing her like I have sends me over the edge. If I'm going to do it, I might as well do it right.

Me: While you're at it, add a fertility drug. Syringe. Three monthly doses.

Is it wrong what I'm doing? Yes. Very wrong. It's morally fucked up, but I can't let her go. By the time she realizes what I've done, she'll be swollen with my child and attached to me forever. My cock comes to life at the idea. Evidence of her belonging to me and only to me. There will be no question of it.

Little bird, you will never fly away. Not if I can help it.

BIANCA



“I guess my daughter’s too busy thinking about her important job to listen to her old man.”

I’m going to give myself whiplash, swinging my head around so fast. Shit, I zoned out again. “I’m sorry. What did you say?”

“Are they working you that hard, sweetie?” Dad’s brows pinch together, an expression of worry overtaking his features. It’s a look I’ve seen too many times. My heart breaks a little for him because all he wants is what’s best for me. Even when he’s being insanely overprotective, he just wants me to be happy.

And I’m very distracted, though he couldn’t possibly imagine why.

He’s waiting, staring at me from his side of the table, wearing his standard uniform of a dress shirt and tie. How many people have felt that heavy stare from the other side of a table down at the police station, I wonder?

“No, they’re not,” I assure him as I reach across the table and squeeze his hand. “I’m just thinking. I didn’t get much sleep last night, that’s all.”

“Is Lucas not treating you right? Because I can have a talk with him.”

I involuntarily flinch at the mention of his name. I have yet to tell dad about the breakup. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. It’s not a big deal or anything. I’m just worried he’ll lose

his mind if he finds out I'm staying with a man much closer to his age than my own.

“Uhhh, things are...”

I blocked his number on Saturday after he called ten times before I even opened my eyes, and stupid me thought that would be the end. I figured since he couldn't get a hold of me, he would have to leave me alone.

That wasn't the case because there he was on Sunday morning, waiting in line at the coffee shop when I turned around, a cup in hand. His icy glare of hate spoke volumes before he ever said a word.

“Having problems with your phone?” he asked loudly enough to get the attention of a few customers.

“No,” I replied in a chipper voice, “the block feature works just fine.”

Somebody snorted, which must have embarrassed him enough to shut his mouth. I didn't even want to think about how he knew I'd be there, so I forced myself to brush it off.

There are only so many things I can pretend weren't on purpose. Was it a coincidence that I saw him standing on the sidewalk just before walking into the building this morning? I don't know. He was leaning against a bus stop shelter, watching me with his arms folded across his chest. Casually standing there like he planned to catch a ride. He didn't say anything.

His random appearances have freaked me out. My skin is starting to crawl. I blame myself partially and Callum. He shouldn't have called him. Yes, at the time, it was fun, and I spent the rest of the night buzzing off the high of knowing he put Lucas in his place. Watching him react to the phone call while Callum fucked me. The way confusion turned to indignation, then to rage. It was beautiful. The ultimate revenge fantasy. Now I'm not sure if it was worth it. Not if he is going to become a stalker.

“Are things all right between the two of you?” Dad's question snaps me back to reality. I really need to get my shit

together before he figures out I'm a hot mess playing a bad acting job. "If you want to talk to me about anything, you can. I know I'm not the easiest, and talking to your dad about boys is a bit of a fiasco, but I'm here for you."

"Actually..." *No.* I can't tell him the whole story, not yet. He needs the sanitized version of events. The Dad version. "I'm glad you asked because, no, things aren't going well. In fact, I think we're going to breakup."

He nods as if he understands. "Finally. We're getting closer to the truth now."

Panic bubbles beneath my cool exterior. "What are you talking about? Do you know something I don't?"

"Lucas stopped by the house yesterday."

My heart lurches into my throat.

I'll kill him. I'll fucking kill him.

Now I wish I hadn't eaten anything for lunch. A sudden wave of nausea clings to my throat, causing bile to rise at the thought of Lucas telling my father anything. Explaining the breakup is the least of my worries. Would he be stupid enough to bring up the phone call or what happened in the club?

I will die here and now. I will absolutely die.

"What did he say?" I whisper, pushing the words out.

"He told me you dumped him a few weeks ago." He shakes his head, a frown appearing on his lips. "I know you have a lot going on, and you're an adult, but I thought we were closer. Since when do you hide things from me?"

"I wasn't hiding it from you," I lie, making sure to maintain eye contact. He's the master of reading body language.

"Then why not tell me? I don't want to scold you, and I don't expect you to share everything with me, but the two of you were together for a long time. It couldn't have been easy. Breakups are hard, especially first love. You shouldn't have to go through something like that alone. I know I'm just your dad, but... I'd help however I could."

“I just... did he tell you why I dumped him?”

He grimaces, tapping his fingers on the table in a slow rhythm. “Whenever a man says it was all a misunderstanding, it usually means it was *not* a misunderstanding, and he’s just a cheating piece of crap.”

I smile. “Well, he did it to himself.”

“I figured as much, and that’s why I told him to get the hell off my property and never come back.”

“You did?” Tears unexpectedly prick my eyes, and I laugh them off, blinking them back.

“What kind of dad do you think I am? I wasn’t about to invite him in and crack open a couple of beers.” He cocks his head to the side. “He cheated on my little girl and broke her heart. He’s lucky I didn’t unload the shotgun on him as he ran across the yard.”

“I’m glad you didn’t. Nothing good would come from that. He’s not worth the ticket or court fees.”

He waves a dismissive hand, snickering. “When you know the people I know, none of those things matter.” He sounds a little too much like Callum right now. “I assumed he showed up because he wanted me to talk to you on his behalf. Like that was going to happen. I wasn’t about to help him earn you back, knowing it wasn’t a misunderstanding, and he was just an idiot.”

I feel immense relief without that hanging over my head. “Thank you for having my back.”

“I always will,” he reminds me. “What we really need to talk about is where you’re living. He said you moved out.”

Ugh. Here we go.

This is the exact reason I didn’t want to tell him yet.

“I’m staying with a friend from school. Her roommate’s gone for the summer, so I’m subletting.” I’m almost impressed with how easily the lie rolls off my tongue.

He takes a sip of coffee. “What’s your plan after that?”

I sit up straighter, glad to have a quick answer. “Funny you should ask. I have an appointment to look at an apartment after work. It’s not far from here, so I wouldn’t even have to drive to work.” I smile. “It’s a studio, so it’s small, but I don’t need a lot of room.”

“I’d be happy to come along with you. You know how some of these landlords like to take advantage of young people—especially pretty girls like you.”

His heart is in the right place, which is why I don’t roll my eyes. “Dad. I’m not a little girl anymore. I’m an adult with a college degree. I have to do these things on my own.”

“I know,” he grumbles, frowning into his cup. “That doesn’t mean I have to like it, do I?”

The server comes our way with the check, which is a relief. The less time we spend together, the less chance there is of me letting something I shouldn’t slip. Like mentioning the fact that I fucked Tatum’s dad from behind one-way glass a few nights ago while a couple hundred people partied below me.

“By the way,” I tell him while he hands over his card to pay, “you look exhausted. Do I have to call your boss and tell him to give you some time off?”

He chuckles, but the sound is grim. Something’s bothering him, and he won’t tell me about it. It irks me, especially when he’s always jumping on top of me whenever something seems off, but when it’s the other way around, he can’t be bothered to spare me a little honesty.

His mouth tugs upward at one corner and light flickers behind his blue eyes. “Like I told you before, I’m on the verge of breaking something big. I’ll tell you more about it once it’s safe.”

“That sounds serious.”

“It is. Very.” He goes to a dark place for a second, his gaze hardening, but just as quickly, he brightens up like nothing happened. “I want you to call me as soon as you’re finished

looking at the studio apartment tonight. I want to hear all the details. Including the location.”

“Why? So you can have a patrol car parked at the curb day and night?”

“You know me too well, sweetheart.”

* * *

“WHAT DO YOU THINK?” The building’s burly owner stands in the doorway leading out to the hall, thumbs hooked into his belt loops. “I don’t want to rush your decision, but I have three interested candidates who already looked at the place.”

I’m sure he does, but I also know this is a pressure tactic to get me to make up my mind. “It’s really nice,” I tell him, and it’s the truth. There are plenty of windows, so I’ll get lots of sun, and the living space itself is bigger than I expected. The kitchen is compact, but the stove and fridge are brand new. The bathroom is a nice size and extremely clean. There’s not a speck of rust or grimy grout.

“Of course, I’ll need first and last month’s rent upfront,” he continues. “But I ran your credit application already, and everything looks good, so I’d have no problem with having you sign immediately.”

Now I sort of wish I’d let Dad come with me, as childish as it sounds. I don’t like feeling forced into this. I’m not the kind of person who’s ever been able to make split-second decisions, at least not over something as big as this. Signing a year-long lease is a big step, and I’ve never taken it by myself.

“Can you give me till tomorrow morning?” I ask, turning away from the windows in time to watch him scowl before he fixes his expression.

“I’ll be in my office by nine.”

“Good. I’ll call you first thing in the morning.” My footsteps echo off the new laminate floors as I cross the room and head for the door. *The couch could go here, and my bed in this corner. I could buy a screen to partition it...* “Thank you

so much for taking the time to show me the place. I really am interested. I just need to—”

“You don’t need to explain. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.” He locks the door behind us and follows me down the stairs to the busy sidewalk. Quaint shops with apartments on the upper floors line the opposite side of the street. A girl walks past with two leashed dogs while a couple crosses her path, pushing a stroller. The little girl inside reaches for the pups, and everybody smiles, including me.

I love the idea of living in the center of everything, being able to walk to the corner store or to one of a dozen restaurants within a couple of blocks. Seeing the same people every day and getting to know them. The commute to work will be way simpler. With all the good that comes with this place, it still has its cons. Living here means leaving Callum, and I realize as I say goodnight to the landlord that the thought of leaving him is what’s holding me back. I could make it work here for a year. The problem is, do I want to?

It’s this or risk my friendship with Tatum. I know this is the safest way. The only option that leaves our friendship in one piece and their father-daughter relationship intact. Even if it hurts, I need to do the responsible thing. Being an adult means making tough choices, though this one seems to have made its own choice.

“What did you think? Are you moving in?”

My stomach clenches and my heart takes off at a frightening speed when I whirl around and find Lucas sitting on the front stoop of the building next door. *There’s no way he’s not following me.* I shiver at that knowledge. He’s dressed in a T-shirt printed with the gym’s logo, so maybe he just came from work to spy on me?

“What do you want?” I growl because, damn it, I will not shrink back and let him scare me. “And why the hell did you bother my dad? Can’t you get it through your thick head that we’re over?”

He has the nerve to look offended as he stands and brushes the back of his shorts off. I could push him into traffic and not

blink. I should. “With that attitude, I assume you don’t want to hear what I have to say?”

“What you have to say?” I’m almost shocked at the audacity. “Why would I care what you have to say?” I throw my hands into the air with frustration. “I listened to you for years. I bought every lie and every excuse. Every word that came out of your mouth, I heard. In my eyes, you hung the moon. Not anymore. I’m tired of listening to your bullshit. It’s over. We’re over.”

His lips purse like he just sucked a lemon. Good, now he can be the wounded one. “I guess you thought it was pretty funny on Friday night, didn’t you? Who was that guy?” he grunts, lowering his brow as he approaches.

We’re in the middle of a busy sidewalk, and it’s barely six o’clock, meaning it’s still fully light in late June. I have nothing to be afraid of, and he’s never hit or threatened to hurt me, so why do the hairs on the back of my nape stand on end?

I back up a few paces, glaring at him. “It’s none of your business who it was. Nothing would’ve happened if you had left me alone. I’m not going to ask you again. You need to stop doing this.”

“I’m sorry for giving a shit. I only care about what’s good for you.”

He can’t really be serious. “You’re not any better of a liar than you were a boyfriend.”

His chest puffs out. “I’m serious.”

“Congratulations. It’s about time you gave a shit,” I snap, before barking out another bitter laugh. “Because you didn’t when we were together, and you know it. All it took for you to notice me or give a shit was for me to breakup with you.”

“This isn’t funny. I’m fucking serious, Bianca.”

I can’t believe how stupid I was. How did I not see him for who he was years ago? It’s all so obvious now. The way he twists my words to make him the good guy doing his best while I’m the unreasonable one.

“You’re right.” I sigh. “It’s not funny. It’s pathetic. For five years, it was fine for you to run around and have your own life while I sat around waiting for you. Do you know why Tatum’s the only good friend I have?” I don’t give him the opportunity to answer. “It’s because she’s the only one who stuck around when you did everything you could to keep me away from the rest of the world. She was too damn stubborn. But you? You did whatever you wanted, no questions asked. How dare you stand there and tell me you give the slightest shit about what’s right for me?”

The weight on my shoulders lightens. That felt good.

“Listen to you.” His lip lifts in a sneer, and his gaze trails down my body in a predatory way. “I’m almost surprised by the outburst, but not really, given all that rough company I hear you’re keeping lately.”

No, no. No fucking way. It was bad enough what happened on Friday, but if he suspects I’m sleeping with Callum... Stop. That’s paranoia talking. He must know I moved in while Tatum’s gone and assumes I’m spending time with her dad. That’s it. “No, maybe I grew up a little. Maybe I see things through different eyes. I guess I should thank you for that.”

“You see things through different eyes? Good. Because I have something for you.”

My heart lurches when he reaches into his leather shoulder bag. Adrenaline crashes through me, taking over my fight-or-flight response, and I’m about to turn on my heels and dart across the street when he pulls his hand out. It’s not a gun or any kind of weapon that he’s holding. It’s a manila envelope.

“This is for you.”

“What is it?” I ask, eyes trained on the envelope. It’s slim. I’m sure there’s hardly anything in it.

“Open it and find out.” He holds it out to me. “Take it. It’s for your own good.”

Maybe it’s the fake gentleness in his voice or the fact that he believes he has the first clue what is and isn’t good for me. Whatever the reason, my blood boils. “You don’t have the first

clue what's good for me, Lucas, and I don't know how you could ever assume you did."

Irritation—and wanting to get this over with—makes me snatch the envelope from his hand. But I don't open it. Instead, I tuck it into my tote bag. "There. I took it. Happy?"

His familiar, dark eyes pierce my own. "Don't you want to know what's in there?"

I shrug. "Not really."

"You'll feel differently once you see the proof," he predicts with a smirk. "I have to wonder what your dear ole dad would think if he knew who you've been spending time with?"

My boiling blood turns to ice in seconds. Only pride keeps me from pulling out the envelope and tearing it open. "Get a life, Lucas. It's over. I'm no longer your problem."

He has the nerve to look like I've wounded him, all sad and pouty. It's an old trick he's pulled on me a thousand times. "Don't you get it? I can't leave you alone."

"I don't care what you can and can't do. Leave me alone, or you'll regret it."

I try to sidestep him, but he cuts me off, his firm body pressed against mine, trapping me in place. To my horror, he leans in, his lips inches from my own. No fucking way.

CALLUM



*R*age.

It rushes out of me like a volcano, all because of what I'm witnessing outside the apartment building across the street from where I parked, waiting for Bianca.

It's enough to suck the air from inside the car and tighten my chest until my heart's about to burst from the strain. Sweat beads along my temple, and my skin becomes tight. I'm going to explode.

They'll find me here, dead of a heart attack or stroke, sitting behind the wheel across the street from where Bianca—my Bianca, nobody else's—ducks away from her ex-boyfriend's attempt at mauling her.

He owes her his life for that. I'm not stupid. I know he wouldn't have stopped at a simple kiss, and then I would have had no choice but to end his miserable life. All that keeps me from firing off a bullet into the bastard's skull is the way she rejects him. I have the grim pleasure of watching her shove him away with both hands. The windows of my car are rolled up, so there's no telling what she says, but her facial expressions are enough.

She's disgusted. Furious. She even flips him the bird before marching away, arms folded over her chest. Her lips are moving, and I can imagine what must be pouring out of her as she slams herself inside her car.

"Good girl," I murmur, breathing like I just finished a run. My hands are wrapped around the steering wheel when I'd

rather have them wrapped around that son of a bitch's neck, squeezing until he goes purple and the light leaves his eyes.

The idea is intoxicating, and I savor it like a fine wine while observing his reaction.

He watches her every move while wearing a look of utter misery. That's the only reason I'm willing to leave him alive. I won't give him the mercy of death. I like knowing he's wallowing in the shit he put in place. The ignorant prick deserves to lie in the bed he made.

"If you're smart, you'll go home," I mutter, staring at him. "You need to leave, shit stain. Don't even think about following her." Even if it would give me the excuse to have him shot on sight for trespassing on private property. I doubt he would be that stupid, or I hope not. Then again, he was brainless enough to cheat on the most perfect creature to draw breath, so I suppose he's capable of anything.

You fucking hypocrite.

My skin prickles, thanks to a reminder from my seldom-used conscience that I'm no better than him. Here I am, warning him against following Bianca after following her myself. She told me this morning she'd be looking at an apartment tonight—like it was nothing, like she wanted me to be happy for her. There I was, assuming we'd settled that. I was expecting her to move in permanently. My fists clenched tight when she said it, but I doubt she noticed.

She might have chosen differently if she had the first clue of what her announcement did to me. How I instantly saw her in my mind's eye tied to my bed, locked behind a heavy door, at my beck and call.

I had no choice but to let her go to work and wish her well, thanks to Romero's unexpected presence in the kitchen while we shared a quick breakfast. He saw her, overheard our conversation—and while he's looked the other way on a great many things, every man has his limits.

I don't think she knows I'm watching, even if it seems by now she should assume. She's crazier than I thought if she

believes I'd let her live in the middle of town, surrounded by god only knows what.

Yeah, like I'd let that happen.

I won't lie. As inconvenient as it is, I admire her desire for independence. I'd rather her try to do her own thing than sponge off me the way Amanda did and continues to do. The slightest thought of that bitch enrages me. It also reminds me of something I meant to take care of already. Bianca's long gone now, on her way home, and I plan to follow. Before easing out into the street, I pull up Tatum's contact details and call her through the car's Bluetooth. She knows better than to ignore me.

"Dad." Her overly chipper response rouses my instincts. "How's it going on the other side of the Atlantic?"

She's trying too hard. "Do you know why I'm calling?" I ask in a carefully measured voice.

"Because you miss your little girl and wish I would come home?"

Wiseass. "That's true, but it's not why I called. Let's be serious. You ran two of your cards over their limit. I know you're aware I get an alert when that happens."

"Oh, Dad." She sighs like a woman with the weight of the world on her delicate shoulders and not a girl whose father is footing the bill for her trip across Europe. "I apologize. I lost track. I don't think you know how easy it is to forget how much you've spent."

"You act like I've never traveled. Being an adult means staying on top of your expenses."

"I know. I'm sorry. I really am."

"Sorry enough to quit buying your boyfriend clothes?"

It's a momentary pause, but a significant one. "What are you trying to say? Yeah, I bought him a few suits," she mumbles.

A few suits. "Thirty-thousand dollars' worth of suits at a men's store in Milan is not a *few* suits."

“Right.”

I draw a deep breath in through my nose and count to five while waiting at a red light. “Tatum. I agreed to foot the bill for him up to a point. I covered the rental properties and, of course, the jet, but otherwise, the plan was for him to pay his own way, and you both told me he would.”

“And he has, mostly,” she defends.

“Doesn’t he have any pride? A real man would not let his girlfriend pay for everything.”

“Dad, can you please not turn this into something it isn’t?” She blows out a heavy breath. “You act like you’re the only one with unanswered questions.”

“No. You’re not turning this around on me.”

“I’m not. I just don’t like secrets, and I heard a rumor that you’ve been sneaking around with Bianca while I’m out of the country. Are you trying to hide it from me?”

Damn it. Who the fuck is she talking to? Better yet, who knows—and how? It’s incredible how many names and faces can fly through my head in the blink of an eye. I’ve been discreet. Not even Romero knows we’re on a more than a friendly basis, though if he did, I doubt he’d tell Tatum. They’re not on friendly terms.

“Dad?” she prompts once a length of uncomfortable silence has unfolded between us. “Is it true?”

“Is what true?” I have to pretend I don’t have the first idea of what’s going on if I’m going to convince her.

“Don’t make me say it, please,” she grumbles. “You know what I’m saying, and I know Bianca’s had a crush on you forever. All that matters to me is making sure she doesn’t get her heart broken again.”

I blurt it out without thinking. “You knew she had a crush on me?”

“*Dad!*” She groans. “Yes, I knew. It was painfully obvious. But she never admitted it to me, and we never talked about it.”

“All you need to know is that I’m being careful with her. I promise.” When she stays silent, I ask, “Are you okay? You’re not upset, are you? She’d be crushed if she thought that.”

“No. I’m not upset. Like I said, it’s not a huge surprise. I mean, it’s a little weird, but not at the same time.”

I’m almost at the compound now, and the familiar anticipation builds in my gut. How many years has it been since I last anticipated going home to a woman?

“Don’t worry,” I murmur as I roll through the gate, lifting a hand to wave at Henry in passing. “Everything will be all right.”

“I hope so.”

“Who told you?” I have to know. My eyes sweep the grounds as I drive up to the house. Is there a traitor among my men? If so, it’s been too long since I’ve had target practice. I can see it now, the potential traitors scrambling for cover while I take shots from my office window.

“I can’t say, so don’t bother trying. I promised I wouldn’t tell.” I’m familiar enough with the defiance in her voice to know it’s pointless to push. I’ll find out in time, anyway. If there’s a leak somewhere around here, it needs to be plugged.

“No more spending money on that guy,” I warn. “I’ll cut the cards off, and you’ll have to come home. Got it?”

“Got it,” she mutters. “Love you.”

“Love you.” She took that better than I imagined, but something tells me it’ll be different once she gets home. Whenever that is. No wonder Kristoff isn’t in a hurry to return; he’s living it up in Italy on my dime. We’ll need to have a talk once they get back.

I pass Romero’s house while ending the call and notice a light on inside. Rather than park in the courtyard, I pull over to the side of the driveway and knock on the door to the renovated gardener’s shed a few hundred yards from my front door.

He comes to the door dressed like he has just finished a workout. “I didn’t think you’d be back already, or else I would’ve—”

“Am I that much of a taskmaster? Your time is your own. I wanted to know if you met up with the doctor.” I haven’t been able to keep their appointment out of my head.

He nods, waving me inside before heading to the desk under the front window. This place is twice the size it was when I first bought the house and land, which means it’s roughly as big as the row home I grew up in. Whenever I get too comfortable or used to the luxuries that have become second nature, a visit to Romero’s home reminds me of where I came from.

He keeps it tidy but sparse. I suppose a workaholic bachelor doesn’t need much more than a little furniture in the living area and the necessities in the bedroom. He’s more than welcome to take his meals up at the house. That doesn’t leave him with much time to kick back around here.

He hands over the plain, wrapped package containing the sugar pills and fertility shots. Nothing about his attitude tells me he has the first clue what’s inside, and even if he did, Romero knows better than to question me. I don’t pay him for that. “He was extremely grateful for the fee.”

“I’m sure he was.” As I close my hands around the brown paper-wrapped box, I snicker. I made a point of paying double the usual rate this time around. “Thanks for taking care of this.” And for not asking questions. But discretion is the name of the game, and that’s one thing I can always count on from him.

Before I can head up to the house to switch out my little bird’s birth control the way I’ve looked forward to for days, he holds up a hand to stop my retreat. “One more thing. I got a call from Jack Moroni down in Miami.”

Fuck me. This isn’t good. Moroni is my main go-between there.

“I knew that shipment issue would come to bite me in the ass.”

“No, it isn’t that. He wants a meeting and says he has a business proposition to discuss.”

Somehow, that’s worse. “Let me guess. He wants to marry his son off to Tatum and unite the families? It’s not the first time he’s come to me with the idea.”

His dark brows draw together over narrowed eyes. “Is that something you would consider?”

“What? Arranging a marriage for my daughter?” When I laugh it off, he doesn’t join me. His features remain cold and stoic. “It’s a joke, in case you missed that. I wouldn’t actually consider arranging her marriage, no matter which family we were talking about. This isn’t the nineteenth century.”

“What if it meant solidifying the situation in Florida? You wouldn’t string the guy along, at the very least?”

He knows me too fucking well. “What’s this about? There’s no harm to be done either way.”

“I don’t trust Moroni, and we don’t know his son,” he reminds me, scowling. “I can’t imagine the son being much better than the slimy father. I can make some calls and ask around, but regardless, I have a bad feeling.”

I don’t have time for this discussion, but more than that, I don’t care. I know my intentions, and that’s all that matters. “I’m telling you, there’s nothing to worry about. It’ll never happen, but I want you to reach out and let Moroni know I’m open to a meeting. After that fucking debacle with the crates, I can’t afford to piss anyone else off.”

His jaw tightens, but he says nothing, only nods. “You know,” I add on my way out the door, “you should take the rest of the night off. Go out, have a drink, and get laid. You’re too tense.”

“I’ll give it some thought.” Something about the darkness in his voice tells me he won’t, but it isn’t my problem if he doesn’t take the offer.

One of us needs to have their mind on business, and I can't complain if that person is him. My mind is miles away from where it needs to be, which I'm sure he knows but is smart enough not to mention. As it is, I have to keep myself from running to the house and straight to Bianca's room.

For some reason, I thought things would get easier now that I don't have to stay away from her. My obsession has only shifted. Now, if I'm not either eating her pussy or fucking her, I'm reminiscing about the last time I did. Wishing I was doing it again. I can't get her out of my head or from under my skin.

I choose to head to my office and drop off the package from the doctor before going to find her. I can't walk straight into her room with this in hand and risk her asking questions. I'm even whistling as I walk down the hall. Aside from two credit cards going over their limit and knowing my daughter's dating a freeloader, everything's going my way.

The whistle dies in my throat when I notice lights on inside my office. What the hell? I round the open doorway and find Bianca in tears at my desk. Instantly, I'm taken back to the day she moved in when I found her in here crying. Only weeks ago, even if it feels like a lifetime ago. There's a manila envelope on the desk. The one Lucas forced on her.

And it's open.

Her red-rimmed eyes shimmer with fresh tears when they meet mine. "We have a problem. A very big one."

BIANCA



I'm going to be sick.

No matter how many times I look at this blown-up photo, it never changes. I need to stop staring at it, but I can't, even if it makes me feel a little more nauseous every time I do.

My first worry is my father. No matter what, he can't find out. I'd never be able to explain myself. And then there's Tatum.

Callum notices what I'm holding and gestures for me to share it, setting down the little package he was carrying before crossing the room. "What's the problem? Whatever it is, we'll work it out together."

I want more than anything to believe him, but he's a big part of the problem, so I'm not sure how he'd help—aside from promising to never touch me again, and I already know how it goes when he tries that. It's a waste of time that makes us both miserable, and we only end up together in the end.

"Promise you won't get mad?"

He arches an eyebrow, his mouth screwing up in a smirk. Even now, with my vision blurred, thanks to all the crying, I can't look at him without wondering how anybody could be so handsome. It's unreal the way he makes a polo shirt and dress pants look like they came out of a magazine spread. Ultra-masculine and commanding. My panties would melt right off if I wasn't feeling so crushed.

"I'll do my best," he mutters dryly before curling his fingers in a gesture that says *hand it over already*.

So, I do. And now he has the pleasure of seeing photographic evidence of the two of us kissing outside the club on Friday night, in the alley where I figured nobody could see. One of his hands cups the back of my head, and the other is pressed against my lower back.

I remember how it felt. The way my heart raced, the heat that flared hot in my core. The comfort and surrender of being in his arms.

Now I get to see what it looked like.

And so does Callum.

As I watch, his features pinch together, his face going red. It's not embarrassment. It's anger, the way I knew it would be. As soon as I opened the envelope and looked at what was inside, my first thought was of him and how enraged he'd be if I told him. I had to because what am I supposed to do about it on my own? There are a lot of things I can keep quiet about, and lord knows I've been keeping secrets all summer.

No, this is bigger than that. Potentially explosive. It could blow up in both our faces.

"Where the fuck did you get this?" He glances away from the picture just long enough to lock eyes with me before returning to it.

I can't tell him, at least not right now, while it's all fresh. He'd kill Lucas for this. Not that I've never wanted to kill him myself, but I wasn't being literal. "Does it matter? Somebody's following me around and taking pictures of me. Do you know what would happen if this got out? If my dad ever found out? He'd kill me."

"I doubt he would actually kill you." His hands are practically vibrating, and the photo along with them. "Disown you? Maybe. And it isn't like this proves anything. We kissed. Is that a federal crime?"

"You know what I'm trying to say."

"You're trying to say your bulldog of a father would never let it go."

My heart shudders at the nastiness in his voice. “What makes you say it that way?”

He lifts a shoulder. “From what you’ve told me about him.” No, that doesn’t feel true. The way he said it. It sounded like he knew what he was talking about. From experience, maybe.

“Anyway,” he continues, “you’re a grown woman. It’s your life. You can kiss or fuck whoever you want.”

“And if you saw Tatum with somebody your age, you wouldn’t care?” All I can do is shake my head. “You don’t know how it is,” I insist when he scoffs. “My mom died, and I became the center of his world. All he has is me and his work. He would go on a rampage if he found out I was with you.”

Finally, I have no choice but to say it. “And he might make life miserable for you, even if I beg him not to.”

The light in his eyes dims, and darkness takes its place. Now he gets it. What I didn’t want to say, but where my mind went immediately upon seeing the black-and-white image. If my father wanted to get revenge, he wouldn’t have to try hard to interfere in Callum’s professional and personal life.

His nostrils flare, and his jaw tightens, but he keeps a hold of himself. “He would do that?”

“Are you kidding me? In a heartbeat. I came here because, even though I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to stay away from you, it was still a better option than moving back home. He means well,” I add because I feel like I have to. Otherwise, it’s like I’m being ungrateful. Disloyal.

“He would be that vindictive?”

“That’s not the only problem we have.” I don’t want to talk about my father anymore. I don’t like the look he has on his face. The tension grows between us, and all it’s going to take is the strike of a match to make him explode. “Somebody is following me, and I’m scared, Callum.” I hate the anguish that fills my voice. “I don’t know what to do.”

“I think I need a drink.” He’s holding the photo in one hand as he crosses the room and pours a drink with the other.

As he does, I watch the photo crumple in his tightening fist.

“So that’s how she knew,” he mutters, his back turned to me.

“Who? What are you talking about?”

Instead of answering, he takes a long gulp from his glass. “I don’t think it’s you the photographer was following. If that makes you feel any better.”

My heart shudders. “What do you mean? Are they following you? Why is somebody following you?”

“My ex is a vindictive, greedy bitch,” he spits.

I can’t help wincing at his bitterness. “Tatum’s mom?”

His head bobs up and down before he turns slowly. I wouldn’t want him looking at me the way he now stares down at his clenched fist, holding the crumpled picture. “Things have been bad for a long time. She’ll do anything she can to get money out of me. Even have someone follow me around, it seems.”

“So, you think this was her?” I don’t because I know where the picture came from. It was Lucas, not Amanda. But I don’t want to tell him that, so I’ll play along. And it wouldn’t be a bad idea to know what we might be up against from her, too.

“It’s exactly the kind of thing she would do.” The grim certainty in his voice tells me his mind is made up.

“But why?”

“It’s a long story having to do with how much money she can squeeze out of me.” He seems to find this funny since, out of nowhere, he laughs. “Why didn’t I think about that? Like she wouldn’t do everything she could to have leverage over me.”

He shakes his head, still snickering. “I have to give it to her. She’s a clever bitch.”

I don’t feel super comfortable with him using that word, but I don’t feel comfortable asking him to stop, either. We

have bigger problems, anyway. “Even if they were following you and not me, I still don’t feel any better. Is this what happens all the time? Am I supposed to look over my shoulder wherever I go?”

“I don’t think it’s that serious.”

“Maybe not for you. You’re used to it. But I’m not asking for any of this. I only want to be with you. Does that mean having to live with your vindictive ex-wife and people spying on me?” And all the other things he threatened me with weeks ago, things I don’t want to think about now.

His brows lower over stormy eyes. “What are you trying to say? You’re afraid to be with me?”

“It isn’t you I’m afraid of.” Not exactly true, but I want to believe I’m safe with him, even if most people aren’t. “It’s all the people around you.”

“I can take care of anybody. Don’t you know that?”

“I don’t know what I know anymore,” I confess, with tears threatening to choke me. “I only know that if my dad finds out about us, that’s it. He will do everything he can to make you miserable. I know it.”

“I can handle him, too.” He finishes the thought with a snort, like it’s funny.

Something about the way he says it. Or maybe it’s the darkness in his eyes—that flat, blank look. I don’t want my mind to go in the direction it’s taking me, but I can’t pretend the question doesn’t exist.

Speaking slowly, I ask, “You wouldn’t do anything to hurt him, would you? Because that would kill me.”

His head snaps back like he’s surprised. “Do you think I’m a monster?”

What a loaded question. “No. But...”

“But?” he snaps. “Tell me. You think I’m capable of that?”

I don’t know what to think anymore. That’s the problem. I haven’t had the first clue since this craziness started. My heart

tells me one thing, my brain tells me another, and my body is in a constant state of longing for him. It's amazing I can get through a day.

Suddenly, I'm crying again, big sobs that make my shoulders heave while I cover my face with my hands. It's embarrassing the way I can't get a handle on this. "I don't know! I don't know anything anymore. I'm scared of what this means."

"Hey." There's regret in his voice when he crouches in front of me beside his desk. This might be the first time his touch has ever failed to light me up inside. The presence of his hands on my thighs is comforting, but I'm too upset for it to mean more than that. "This doesn't have to mean anything. It's just a picture from your piece of shit ex, who I'll gladly pay a visit to if it makes you happy."

I lower my hands from in front of my face as the idea sinks in. It doesn't sound half bad. Lucas needs to figure out once and for all that I don't want anything to do with him, and nobody knows better than me how scary Callum can be when he puts his mind to it.

So why is there a red flag waving in the back of my head? Something about the idea is all wrong, but I can't put my finger on it.

Until our eyes meet, his shining with hatred and murderous intent. That's when I get it.

I push the wheeled chair backward away from him. "How do you know that?" I whisper.

"Know what? Where are you—"

"Lucas." My legs are watery, but I force myself to stand. "How did you know he gave me that picture? What are you hiding?"

He stands, his eyes never leaving me. Eyes now burning with the sort of intensity I've seen before. Intensity that doesn't usually mean anything good. "Let me explain myself."

"What is there to explain?" The panic building in my head makes it tough to think straight. He was following me. Spying.

“Why were you even there? How did you know exactly where I was going to be when I didn’t give you an address?” Every question leads to another until it isn’t only panic threatening to break me.

It’s outrage.

“Would you take a breath and let me—”

“No,” I snap, though I regret it when his eyes bulge. He’s breathing hard, barely controlling himself, and all it took was being questioned. Something as simple as that, and he’s ready to explode in rage.

Backing away toward the door, I make up my mind. “I’m signing the lease on that apartment tomorrow. This was all a mistake.”

“Bianca.” He throws his hands into the air, hands I’m afraid of again. He was stalking me. “What? You thought I was going to let you live just anywhere? If you’re this determined to live on your own, I could afford a much nicer place in a guarded building. I followed you from work, big deal. You can’t expect me to sit back and let you march into trouble.”

This isn’t the first time I’ve imagined living in a cage, is it? I didn’t realize how right I was.

Now, I see it all. “You’re just as bad as my father. Trying to control every part of my life.” It’s hard to breathe once the full weight of this sits on my chest. I’ve exchanged one cage for another.

He’s never going to see me as my own person, someone able to make my own choices. I will always have to follow his rules, always knowing there’s a chance he’s watching. Judging. Waiting to punish me for going against him.

I won’t live that way.

“Bianca!” he shouts when I take off, running from the room and down the hall. I don’t even know what I’m doing—it’s not like I have a plan in place. I only know I need to get away and stay away. It doesn’t matter that I still want him, and the idea of being without him is torture. My head’s all screwed

up, thanks to my body being weak for him. It's pathetic, and I will not let it rule me anymore.

"You will not leave this house!" He's close, running behind me, and it's sheer terror that makes me sprint madly for Tatum's wing. "Bianca, get back here! Where do you think you're going?"

Away from you. Anywhere but here. I slam the door to her wing and lock it before fleeing for the bedroom. I don't even need that much. I'm in such a blind panic, so desperate to leave, I should've run straight for the car instead. I'm not exactly thinking clearly.

I lock the bedroom door, too, and hope he doesn't get it into his head to stay out there and essentially block me in while I yank a bag from the closet. My laptop, my essentials. I throw them in at random with hands that shake at the thought of how furious he is. I shouldn't have announced that I was leaving. When will I ever learn?

"Bianca!" His pounding on the door pulls a broken, breathless sob from my chest. I'm not going to let him scare me out of this. I refuse. No matter how hard he pounds, so hard, I'm afraid he'll punch his way through the thick wood while I zip up my bag.

My head swings back and forth. The idea of an escape is the only thing that matters now. Could I make it out the window?

Oh, my god. Did I actually consider that?

I spin around from the window and bark out a scream when, all at once, the door flies inward, thanks to the way Callum kicked it open. He looms large in the doorway, his hands in fists at his sides and his broad shoulders heaving while he glares hatefully at me.

All I can do is shrink back against the dresser between the windows, cowering in the face of his rage.

I think I signed my death warrant.

Because he looks like he'd love nothing more than to kill me.

CALLUM



When I think I understand this girl, she leaves me wondering what the hell I was thinking, getting involved with her. The back and forth, up and down—it's enough to make me want to throw her out on her ass and forget I ever set eyes on her.

“Please, don't hurt me,” she whispers, cowering like a trapped fox when the hounds have closed in.

How dare she? She thinks I'll let this go? Pretend this was only a misunderstanding? I've killed men for insulting me less than she has. Practically spitting in my fucking face after everything I've been willing to sacrifice.

How does she repay me? Running from me in my own home. Forcing me to chase her down.

And after all that, she thought a locked door would stop me from getting to her? Have we met? Does she not know me? As if I would let her get away. As if I wouldn't stop at anything to make sure I have her forever.

“You can't run from me.” I'm panting, grinding my teeth, hungry for the sound of her apologies. To make her hurt.

At the same time, I can't help but stare in fascination. She's never been more beautiful than she is now, fearing for her life in the face of my rage. Her red-rimmed eyes sparkling with unshed tears, and her fair skin paler than moonlight. She clutches the tote bag in front of her like a shield, like that would do anything to protect her. A locked door couldn't do it.

“Don’t hurt me, Callum. Please.” She shakes her head, her eyes glued to me, and her body tense like she’s ready to run if I give her so much as an inch of space. “I know you don’t want to hurt me.”

That’s what does it. What breaks through the haze of rage.

She lets out a yelp when I cross the room and take her by the arm. “*Hurt you?* You’re the one who’s been wounded? When you run away and force me to chase you through my own home? What kind of game do you think this is?” I bellow in her face while she flinches, weeping.

“You can’t do this to me,” she chokes out while her body trembles. “How can you say you care about me when—”

“When all I care about is your safety? I want you to be protected and cared for, and I’m supposed to apologize for that? It will never happen.”

“I don’t want to live that way!” If she doesn’t stop trying to yank her arm free, she’ll end up dislocating her shoulder. Not that I’m going to ease my grip. “Don’t you see? Aren’t you listening?”

“You are not leaving me,” I grit out. “Never. So get the idea out of that pretty little head right now.”

“You’re hurting me,” she whimpers, all traces of strength and defiance stripped from her voice.

“You’ll have to remember that the next time you take it into your head to run away.” Pulling her close, I release her arm in favor of taking her face between my hands. This beautiful, tear-streaked face, so soft and fragile. “I hate having to do this, but you leave me no choice.”

Her troubled gaze bounces over my face, brows drawing together. She’s confused and full of dread. What a shame she didn’t think before forcing my hand. “What are you going to do?”

“What a bad girl deserves.”

It isn’t until I drag her to the bed and take a seat on the edge that she thrashes around, fighting to be free. “No! You

can't be serious!"

She's wrong again. I've never been more serious than I am now, pulling her to me and throwing her over my lap. She lands with a soft grunt and instantly starts pounding her fists against my leg and kicking her feet pointlessly into the air.

"You did it to yourself." She may as well be pounding the air with those tiny fists of hers. I barely feel the blows she lands. I'm too focused on her ripe ass, bared to me once I pull her modest little work dress up to her waist. A thin strip of pink cotton is wedged between those luscious cheeks, leaving her smooth globes for me to stroke and squeeze.

"Stop! Callum, this is ridiculous!" She wriggles and kicks and twists her neck to look up at me. The shock on her flushed face almost makes all of this worth it.

But it's the fighting and squirming and rubbing against my crotch that's becoming a problem. Nothing I can't handle, but if she doesn't let up, I won't be able to get through this without being distracted by other needs.

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you were trying to get me hot, so I'll forget about your punishment." I run my hand over her soft ass, and my dick twitches in response. "Is that what you're doing, little bird?"

"No! Damn it, let me go!"

"Not until I'm satisfied you've learned your lesson."

She shrieks at the sharp crack of my hand against her cheek. Like magic, a red print in the shape of my palm appears. "I'm not going to stop until your entire ass looks like a fucking boiled lobster, so you might as well stop fighting." With my forearm thrown over her lower back, I smack her again and savor her pained cry.

And the way her cheek bounces. It's hypnotic.

"Stop! Please!" The fighting is getting weaker, not that it did any good. "You're hurting me."

"That's the point." My palm stings, but I keep going, counting the strikes as they land. "Five... six..."

“I get it!” she sobs, flinching. “Enough! Callum, enough, please.”

“You don’t like taking your punishment, huh?” Instead of bringing my hand down hard in a slap, I choose instead to apply featherlight pressure with the tips of my fingers until she squirms and moans helplessly. Her skin is hot under my touch.

Considering what’s now soaked through her thong and leaked onto her inner thighs, I don’t think the heat comes from my slaps alone. “What’s this?” I whisper, sliding my fingertips over a slick patch of skin. “I must’ve been wrong. I’m supposed to be punishing you, and you’re dripping like a leaky faucet.”

Her silence speaks volumes. “What?” I taunt, stroking her inner thigh. “Embarrassed?”

“Please.” It’s barely a breath; her body tensed and still.

“Please, what? Please keep getting you hot?” It’s almost enough to make me forget where this started. I can’t focus on punishment when the fragrance of this sweet pussy is threatening to make me forget my own name.

“That’s not what I want.” She’s not fighting to get off my lap, though, and all the fire blazing in her voice has cooled.

“I think you’re lying.” She writhes pitifully when I stroke her red skin again. It’s ultrasensitive and throbbing now that the blood has rushed to the surface. “Lie to yourself all you want, but don’t lie to me. Never to me.”

All she can do is whine and moan, trying like hell to get away. “I can’t... please...”

“Can’t what?” My arm is an iron bar across her lower back, holding her in place. This is better than a spanking. A deeper torment.

No matter how much she wants to deny it, she can’t control her response, and it’s killing her. Nothing in the world could stop me now.

“I can’t take it!” Her voice rises in pitch until it’s a needy whine. “Please, I can’t!”

“You should’ve thought of that before you forced me to chase you.” My blood’s humming, and my cock is steel; she insists on rubbing against it with every desperate wiggle of her hips. I’m not only torturing her. We’re both suffering.

“I-I’m sorry!” She bucks her hips, but it does no good.

“I don’t believe you.” And if I give her what’s now dripping into my shorts, it’s the same as rewarding her for that defiance. But I don’t know how much longer I can keep from taking her.

The scrape of my short nails over her welt-covered ass makes her scream, and the sound only adds to the pressure building in my balls. “Keep screaming, and I’ll fill that mouth,” I warn. I have to raise my voice to be heard over her guttural moans.

“You’re killing me!” she sobs. “Please, stop!”

Not when I have her like this, so ramped up, she’s about to melt down in my lap. When I pull aside the skimpy cotton thong and bare her bald pussy to my greedy eyes, the sight of fresh juice oozing from her slit leaves me no choice but to slide two fingers deep into her cunt. I need to get to the source of that sweetness and feel her muscles fluttering around my digits.

“Oh, god!” She lifts her ass to meet my strokes, grinding her hips. Watching her break down is fucking beautiful. Making her forget every reason she ever thought this was a mistake. “Callum, oh, god! Yes!”

My hand is a blur, knuckles pounding against her while my fingers invade her roughly. The sloppy wet sound mixes with her throaty cries in an erotic symphony that leaves me breathless, grunting, and grinding my teeth because, fuck, she is so ready for me.

“I shouldn’t let you come.” My hand goes still, and she lets out the loudest scream of all. Anguished and furious.

“No!” Her ass bounces like she’s trying to force my fingers deeper.

“No? You don’t want to come?”

“Yes! I do!”

“You’re confusing me. You should learn to be clearer.” Her misery only sweetens all of this, the way she moans and whines—especially once I withdraw my fingers, now shining with the evidence of her excitement.

I’m as helpless as she is by the time I raise them to my nose and inhale deeply, sucking her musky essence into my lungs. It isn’t enough, even when I lick her nectar from them and savor the taste. I’ll never get enough of her.

She’s still moaning in misery, hanging on the line between arousal and release, when I lift her from my lap and throw her face down across the foot of the bed. “Why should I give you what you want?”

“Please, Callum.” When she pushes herself up on her palms, I slam her down again, a hand between her shoulder blades.

With the other hand, I lift her dress again and pull the thong free, letting it fall to her ankles. “You’re going to learn. I decide when you come. I decide whether you live here or elsewhere. Where you go. What you do.”

I move her legs apart with one of mine before lowering my zipper with a trembling hand. I’m so close already, painfully erect, balls aching.

It’s the sweetest relief to sink deep into her wet heat. Her cunt clenches around me, locking me in place and promising release. “Repeat what I just said.” My thighs slam against hers. “I decide.”

“You... you...” Still defiant. She doesn’t want to give in. I almost admire her for it.

I wrap her silky hair around my fist and pull until she lets out a broken cry. “Say it!” I demand. “I decide.”

“You decide!” she wails, pounding the mattress with her fists.

“Because I fucking own you.”

“Yes!” She’s a helpless, screeching animal. “Yes, yes!”

“And you go nowhere without my say-so.” She’s getting tighter, wetter, and I don’t know how much longer I can last. But I have to. I need to hear her say it.

“Yes! Oh, yes, just let me come!”

Through gritted teeth, I grunt, “Because. You. Are. Mine.”

“Yours! I’m yours!”

I release her hair in favor of leaning over her, driving hard and deep while I growl in her ear. “Come for me, little bird. Show me you mean it.”

“Oh... oh, yes... oh, god, yes, I’m—” At the last second, she buries her face in the bedspread and lets out a scream that doesn’t sound human. Like it’s coming from her very soul, like I’ve shattered what stood between us and left behind this screeching, shaking creature.

A creature belonging to me. Every last bit of her.

And she knows it.

With a triumphant roar, I empty my balls deep inside her cunt, filling her with my hot seed. She’s still coming by the time I’m spent, her tiny muscles rippling like they want more, her body trembling.

When my softening dick slides from her sloppy hole, she doesn’t react. “Bianca?” I murmur as I tuck myself into my slacks, but there’s no response. I roll her to her side, concerned, only to find she’s passed out from the intensity of what I made her experience.

“You rest,” I whisper, stroking sweaty hair back from where it’s plastered against her flushed cheek. Now that the storm has passed, there’s nothing but tenderness swelling in my chest when I see her like this. *My little bird.*

I undress her the rest of the way, careful not to disturb her, before wrapping her in a blanket and carrying her from the room. She belongs in my bed, and that’s exactly where I take her. The conqueror carrying his prize.

It only occurs to me once I’ve laid her in the bed that there will never be a better time to go through with my plan.

Once she's tucked in, and I'm sure she's still out cold, I head down to my office. The package is still waiting where I left it on the table near the door—the sight of it stirs satisfaction in my chest and brings a smile to my face.

Tonight, I set things straight. I made sure my little bird knows who she belongs to. Who owns her—body and soul.

But I've learned a few things while building my empire.

For instance, assurances mean shit unless you have insurance to back them up. In this case, my insurance is contained within this little package. My soft whistling carries down the hall as I walk to the opposite end of the house.

According to the pack of pills in her nightstand, she took today's dose. I take the appropriate number of sugar pills from the pack I'm switching out, then exchange the plastic containers. She'll never know the difference.

But I will. And every time we fuck, and I come inside her, there will be a chance of getting her pregnant. The idea gets my pulse racing. I wonder how long it will take. A young, healthy girl like her should have no problem conceiving.

Though there's still the extra matter of the fertility drug to seal the deal. The syringe is already filled, and when I return to my bedroom, Bianca is still asleep. There's nothing to do but pull the blankets back and reveal her naked body. She's on her side, curled in a ball with her hands tucked under her head.

So peaceful.

Even the prick of the needle in her ass does nothing but make her stir, mumbling in her sleep. "Everything's fine," I whisper as I push down on the plunger. "You have nothing to worry about, little bird. Because you're mine."

And nobody gets in the way of me taking what's mine.

Not Amanda, who wants what she didn't have to lift a finger to help build.

Not Lucas, who only thinks he can get back what he so stupidly tossed aside.

“I’m going to make everything perfect for us,” I murmur as I stand by the side of the bed. “For us and our baby.”

BIANCA



Of all things, why would I dream about getting stung by a bee?

That's the first thing that comes to mind when I wake up. My ass is sore all over, but there's a different sort of stinging, too. I must be imagining it.

I don't know where I am right away, and I'm afraid to open my eyes. Why am I afraid? There's dread weighing on me, tapping the back of my mind when I'm still half asleep.

Warning me.

It doesn't take long to figure out why once it all comes back. I don't even remember falling asleep. Somehow, I did, and now here I am. Naked and in bed, but not the one in Tatum's room. This room has a masculine smell to it, and I recognize it right away.

He brought me to his room. And he's next to me. I hear him typing away on his laptop. His spicy, masculine scent fills the air.

Right away, my heart flips, and I feel all hot and clammy. I don't have any reason to, really—he's working quietly, not bothering me. I'm sure he thinks I'm still asleep. And although he undressed me while I was out of it, I'm safe and comfortable. He hasn't hurt me.

At least, not any more than he already did.

My body flushes with shame when I remember how easy I made it for him to make me say what he wanted to hear. That I

want him to humiliate me. That I belong to him. No wonder my ass hurts.

And what was worse, so much worse that it makes me feel sick, is how natural it felt. How much I wanted to give in. I don't know what it is about him or what he does to me, but at that moment, I would have said anything. I was completely under his control, no matter how much I didn't want to be.

In the moment, I wanted it very much. I wanted it to be true.

I can't keep living like this. It's sick and twisted and wrong. I shouldn't have let this go on as long as I have. He thinks I'm going to stay here with him forever, and that was never the plan.

Now that I'm thinking clearly—because he's not touching me, teasing me, torturing me—I can't remember why I ever gave in.

I only know for sure he'll hold me to my promise.

There's got to be a way out of this mess, no matter how warm and comfortable I feel right now. Even the sound of his fingers hitting the keys is soothing. I could easily fall asleep again.

But I won't do that because I have too much to figure out. I can't give up on myself, which is exactly what I'd be doing if I let myself fall asleep in these luscious satin sheets and act like there was anything right about what happened.

It's always going to be this way. I can't live like this. Who could? I never know what he's going to say or do. The mood he'll be in. What stupid little thing I'll do that will set him off. This is wrong, and I don't want it.

But I can't lie to myself. I still want him. I'm not proud of it, but I can't pretend otherwise. My whole life could depend on whether I'm honest with myself now. I owe it to myself, to be honest.

“I know you're awake.”

Damn it. At the sound of his voice, I tense all over, which I'm sure only proves what he just said. I yawn loudly, like I just came to, before opening my eyes and rolling over to face him. The room is pitch black except for the glow from the laptop that lets me see him sitting with his back to the headboard, bare-chested and maybe naked under the blanket pulled up to his waist.

And here I am, staring at his body and the tattoos on his biceps and chest. He's a work of art—a twisted, unpredictable, violent work of art.

“What time is it?” I whisper. My voice is hoarse, and right away, I remember screaming like a banshee earlier. I'm so ashamed of myself for acting the way I did.

“One o'clock.” I was out for hours. No wonder my stomach's growling.

“I'm going to go down and get something to eat,” I whisper as I sit up. “Can you give me something to wear?”

“No need.” He doesn't even look away from his screen, only jerking his chin in the nightstand's direction on my side of the bed. “I brought food in for you.”

Yes, he did. A banana and a couple of protein bars, a packet of trail mix, and two bottles of water. If I was feeling really suicidal, I would make a snarky comment about the feast he prepared. I think I'll keep it to myself.

“I'd better go put some pajamas on.”

“Why? You're fine the way you are, and you're staying here with me tonight.”

Like it's a done deal. Like his word is law.

“I had work to do when I came home tonight, you know.”

“You don't have to worry about that anymore.”

The pit in my stomach is expanding with every word he says. I don't think I'm so hungry anymore. “What do you mean by that?” I whisper, even though I'm pretty sure I already know.

“You don’t have to worry about your work anymore. You don’t have to go.” His fingers never stop moving as he speaks.

Calm, be calm, don’t react. But how can I not? He’s sitting here deciding about my life without bothering to ask for my opinion. He can’t even be bothered to stop typing.

Digging my nails into my palms keeps me from reacting, but only so much. At least it stops me from panicking.

I need to take a deep breath and let it out slowly before saying another word. “I don’t understand. Do you know something I don’t?”

“Hmm?” I still don’t have his full attention. Is this a test? I hate that I even have to ask myself that. Here I am, playing chess again, weighing every choice, every word.

“Did I get fired, and nobody told me? Because things seemed fine when I left the office today.”

Finally, he looks at me—and he even rolls his eyes. He has the nerve to do that. “Don’t play dumb.”

My teeth are going to break if I have to grind them any harder. “Who’s playing? I’m in the dark here.”

With a sigh, he sets the laptop aside. “You aren’t going anywhere,” he informs me, speaking slowly like he would speak to a child. “You’re here, with me, and that’s it. I’ll give you everything you want on the condition you stay here. That’s a fair exchange, I think.”

I’m glad he does. I sure as hell don’t. “You want me to quit my job? I just started.”

“You don’t have to work. That’s what I’m trying to tell you.”

“But I want to.”

“You want to sit in a cubicle and stare at spreadsheets all day? Is that your big plan for your life?”

It’s better than sitting around the house all day. I practically have to bite my tongue off to keep from saying it. I don’t think he would take it very well if I did.

“I’m not sure what the plan is yet, but I know I worked really hard for four years to get that job, and it’s a great company. I don’t want to throw it away.”

“It’s nothing. Small-time bullshit.”

It’s so funny when I think back on how unimpressed I was at first with my job and everything that came with it. Now, facing down the possibility of having to leave, anger and pride swell in my chest and make me want to fight like hell. “It matters to me. Doesn’t that count?”

“I don’t want you leaving the house. End of story.”

So that’s what this is all about. I should’ve known. “You want me to be your prisoner? That’s what you’re saying.”

“It’s not that dramatic.”

“It is for me. I can’t be a prisoner here for the rest of my life. I need to go out in the world.” Because my throat is so dry, I grab one of the water bottles and take a deep gulp. It isn’t easy to keep my hand from shaking and spilling all over the place.

“How can I trust you? You throw it in my face that you want to turn your back on everything I’m offering, and you expect me to trust you to come home tomorrow after work?”

That’s just it. The more he talks, the better I understand his thought process, and the more determined I am to never step foot in this house again after I leave. Already, there’s a plan taking shape in the back of my mind. I’ll pack my things before going to the office, and I’ll have Tatum bring them to me after she gets home. Otherwise, I’ll carry my necessities with me to work. I’ll sign the lease, and then I’ll go to Dad’s and work everything out from there.

“Well?” Callum lifts an eyebrow. “What am I supposed to do here?”

“You really want me to stay here with you?” I grab one of the protein bars, hoping it will settle my stomach, which is now doing backflips. And not in an exciting kind of way.

“That’s just the way it has to be. Don’t you see? This is where you belong.”

It makes me want to scream how matter-of-fact he can be, even when he’s saying the craziest things. “But don’t you want me to be happy?”

“You would be. If you would let me make you happy.”

“I’ll never be happy unless I have some freedom—you can roll your eyes all you want,” I add when he does just that. “That’s not going to change. And I don’t think you would like it if you found out somebody was forcing Tatum into doing what they wanted.”

“Do not throw my daughter in my face,” he growls.

“I only want you to understand what I’m thinking. Please, let me make some of my own choices. Give me the freedom to come and go. And you’ll just have to trust me.” The words threaten to stick in my throat, but I force them out.

He’s fighting with himself, scowling, his jaw going tight. I have to fight off the impulse to beg and plead. That will not get me anywhere.

“I want you home immediately after work. No excuses.”

“I promise,” I lie. My heart’s hammering, and I’m sure he’ll be able to see my thoughts written on my face, but it doesn’t seem that way. He’s pretty calm and even-tempered. The complete opposite of the way he was earlier. I wish I hadn’t made it so easy for him to get what he wanted, but it’s like I can’t resist him. And that’s why I have to get away for good, because when we’re together, there is no denying how I crave him.

“Fair enough. But stay with me,” he adds as he stretches out, welcoming—demanding—me with his open arms. “You’re sleeping here.”

I’m almost too happy to agree. I did it. I faced off with him, and I came out on top. How many people have been able to say that?

I wish it didn’t feel so good to lie in his strong arms.

I wish it didn't hurt so much to imagine never doing it again.

* * *

I CAN DO THIS. I'm going to do this.

I only wish I didn't feel like I have to look over my shoulder the whole time, like Callum's going to jump out from behind a trash can or something. I can't trust him not to follow me around. And he expects me to give up almost everything.

I can't do that. I won't. Even if it means I can't be with him.

The way it has all morning, the thought makes me feel sick. Why does he have to be the way he is? There's a difference between being sexy and commanding and telling me what I can and cannot do. He might have relented for now, but I'm understanding the way he thinks. He'll find another way to control me.

Now I'm supposed to learn to live without him. I hate him for putting me through this.

But not enough to walk into the building and up to the apartment I plan on leasing. I was just fine getting here and walking up to the front stoop, but this is as far as my feet want to carry me. It's just a lease. I can do this—no, I need to do this.

But what happens when Callum shows up? Because he will. I didn't think about that before. He knows where this place is because he basically stalks me. He'll come looking for me before long.

If he doesn't tie me up and throw me over his shoulder, he'll find some way to convince me to come back. And then what? I'm stuck with a lease on an apartment I don't live in.

Who are you trying to kid?

I hate the know-it-all voice in my head that sounds like Tatum because she's right. I'm kidding myself. I don't want to

live on my own. I don't want to sneak away from Callum. The thought of it makes my eyes threaten to well up.

I need him. I wish it wasn't true, but I can't change it. I've been in love with him for years, and it didn't matter how many times I told myself how wrong it was to feel that way... how he'd never feel the same... how he didn't even look at me as an adult.

It was impossible to forget him before. How am I going to do it now that I know I was wrong about the way he saw me?

I'm not. That's it. I'm never going to forget him. I'm going to be miserable for the rest of my life.

Maybe there's a way to make things work.

I can't believe I'm thinking this, but now that the idea has wiggled its way into my brain, there's no getting rid of it. In fact, I'm relieved. I don't have to live without him. I didn't really want to give up and run away.

I'm not a runner. I stick around and work through my problems. I mean, it took five years to give up on Lucas, and he had to force me into it.

This is going to be different. Better. It just has to be.

My heart feels lighter than it has all day when I back away from the stoop, determined to go back to Callum after work and set some ground rules. We need them if this is ever going to work. He came around last night when I told him how important it was to keep my job. That means he's not totally unreasonable.

I might be telling myself what I want to hear, but I don't care. I'm happier with him than without him—that much, I know. We'll find a way.

I'm so busy convincing myself of this as I step off the curb that I don't hear the car coming straight for me.

Not just coming. Speeding up.

It hits me, and I hit the ground, and everything goes dark.

CALLUM



“*B*oss?”

The sound of Romero calling for me out in the hall is what breaks the resolve I’ve barely been able to hang onto once five-thirty came and went. That was more than a half hour ago, and there’s still no sign of her.

She lied to me. She fucking lied to my face when she said she’d come home after work. I’d get a phone call if there was traffic or some emergency. Unless she was trying to avoid me.

Which means that’s exactly what she’s trying to do. She’s too responsible for this to be anything but deliberate.

I’m already halfway to the door before I bellow in reply. “What the hell do you want?”

He was on his way across the hall and now falls back a step. “I had a handful of contracts for you to look over. The new shipments?” He extends a handful of folders.

Folders I ignore. “I don’t have time for this shit right now.” The damn things could be written in Sanskrit, and I wouldn’t notice. I can’t care about anything but Bianca. Why isn’t she here? Why hasn’t she called?

Did she make a fool out of me again? Because I believed her, I did. I was sure she’d come back. Because she’s mine.

She is, isn’t she?

“Fuck!”

“What?” Romero calls out after me, but I’m already halfway down the hall and pulling up Bianca’s contact details on my phone. I’m not waiting another minute to let her know this is unacceptable. I’ll tie her to the bed from now on, the way I should’ve done last night. When will I listen to my instincts when it comes to her?

Her phone rings once, twice, while I march to her room. I don’t have the first idea what I’m looking for, though I can’t help wondering if she figured out the switch I pulled with her pills. No, that’s impossible. The packaging is identical. I didn’t leave anything out of place, either.

So why didn’t she come home when she said she would?

The answer is obvious once I find the three packed bags she left in the bedroom closet. There’s nothing I can do but stare at them while the rushing of blood in my ears deafens me to everything else but the burning rage that’s about to make me burst into flames. The evidence of her plotting against me is sitting right there. She hardly tried to hide it.

“Did you think it would be this easy?” I ask her voicemail since that’s the closest I’ve managed to get to speaking directly to her. “You think I won’t find you? Think again. And when I do, we’re going to have this out.”

It isn’t good enough. I need her in front of me. Now.

No more listening when she gives me her sob stories about wanting a life of her own. No more giving a shit about her satisfaction with her career or whatever the hell she thinks she’s building. She won’t have time for that once she’s pregnant, anyway.

I should have listened to myself. What is it about her that makes me forget everything I know?

On the way back to my office, I grab a trio of my guys hanging out in the kitchen, eating slabs of chocolate cake Sheryl left out tonight. “Earn your money,” I grunt, waving for them to abandon their plates and follow me instead. “What, do I pay you to gorge yourselves?”

“Sorry, boss,” one of them murmurs behind me. I don’t bother looking to see which one of them it was. It doesn’t matter.

“The three of you are going hunting.” I signal for Romero to join us once we reach his doorway. “And you, I want checking with the parking company that runs the garage attached to Bianca’s office building. I’ll text you the address.”

“What’s going on?” he asks, following me to my laptop while the guards fall in step behind him.

“I have reason to believe...” I trail off when my excuse rings false even to me. “Bianca hasn’t come home from work yet, and we’re going to find her and bring her back.”

If it was just the two of us, he might make an excuse about traffic or overtime. It’s one thing to speak personally, but another to do it in front of the bodyguards.

“You’ve all seen her car,” he says, turning to the men while I send him the information he needs. “The three of you will begin at her office building, then spread out.”

Something else occurs to me, something that makes my stomach churn. “And Romero, I want you to head to another address.” Because I’m starting to believe she may have signed that lease today, after all. She could be there.

She could also be at her father’s house. Should I send him there? Do I dare open that can of worms?

One guy snorts while I’m still digging through contact information. “I didn’t know we’d end up babysitting tonight.”

I raise my eyes, staring daggers at him. Nathan has been with me long enough to know I don’t accept shit like that. “Excuse me? Did you just question an order I’ve given?”

He knows he’s stepped in it—so do his buddies, both of whom place space between themselves and him. Like they don’t want to get caught in the splash zone when I blow his brains out. His face goes gray, and he moistens his lips with the tip of his tongue before choking out an apology. “Sorry, boss. I was only screwing around.”

He gulps audibly when I crack my knuckles, rounding the desk. What's he going to do? Back away and make himself look like a pussy, or stand his ground and get the shit kicked out of him? Since he stays still, it's clear he's made his choice.

“What about this situation makes you think it's okay to screw around? Since when are my orders treated as a joke?”

All he can do is stammer while his eyes sweep the area like he's looking for a way out. There isn't one.

“Come on.” I roll up my sleeves without looking away from him. “Tell me. What was so funny? Who told you to laugh at my orders?”

A bead of sweat rolls down his temple. “I... I don't know. I'm sorry, boss.”

Wrong answer.

His knees buckle when I drive a fist into his midsection, so I haul him up by the collar for a jab to his nose. Cartilage crunches under my fist before blood flows.

“Hey, boss.” Romero wasn't able to stop me down at the harbor, but this time he won't let go until I lay off the pathetic sack of shit now bent at the waist, clutching his broken nose.

“Get him out of here before he bleeds all over my floor,” I warn the other two. “Then get the fuck behind the wheel and do what you're told. You're bringing her home.”

They waste no time dragging him out while he groans in pain.

I have to turn away from Romero when I catch him staring at me like we've never met. It's that or ask if he would like a little of the same treatment I just dished out. I'm not in the fucking mood for his concern. “Well? What's stopping you from doing what you're told?” I demand.

“I've never seen you do that before. Beating on one of your own men.”

“Maybe I should do more of it, seeing as how they think it's okay to make wiseass remarks when I've given an order.”

We both look down at the desk when my phone buzzes, and I might as well be jumping on a live grenade. I'm desperate to answer when I find the one name I want to see written in capital letters across the screen. My heart's fluttering, my stomach's in knots, and I've never felt this relieved.

She isn't ignoring me.

"Where the fuck are you?" I demand, pushing aside the flare of hope. She needs to learn this will not be tolerated. "What do you think you're doing? Do you know I'm about to send guys out to look for you?"

At first, I take her silence as guilt, and all it does is stoke the inferno already blazing in my head. "Well?" I bark. I hate Romero is witnessing this. I'm not proud of myself for letting her turn me into this person.

Finally, there's a soft snuffle on her end. "Can you please come get me?"

The fragile tremor in her voice calms my rage like water drowning a fire. She's in pain, or scared, or both. "From where?"

"The emergency room."

* * *

"I'M SORRY." She squeezes my hand, groaning, and the sound threatens to break what's left of my heart. Seeing her like this—the IV in her arm, the bruising and scrapes along the left side of her face, her arm, her leg—is almost worse torture than when I forced myself to stay away from her.

There's nothing I can do to take the pain away. I'm helpless, and I've never been a man who handles helplessness well.

"What are you apologizing for?" When she licks her dry lips, I pick up the Styrofoam cup of water from the wheeled table next to the bed and guide the straw to her mouth.

She takes a sip and tries to smile, but it looks more like a grimace. “For not calling sooner. I was so out of it, and they had my purse. They didn’t give it back to me until I came up from getting all those tests done. I don’t even know what half of them were.”

I could kick myself to death. There I was, cursing her, prepared to tie her to my bed and leave her there until she rotted. While she was alone here at the hospital, afraid, and probably half out of her senses from the pain.

All because some asshole hit her with their car and left her for dead.

“Did you see who hit you?” It’s amazing that I can speak clearly when I’m barely hanging on to the last shreds of my sanity. “Did you see the car? Did you see who was driving?”

She shakes her head slightly, a tear rolling down her bruised cheek. My perfect little bird, bruised and swollen because some asshole ran her down. “I didn’t even see them coming. One minute, I was crossing the street, and the next thing I remember was waking up in an ambulance. It was all my fault.” The monitor beside the bed beeps faster, thanks to the sensors stuck to her chest.

“You need to calm down,” I murmur, which is almost funny coming from me. The way I feel right now, nothing short of beating someone to death would calm me down.

“But I wasn’t looking. Why didn’t I look?”

“These things happen all the time. That’s not your fault. Whoever was behind the wheel should’ve been paying attention.” And they should have fucking stopped. Who the fuck hits somebody and leaves them in the street—in broad daylight. Someone who wants to kill someone.

I stroke her hair as gently as I can. According to the doctor, her injuries are superficial, but she’s in an understandable amount of pain, and I don’t want to make things worse. They ran pretty much every test known to man while I ranted and raved and nearly burned my house down. We’ve been at the hospital for hours, but Bianca was here for a few hours before

I got the call. The whole time, I was unaware of where she was or that something had happened. She could have been dead, and I wouldn't have known. It never occurred to me she could've had an accident.

There's no choice but to swallow back my self-loathing for her sake. "The doctor said you'll be fine, just sore for a few days. I'm going to take good care of you. And don't worry about the bill from this place. I'll take care of that, too."

"You shouldn't do that. I can—"

"I told you I would take care of you, and I mean it. You're only wasting your breath by arguing." I have to force a smile I don't feel for her sake.

Her eyes close. "I'm so sleepy," she mumbles.

"That's the pain meds. As soon as the nurse comes back with your scripts, I'll take you home. Get some rest now." I press my lips to her clammy forehead and close my eyes, reminding myself she's all right. It could've been much worse.

Her mouth moves wordlessly before a soft whisper reaches my ears. "I was coming back. I wasn't going to sign the lease." She forces her eyes open and finds mine. "I was coming back to you. I swear."

"Just get some rest." I believe her. And it makes my rage that much more potent. Someone nearly took her from me and didn't have the balls to stop and help her.

Romero clears his throat from beyond the doorway of the cubicle in the busy ER. I join him, always keeping an eye on the bed. Just in case she needs me.

"I spoke to the cop who took her statement," he murmurs, looking around to be sure no one's listening in. There are too many people needing help and too many alarm bells going off for any of the busy nurses to pay much attention.

"And?"

"They don't have anything yet. She never saw the driver and didn't have anything to tell them. The woman who called 911 didn't get a good look at the car, either."

At least somebody bothered to help. “I figured. Here’s what I want you to do. Call all the businesses on that block and find out if they have security cameras out front. We might be able to get footage of whoever did this.”

“Will do.” He looks into the room, his lips drawn in a thin line. “How is she?”

“Pretty damn lucky. Heavy bruising to her left side.” Which means, as she said, she was walking away from the side of the street the apartment she viewed sits on. If she’d been walking toward the building, they would have struck her on her right. “When I talked to the doctor, he said the car couldn’t have done more than clipped her in passing.”

“I’ll start making those calls.”

I grip his arm before he can walk away, when another idea occurs to me.

Calls. She called me. Not her father. I can’t put into words how gratifying that is, so I won’t bother trying.

But thinking of him gets me thinking about the future and what a pain in the ass he could end up being if I don’t cut him off. “I want you to call your contact down at headquarters. Whoever you trust the most. If she spoke to the police, they filed a report. I want that report stricken from the record.”

When he frowns, I add, “Her father.”

Understanding dawns on his face before he gives me a tight nod and heads for the exit, raising his phone to his ear. The last thing I need is a detective with a personal stake in the matter, finding out and blowing it all up. It would create too many problems. Complications I can’t afford.

Not to mention I need to get my hands on whoever did this. I’m not going through law enforcement, the so-called legal way. I won’t risk somebody getting off with nothing more than a slap on the wrist.

They almost took her from me and had the audacity to drive away.

No. A plea deal isn't enough. They're going to pay in blood for what they've done.

Staring at the small, fragile body in the bed, it's clear even that won't be enough. I can't risk this happening again. I'll have to install a tracking app on her phone. At the very least, for her protection.

And if it means being able to tell where she is at all times, even better.

I made the mistake of giving my little bird too much room to fly.

I won't exactly clip her wings, but that doesn't mean I'll let her fly free, either.

BIANCA



W hat day is it?

That's the first question that comes to mind when I open my eyes, but then it usually is. It's bad enough when I take a nap in the middle of the afternoon and wake up without the slightest clue of what time or day it is. Adding painkillers to the mix makes it impossible to keep track of time.

When I check my phone, the date reflects back at me like a neon sign. *Four days*. It's been four days since the car hit me. Four days of in and out of consciousness while random shows play on the big TV mounted on the wall across from the foot of the bed.

Sometimes, I wake up, and it's night, and Callum is next to me. All it takes is a soft grunt or a sigh, and he's beside me, asking if I'm okay, if I need anything, or if he can make me more comfortable. He can't be sleeping well. I warned him last night that if he doesn't start sleeping for real, he'll end up in the hospital.

Just thinking about waking up with a bright light shining in my eyes and the paramedics loading me onto a gurney turns my stomach. Nobody could tell me what happened or why I was hurting so much. When I asked for my purse, all they did was put a mask over my face and blow oxygen at me. It was like waking up to a nightmare.

My heart races. I need to stop thinking about it. I'm safe now, and I doubt anybody has been better taken care of than

me. The past few days have shown me a side of Callum I never knew existed. Gentle and attentive, trying to anticipate everything I need beforehand. He checks in on me a few times a day, even while he's working, and otherwise hangs out here.

He's even watched a few classic romantic comedies with me. Callum Torrio, the feared arms dealer, cracking up to an old Cary Grant movie. Nobody would believe it. I wouldn't if I wasn't curled up next to him at the time.

He's made all of this so much easier to live with.

It only makes me feel worse that I was in that part of town at all. Why was I even thinking of signing a lease to begin with? It's hard to remember now that I know this side of him exists.

Maybe this is a turning point. It would make all the pain worthwhile. The idea makes me smile, even as I fight to swing my legs over the side of the bed so I can use the bathroom. Moving around is getting easier, but I'm still sore and stiff. One of the nurses told me I'm lucky I didn't break anything, and I know she's right, but there've been moments when I was sure the x-rays were wrong, and I had a broken leg or arm. No, it didn't make sense, but who thinks clearly when they're in pain?

Four days have made it easier to face myself in the mirror, too. I don't flinch away from my reflection while washing my hands. The bruise on my cheekbone will turn an ugly shade of yellow and green before long, but I can cover that with makeup. The scrapes, too.

"You're still perfect," Callum told me as I drifted off to sleep beside him the first night. I don't know if he thought I could hear him or not, but I've heard those three whispered words in my head countless times since then. He still thinks I'm perfect.

Could this mean he has actual feelings for me?

There's no time to mull that over since my phone rings on the nightstand. Stephanie has been checking in on me from the

office, and I don't want to miss the call if it's her, especially when she's covered for me since the accident.

It's not Stephanie, but somebody I've been dying to talk to. "Buongiorno," I chirp on answering. "Wait. Are you still in Italy? I've lost track of your jet setting."

"Are you serious?" Tatum blurts out with an edge in her voice. "You're cracking jokes?"

Oh, no. I sink to the bed while my heart continues plummeting until it's down around my ankles. She must've found out about us—why else would she sound so pissed? "I'm sorry," I whisper over the tears clogging my throat.

"You got hit by a fucking car, and I had to wait four days to find out? Did you forget all about me?"

She sounds genuinely hurt, so it's probably not cool that I'm so relieved. She's only upset that she didn't know about the accident.

"When were you going to call me?" I can almost see her standing in front of me, arms folded, tapping a foot against the floor, and looking murderous.

"I've been so out of it. I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to keep it a secret or anything." I stifle a groan while settling back against the pillows.

"Are you okay? I mean, considering?"

"Considering, I'm fine. I got off pretty easy when you think about how much worse it could've been."

"Please, don't remind me. I just about died when Dad told me."

Even while I'm half doped up after my last pill that put me to sleep, there's no escaping the guilt that lances through me. "He's taking great care of me," I murmur, wincing. Here I am, in his bed, and I have to pretend our relationship is totally innocent.

"Well, this settles it."

"Settles what?"

“I’m coming home right away. Obviously, somebody needs to keep an eye on you, and Dad is too busy working all the time.”

If somebody told me a few months ago that I would ever dread the idea of my best friend coming home after weeks apart, I’d tell them they were crazy. This is Tatum. I miss her. Having her gone all this time has been like missing a part of myself. Of course, I want her to come home.

But.

“Um...”

Her familiar laughter only adds to the discomfort. “What? You don’t want to see me? Did you find another best friend? Because I’ll cut that bitch.”

“Put the knife away,” I murmur, chewing my lip until it hurts. What’s better, telling her now or waiting until she gets home? It’s not like I’ll be able to hide it from her. I could never hide anything from her; she’s too observant and knows me too well.

“You know, if this goes on much longer, I’m going to feel insulted,” she warns in a deceptively light tone of voice that I know conceals irritation. I know her too well, too.

“I have something to tell you.” Oh, god, I’m actually doing this. But it has to be done. She has to know. I don’t want to drop the bomb on her after she’s arrived, and that’s probably because I’m a coward. I don’t think I could stand the look on her face when she finds out about us.

I’m sorry I couldn’t be a better friend.

She sighs loudly while I struggle to find the right words. “Does it have anything to do with you sleeping with my dad?”

I barely tighten my grip on the phone in time to keep from dropping it. I’m imagining this, right? This is some kind of side effect from the painkillers.

“Sorry, did I kill you? Are you still with me?”

I don’t know what to say. She doesn’t sound outraged. More like she thinks this is funny. I hope that’s a good sign.

“You already knew?”

“Yeah,” she continues with an exasperated sigh. “Listen, it’s not my favorite thing in the world, but it is what it is. And yes, Dad knows I know.”

There I go again, almost dropping the damn phone. “How long has he known?”

“Only a few days.” I guess it slipped his mind. Not like I haven’t given him other things to worry about since the accident, but still. He could have at least thought to mention it. One less thing for me to feel terrible about.

“I’m sorry. I really am. You’re not mad at me, are you?”

“I’ve known for years you had a crush on him.” She laughs at my gasp. “Please. He’d walk into the room, and your face would go bright red, and you’d start looking anywhere but at him. That’s a crush. And I mean, I guess I can’t blame you, even if it’s a little weird. But I’m not mad. I want you to be happy.”

She pauses, and it’s a heavy sort of pause. “Are you happy?”

Am I? She deserves an honest answer, not something I fire off without thinking. It isn’t easy admitting to myself how rocky things have been, but I believe things are going to get better. Because at the heart of all of this is one fact I can’t get around or talk myself out of—he’s what I want. I can’t get him out of my soul and don’t want to. So there just has to be a way for everything to work out and for us to be happy without all these roadblocks and problems.

“I think I will be,” I decide. “I mean, honestly, worrying about how you would take it was a lot of the reason I was nervous and questioning myself. Now that I have you out of the way, yeah, I think there’s a lot more room to be happy.”

“Now that you have me out of the way,” she mutters. “Boy, you have a way with words.”

“You know what I mean. I couldn’t let myself be happy because I was so worried about what it might do to us.”

“I get it, and you have nothing to worry about from me. Just don’t ask me to take sides if you guys get into a fight. I don’t have it in me to get into that drama.”

“Understood.”

“I’m still coming home. I’ll have Dad arrange for the jet, and I’ll let you know, so you’re not, you know, humping each other when I get there.”

“And I’m the one who has a way with words?” It’s so nice to laugh with her for the first time in weeks. I feel a weight lifting off my heart.

A soft knock at the door gets my attention a moment before Callum appears. His brows draw together, but I shake my head with a smile to ease his mind.

“I better let you go so you can rest,” she says. “I’ll see you soon. Love you.”

“Love you, too.” And once the call is over, I rest my head against the mountain of pillows at my back and release a deep breath. With it goes all the guilt and worries that have weighed me down for weeks.

“Everything all right? I figured she would call you right away once I told her.” Callum sits beside me on the bed and takes the hand resting at my side. I love the way his calloused fingers feel against my skin.

“You didn’t tell me she knew about us.”

He looks almost sheepish, which I didn’t know was possible. Not for him. “It slipped my mind. I had other things to worry about, like your health. How are you feeling?”

“Better, now that I know I didn’t lose my best friend.”

“You have no idea how glad that makes me.”

But he doesn’t sound so glad. In fact, his voice is heavy, almost like he’s in pain.

“What’s wrong?” I turn my hand over so I can wind my fingers through his. He looks worried, with deep lines etched across his forehead and over the bridge of his nose.

The corners of his mouth tug downward. “You should get some rest. We’ll talk about it later.”

His dismissal only makes me sit up. “Here’s one thing you need to know about me. There is no chance of me getting any rest after hearing you say that. Besides, I’ve been resting for days.”

It was supposed to be a joke to make him laugh, or at least smile. But all he does is grimace, and his worry lines deepen. “I’ve been wrestling with myself, deciding whether to tell you.”

“Tell me what? Did something terrible happen? I already know Tatum’s okay because I talked to her.” I can’t imagine what else it might be.

“I’m telling you this because I know the way you think, and I know you would hate to find out after the fact.”

Is it my imagination, or is it suddenly colder in here? That must be where the goosebumps are coming from. “Find out what?” And why am I so full of dread now? You don’t start off a story the way he just did unless there’s something ugly coming.

“It has to do with the accident.”

Yup, there it is. The pit in my stomach right on schedule. Now I wish I had never asked if there was something wrong.

But I’m not a child. And I can’t run away from what happened.

“I can handle it. Whatever it is.”

He doesn’t look convinced. His frown only deepens before he heaves a sigh. “I had Romero reach out to the businesses on that block in case any of them had security cameras pointed toward the street. A few of them do, and they let him look at the footage. He was able to get a clear look at the plate on one of the cameras.”

“Did he... see the accident?” I don’t know why the thought makes my heart pound. It’s unnerving knowing there

is footage of me coming close to being killed, but a twisted part of me wants to see it. Because I survived.

“No,” he murmurs, but the way he averts his eyes makes me wonder if he’s telling the truth. “That’s not the point, anyway. We found the name the vehicle is registered under.”

He stares down at our clasped hands, and something in my head clicks into place. “It wasn’t an accident, was it?”

Right away, his head snaps up, his eyes widening. “What makes you say that?”

“Because the way you’re making it sound. It’s a name you recognized, or one I would recognize. Right? And if it’s somebody I know, that means it wasn’t an accident. They deliberately hit me. It’s okay,” I insist when he grimaces. “I can handle it. Because you’re here with me. And I’m safe.”

With his free hand, he reaches out and cups my cheek. I lean into his touch. It’s my salvation. I couldn’t handle any of this without him. “You’re right. It was someone you know.”

Which tells me it could only have been one person. The only person from my life, besides his daughter, whose name he’s familiar with. Even though I want to turn away from the idea, it makes too much sense.

“Tell me,” I whisper, bracing myself.

“It was Lucas. I’m sorry. I really am.”

I close my eyes, forcing myself to accept. “Are you going to kill him?”

His grip on my hand tightens. “What makes you ask that?”

“Let’s skip the pretending.” I say it with as much affection as I can, so I don’t hurt his feelings. “I know that’s what you want to do because I know you.”

“You want to hear the truth?” I open my eyes and nod slowly, even though I dread hearing it come from his lips. “All that’s been in my head since we got the confirmation is the different ways I could extend his life as long as possible while making him wish I would take mercy and kill him quickly.”

He leans in, staring intensely. Looking into my soul, it seems. “But that wouldn’t be fair to you. You’re the person he hit, which means you get to decide.”

I can’t believe I’m hearing this. “You want me to decide if you kill him?”

“You’re the only one with the right to make that decision.”

I wish I could believe he was joking, but I know better.

A man’s life is in my hands—when he could have ended my life easily. When he has already robbed me of five years.

“There’s one more thing,” he murmurs. “From the footage, it looks like he sped up halfway down the block.”

Yes, he did. I remember now how the engine revved like he was picking up speed.

It was deliberate. Lucas deliberately hit me. He tried to kill me.

But is that worth a death sentence?

CALLUM



*C*ome on. Make the right choice. Give me the go-ahead.

This is a big step. I wish there was a way to make her understand what it means for me to leave this in her hands.

Control is my thing. Before I met her, it was the one sure thing that would always get me off. Knowing I called the shots, that I held lives in my hand. Everything happens according to my schedule—when I’m damn good and ready.

Then along comes this girl, and everything I thought I knew about myself went out the window the moment I stopped thinking of her as a child and saw her as the woman she is. It’s times like this, sitting on the edge of the bed and waiting with bated breath for her to make up her mind, that I almost wish we’d never met.

But that would be a mistake, like cutting off my nose to spite my face.

In the end, this is for her sake. A small sacrifice on my part, so she’ll feel like she has the room to make choices for herself. I know how important that is to her. And if it means making sure she doesn’t get it into her head to run off again, it’s worth swallowing my pride and risking sparing that murderous motherfucker’s life.

He sped up. The son of a bitch sped up, probably once he saw her crossing the street. He sped up because he wanted to kill her.

My Bianca, my little bird, a woman he never knew even over the course of five years. He never learned the first thing

about her, or else he would never have wasted the chance to love her.

I'll give her credit. She gives it real thought, her brow wrinkling, teeth digging into her lip. That she's even thinking about it tells me I haven't imagined the darkness lurking inside her. She has a gentle soul, but somewhere in there is a streak of darkness. There has to be. Why else would she be so drawn to me even when she knows the man I truly am?

"Part of me wants to see him dead," she admits, using her free hand to pick at the duvet. "Does that make me a bad person?"

"Are you really asking me that? Because you know what I'm going to say."

Her lips twitch in the beginnings of a smile that never quite forms. "I know. But that's what I have to ask myself."

"You're human, and you just found out your ex tried to run you over. I would have to wonder if you were telling the truth if you said you didn't think about spitting on his grave for at least a second."

"Oh, I was going to do that. I just figured it would be years from now." My brave girl tries again to smile, but she doesn't quite get there.

"What you're telling me is I should leave him alive."

"Not because I care about him," she insists, squeezing my hand tight enough to grind my knuckles together. "You have to know that. I don't want you getting the wrong idea. I just don't want it on my conscience, you know?"

"I understand." I don't want it on her conscience, either. She doesn't need that. I'm the one already damned after all the things I've done. I wouldn't put her through that because we aren't the same. Her pure soul might have a dark streak, but mine is entirely dark—if it still exists at all, something I questioned more than once over the years.

If anything, she's proven to me I do have a soul, and it belongs to her.

“Are you disappointed?”

The innocence behind that question makes me chuckle before I can hold back. Her brows draw together in pain, and I raise her hand to my lips to press a kiss against it. “I don’t mean to laugh at you. That question makes me sound like a psycho.”

“That’s not what I think of you.”

I have to wonder. I haven’t done much to prove otherwise.

“But are you, though? I know you want to get back at him. But don’t do that for my sake, please.”

“Are you that concerned? You don’t have to be.”

“It’s just...” She sighs, looking toward the window. It’s late afternoon on a hot summer day, and there’s a haze hanging over the grounds. “It’s really beautiful out there, isn’t it?”

The abrupt change of subject makes me follow the direction of her gaze. “It is. I’ve always thought so.”

“You worked really hard to put everything in place, didn’t you? The house, everything.”

“It took a lot of work and a lot of oversight. When I bought it, this was nothing but a plot of land surrounding an old house. A few small outbuildings and a lot of weeds.”

“What put it in your mind? Your vision, I mean. Where did it come from?”

Why is she asking these questions? “You need to get some sleep.”

She only clutches my hand tighter, swinging her head from side to side. “No, I’m serious. Where did it all come from? I really want to know.”

And I really wish she would let it go. This is Bianca, the woman I will spend the rest of my life with. It’s only right that she would want to know me, isn’t it? This is how so-called regular relationships work. Two people share with each other, give and take, back and forth. They open themselves up and make themselves vulnerable.

I am not vulnerable. I have no intention of being vulnerable, even for her.

Still, it clearly means something, this line of questioning. There must be something behind it.

“I’ve never told anybody,” I admit. “Then again, nobody’s ever asked.”

“You can tell me,” she whispers, trying and failing to hide her interest. “It’ll be our little secret.”

Her youthful innocence and excitement do something to me. I can almost believe it’s safe to open up and share myself. “TV. When I was a kid, way back in the day, prime-time dramas were the big thing. All these shows with wealthy families in huge mansions, living incredible lives. There I was, living in a house where we froze in the winter and roasted in the summer, and it seemed...”

My chest is so tight I have to look away from her. Away from the curiosity of her stare. “It seemed like they were living on another planet.”

“It isn’t easy imagining you as a little boy.”

“I was, once. The girl who lived across the street would come in and sit with me at night while my dad worked. She was the one watching those shows on our old console TV. You know, the kind with the wooden cabinet around it?” She frowns, but nods. She’s probably never seen one but is too kind to tell me so.

“And that’s where you got the idea you wanted to be wealthy one day?”

“Who doesn’t want to have money? But looking back, I think that was my first glimpse at the way life could be. Otherwise, I would’ve ended up working myself into an early grave the way my old man did.”

“You still work really hard. You’re in your office all hours.”

“Not the same,” I murmur, shaking my head. Strange, but the stench of my father’s work coveralls seems to hang in the

air around me now. I'm almost afraid to blink. If I do, I might find this was all a dream, that I imagined my life up to this point. I'm still sitting in that old house built for families working at the refinery that sprawled upward like a gothic castle. Like so many other tiny houses built for the workers, men and women who couldn't afford to think past today, maybe tomorrow. Scratching out a living and fighting to survive.

None of them could've dreamed up what I've built. No matter how I was forced to build it.

"What made you ask about that?" I can't go down memory lane anymore. Not when the memories come back so clear. I left all of that behind and made it a point not to look back.

"I guess I was thinking about the risks you take in your business. I don't want you taking more risks than you need to."

"What, you're afraid if I killed your ex, it would be the end of me?" I stifle my laughter for her sake, but it's difficult. "You don't think I could take care of somebody like him with a snap of my fingers?"

"I know you could," she whispers, looking green. "But I would rather you not take the risk. I wouldn't want to be the reason anything happened to you."

This is the second time she's said something like that, the first being the day she warned me about her father. How he would come after me if he knew we were together.

"Do you think your dad would take it personally? If Lucas disappeared, would he try to find him?"

"Why are you asking me that?"

"Curiosity."

"Maybe. He's not a fan of Lucas after what happened. I don't think he ever was."

There's one thing we can agree on, even if that's the only thing. But I still think he'd want to get to the bottom of it. "Be

honest. Is that part of the reason you don't want me going after him?"

"No, really. I didn't even think about that."

Her teeth sink into her lip while adorable worry lines etch themselves between her brows. "But now that you mention it, that's another reason. I don't want anything bad happening to you, especially not because of me."

Her skin is so soft. It reminds me of a ripe peach. Usually, I want to sink my teeth in and let the juices run over my chin and coat my tongue. Right now, it's enough to stroke her cheek and admire her beauty.

Even if she tries to turn her face from me.

"Don't do that."

The sadness in her voice keeps me from taking it the wrong way. "What? Touch you?"

"I don't want you to stare at me. I'm so ugly."

"You couldn't be ugly if you tried." She tries to turn away again when I gently brush my lips over the scrape at her temple. "Remember, don't hide from me. Even the parts you think I won't like because you don't like them. I want all of you."

"Like this?"

"Like this." I've never wanted her more. She wouldn't believe it if I told her, and I'm not sure I could find the words to say it. The feeling builds in my chest, though, awakening a hunger deeper than anything I've felt for her before. Stronger.

I came so close to losing her forever. All the steps I've taken to keep her with me were almost for nothing.

But she's here, and she's soft and warm, and now she catches my mouth with hers, and a deep, aching desire blooms between us.

"God, I want you," I whisper against her lips. The past few days, I've treated her like a porcelain doll for fear of hurting

her. There's a beast inside me, fighting to claw its way out, and I don't know how much longer I can keep him locked up.

"Me, too," she admits, then slides down the bed until she's on her back and pulling me closer. "Touch me. Please."

"I don't want to hurt you."

"I know you won't."

I have my doubts but want to live up to the trust shining in her baby blues. It's the only reason I'm able to keep my touch gentle as I drag a hand down the side of her body. I almost lost this. I almost lost her.

My touch has its usual effect on both of us. My cock immediately springs to life, weeping cum into my shorts after days spent outside her heat. Her head falls back while her legs fall open, hips tilting like she's offering her pussy. Or demanding I take it.

"Make me feel good," she whimpers, taking my hand and guiding it to her covered mound. A downward glance reveals how wet she's already become, and I touch my fingers to the growing dampness. Her frustrated groan threatens to break my self-control. All I see in my head is me mindlessly rutting her, driving her into the mattress, using her body for my release.

Instead, I'm careful to remove the lacy thong without scratching her bruised thigh, even though her quickened breath signals how desperate she is for more. She's too precious to take advantage of, which is what I'd be doing if I spread her legs wide and devoured her dripping pussy. I don't know if I'd be able to contain the beast if I started out that way.

So instead, I work her clit in slow circles with my thumb, watching her every move. Every muscle twitch, every lip bite. Her taut nipples stand out against a thin T-shirt, and I tease them with the other hand until she arches her back with a pitiful cry.

"You're killing me..."

No, she's killing me. Her slow descent into bliss is the most beautiful thing I've ever watched. That this perfect creature could trust me with her body, with all of her. It's

almost too much to handle and enough to make me want to stop thinking, to take, to claim, but that would be too easy. I fight my way through it, easing her into pleasure even when my cock aches to be free.

“Is my little bird ready to come? Does she want to come for me?”

“Yes, please!” She grips the pillow, hands on either side of her head, her face flushed and teeth gritted.

I quicken my pace, my thumb gliding over the bundle of nerves slick with her juices. The wet spot grows under her ass, and the aroma of her need fills my every breath. Breath that comes faster, the way hers does, and by the time she comes, we’re both panting and straining.

This isn’t enough. I can’t stop at watching her hole pulse. I have to feel it pulsing around me.

Her eyes open as I’m tossing my shirt aside, and the slow curving of her full lips sends sizzling bolts of fire straight to my throbbing member. It sways slightly once I’ve freed it, the angry head shining and slick with the excitement that oozes from the tip. She welcomes me with open arms, winding her legs around my hips and drawing me closer.

I can’t speak and can’t promise I’ll be gentle; all my concentration is centered on taking it slow. The welcome grip of her fluttering cunt is bliss, enveloping me, drawing me deeper until I’ve sunk in to the hilt. “Fuck,” I groan, letting out a deep sigh while staring down at her.

Her satisfied smile widens. “Just like that,” she whispers. “Slow. I want to feel every inch.”

That’s how I give it to her. Achingly slow, grinding against her clit with every roll of my hips. She moans into my mouth while I kiss her slowly. Deeply. My tongue mimics each stroke from my cock, dipping in and out until we’re both half-crazed and about to explode.

And when she clenches around me, I let go, my aching balls releasing deep inside her core while she moans my name. “Callum... Callum...”

My Bianca. My everything wrapped around me, clutching me. Body and soul, she's mine... and I'm hers.

I'm starting to forget where she ends and I begin.

I only know as I roll onto my side and draw her into my arms that I'd burn the world down if it meant saving her.

BIANCA



Something is wrong.

Not that Tatum would admit it, sitting across from me at a burger place near the movie theater where we just caught a matinee. It's an example of one of the things I like most about her. She might have a billionaire for a father, but she's still a regular girl who likes the smell of movie theater popcorn and will slum it in restaurants I would've considered fancy back when I was a kid.

Her tastes haven't changed... but something about her has. I know better than to come out and ask her point-blank what the deal is. Not that she would lie, but she's never liked being questioned.

As close as we are, I've always had a feeling there are things she hides. She doesn't trust anybody with all of her, not even me.

I guess she gets that from her father, who still keeps secrets between us. I mean, it's not like we've been together for a long time, and I don't expect him to be an open book. But there are moments when I can feel a wall coming down between us, and I know I shouldn't push much further unless I want to start another war. He has his boundaries, and so does she.

Which is why I don't want to come straight out and ask Tatum why she seems distracted. She's here physically, but her thoughts are a mile away. She's not the bubbly girl I know. It's like someone took the volume control and turned it down.

"What?" she asks with a tight smile.

“Sorry. I didn’t realize I was staring at you.”

“I mean, I know I’m beautiful.” She tosses her golden hair and rolls her eyes the way she always does. It gives me hope, but the hope is short-lived. Her eyes dim again, and she quickly turns her attention to the bacon cheeseburger on her plate.

“It’s funny. All that delicious food in France, and all I wanted after a few days was one of these.” She sinks her teeth in and closes her eyes, and I’m glad to see her truly enjoying something for the first time since she got home three days ago.

“So seriously, do you have pictures? What did it look like? Did you see any famous people?” Because, of course, she only stayed in the most exclusive areas, where celebrities sometimes vacation. At least, that was the way she made it sound when she first described the trip to me months ago.

She shakes her head, picking at the bun. She’s been biting her nails, I see. A new habit. “Not really.”

That’s another thing. She usually never stops talking. When we were younger, Dad used to call her the Energizer Bunny because she would keep going and going. I didn’t think that had changed until now.

I know why. And I want to die right here in this booth.

It was one thing for her to be okay with Callum and me when she was an ocean away, but obviously, she feels differently now. We haven’t been physically affectionate in front of her, and I’ve kept from talking about us. It’s too awkward, and I don’t want her to feel like I’m rubbing her nose in it.

I hate feeling like I’m walking on eggshells around her, but I don’t want to bring it up. I don’t want to force a conversation if she doesn’t want to discuss this relationship. When she wants to, she’ll come to me. We’re both adults. I have to give her space.

And until she comes around, I’ll be staying in her father’s room. This is so fucked up.

By the time we finish eating—she doesn't do much more than pick at her food, even after rambling about how much she was craving a burger—she slides out of the booth wearing a determined expression. "I want to go shopping. I need a few new things, especially for when I start my internship next month."

I can't put my finger on it, but something about that seems off. Just one more thing. "What a shame you didn't just vacation somewhere with incredible clothes stores," I remind her. "I figured you would come back with trunks full of new clothes."

"Yeah, well, I didn't get much of a chance to go shopping." She's digging through her purse, intent on finding her lip balm, but I wonder if she is also avoiding looking at me. Something's not adding up, and I don't know how to phrase it in a way that won't piss her off and bring our day to an end.

She was gone for almost two months, and it's like she came back a different person. Callum asked over dinner last night if Kristoff would come around to thank him for the trip, and she looked like she was going to throw up. She hasn't mentioned him to me, and considering how tight-lipped she's been, I don't know if that means there's something wrong with him or what.

"I could use a few things for work," I offer. It's difficult trying to sound chipper with this dark cloud hanging over us, but I do my best as we leave the restaurant and head for the car waiting outside. Romero isn't driving, which is unusual, but Callum has kept him busy lately with all kinds of work I'm not allowed to know the details of. I'm sure it's better that way.

"Just make sure it's nothing too cute, or Dad might get jealous." I almost choke on my spit when she says it, but she pairs it with a light, genuine laugh that makes her sound like her old self.

I wish I knew what to think. I only know I'm so starved for her presence and friendship that hearing her laugh like that is a gift.

* * *

“THIS IS CUTE.” I turn around in the mirror and check myself out over my shoulder. I wish it would get cold soon, so I have an excuse to wear a sweater dress. It’ll be super cute with boots.

I bet Callum would love it. The idea makes me giggle at myself. He won’t be able to keep his hands off me with my curves on display. I might not make it out of the house before he attacks.

“Hey, check me out.” I open the door to my dressing room and knock on the door beside it. “What do you think?”

“Gimme a sec.” Her high-pitched voice rings out at the same time I realize her door isn’t fully closed, and it doesn’t occur to me not to open it until I see what she is trying to hide.

She’s just finished taking off a dress and is only in her bra and panties, so nothing’s keeping me from the black-and-blue patches all over her upper arms, her shoulder blades, even her ass.

Her wide, panicked eyes meet mine in the mirror. “It’s not what you think,” she immediately whispers.

“What happened?” The sight of her wearing those bruises makes my throat so tight I can’t do more than sip air.

“It’s nothing.” She backs herself into the corner, her arms crossed over her chest, hands gripping her shoulders. “Can I get a little privacy?”

No, she can’t because when my eyes drop below her waist, the bruises on her thighs jump out at me and make my eyes sting.

“We were swimming,” she explains while I stand in mute horror. “We rented a boat in Catania and were out in the water. I got thrown against some rocks. That’s all.”

And were any of those rocks hand-shaped? Because that’s the shape of the bruise on her left bicep—the perfect imprint

of a palm and five fingers wrapped around her arm.

“Listen to me.” I close the door behind me and lower my voice to a whisper. “I want the truth.”

“That is—”

“Tatum,” I snap. “That isn’t true. What about the bruises on your legs, inside your thighs? What really happened out there? You can tell me. I love you. You’re my best friend.”

“I know that.” She stares at the floor, curling and uncurling her toes and chewing her lip.

“If somebody hurt you, I’m here to listen. No judgment. But you have to be honest with me, and I can tell you aren’t.”

It’s when a tear hits her arm that my heart shatters. I have never seen her cry in all the years we’ve known each other. Even when she broke her wrist after tripping and falling on the playground in middle school, she didn’t shed a tear. She’s gone through breakups, and her mom has flaked out on something important a million times. Tatum never so much as sniffled.

“It was bad.” I almost have to lean in to hear her; she’s whispering so softly. “Worse than before.”

“Before?” I ask with dread in my stomach. Damn it, I should have known. I saw all the warning signs. I just figured he was a temperamental douchebag, not that he would ever really hurt her. Somehow, I always had this stupid idea Callum Torrio’s daughter could defend herself—and that even if she couldn’t, nobody would be stupid enough to screw around with her, knowing who her father is. I figured she was invincible.

There is nothing invincible about the bruised, weeping girl in front of me. “He started getting physically abusive maybe a month before the trip,” she confesses, still looking at the floor, tears now dripping from her chin. “I thought he would be better once we got away and there wasn’t so much stress. But it only made him worse. It took me a while to figure out he didn’t feel like he had to be careful anymore, with us being in

Europe. There was nobody watching, nobody that could stop him.”

“Oh, sweetie...”

“I don’t know where he is.” She looks at me from under her lashes. “He went off with some people he met in Rome, packed all his stuff and everything. Even the things I bought for him. I would do anything so long as it would make him happy and keep things calm.”

It obviously didn’t work because these bruises can’t be more than a week old. Some of them are as vivid as the ones I still wear on my skin after the accident.

“That’s why you didn’t go anywhere,” I realize. “No shopping, no sightseeing.”

“Only if he wanted to, and he almost never did. He just wanted to lie out on the beach or go to clubs and meet rich people. That’s all he cared about. And all I wanted was for him to stop... to stop being angry...”

She covers her face with her hands, shoulders heaving, and the sight of her propels me across the small space. When I wrap my arms around her, she drops her hands and throws her arms around my neck, weeping on my shoulder.

“I am so sorry,” I whisper over and over, rocking back and forth while she cries it out. “So, so sorry. I didn’t see it. I never guessed.”

“Why would you? Lucas... was an asshole. But he wasn’t like this.”

No, but he tried to kill me with his car. I’ll spare her that detail—there are certain things I haven’t told her yet, either. Amazing the secrets we keep from each other when we’re supposed to be each other’s confidant. Shame is pretty fucked up when you think about it.

“You couldn’t have known. I made sure you didn’t know. I’m so ashamed.”

“Honey, you have nothing to be ashamed of. You didn’t do anything wrong. And you’re safe now. He’s not going to hurt

you anymore.”

“Oh, my god.” She lifts her head, holding me at arm’s length. Her eyes are wide and wild, her chin trembling. “You can’t tell Dad. Please, I’m begging you, don’t say a word about this to him.”

And she’s the one who told me she didn’t want to get in the middle of things. Meanwhile, here she is, placing me between them.

“Bianca. I’m begging you. He’ll kill him.”

That’s the thing. I do know, maybe even better than she does. As far as I know, she still only suspects her father is a violent, dangerous man. I know for a fact after what he told me in his office the day he threatened me with the gun.

I don’t like the idea of keeping this from him, especially when I know how furious he’ll be if he finds out I knew and didn’t say anything. But this is my best friend. She’s been so supportive all these years, but especially now. She could have thrown a fit when she found out about Callum and me, and I can’t risk losing her over this. I only hope I’m doing the right thing when I nod.

“I won’t say a word, I promise.” Besides, Kristoff’s still in Europe. He’s no threat to her right now. “But I have to tell you, if he comes back around again, I can’t act like I don’t know anything.”

“You don’t have to worry about that,” she tells me, wearing a determined grimace. “There is not a thing he could do or say to convince me to go back to him now, not after this.”

“Okay. I believe you.” I only hope he doesn’t show up and make her change her mind.

“You know what?” She turns to face herself in the mirror and wipes the tears from her cheeks. “I don’t feel like shopping anymore. Would you mind if we just went home?”

“I want to put on my pajamas and veg out for the rest of the day. Does that sound good?”

“It sounds perfect,” she says with a sigh. It’s like magic, watching the tension drain from her body. “I want to get under a blanket and not come back out for a little while.”

“Done.” I go back to my room next door to get everything together, then take a deep breath to center myself before stepping out again. What she just laid out was pretty heavy, and I want to keep my spirits high for her sake, but my heart is like a boulder. So heavy with sadness. She must have felt like a prisoner out there, with nobody she could turn to.

By the time we’re ready to go, it’s like the whole thing is in the past. She doesn’t want to talk about it anymore, and I can accept that. It’s enough that I know, and she knows she can come to me if she wants to talk about it some more. I don’t want to risk her shutting me out by making a big deal about it.

“Are you sure my dad will know what to do with himself if we hang out tonight?” she teases me as we step out of the store and into what’s turned into a cloudy day, heavy with humidity. The air has that special feeling to it, like we’re going to get a thunderstorm soon.

Before I can make a joke, something catches my attention from the corner of my eye. I barely have time to register what’s happening before Lucas is practically on top of me.

“I thought I saw you,” he grits out, his teeth bared.

I might not have recognized him if it wasn’t for his familiar voice. He hasn’t shaved in a couple of days, and his sweaty hair could use a trim. But it’s his eyes, bloodshot and wild, that creep me out.

As usual, it’s Tatum who puts my thoughts into words. “Man, you look like shit,” she blurts out. “If I was passing on the street, I’d give you a dollar.”

She doesn’t know what he did. If I tell her right now, she might claw his eyes out in front of the dozens of people walking in and out of the store as we stand in our little cluster.

“Let’s not waste our time on this dickbag,” she murmurs, taking my hand.

But I can't go. Not yet. "Listen," I whisper, glaring at him. "If you're half as smart as you think you are, you will stay the hell away from me. I know what you did. You're lucky you're still breathing."

"Huh?" Tatum's in the dark, of course. I'll have to tell her about it later.

His tongue darts over his chapped lips.

"If it wasn't for me," I tell him, "you'd be dead right now. I'm not kidding. So do yourself a favor and don't approach me again for any reason. Got it? Forget I exist."

"I can't do that. You can't expect me to do that." When Tatum pulls me away, his hand shoots out and wraps around my wrist. "Listen to me!"

"Fuck all the way off, asshole!" Tatum shouts, which earns the attention of a few people passing by. "She said she's through with you. Let it go and maybe take a shower while you're at it. You stink like the shit you are."

His eyes dart around before he lets go, and I know he's doing it more because there are witnesses than because it's the right thing to do. I don't care. So long as he's not touching me.

As we hurry to the car, where the driver has gotten out and is staring over our shoulders to where Lucas is probably still watching us, I rub my wrist against my jeans like that will help remove any trace of him from my skin.

"Damn." She laughs as we get in the car. "He fell apart without you, didn't he?"

"You have no idea," I whisper, buckling my seat belt before the car rolls out of the spot.

Lucas is gone now and thank god for that. I'm not sure I could stand looking at him again.

Even though I know he's out of his mind, I can't help but wonder what he thought was so important.

CALLUM



*H*ow much longer is this going to take? When do I get to be with Bianca again?

Jack Moroni is droning on, unaware of my distraction—until he asks a question I didn't hear. I only realize I've zoned out again when Romero softly clears his throat.

"Excuse me? Sorry, there are technical issues on our end, it seems," I say.

Jack nods knowingly. "Technology. It makes life so much easier in so many ways, and we're screwed when it decides it doesn't feel like working." He laughs like this is the cleverest thing anyone ever said, and all I can do is offer a tight-lipped smile. "I asked how your daughter is doing. I understand she was overseas for a while over the summer."

"She's fine." I deliberately ignore the way Romero practically growls on the other side of the desk, behind the laptop screen and out of sight. "I'm glad to have her home."

"If I were blessed with a daughter, I would keep her under lock and key." He strokes his jaw, wincing. "I remember what it was like, a young man at that age."

He's overplaying his hand, but then he always does. This is supposed to be a video meeting relating to the business idea he wanted to bring me, but he insists on steering things back toward Tatum. The man is tenacious, I'll give him that much, but that's where the admiration ends.

It's time to steer things back on course. "Looking back at your prospectus..." I flip through the pages of the document

Romero printed out prior to the call. “I have to say I’m impressed. I would want to get a clear idea of where the shipping company stands on the terms you’ve laid out.”

“What? Is my word no good anymore?”

“Of course, that’s not how I meant it at all.” That’s exactly how I meant it. “But if you want to strike up a deal with me, you must know I believe in doing my homework. I think it makes me a stronger partner. I take nothing at face value.”

“Fair enough,” he replies in a smooth voice. “I’m sure we can set up something in the coming weeks.”

“Yes, I’ll have Romero reach out to your office.” I’ve already spent too much of my day faking friendship with this man, and I need a hit of my favorite drug. I know she’s home. I heard her voice floating my way, along with my daughter’s, not thirty minutes ago, when our call began. Since then, I’ve had a hard-on that won’t quit.

“In the meantime,” Jack continues, “I’m on my way to the airport in a few minutes. I’m flying up to visit family, with my son. In fact, not fifteen minutes from you. We don’t have any plans this evening. Would you and your beautiful daughter care to join us for dinner?”

And there it is. That’s what this is all about. Getting the two of them together. “Tatum has only been back for a few days,” I explain as gently as I can, evading Romero’s gaze. From the corner of my eye, it’s obvious his face has gone dark red, and I wish I knew why. He’s not the one whose potential business partner is determined to become an in-law.

“It’s only dinner. Please, I would be so happy if you would join us. Especially if we’re going to work together,” he adds, because, of course, he has to be heavy-handed about this. There is no such thing as subtlety where he’s involved.

His true meaning stares me straight in the face. *Do this if you want our deal to go through.*

And I want the deal. Very much. The man is an idiot, but he’s a useful one, and he’s uncovered a means of transporting weapons while saving a ton of money by investing in our own

shipping line, rather than using barges from willing partners who want a cut of the profits.

“I have a better idea,” I propose. “Meet us tonight at eight o’clock at a restaurant I own in town. I’ll send you the details.”

“So, you’ve paid heed to the old adage,” he muses with a rueful chuckle. “Don’t put all your eggs in one basket.”

“I believe in diversification. Can we expect you?”

“Certainly. I look forward to meeting your lovely daughter.” I know better than to say anything, so I settle for nodding and lifting a hand, which I then use to close the window and end the call.

Just in time, too.

“You can’t be serious!” Romero practically shouts.

“Would you please calm down? And lower your voice while you’re at it. What has gotten into you? Do you have a personal problem with this guy?” Now I can loosen my tie and lean back in my chair, dropping the friendly act.

“How can you not?” he counters. “He couldn’t be more obvious if he tried. He might as well come straight out and say he’s willing to sell his son to make this deal.”

“What if he is?”

“And you’re willing to sell Tatum?”

It’s clear he realizes his mistake the moment the words leave his lips. I fight to keep myself calm. Of all my close associates, he’s the one I can least afford to alienate. This isn’t someone whose nose I can break and expect him to show up with a cheerful disposition in the morning. Unlike Nathan, who’s been all but kissing my ass in the week since Bianca was injured.

“I’ve said it before, and I will say it again—this one final time,” I add, lowering my brow and pinning him in place with my glare. “I am not arranging a marriage. I have no intention of selling my daughter.”

“So you’ll string him along for the sake of a deal?”

“I’ve done it before. I’m pretty good at it,” I add, snickering. “The man is a fucking loser who only got where he is now thanks to his father’s savvy. But he may have stumbled on something valuable here. He’s the one who has inroads with the shipping company. I need him to get my foot in the door. Once I do, I’ll make the deal.”

“And you’ll cut him out?”

“I sure will. Fuck him.”

He doesn’t look convinced, but at least he’s smart enough to keep his temper in check the way I am. “You’d better at least warn her before dinner,” he muses, his jaw working like he’s grinding his teeth. “You know how she is. Catch her off guard, and she’ll spoil the whole thing by throwing a fit.”

It’s my turn to grind my teeth since I don’t appreciate his condescending attitude. “Keep your opinions to yourself, and I’d appreciate if you would stop underestimating me. It’s getting so I’m not sure anymore if you’re not going to stick a knife in my back because you want to take my place.”

He rocks back slightly, like I hit him. “You know that’s not true.”

“I’m not so sure. You were never this outspoken. We had our disagreements, but you weren’t such a pain in the ass about it. What’s changed?”

Again, his jaw works, but eventually, his shoulders drop while he grunts, “I don’t want to see you getting jerked around, is all. Especially not by somebody like this sleazy dick.”

“Leave that to me,” I assure him. “In the meantime, we’ll be at Rinaldi’s at seven forty-five. Give them a call and let the chef know we’ll want a private menu.”

“Seating for four?”

“Make it five—six, including you. I want you at the table in case Jack’s kid gets the wrong idea about Tatum.” When he

only blinks, confused, it annoys me I have to clarify. “And Bianca, of course.”

“I’ll get right on that.” He’s smart enough to keep his thoughts to himself this time. He needs to make that a habit again.

“Before you go.” I sit up straight and crane my neck, making sure Bianca isn’t outside. “Any progress? Where is this fucker hiding?”

He shakes his head. “No luck so far. He was living with a friend who said he left about three weeks ago. He lost his job at his uncle’s gym, but I couldn’t get a reason for that.”

“Because he’s a miserable sack of shit,” I muse. And if he was desperate and unhinged enough to run her down, the rest of his life is falling apart, too. Still, he has to be staying somewhere.

And I’ll find him. Bianca doesn’t want him dead, but she doesn’t need to know. I might not even kill the fucker right away. Watching from afar as his life falls to pieces might be entertaining.

Right now, the only thing that matters is seeing her. I’m jonesing so hard I’m almost salivating with need. My rapid footfalls echo through the hall, but they’re not as fast as the beating of my heart. It’s like having the biggest, best gift ever, always waiting for me. I can’t imagine the thrill ever wearing off.

Following the sound of their voices, I find the girls in the living room.

“What’s this?” I’m glad to see them relaxing together, but they’ve completely dressed down after getting home. Both girls are wearing pajamas, wrapped in blankets, and have their feet up on the couch across from the TV.

“We came home early,” Tatum informs me. “I guess I’m still a little jet lagged.”

“I hate to break in on your girl’s day, but we’re going to dinner tonight. So I’ll need you both to change out of the pajamas and into something nice.”

“Where are we going?” she asks, while Bianca only offers a willing smile. As glad as I am to have my daughter back, I could use a little time alone with my little bird. The sight of her bare legs peeking out from under a blanket makes saliva pool in my mouth.

“Rinaldi’s. We’re leaving at seven-thirty sharp to have dinner with a potential business partner.” As an afterthought, I add, “He has the idea you’ll be marrying his son one day, so keep that in mind.”

Now both girls gape at me like they’ve never heard English. “And where would he get this idea from?” Tatum arches an eyebrow.

“It’s business. Don’t worry about it. I’m only telling you, so it won’t surprise you if it comes up.”

She folds her arms, her lips pursed. “I was thinking I could chill out at home.”

“It’s only four o’clock. You have plenty of time to relax before you get ready.”

Her eye roll comes right on cue. “Spoken like a man. I guess I’d better go find what I’m wearing.” She takes the blanket with her, wrapping it around her body like a cocoon before marching off.

Once her muttering fades to silence, I take her place on the couch, intent on diving under Bianca’s blanket and getting my fix.

She’s too quick for me, sliding further along the couch before I have the chance to touch her. “Hang on a second. This is a business dinner?”

“That’s right.” I reach for her again, disappointed when she frowns. “What? Are we playing cat and mouse? Do you want me to throw you over my shoulder and take you to bed?” As if I need the excuse.

“No. I was only wondering...” She shakes her head. “It’s fine.”

“Don’t do that.” When she looks away, I take her by the chin and turn her face toward mine. “What’s the problem?”

Her forehead creases like she’s in pain. “Who will I be there as? Tatum’s friend? The girl who’s staying in your house until she gets on her feet? Or... your girlfriend?”

That’s one way to kill an erection. “I...”

“It’s okay. That’s why I didn’t want to say it. I’m not trying to put you on the spot.”

“I hadn’t thought about it.” I peel away the blanket. “I want you there. Isn’t that enough?”

“No, no, it is.” Her delicately tapered fingers pick at the blanket’s hem. “But it might be uncomfortable if anybody asks. For both of us. So maybe we should know what to say.”

“I think you’re reading too much into this.” She flinches slightly, and her features pinch together in that pained expression again. I’m not the *let’s talk about our feelings* guy. She should know that by now.

“Okay, so maybe I’d like to know for myself.” A shrug follows her guilty glance. “Sorry. But we’ve never talked about what we are.”

How naive of me to think we could avoid this. “Haven’t I been clear enough?” This time, when I pull her to me, she melts into my arms with a soft sigh.

“I know. I’m being a pain in the ass.”

“You aren’t.” She is, slightly, but mostly because I would rather be balls deep in her at this moment. Fucking her until our cum drips down the crack of her ass and soaks into the priceless rug beneath us. “If you don’t know how important you are to me, I haven’t done a good enough job of showing you.”

I tilt her chin upward to align our lips and brush mine against hers. “I intend to keep you with me always. I want us to have a life together. There’s nothing else I can say.”

She leans into me, her eyes closing before a voice echoes down the hall. “Are you coming, or what?” Tatum bellows,

loud enough for the sound to carry to us.

What a choice of words. I might have been coming in a few minutes if it wasn't for her interrupting us.

Bianca shakes her head, pulling away. "I need to get ready, too," she whispers, frowning. "I'm going to need to borrow something from her, since I don't have a lot of outfits that will work for tonight."

"If it's too much of a hassle, I could always leave you here, tied to the bed."

"No way." She flashes an impish smile while backing away. "You don't tell a girl you'll take her to dinner and change your mind."

"Then you better get your ass moving little bird." I grin, knowing I'll have to wait till much later to devour her like I wanted too.

BIANCA



Now I understand why Tatum was dead set on getting dressed up tonight. We're both wearing cocktail dresses and sky-high heels when we enter the upscale restaurant Callum owns.

I have to remind myself to not look like too much of a rube as I try to take everything in, the sleek, dark interior, the shining bar spanning one wall, and the open kitchen further back. The crew works like a well-oiled machine, moving quickly but smoothly through the process of creating food that smells good enough to make my stomach clench with hunger.

"Right this way," the perky hostess beckons with a smile. "It's been a long time since we last saw you, Mr. Torrio. But we know you're a busy man."

"And let's be honest," he replies with a charming grin. "Nobody wants to work with the owner looking over their shoulder."

She blushes and giggles, which makes me want to scream. Where did that come from? That sudden, blinding rush of rage? I never thought of myself as a jealous person, but maybe I was wrong.

I want to wind an arm around his waist and silently tell her he's mine, but I will not sink to that level.

Besides, I'm waiting for his move. He might think I'll let our earlier conversation go, but he has another thing coming. He can't expect me to show up on his arm without being

willing to make a public commitment, so right now, I'm merely his guest.

The whole situation leaves me conflicted as Callum pulls my chair away from the table so I can take a seat at his right hand. His fingertips skim the nape of my neck before he pulls out Tatum's chair across from mine. Even though it's still humid and threatening to storm, we're both wearing shawls to cover our respective bruises.

I guess all it took was her coming clean with me to pick up her spirits because her eyes sparkle with genuine warmth even when Romero sits beside her. He leaves plenty of space, as usual, but she doesn't sneer at him the way she normally would. "You got roped into eating with us, huh?"

"I do what the boss says." As usual, he's not one for big conversations.

"I guess there are some perks that come with the job." Anybody could hear the undercurrent of snarkiness, but all he does is blow out a deep breath through flared nostrils. He's not taking the bait tonight.

The chef comes out to greet us, clasping one of Callum's hands in both of his before we're joined by a pair of tall, slim men in dark suits. The older of the two is handsome in a silver fox kind of way, his salt and pepper hair and icy gray eyes in contrast to his tanned skin. Both men share the same long, thin faces and cleft in their chins.

Father and son, the Moronis. Callum told us about them on the way here.

"Look who it is," Romero murmurs as he pushes his chair back. "Your future husband." Tatum flushes, shooting him a filthy look before he stands to shake hands with the men.

Callum nods to Tatum. "Jack, Dominic, this is my daughter, Tatum."

I hold my breath, my skin tingling before Callum's gaze falls on me. "And this is her friend, Bianca."

I force an overly wide smile, nodding to the men before they both plant a kiss against the back of my hand. Dominic

sits to my right, while his father sits opposite Callum at the rectangular table. We're seated close to the kitchen, the chef's tasting table, partly secluded by a low wall separating us from the rest of the dining room.

This would be like something out of a dream if it wasn't for the disappointment that's slammed into me. What did I expect? For Callum to stand on his chair and announce to the entire restaurant that I'm his woman? I don't even want us to be public yet—not until I figure out a way to explain it to my dad without him having a stroke over it.

But here I am, ready to sulk, feeling like the poor girl who wants to sponge off her rich friend.

Stop projecting. Don't ruin this. I stiffen my spine and murmur my thanks to the server, who pours me a glass of wine.

"Bianca." Dominic's voice is low and rich as he turns my way in his chair. He's handsome like his father but just as smarmy. There's an intimacy in the way he whispers to me. "Do you have a last name?"

"Sure, I do."

"Not going to make it easy for me, are you?"

I'm not sure what he's talking about, so I don't say anything. When I glance at Romero, he's glaring openly at Dominic, but looks away when Callum clears his throat.

I feel like I walked into this situation without knowing all the facts.

"Tatum, it really is a pleasure to meet you," Jack says, raising his glass like he's toasting her. "I understand you spent a good portion of this summer in Europe."

"It was a graduation present," she explains. Considering she bitched to me for hours about this dinner at home, she's putting on the performance of a lifetime. Nobody would guess how unhappy she is to pretend.

"And what do you plan on doing after this? Any jobs lined up?" He laughs indulgently, winking at Callum. "I'm sure your

father could pull some strings.”

“Tatum will go her own way,” Callum informs him. The tightness in his voice is obvious. This guy needs to tread lightly, or any deal between them is going to die before it goes through.

“And what about you?” Dominic asks in a whisper meant only for me. “Did you tour Europe, too?”

“No, I had a job lined up already.”

“A hard worker.” His leg brushes firmly against mine under the table. “I like that. Too many girls nowadays expect a man to take care of them. All they have to do is sit around, look pretty, and get their nails done.”

Cool. Dinner with a side of misogyny. Exactly what I was in the mood for.

It’s a relief when the chef comes out to describe the tasting menu he’s created for us tonight. Each course will be paired with a specially chosen wine. I’ll be lucky if I can walk by the end of the night at this rate. At least once we’re eating, there will be something for Dominic to do besides flirt, if that’s what he’s doing.

All I know is I wish he wasn’t sitting so close. By the time we’re on the third course, I practically have to angle my knees away from him to keep out of his reach. It doesn’t seem to matter because he keeps finding ways to make contact.

I bump against Callum’s knee, and his eyes cut my way, the corners of his mouth twitching before he rubs his knee against mine. He doesn’t get it, and I can’t come out and announce what’s happening. Tatum’s oblivious, too, commenting on the little plate of lobster risotto and how well it goes with the white wine pairing. Romero only grunts his response. He’d help me, but there’s no way for me to signal for that help.

Finally, I’ve had enough by the time our plates are cleared, and the last sips of crisp white wine don’t do a thing to cool my anger. “Is anything wrong?” I whisper.

“What do you mean?” Dominic whispers playfully, like it’s a joke.

“Is there not enough room at the table? Because you keep bumping into me by accident.”

“Who said it was an accident?”

This guy is nauseating. “Aren’t you supposed to be here to get to know Tatum?”

“If I have to marry her, I will.” I recoil in disgust when, instead of using his leg, he brushes his fingers over my knee. “But my free time is mine.”

“I’m not single. Please, don’t touch me like that.” I’m barely moving my lips, so afraid Callum will hear and lose his mind. This deal has to be important to him. I don’t want to ruin it just because this guy is a piece of shit.

“You have no idea how many brainless brats there are in my world.”

“I could be brainless, too, for all you know.”

“Why don’t you let me be the judge of that?” My stomach turns when he touches me again, this time grazing my thigh. “I already like what I see. I can’t wait to learn more.”

I don’t know what makes me do it. Disgust, rage, frustration at being ignored when I flat-out told this fucker not to touch me. I want to scream, I want to throw up, I want to slap him across the face in front of everybody.

Instead, I’m a little more discreet. I pick up the fork the server just placed in front of me for the next course and jab it into the back of his hand under the table, out of sight.

Only I think I did it a little harder than I wanted.

“What the fuck?” He shoves himself back from the table, holding up his hand so everyone can see the fork sticking out of the back. “What the hell is wrong with you? Are you crazy?”

“What’s the matter here?” Jack demands.

“Bianca,” Callum growls.

It's Romero who speaks up. "He's been screwing around with her under the table this whole time. She asked him to stop, and that's what he got." And unless I'm misreading him, he looks and sounds proud. Happy, even. I didn't know he was watching that closely.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper to Callum, trembling under the weight of his stare. "I really am. I tried to make him stop."

"She told you to stop touching her, and you did it anyway?"

Oh, shit. This isn't my fault. I know it's not my fault, but that doesn't stop my heart from taking off like a trip-hammer, thudding against my ribs. I've seen that look on his face, and I was sure it meant he was going to kill me.

Only now, he's glaring at Dominic.

"I was just fooling around." With a grimace, he yanks the fork from his hand, then presses a napkin to it.

Callum's breathing hard, gripping the table with both hands. "You touched her? Do you know what I would normally do to a man who touched what's mine?"

Double shit. I shoot a panicked look at Tatum, who's watching everything through wide eyes.

"Yours?" Jack asks. "Do you mean—"

"She is here with me. She is my date this evening and every evening. She's... We're together."

Not exactly a declaration of love, but relief and joy wash over me. He came out and said I'm his. And if he were any other man in the world, I might stick a fork in his hand, too, since I don't belong to anybody.

No, that's not true. I do belong to him, and I always have. Now, for better or worse, everybody's going to know. Maybe I should thank the grimacing, muttering pig next to me for forcing his hand. No pun intended.

Callum stands, his eyes narrowed into slits that glare across the table. "This meal is over, and unless you're willing to extend reparations for the discomfort Bianca experienced

tonight, the deal is over, too. I'm going to need to give this some thought, and I suggest you do the same."

"Let's all take a breath." Jack's practically sweating, his voice shaky like he's overwhelmed. "We can work this out."

"Get him out of my sight before I turn you down flat," Callum warns. "Unless you would like Romero here to show you the door."

Romero stands, straightening his tie, looking back and forth between the two men, who are now red-faced and sullen as they stand.

"And you, come with me." Callum practically pulls me out of my chair, and I have no choice but to stumble along behind him.

My head is spinning, and my heart's about to explode. He stood up for me. He wasn't afraid to tell everyone we're together. I had no idea I would feel this proud when the time finally came. I was worried he'd keep me a secret.

We end up in an empty banquet room lit only by the lights outside shining through the windows. Even though I can only make out his profile, there's no mistaking the rage that's still tightening his features.

"I really tried to stop him," I whisper with my heart in my throat. "I'm so sorry—"

All the breath leaves my lungs when he shoves me against the wall just beside the door and pins me with his body. He's hard as a rock, pressing against my hip, and his hot breath fans across my face when he leans down.

"Promise me something," he growls, sending a shiver up my spine. "Don't ever suffer in silence again. Somebody's touching you, fucking with you? You tell me."

"I didn't want to ruin—"

"Promise."

"I promise." The words have barely passed my lips, and his mouth is on me. His tongue thrusts against mine while he works my dress up over my thighs with shaking hands.

I can't wrap my head around the way he claimed me out there, out loud, for everybody to hear. I'm his, the way I always wanted to be. My dreams have come true. Now nothing is standing between us.

"Fuck. I want to go back in there and kill him for touching you," Callum growls against my lips.

"No. Stay. I need you," I plead, weaving my arms around his neck and pulling him closer.

"Who do you belong to?" he demands before he pulls aside my thong and sinks two fingers deep inside me. I gasp, pressing my face to his neck to stifle the sound while servers pass back and forth just beyond the door at my side.

"You." I moan against his skin while he pumps his fingers mercilessly, rubbing my walls and massaging my g-spot until I hump his hand. All I hear is the rushing of blood in my ears and the wet, sloppy sound of his digits invading me. His fingers move faster and faster, and then his thumb presses against my clit, and I detonate.

I dig my nails into his shoulders, the pleasure so intense I'm pretty sure I stop breathing, but he doesn't stop. Even now, when we could be discovered, he's determined to prove his power over my body.

"Fuck me," I whisper between gasps for air. "Please, I need your cock inside me..."

"Damn, you beg so sweetly, Bianca. My cocks already dripping cum from your sweet moans and cries of pleasure. If I had the time to tease you, I would, but I don't, and my desire to be inside of you right now is my only thought."

YES!

Pulling his fingers from my sopping pussy, he brings them to his lips, sucking the juices off of them. It's the most erotic thing I've ever seen, and I wish the lighting was better so I could see his eyes fully.

"Sweet as honey," he murmurs and releases me for a moment. He undoes his belt and then lowers his zipper, the sound loud in the empty room. Lifting me once more, he pins

me to the wall, his frame holding me in place. I hitch my legs around his waist, bringing him closer. Anticipation bubbles in my belly. He's so big and thick.

"I wish I had it in me to take you slow, but I can't." I feel the fat head of his cock at my entrance, and a moment later, he's filling me. He stretches me to the point of pain, and I breathe through my nose, swallowing back a whimper as he thrusts forward.

With every thrust, he sinks a little deeper inside of me and while I struggle to take him, the pleasure that swirls in my core as he forces himself inside me is worth the pain.

"I don't think I'll ever get used to the way you struggle to take me. Your little pussy stretches around me so nicely, pulling me deeper and deeper. Those first few pushes inside of you. Fuck..." Callum's filthy words are my undoing.

He moves faster, and the hints of pain give way to complete pleasure as I adjust to his girth. I hang on tight and press my face to his neck to hold back my ecstatic cries. My nipples are so hard they rub against the fabric of my bra, intensifying the pleasure in my core.

"Mine, mine," he grunts with every stroke. He's right. I'm his.

I love you. I want to say it. It's right there on the tip of my tongue, but I hold it back. Still too afraid, even while he's pounding into me, taking me the way I need to be taken. I've never been so sure how I feel, but I can't risk ruining the moment.

"Yes," I whisper into his ear. "Yes, Callum, yes."

He hits that special spot at the top of my channel, and my eyes roll to the back of my head. My toes curl, and... thrust, thrust, thrust. He fucks me harder, each stroke hitting the same spot. In a breath, I'm swept away again, my muscles tighten, and I explode. My entire body trembles.

"Such a good girl," he praises. "Squeezing my cock like that. Now I'm going to reward you. I'm going to fill you full

of my cum. You want that, don't you? You want my cum inside this tight pussy?"

"Yes, yes! Come inside me," I urge, breathless, ready for his release.

"Fuck," he growls, grinding his hips against me. I can feel him deep, as deep as he can go. He tips his head back a second later, and a rush of warmth fills my core. This is the part I like best. When he's helpless, lost in the way I make him feel. It's probably the only time he's ever really helpless and loses the firm grip he maintains over everything else in his life.

I hold him close, cupping the back of his neck in my hand, pressing my lips to his cheek, his ear. *I love you*. My heart is so full I'm afraid the words will spill out, but I bite them back in time. He slowly pulls out of me, bringing with him a gush of our mixed juices. Taking a step back, his gaze sweeps over me. I can't tell what he's thinking, but I wish I could. He helps me adjust my dress and gently caresses my cheek.

"The ladies' room is across from here. Go on in and clean yourself up, but leave my cum inside your pussy where it belongs." I swear I see the hint of a grin appear on his lips. His hand drops from my face, and he tucks himself back into his pants, straightening out his clothing. "I'll go back out and do damage control."

I can only nod, breathless from our activities. I feel like I got hit by a hurricane and probably look that way, too.

I duck out of the room first, darting across the narrow hall leading out to the back of the building. The ladies' room is just as classy and tasteful as the rest of the establishment, with forest green walls and sparkling marble on the floor and the sink. I guess a man like him wouldn't own any old rinky-dink place.

One glance at myself in the mirror, and I'm glad no one saw me scurry in here. My lipstick is smudged around my mouth. I quickly wipe it clean and reapply, then dab at the perspiration along my hairline before pulling a comb out of my clutch.

Where does this leave us? I know better than to ask him that question, so I'll plague myself with it on repeat. Word is going to spread. I'm sure Jack Moroni is already bitching to whoever will listen about what I did to his precious son tonight.

A giggle bursts out of me before I can stop it. I stabbed the guy with a fork. Quiet little me.

When the door to my right opens, I imagine it's Tatum, and I'm ready to laugh with her over the way things fell apart.

But it isn't Tatum, and it's not another guest.

I don't recognize him at first, thanks to the black ball cap he's wearing, pulled low over his eyes.

It's only when he lifts his head, standing directly behind me, that I gaze at the reflection of my ex-boyfriend. "I came in through the kitchen," he whispers. "This is the only way I can help you."

I don't know what the rag in his hand means. I only know it can't mean anything good. He clamps the rag over my mouth and nose before I can scream.

A sweet smell overwhelms me, and my vision blurs before I can do more than squirm and kick weakly.

Then everything goes dark.

CALLUM



I wish I could say the satisfaction of claiming my woman has calmed me down, but that's not exactly true. I know she's mine; no one's taking her from me.

Certainly not some sleazy piece of shit like Dominic Moroni. His last name is the only reason he's still breathing. That and the witnesses present at the restaurant.

Still, I've been insulted. That kid was supposed to be here to meet my daughter, not to feel up another girl while sitting at the same table as Tatum. Jack had better do a lot of thinking on how to make this up to me. If not, I'll set the terms myself.

Terms he will not like much.

Our table is empty now, and our servers stand around looking guilty and confused.

"Sorry to have broken things up," I murmur, but it's Tatum I'm concerned with now. Scanning the dining room, I find her sitting alone at the bar, nursing a glass of wine. Something about the way she holds herself gives off a *Do Not Approach* signal, but I'm her father. That sort of shit doesn't work on me.

She spots me in the mirror behind the rows of bottles along the wall and cuts me off before I've said a word. "That's who you were going to marry me off to, huh? A real Prince Charming."

I can't hold back a sigh. "There was never any real chance of a marriage."

"Of course. How could I forget? I'm a pawn."

“You’re being a little dramatic, don’t you think?”

“No, I don’t. How could you even give that guy the idea I would marry his son? You didn’t even ask me about it.”

“How many times do I have to explain myself, Tatum? It would never happen. You’re making a big deal out of nothing.”

“I didn’t like that Jack guy looking me up and down like some prize heifer.”

“I didn’t like it, either.”

“You didn’t stop him, though.” She stares down into her glass, biting her lip. Dressed the way she is, she could go to any club in the city at this very moment and have her choice of any man. I’d have to break their hands for touching her, of course.

Right now, she’s my little girl. Unsure of herself and lost in her feelings.

“It was business,” I remind her, gentler this time—gentler than I normally am. “Emotions can’t get involved with business.”

I catch my mistake when she lifts an eyebrow, but it’s too late. “So, you weren’t emotional back there at the table?” She arches the other eyebrow and folds her arms.

“That’s a different story.”

“Is it, though?”

“What was I supposed to do? I would have stopped him if it was you he was fondling under the table, too. You know I would have. That’s unacceptable.”

When she dips her chin, I tilt it upward with one finger until her green eyes meet mine. “He insulted you, too. If I wasn’t already planning on fucking that Moroni bastard over, I would start making my plans now.”

Her lips twitch. “I should’ve known.”

“Anyway, I haven’t forgotten you aren’t on the market, even if I am waiting for Kristoff to thank me for those suits

you bought him.”

It isn't my imagination. The light leaves her eyes a split second before she pulls free, examining her wine glass and avoiding my gaze again. “I don't know if you'll see him anytime soon.”

“Why not?” Something about the way she says that—her flat voice, the sadness running like a river under her words—reminds me I haven't paid her a lot of attention since she got home. I haven't asked the important questions, and now uncertainty stirs to life in the back of my mind. “What's going on with you two? Do I need to have a conversation with him?”

“Not everything can be fixed with a conversation.” She smirks, and there is a deep wisdom and understanding in the way she looks at me. “Not even the kind of *conversation* you would have.”

I'm wondering if I've kept her as far from my work as I've always imagined.

“What are you trying to say?” And now I'm prepared to close out the night by paying Kristoff a visit to make sure he pays me back in blood. “What happened when you were gone?”

Instead of being straight with me, she wraps her shawl a little tighter around her shoulders. “Where's Bianca?”

“Don't change the subject.” Although, that is a good question. I didn't expect her to take this long. “She went to the ladies' room. Can you go check?”

“What, you mean you're not going to storm into the girls' bathroom? You own the place.” Still, she gets up from her stool and walks to the back while shaking her head.

She doesn't reach the swinging door before an ear-splitting shriek slices through the air. The wailing of an alarm. Diners look up from their plates, and a few of them push out of their chairs and climb to their feet. The hostess cuts across the room, ponytail swinging, and instinct forces me to follow her.

“Someone tripped the emergency exit,” she calls out, but the siren almost swallows her voice.

Tatum stands in the bathroom doorway, holding the door open with one hand. She grabs my sleeve as I pass. “Did you say she was in here? Because she isn’t.”

No, not this. Anything but this.

I break free of her grasp and run the rest of the way down the hall, past the empty banquet rooms, and out through the emergency exit, which empties onto a line of dumpsters and employee parking. “There!” I shout to Romero when he falls in next to me, pointing to a pair of taillights dwindling to pinpoints before they blink out. “There she is.”

I don’t know how I’m so sure, only that I am. Part of my soul is in that car, and somebody is taking it away from me. The weight of that knowledge threatens to buckle my knees.

“Dad, what’s happening?”

I spin in place to find Tatum shivering despite the heavy humidity. Thunder rolls across the sky before the sky opens, and rain spatters the ground, adding to the sense of everything falling the fuck to pieces.

“Somebody took her.” I take one more look in the direction the car disappeared before pulling Tatum back inside the building. “But we’re going to get her.”

“Why?” Her lips pull back from her teeth in a horrified grimace. “I don’t understand!”

“Neither do I. I’m going to need you to listen to everything I say and do what you’re told.” With one hand firmly around her arm, I direct her back to the dining room. Some heroic soul cuts the alarm, but somehow the silence is more deafening.

Romero and I exchange a look. “The tracker,” I remind him, and immediately he pulls out his phone.

“What tracker? What is happening?” Then, before I can order her outside to our car, she gasps. “Maybe it was Lucas.”

I can hardly keep up with the rush of thoughts running through my head. All my frenzied subconscious can latch onto is that name. Lucas.

“What does he have to do with this?”

“We saw him today outside the store. I didn’t think—I mean, I figured—”

“Slow down.” I take her face in my shaking hands. “Breathe. Tell me what happened.”

“He just came out of nowhere, and he looked crazy. But I kind of laughed it off because I figured he was just being a loser and trying to get her back.” Her chin quivers, her eyes welling up with tears. “That’s what he’s doing, right? He took her so that he can convince her to stay with him?”

Fucking hell, and I did not know. “She didn’t tell you?”

“Didn’t tell me what?”

“It was Lucas who hit her with the car,” Romero says, rather than leave the announcement to me.

“Are you fucking serious?” Her scream echoes through the dining room. We already had an audience. What’s more attention on us? “Why didn’t she tell me?”

“One thing at a time. We don’t know if he took her.” Or what he hopes to get out of this. I can’t imagine it wasn’t him. Especially if he confronted the girls earlier today. If one of them had told me about that, and I’d known he was in the area, I could’ve been on alert. I could’ve stopped this from happening.

“I have the signal from her phone.” Romero shows me the screen, where a blinking blue dot tells me she’s moving.

“Dad, please, find her. Please get her back!” Tatum is weeping as I wrap my arm around her shoulders and walk her out of the dining room with Romero on our heels. A snap of my fingers and the pair of guards waiting under the awning in front of the restaurant jump to attention. Damn it, it never occurred to me to have any in the back. I wasn’t thinking. Why wasn’t I thinking? I’ll never forgive myself—

Stop it. Focus. She needs you.

“Take Tatum home,” I tell them, raising my voice to be heard over the storm. “Then wait for further instructions.”

Romero heads for the second car and is already behind the wheel before I join him. The tires squeal across the pavement before I've closed the door.

"We can't afford to chase them down," Romero says as he speeds through the lot before bursting out onto the access road running behind the restaurant. "He might try to outrun us."

He doesn't have to say anything more. I'm as aware of how this could end up as he is, already playing out every possibility in my racing mind.

"That doesn't mean you need to drive like an old woman. Move." Lucas—if it is Lucas—is already miles ahead of us. What if he drives them both off a bridge? Or deliberately slam into the concrete wall of an overpass at top speed? The way Tatum described him, he's completely unpredictable.

I should have tried harder. Should have stopped at nothing before finding him.

"Where the fuck has he been?" I demand, punching the door.

"For all we know, he could've been living out of his car all this time." He glances my way before weaving around a line of cars traveling too slowly. "You did everything you could."

That doesn't matter. "It wasn't enough."

And I will never forgive myself if my failure means losing her forever.

BIANCA



“*Y*ou’re safe now. You don’t have to be afraid of him anymore.”

All I can do is groan. My head is so heavy, just like my eyelids. I can’t open them. I’m so tired, and it feels like I’m still dreaming even though I know I’m awake. Stupid pain meds always mess me up like this.

Wait. No. I’m not taking them anymore.

The voice comes back, weaving its way through my foggy brain. “I know you didn’t want to listen to me. That’s why I had to do this. You left me no choice, but it’s for your own good. You’ll see.”

If I didn’t know better, I would swear it was Lucas talking. I must still be dreaming or caught between a dream and reality.

It’s storming outside, and the sound of thunder and fat raindrops hitting the windows makes me want to go back to sleep.

“Callum...” I whisper while I curl into a ball. I want him close to me. I want to sleep safe and warm in his arms while a storm rages outside.

“You never have to be afraid of him again. I don’t care how long it takes. You’re going to forget Callum Torrio ever existed.”

Wait.

I’m not in Callum’s bed.

And I am not dreaming.

That really is Lucas murmuring close to where I lie.

I force air into my nostrils. My mind is on the fringes of panic. Instead of the familiar, spicy scent of Callum's skin on the sheets, it's wood I smell. Lots of wood, like I'm in a room filled with it. Or made of it. The mattress under me has springs that poke into my hip and shoulder.

Lightning flashes bright enough that I see it from behind my closed eyelids, and it's followed by a clap of thunder that shakes the room. I can't pretend to be asleep, not with Lucas so close. And I know he's close. I smell his acrid sweat, the way I did outside the store and in the bathroom, where he knocked me out. *Kidnapped me.*

I should've taken him more seriously. Why did I think I was doing him a favor by letting him live?

"What... what's going on?" I force my heavy eyelids open. My vision is blurry, and it takes me a moment to fully see the room. But once my eyes focus, I find him sitting in an armchair beside the bed. His intense stare makes my skin crawl. *Stay calm. Reason with him.* "Is this your parents' cabin?"

A soft smile touches his lips. It's obscene looking. "I knew you would remember."

"Is this where you've been living?" There are dirty clothes in one corner, and faint food smells come through the open bedroom door, giving me my answer.

"I've been here a few days."

"But why?"

"I needed somewhere to go."

"Don't you have a place?"

"I don't want to talk about that right now. I want to talk about you." When he leans in, I have to force myself not to recoil in disgust. This is not the Lucas I used to know, who would spend longer in the bathroom getting ready to go out than I would. Even though he only worked at a gym, there was

never a hair out of place and no stubble on his cheeks. He was clean and mostly respectful. This version of him looks like he just crawled out of a sewer and smells about as good, too.

“Okay, let’s talk about me then.” I have to get out of here. At least I know where we are, but that doesn’t do me any good if I can’t get the keys to his car.

Through the frantic thoughts bouncing around my head, I try to zero in on the layout of the cabin in my memory. Down the stairs, front door straight ahead. Maybe he left the keys by the door if they’re not on him right now. Can I get him to take me down to the kitchen so I can get a look?

“I got you away from him. Finally. You’re safe now. He’ll never find you here.”

Gentle. Be careful. “Who told you I was in danger?”

His eyes darken, and his voice slides into a growl. “Somebody who would know.”

What does that mean? “Lucas, I’m fine.”

He grits his teeth. “You were groomed, you mean.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“I know about everything,” he growls. “I know it was Callum who called me that night at the club. Did he force you? Just to make a fool out of me?”

“No. He never forced me.”

“Right, because he got in your head. He didn’t have to.” He snickers in the way that says he thinks he knows better. “I used to think you were smart.”

Even if I want to laugh, I need to be gentle. “I’m sorry, but whoever you got your information from, they’re wrong. Whatever is between us is between us, and it’s what I want. I really am sorry if it hurts you—”

“*Hurts me?*” I cringe at the way he jumps out of his chair, his fists balled up tight. His expression is crazed. “How could you let somebody like him touch you? How could you let him fuck you? Do you know what he does? Do you know how he

made all that money he has? Do you even know the type of person he is? The monster you've been sleeping with?"

It takes all my determination to not back down from his temper. One of us has to stay calm. "Yes. I do."

"Are you sure of that? Or do you only know what he wants you to know?"

"I know plenty." It isn't easy keeping my voice neutral. Just like it's not easy to keep from shaking when I see that look in his eye. The one that tells me he's capable of doing anything that will keep me where he wants me.

"Do you know he's a fucking murderer, Bianca?" He sneers. "I can't believe you let a filthy fucking murderer inside you? I know I wasn't the best boyfriend and made mistakes, but I never killed anyone."

"It's okay, Lucas. Everything is going to be okay."

His head snaps back from the shock of my words, his eyes bulging so much it looks like they're going to fall out of his head. "It's not okay. Nothing is okay. How can you sit there and act like anything about him is sane? Do you think the things he's doing are okay? What the fuck did he do to you?"

My defenses are up. I can't bite my tongue on this one.

"I can tell you one thing he never did to me," I blurt out because I'm sick of his sanctimonious attitude. It's probably a bad move, but something has to snap him back to reality. "He's never tried to run me down in the street. He's never tried to kill me."

"How do you know about that?"

"Why would I have brought it up today, outside the store? I know exactly what you did. You're alive right now because I told Callum not to kill you because I didn't want you to die for making a mistake."

Immediately, I regret what I've said. I know it the second his features soften, and he releases a long sigh, with his head tipping to the side. "I knew it."

His reaction sends fear skittering up my spine. “What did you know?”

“We’re not over. We will never be over.” A flash of lightning illuminates his face. The circles under his wide, crazy eyes look darker. “You covered for me. You protected me.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, Lucas. I’m sorry, but you don’t.”

He’s faster than I recall. Before I know it, he’s on top of me, taking my wrists in his hands when I beat at him with my fists. “This is what’s meant to be.” He forces my arms apart and pins my wrists to the bed.

“No! No, no, don’t do this!” I’m a wild animal, bucking and kicking, twisting from side to side because I need to get him off me. I have to. This has to stop.

But no, he wedges his knee between mine and forces my legs apart. “Don’t make me hurt you,” he says in a strained voice. “You mean so much to me. I didn’t mean to do it. I wanted to scare you, that’s all.”

This is going to break me. This is where I shatter into pieces so tiny that no one will ever put them back together.

His sweat drips onto my cheek, and I scream in horror. This is happening, no matter how hard I fight. He’s too strong. “Please, don’t!” I can hardly hear my pleas over the constant rumble of thunder shaking the cabin. The storm is at its peak, adding to the blood-curdling nightmare I can’t wake up from.

“Stop... fighting...”

I won’t. I can’t. “No!”

“Get your fucking hands off her!”

Lucas freezes, and so do I for a heartbeat before I crane my neck to see who’s standing in the doorway.

A flash of lightning reveals a soaked, very enraged Callum. He’s a lion ready to strike. Nothing has ever looked better.

A second flash reveals the gun in his hand, aimed right at Lucas. “Get. Off. Her.”

Lucas pushes up onto his knees. I can’t see his face, but he’s going to break my wrists if he squeezes any tighter. “You. This is all your fault. You destroyed her.”

“Lucas.” My throat’s so tight I can hardly whisper. “Listen to him.”

He doesn’t listen to either of us, letting go of one of my wrists to reach for something at his side. All I catch from the corner of my eye is the glint of steel before he touches the cold switchblade to my throat. I can’t breathe. I can’t do anything but lie here, helpless, afraid of what will happen next.

“I’d rather see her dead than let you put your hands on her again,” he snarls at Callum.

It all happens so fast. The boom of the gun as it goes off. The spray of warm blood across my face. The sudden release of my wrist. He drops the blade before falling onto his side. For a moment, I can’t comprehend what has happened.

A scream rips from my throat. *There’s so much blood. His blood.*

Callum’s hands roam my body, touching my face, arms, and legs. All I can see is his face filling my vision. His hands cup my cheeks, and they’re warm, so warm.

“Are you okay? Did he hurt you at all?”

He’s here. I’m safe. There’s so much blood. Lucas is dead, but I’m safe. My screams fade to gasps as I try to suck in enough air to clear my head. I’m okay. It’s over.

There’s a dead body sprawled across my leg. Bile rises up my throat. I startle when Romero comes in, but Callum’s arms hold me in place.

“All clear,” he says, looking around the room. “Is she okay?”

I don’t know what to say. I don’t think I can speak. All I can do is keep my eyes away from Lucas. He’s dead, and his

blood is on my face. It mixes with the raindrops that soak Callum and drip down onto me.

Romero pulls out his phone and starts barking instructions while Callum lifts me out of bed. “We need to go.”

“But...”

He turns my face away from the bed and angles me toward the door. “Now. We’re leaving. I’m taking you home, and Romero will take care of this. We’ll make it look like a suicide.”

I hear him, but nothing he’s saying sinks in. Like my subconscious doesn’t want to accept what’s happening.

Callum guides me to the stairs, but my feet won’t take me down. I can’t move anymore. I can hardly breathe; there’s no air in the room. Why am I so cold? My teeth are chattering.

I hardly notice him picking me up and carrying me down the stairs. Only the rain pelting my face once we’re outside snaps me out of the worst of the shock. Lightning zigzags across the sky, and I bury my face against Callum’s neck until we reach the car, where he lowers me into the passenger seat and buckles the seatbelt for me.

The rain sounds like hundreds of little gunshots going off at once as it pounds against the roof. I fight off the urge to cover my ears while Callum gets behind the wheel and starts the engine.

“Romero?” I murmur, looking back at the cabin. How many other cabins around the lake are being used right now? Did anyone hear the shot? Maybe not over the thunder.

“He’s staying behind. He’ll get a ride back with the cleanup crew.”

He pulls away, and soon we’re rolling down the muddy road. The tires send jets of water shooting up both sides of the car, and lightning highlights the dark, towering trees.

Dead. Dead. He’s dead.

Callum killed him.

Callum saved me.

“You’re safe now.” Callum’s calm voice slices through the fog in my head, the way lightning slices through the sky. “I’m sorry, little bird. I’m sorry I didn’t get there sooner.”

I’m too exhausted to speak. All I see is the blood. It all happened so fast. One minute he was there, and the next, he was...

“I will never let anyone hurt you again.”

I want to tell him I believe him but can’t make my mouth work.

He was alive, and then he wasn’t.

I must zone out for a while because, the next thing I know, the car is swinging through the front gate of the compound. We haven’t reached the courtyard yet when the front door flies open, and Tatum comes running down the front steps in the rain.

“Oh, my god!” She practically pulls me out of the car before squeezing me hard enough to make my ribs ache. “Thank God! Are you okay? Did he—”

“Get her inside,” Callum urges, before nudging us both toward the house. “She needs to get cleaned up.”

He touches my shoulder, and I don’t know what makes me do it. The memory of the gunshot, or how easy it was for him to blow a man’s brains out. He didn’t even hesitate. How could he end someone’s life so easily? Whatever the reason, I flinch away from his hand and cling to Tatum. His jaw works, but he doesn’t say a word.

“I’ll take care of it.” She steers me toward her wing once we’re inside, and I’m glad to let her take the lead. I can barely think, much less anything else. I’m numb. Why can’t I feel anything?

“Come on, sweetie. You need a shower, clean pajamas, and a few days in bed.” Tatum’s voice is soothing. It brings tears to my eyes. At least something’s getting through to me.

If she notices the blood on my face, she ignores it once we're in the bathroom. She turns the shower on, and it doesn't take long for steam to fill the space. I peel off my torn, soaked dress and let it fall in a sodden heap at my feet.

She helps me under the water and closes the shower door while I tip my head back to let what's left of Lucas's blood run over my skin and down the drain. The longer I stand here, the clearer I can think. The world comes back to me.

"You okay in there?" She pokes her head into the bathroom, and it hits me that I have no idea how long I've been standing here.

"I'm okay." I shampoo my hair, and she's cleaned up my messy clothes by the time I've rinsed it out. It's enough for her to be here with me. A reminder that I'm safe.

"I'm just so glad he found you so quickly."

"Me too," I choke out. I'm halfway through scrubbing my arms—trying to keep from staring at my bruised wrists—by the time it sinks in.

He knew where to find me. It didn't even take long.

"How did he know where I was? Did he tell you?"

"There was some kind of tracking app on your phone."

"He was tracking my phone?"

It should be the last thing on my mind, but it's merely another brick on top of all the others. Once again, he's invaded my privacy. I'm glad to be out of that cabin and safe, but I'm not safe if I can't have a single second to myself. It wasn't enough for him to watch me. He has to know where I am, literally at all times.

What happens when he isn't satisfied with that anymore? He might decide to keep me around the house instead. It's not like he's never threatened me with that before. Tying me to the bed and all. What if I'm the next person he kills? He threatened that once before. After witnessing the results first-hand, I have no doubt he'd kill me if he wanted to.

“He doesn’t trust me,” I whisper, trembling under the hot water.

“He doesn’t trust anybody,” she says with a sigh. Through the shower door, I see she’s finished changing into pajamas and is now taking off her makeup at the sink.

“Why not?”

“I think my mom really fucked him up, and now he can’t trust any woman.” She shrugs at her reflection. “I have no idea how his brain works. I’d be too afraid to dive in.”

She can feel that way, but I can’t. Our relationship is different. I need to understand him.

By the time I’ve finished rinsing off, there’s not a doubt in my mind. All my body wants is Callum—the comfort of his touch, his strong arms wrapped around me. Nothing in the world can hurt me so long as I’m with him.

Not quite true. There is something that could hurt me: Callum himself. That’s the problem. The closer I get to him, the easier it is for him to cause me pain with his distrust and secrets.

He has no problem killing a man and walking away. His crew will clean it up, and it’ll seem like it never happened. I should be grateful, but deep down, it terrifies me. What kind of person am I, keeping a secret like this? Knowing Lucas didn’t commit suicide, the way they’re going to make it look. His parents will carry that with them until the day they die.

Is it better for them to know he lost his mind and was trying to rape me?

This is the world Callum inhabits. The world he wants me to be a part of. How much worse is it going to get? How many secrets will I keep before they rot me from the inside out? While I waste away, locked up because he’ll never trust me.

I open the shower door and wrap a towel around myself before stepping out. “I need to leave.”

Tatum lowers the towel she’s drying her face with. “What do you mean? Don’t be rash. You’re still in shock.”

“Maybe a little,” I admit, “but I have to do this. I can’t... this can’t...” It’s too much. The pressure on my chest feels heavy again.

“Where will you go?”

“I don’t know. My dad’s, I guess.”

“But why?”

“Don’t make me explain, please.”

“You can’t come at me with an announcement like that and expect me to let you go without asking you questions.”

I know she’s right, which is the only reason I bother putting my feelings into words as I rush into her room barefoot and wrapped in a towel. It must’ve been instinct that made me keep my stuff on her side of the house instead of moving it into Callum’s room. Like there was a part of me that always knew this wouldn’t work out and wanted to protect itself.

“I can’t do this,” I whisper while pulling bags from the closet. I’m only revisiting the same situation I was in more than a week ago, packing in a hurry, ready to run. Isn’t that the definition of insanity? Doing the same thing over and over, even when the outcome never changes.

“Can’t do what?” She stands back and lets me pack, at least, instead of getting in my way.

“This. All of this. I won’t stay with a man who’d install a tracking app on my phone without my knowledge. What else has he done then I don’t know about?” I glance up from the drawer full of underwear I’m clearing out to find her face pinched in pain. “I’m sorry. I’m not trying to hurt you.”

“You’re sorry?” A manic laugh escapes her. “I’m the one who should be sorry. Not you. I know I didn’t do anything wrong, but he’s still my dad.”

“None of this is your responsibility.”

“I still feel like shit. Plus, I was the one who told you about the tracker.”

“You told me the truth, and that’s probably more than I’ve gotten before now.” I can hardly think. I’m so angry and frustrated. How could he betray me like this?

“You’re not really going to your dad’s, are you? You know, if you show up like this, he’ll assume something’s wrong. He’s not going to let it go, and then you’ll have to explain everything to him.”

She’s right. One look, and he’ll know something is wrong. Then he’ll lock me away for who knows how long because somebody hurt his little girl, and that would be without knowing the truth.

“I’ll figure it out.”

“He’s going to expect an explanation. He’s a detective for a reason.”

“Then I won’t be upset. Simple.”

Tatum rolls her green eyes. “Then he’ll want to know why you’re there.”

“Jesus. I’ll make something up. I’ll figure it out.”

She sighs, her shoulders sinking. “Was it Lucas who took you from the restaurant?”

I can’t speak over the lump in my throat, so I nod.

“You come back here in shock, with blood all over you...” Her breath hitches. “He’s dead, isn’t he?”

I don’t realize my legs have buckled beneath me until Tatum’s arms circle my waist, holding me up. “I’m sorry. But I had to know. It’s true, isn’t it?” All I can do is nod because, of course, she knew with nobody having to say the words.

“Hearing it...” I whisper before choking up.

“If your dad gets even a hint of there being something wrong with Lucas... and if Lucas goes missing officially... if his parents go to the police.”

And I’m not a very good liar, at least not when living with the man. Telling a few fibs over lunch is one thing, but being in the same house... It’s inevitable that I’ll let something slip.

“Then I’ll go to a hotel.” I gently push her away and slip into a pair of leggings and a T-shirt chosen at random. I only know I need to get out of here before he talks me into staying.

“*We’ll* go to a hotel.”

“No, you don’t—”

“Shut up. Like I would leave you alone right now. That’s not what friends do. You’re in shock, and if something happened to you. No. I’m going.”

I shake my head. “I’m not trying to drag you into this.”

“You’re not dragging me into shit. I love my dad, and I’m glad he found you and brought you back, but he’s not my favorite person right now. He’s made some serious errors lately, not to mention he used me as leverage for a fucking business deal. Do you know how insulting that is? I’m not a fucking object to be bid on.”

No, I can’t imagine, but I know what it feels like to be hurt by him.

There is no talking her out of this. She grabs a bag from the closet and starts packing. “Forget it. I’m going with you, so move your ass.”

Even though it’s painful to move my ass, I do it. I don’t want to do this. It hurts so much. Like I’m physically being torn in two. But I refuse to live the rest of my life in a cage. If it means having my heart ripped out for the sake of protecting myself in the future, that’s the way it needs to be. And that’s what I tell myself as Tatum and I sneak out of the house in the middle of the night, the storm still blowing hard, but not as brutally as before. We look over our shoulders as we run, bags in hand, before fleeing in my car like a couple of escaped convicts.

That’s exactly how I feel. Like I just broke out of prison.

A prison I walked into with my eyes wide open.

CALLUM



The shattering of glass fills the air but doesn't do anything to quiet the storm in my head. "Then what the fuck are they using for money if none of Tatum's cards have been accessed?"

"Bianca must be paying for it herself," Romero muses.

He's still standing exactly where he stood when he told me there's been no trace of Tatum's activity twenty hours after they ran away. His balls are massive. He's the only one of my guys who's been able to stay in the room with me for more than half a minute since last night. All my men are running scared, scrambling around like chickens without their fucking heads, and none of it matters.

We're no fucking closer to finding them than we were last night.

"That's on me," I growl, kicking aside one of the chairs in front of my desk. "I should have been tracking Bianca's finances, too."

When will I learn? I should've been doing lots of things.

"The good news is they can't stay away forever."

I bark out a bitter laugh. "Do you want to bet? We're talking about Tatum here."

"I'm talking more about Bianca. The girl was in shock. You shot off half her ex's head while they were in the same bed. You can never tell what somebody's going to do when they're in shock. If you ask me, her reaction is pretty calm."

He is not helping matters.

“Then, by all fucking means, let’s allow both of them to run around the world unsupervised. Look, I already feel better...” I pin him with an icy stare.

His nostrils flare as he lets out a slow breath. “My point is, Tatum might have gone along with Bianca to make sure she was safe. After what happened, she probably wasn’t thinking clearly. She fell back on an old habit.”

Running away. Yes, that is an old habit of hers. Because she would rather face a cruel and unforgiving world than face me. I hate myself for wanting so much to believe him. I want to cling to that bit of hope that he’s giving me because I’m a pitiful fucking bastard when it comes to this girl. That’s what she’s done to me. She’s made me weak, emotional, and undisciplined. I’m out of control and won’t be able to find my footing again until I find her. How am I supposed to go on if Bianca isn’t my reason for living?

“Tatum is level-headed,” Romero continues in that measured voice he puts on when he’s trying to calm me down.

That makes me laugh again. If there’s one adjective I’d use when describing my daughter, level-headed would not be it. Now I know he’s breaking his back to placate me, blowing smoke up my ass. “If she was, she would have come to me instead of running off in the middle of the night. It’s irresponsible. They’re acting like they’re having an adventure together or some bullshit.”

My skin is hot and flushed. My body’s been in a rage ever since I found the girls gone, not even thirty minutes after sending Bianca off with my daughter to clean up. I shouldn’t have let her out of my sight, but I was trying to think of what was best, what she needed. Once I noticed the way she clung to Tatum, I thought I had it pinned down.

Asshole me, assuming she’d do better with her best friend than she would with the man she witnessed murdering her ex. Thinking it would cause her greater distress if I got in her face when what I wanted most in the world was to hold her. What if there hadn’t been a way to track her location? We spent days

searching for Lucas and never found records of that cabin. I never would have found her. Once again, I went against my instincts and let her walk away.

“Let’s be honest. This could have to do with her being pissy over the Moroni fiasco.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me if that had something to do with it,” he admits, his jaw tightening. “But I know she cares about Bianca. There’s a good chance she did it to be a good friend.”

She needs me. What else must I do to show her she means everything to me? I’ve killed for her. That’s still not enough to keep her from disappearing. I’m not enough to keep her from disappearing.

“Try the app again,” I growl, pacing the room and pounding my fist into my palm. Glass crunches beneath my shoes, and Romero lets out a choked sort of warning sound, but I ignore him. Like I give two shits about broken glass.

It’s better for both of us if I pretend I don’t hear the way he sighs as he pulls out his phone. It’s clear he thinks this is useless, and he might be right, but I’d kick myself to death if either of them turned their phone on, and I missed the opportunity to track them.

Last night, it was a stupid mistake to make Tatum aware of the app. It couldn’t have taken long for one of them to connect the dots and assume Tatum’s phone held the same tracking system. By the time I realized they were gone, they had both switched their phones off, leaving themselves untraceable.

“Nothing.” He sighs after a minute. “I’ll keep checking.”

“How many cars do we have out there looking for them?”

“Eight at the moment.”

That’s not enough, obviously. “We need more.”

“Boss, respectfully—”

“Cut the bullshit,” I bark. I’m going crazy. I fucking killed for her, and she left me. I’ve been sitting on my hands—ineffective—because I want to be here waiting once they’re

brought home. Is it any wonder I'm ready to burn the fucking world to ash?

"Fine. We've been combing the city since last night. These guys haven't slept, and they're still searching every inch of the city. If I send more cars out, I'm going to have to pull some back to give them a chance to sleep."

"You think I give a fuck about whether they're well rested? They want to sleep; they need to find the girls. End of story."

"Fair enough. I'll get on it."

"And save your fucking opinion next time," I shout at the back of his head while he goes to his office. "I didn't fucking ask for it, so I don't want it."

"Point taken." At least he's smart enough not to slam his door, though it's odd enough for him to close it at all.

Motherfucker. Whatever happened to the days when it was simple. My kid stepped out of line, and I could ground her. There's no grounding a twenty-one-year-old, especially not when she's my stubborn daughter.

At least I know they won't go far for long on whatever Bianca has saved in a month at her job. At the very least, I have the comfort of knowing she's supposed to return to work on Monday. That's two days from now, and the thought of waiting so long when hardly twenty-four hours has practically broken me...

No way I'm waiting that long. Anything could happen in two days.

I'm still pacing when Romero returns. "It's done. We're covering every corner of the city and surrounding suburbs. Something's bound to come up."

"I don't need you coaching me through this."

He falls silent while typing on his phone, and I continue pacing like a caged animal. Where the hell could they be? As if I wouldn't move heaven and earth to find her. She should know me better by now.

“You know, there is an option we haven’t covered yet,” he murmurs after a while.

I do know because it’s been in the back of my mind for hours. “No. We aren’t getting the cops involved, even the ones we pay.”

“Bianca’s name never has to be brought up. All you have to do is tell them you’re looking for Tatum, that she might be in distress.”

Tempting... but no. “Absolutely not. I can’t risk it.”

The thing is, I’ve already considered it. That’s how crazy this has made me. I actually considered reaching out to that prick detective to ask him for help to find his kid. He doesn’t need to know about us, only that the girls are missing. He’d have fifty cars out there looking for her within minutes, if not more. I already know how far he’s willing to go when something matters to him. But I also know what a pain in the ass he is, and I’m not about to have him barking up my tree with questions.

That’s an absolute end-of-the-road, “all other possibilities have been exhausted” sort of step. We aren’t there yet. After calling all the hospitals in the area to ask if they brought in any girls matching their description, there’s not much we can do but wait for one of them to show their face.

And when they do? This isn’t going to work out well for either of them.

Especially my little bird. Romero could be right. She might still have been in shock and reacting rather than thinking. That doesn’t mean I can’t be fucking furious with her and my daughter—who knows better.

I’ve been too soft on her. Though, God knows, with a mother like hers...

Why did it take me so long to see what I missed? I stop dead in the center of the room, and my mouth falls open when a gigantic piece of the puzzle falls into place.

“Motherfucker.”

“What? Did you think of something?”

“Yes, I fucking did. How did I not see it?”

“See what?”

I’m already pulling up Joe Smith’s contact information on my phone. What did he say again? I can’t remember how he described it. The line rings once.

He picks up, his voice warm but professional. “Mr. Torrio, what a pleasure—”

“The last time I spoke to you, you said Amanda’s been spending time with a kid young enough to be her son.”

“That’s right.”

“And you never got a good look at him?”

“Never at his face, no. He’s tall, athletic build.” *Like Lucas is—was.*

Romero throws his hands into the air, lost. Covering the phone with my hand, I murmur, “I never thought about it. I was too distracted. Smith told me he saw Amanda with some young guy out in public. And somehow, Lucas got his hands on a photo of Bianca and me. Now, where do you think he would have gotten that from?”

“You think Amanda might be behind some of this?”

“I don’t know. I only know if she’s that dead set on hurting Bianca, it wouldn’t matter to her if Tatum was a casualty. She’s that fucking determined to get back at me. Hell, using Tatum might make the hurt worse. It’s not like she ever gave a shit about being a mother.”

Judging by the way his mouth screws up in a skeptical smirk, he’s unconvinced. “Think about this for a second.”

No, I’ve done enough thinking. It’s time to act. I want answers from that vindictive bitch. And if it means getting her off the street and out of Bianca’s path, even better.

“I want Amanda found now,” I bark into the phone. “And the second you set eyes on her, you tell me. Do not lose sight

of her. I'll pay you three times your rate. Just find her so we can have a talk."

"Consider it done." If only everyone on my payroll could be that unproblematic.

Once I've ended the call, Romero ventures, "Do you really think Amanda would do something like that to Tatum?"

My hand tightens around the phone until my knuckles ache. "She already fucking told her about Bianca and me."

His brows draw together. "When did this happen?"

"When Tatum was in Europe. She knew before she got home. Only two people would have reached out to her about it, and I doubt my kid would have taken a call from Lucas." The more I think about it, the more sense it makes. I immediately suspected Amanda minutes after Bianca first showed me the photo. Then, Bianca tried to run off, and I didn't think the problem through.

Amanda gave Lucas the photo. What else did she give him? A bunch of information, rumors, and lies that fucked with his head until he tried to run Bianca down. Or maybe Amanda convinced him to do it because they're fucking. I'm getting more questions than answers at this point.

"She had someone following you," Romero marvels, shaking his head.

"Exactly. And once she saw pictures of us together, she could've started following Bianca instead. Who knows? She could be following her now." And there's nothing stopping her from doing whatever the hell she wants to get back at me for cutting her off.

The more I think about it, the more convinced I am. She had something to do with Lucas going apeshit. It's almost enough to make calling Charlie, Bianca's father, sound like a smart idea.

Before I can go through with the idea, the phone rings, and my heart seizes.

“Bianca,” I breathe before hitting the green button while Romero sighs.

“Callum?” her voice is small, a whimper. Before I can demand anything from her, fear in her trembling voice freezes my blood. “I need you to come here right away. There’s something wrong with Tatum.”

BIANCA



She'll kill me for calling him, but I don't know what else to do. I've been knocking at the bedroom door in our suite for the past hour, and she won't let me in. I could either call hotel security and have them unlock it, or call Callum and hope he can get through to her.

"Tatum?" I murmur while knocking for the millionth time. "Sweetie, at least make a sound and let me know you're okay. I'm really scared and worried."

Last night, she was hysterical over Lucas kidnapping me. Tonight, I'm talking to a locked door and hoping like hell she's alive on the other side. I've never seen her like this before. She's capable of anything, as painful as it is to think about.

"Just leave me alone." It's so soft I can hardly hear it, but her muffled voice at least tells me she's alive in there.

Think, damn it. What set her off? She couldn't have had more than two or three drinks at the bar, so she's not wasted. I've seen her double-fist margaritas all night long. "Why won't you let me in? Are you sure that guy didn't hurt you?"

"Leave me alone!" Something hits the door, and I jump back, cringing. I have no idea what could've happened or why she's keeping it from me.

Calling for help was the only thing I could do.

It's not like I wanted to go through with this whole running away thing by the time the sun came up this morning. We hung around the suite all day, watching TV, ordering room

service, soaking in the big tub, and napping while I tried and failed to forget the horrors of last night. Then, when we were both bored enough to scream, we figured we'd have a few drinks downstairs.

Which was when everything fell apart.

A sharp knock at the door makes me run across the living room half of the suite. A look through the peephole shows Callum and Romero out in the hall. Big surprise, Callum looks ready to kill someone. Romero glances up and down the hall, always the protector.

I leave the chain in place and open the door a crack. Callum pushes on it right away. "Let me in."

"Shh." I hold a finger to my lips, eyes wide.

"Open. The door." His eyes are nearly black, burning with rage. "Now."

"She's too upset for you to come barging in here," I whisper. "I mean, really upset. I'm scared. She needs us to be calm with her."

When all he does is seethe, I add, "Please, Callum. Don't make me regret calling you."

Little by little, his features soften. "Fine," he replies, teeth gritted. "Tell me what happened."

I have to trust him, I guess, for Tatum's sake. I'll ignore the way my heart feels like it's going to explode. This isn't about me or how much I missed Callum today. How I wished a hundred times I could call him and beg for forgiveness. I was feeling weak and lonely and regretting my decision. Seeing him now ready to bust a blood vessel reminds me why running seemed like a good idea.

I close the door to remove the chain, then step aside and open it the rest of the way. Callum looks around the spacious, tasteful room and sniffs the air before scowling deeper than before. The scent of cologne still hangs in the air.

He keeps his temper in check, maybe because of the closed bedroom door. He jerks a thumb toward it, and I nod. "What

happened?” he mutters while Romero presses his ear to the door.

I gesture for them to follow me to the window at the opposite corner of the suite. He’s here as a father, not as the boyfriend I ran away from last night. I remind myself of that.

“I don’t know what happened,” I whisper while wrapping my arms around myself to keep from shaking.

“Maybe start with why it smells like a bunch of frat boys were in here,” Callum says. “It reeks of cheap cologne.”

“We were downstairs in the bar.” It’s easier to look at Romero since he doesn’t look like he wants to snap my neck. “We only had a couple of drinks. Three guys came in, and we started chatting, and...”

“And?” Callum’s face hardens.

“And...” The words keep getting stuck in my throat. “And they said we should take the party upstairs, so we brought them up to the room.”

“*You what?*”

I will not cry. Even when I know how this must sound. “It was Tatum who said yes,” I tell Romero. “I wasn’t interested. I sat out here with two of the guys. Tatum took the third one into the bedroom.”

I squeeze my eyes shut when Callum lets out a feral growl. This is more uncomfortable than I imagined it would be. “I swear, it couldn’t have been more than half a minute before she started screaming.”

That’s what it does. The thread he was still hanging onto snaps, and he rages. “Son of a bitch—”

Romero grabs him and holds him back while I blurt out, “No, no, the guy came out and swore all he did was try to kiss her. He had all his clothes on, and so did she. He was totally confused and freaked out. They left right after, and she locked me out of the bedroom.”

Callum’s breathing like a bull ready to charge. Romero’s gaze looks stormy, too, but he has a better grip on his self-

control. “You believed him when he said nothing happened?”

“There wasn’t enough time for something to take place.”

Callum shakes Romero off and shoots me a disdainful look before crossing the room. All I can do is hold my breath and hope he doesn’t make things worse by throwing his weight around and acting like a possessive asshole.

He raises his fist, and I brace myself. I’m afraid he’s going to pound on the door, but his knock is gentle. “Tatum, sweetie? It’s Dad. I’m here. Unlock the door.” I’ve never heard him talk to her that way before. So tender and kind.

Please, listen to him. My insides are churning, and I’m breaking out in a cold sweat. Seconds tick by. Then the lock clicks, and the door slowly opens.

Tatum’s face is tomato red and slick with tears. “Daddy.” She walks straight into the circle of his arms and presses her face to his chest before heaving out a sob.

“What did he do to you, baby?” He strokes her hair with one hand and even sways slightly from side to side. Like he’s rocking her.

“It wasn’t... him...” She shakes her head, crying harder.

“Who was it?” Slowly, he walks her to the silk-covered sofa and sits her down before sitting beside her. He wraps a secure arm around her. “You can tell me anything. You know that, right?”

A glance at Romero tells me nothing. He’s so intense, staring at the two of them, barely blinking.

“I didn’t want you to know.” Her voice is thick, and she’s shaking so hard her teeth chatter. “I’m so ashamed. Please, Daddy, don’t kill him. Okay?”

“Who, baby?”

My throat is so tight, I can’t breathe, but I can mouth the name along with her. “Kristoff.”

Damn it. I didn’t think. I didn’t put it together. Now everything is making sense.

Callum's nostrils flare, and his eyes narrow to slits, but he keeps it together enough to mutter, "What did he do to you?"

"He..." Her guilty gaze meets mine before darting away. "He hurt me. I didn't want you to know. On the trip. In Europe."

He closes his eyes and breathes slowly and deliberately. "How?"

"He..." She's still weeping as she slides her shoulders out of her cardigan until her bare arms and their bruises are visible. The lamp on the end table shines bright on the ugly marks. Romero makes a choked sound while Callum only stares at the bruises, wordless. I've seen the look in his eyes. He might not be speaking, but that doesn't mean he isn't raging inside.

"And..." She ducks her head, then covers her face with both hands. "One night, I didn't want to... but he wouldn't stop... and he... I couldn't make him *stop!*" Callum pulls her against his chest and closes his eyes, rocking her again. "It was so bad, and he hurt me."

I have to cover my mouth to stifle my sob. She didn't tell me that part. No wonder she lost it when a stranger tried to touch her. No wonder there were bruises on her thighs. Why didn't she tell me?

"Okay, baby," Callum murmurs, stroking her tangled blonde curls. He's still holding on, but he could snap at any second. "Everything is going to be okay."

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"For what? You didn't do anything wrong." He kisses her sweaty forehead before brushing the hair away from her skin. "You don't owe me an apology. I'm glad you told me. You shouldn't have to keep something like that inside."

"I'm ashamed of myself," she admits in a whisper, running her hands under her eyes. "I lost it earlier, too. It wasn't his fault. I just..."

"You don't have to explain. And you never have to worry about telling me things. When you need help, I'll be here to

help you. Always.”

“Dad.” She’s still shaking and sniffing, but looks him in the eye. “I didn’t want to tell you because I was afraid of what you’d do to him.”

Romero takes a step toward the sofa, his fists clenching. “You want to protect him after what he did?”

“No. But I don’t want to cause trouble.” She squeezes Callum’s hands. “Please, don’t do something stupid because of me.”

“All right, sweetheart.” He cups the back of her skull in one hand and kisses her forehead again while looking over her head at Romero.

Their eyes meet, and even though I’m not a mind reader, I know Kristoff’s days are numbered. The thought of a murder being decided that easily, without using words, makes me shiver, but I can’t find it in me to care, not after what Kristoff did to her. He doesn’t deserve to live. I wish I could kill him myself.

“Let’s get you home.” Callum helps her to her feet but gently hands her off to Romero. “He’ll take you to the garage, and I’ll help Bianca get your things together.”

There goes the pit in my stomach. For Tatum’s sake, I put on a brave face until she’s out of the suite, and I can let out the breath I was holding. Now it’s just the two of us. Nobody’s here to protect me. Nobody to keep me from throwing myself into his arms and begging him to love me. Having him this close has stripped away every reason I had for running. I can’t afford to forget what staying with him means, no matter how my heart wants to.

His stormy eyes threaten to knock me on my ass, but I hold my ground. “I didn’t know it was like that,” I whisper before he can ask. “I didn’t know he did that to her.”

“I believe you.” He folds his arms, looking me up and down. “What? No argument?”

“About...?”

“About killing that bastard for what he did to somebody I love. You’re not going to tell me how wrong it is or run away again?”

“Callum.” I sink into an armchair close to the window overlooking the city. It’s a beautiful suite in a beautiful hotel, and I’ve spent a miserable day in it. All I want is to go home and forget this happened, but he’s not going to make it that easy.

“Well?”

“You tracked my phone without me knowing about it.” His face is stony. He doesn’t even have the decency to look sorry. “I’ve been living in a cage most of my life. When my mom died, my dad doubled down on protection. I couldn’t make a move without him hovering over my shoulder. Over the years, I grew to resent him, and at times, I’ve even hated him. It ruined my relationship with him, and when I got my own place, I promised I wouldn’t go back to living like that.”

I sigh. “I don’t want to grow to resent or hate you. You have to let me live.”

“What about my cruel protectiveness saving your life?” he counters with a sneer. “It came in handy last night. I’m a bad man. I warned you of that and won’t apologize for what I did to him.”

“I’m not asking you to. But I’m asking you to apologize for violating my privacy—*again*.”

He clasps his hands behind his back and paces in front of the sofa. I can’t take my eyes off those hands, clenching and relaxing rhythmically. Hands that could snap a neck with no problem. Hands that have brought me great pleasure.

“If you’re wondering,” I add in a soft voice, “it’s comforting, knowing I have you to defend me. It’s a little scary too, but it’s comforting.”

He snorts, shaking his head while wearing a groove in the throw rug under his feet. “Glad I have your approval.”

“I’m trying, Callum. Meet me halfway?”

“That’s not how I work. I won’t compromise.”

“Then that’s it.” My chest aches. It hurts more than I can stand. He might as well tear out my beating heart and stomp on it. “This is where we end. Because I’m not living in a dictatorship. If you want me with you—where I want to be, so much—you have to give me space. I’m yours, but I don’t belong to you. I belong to me. I love you... but I love myself too.”

I can’t believe the words slipped from my mouth so easily. I’m almost shocked. Not by the meaning. I’ve been falling for Callum for awhile, but the impact they have on us, if *we* even exist anymore.

Seconds tick by, and I almost wonder if he heard me. “You love me?” His voice is a sharp jagged whisper. All I can do is nod, the lump in my throat making it hard for me to speak. He crosses the space between us stopping in front of me. “I want you to come home. With me. To stay.”

“That’s what I want too.”

“I can’t change the man I am. I’m always going to want to own you. I’ll always want you at my side—and when you aren’t there, I’ll want to know where you are. I’ll always want to know who you’re with or what you’re doing. I can’t loosen my grip all at once.”

His gaze locks with mine, and now I’m seeing another side of him I never knew existed. He’s worried. Anxious. Almost pleading with his eyes. “I can’t promise I’ll always do the right thing, but I need you to remember I’m trying. All I want is you. If it means learning to lessen my grasp, I’ll do my best. I’ll fucking try, but I can’t lose you.”

“Really?” A tear rolls down my cheek, then another one.

“Just come home. Let’s get the hell out of here and start over again.” Finally, he allows himself to reach for me, and as soon as his palms press against my cheeks my entire body bursts into flames. “Because if I have to go another minute without being inside of you, I might lose my mind. I need you, Bianca.”

That's all I needed to hear to launch me out of the chair and into his arms. All the doubt and regret I wrestled with today melts away and leaves nothing but relief. "I want to come home."

"Thank God." He pulls me close enough that I can feel the rapid beating of his heart against my chest. He can be as stoic as he wants, but the thumping of his heart gives away what's going on inside, and that's enough for me.

CALLUM



God help me. I could live off the taste of this pussy for the rest of my life.

How many times have we fucked today? I've lost count of the hours spent here in bed, only coming up for air to check on my daughter. She's asleep now, but the time will come when accounts are balanced and everyone gets what they deserve. Kristoff first.

Right now, all I want is to forget reality.

My sleepy little bird awakens at the touch of my tongue against her pussy lips. "What are you doing?" she asks in a thick voice before stroking the back of my head.

"What do you think? You fell asleep while I was gone. I couldn't think of a better way to wake you up."

She stretches, her back arching, while I return to my task. I couldn't help myself, finding her lying here, naked and gleaming in the moonlight pouring through the window. An angel sent here to make my life complete.

I can't remember the last time I spent all day in bed, even when I was sick, but today felt like the most normal thing in the world after bringing her home from the hotel. Playing with each other, dozing, and getting up to shower only so we could fuck against the shower wall. No matter how many times I've been inside her today, I'm still hungry, my cock hard as steel and aching to sink into her silken heat again.

Using my tongue, I fuck her, greedy for the honey flowing freely now that her body is waking up to me.

“That’s good.” She moans, and it doesn’t take long for a wet spot to form under me, thanks to the cum already dripping from my tip.

She’s a religion I will pray to again and again.

Replacing my tongue with two fingers, I groan at the sight and scent of her. “You are so fucking beautiful,” I whisper before flicking my tongue over her clit, peeking out from beneath its hood. She grunts, one hand finding my hair and tugging while her hips grind against my face.

She’s already becoming more confident in herself, taking what she wants. I can’t wait to see her wake up to the sensual creature she is. Even better, I’m the lucky bastard who gets to witness that awakening.

“Fuck me,” she pleads, lifting my head with both hands. “I need your cock. Please.”

My aching cock jumps in response, but we’ve already gone through the marathon of insane, wild rutting today. I’ve taken her in numerous positions, hard and fast, slow and sensual. I’ve taken my time working myself inside her and forcing her to take me, but now, after all these hours, I know she’s sore, and I don’t want to risk hurting her. That’s what leaves me lying on my side behind her, lifting her leg to give me room to slide into her cunt—slowly and gently—while I roam her body with my hand and memorize every curve.

Her stomach is still taut and flat, but not for long.

“I can’t wait to get you pregnant,” I whisper in her ear, pressing a hand against the place where our baby will grow. The first of many. I’m going to fill this house with our children. She’s the second chance I didn’t know I wanted.

She keeps moving with me, though she throws a confused look over her shoulder. “Since when?”

“What? You don’t want to have my baby?”

“I do.” She bites her lip, her eyes shutting as she moans. “Just... never heard you talk about it...”

“I’m talking about it now. The entire world will know you’re mine, and they’ll know it’s my child you’re carrying.” The idea makes me grit my teeth and fight to hold myself back instead of pounding her harder like instinct tells me.

“Just think of it.” Dipping my hand between her legs, I find her nub and work it with my fingers. She raises her leg and hooks it around mine, spreading herself wider. “That life growing inside you. A gift I put there.”

She arches against me, whining in her frenzy to come. I respond by moving faster and deeper, flicking her clit until she tightens around my shaft. “You like that idea, don’t you?”

“God, Callum...”

“Say it. Say you like it. Say you’ll have my baby,” I growl.

“Callum, I’m going...”

“I will stop fucking you right now unless you say it.” The hand over her clit goes still, and I barely move inside her—not easy when I’m this close, but I have to prove a point. A groan of frustration slips from her lips.

“Please...” she whines.

“You want to come? Does your pretty pussy want to drench my cock?” She can only moan her response, jerking her hips mindlessly, desperate for relief while she fucks herself on my cock. “If so, say it. Give me what I want.”

“Yes!” she sobs. “Yes, yes, I want it! I want your baby!”

I chuckle against her shoulder before biting down on her soft flesh. The lightest stroke against her swollen clit makes her cunt twitch and flutter around my thrusting cock. “That’s my good little bird. You squeeze my cock so good. Your tiny little cunt is trying to suck all the cum out of me, isn’t it?”

“Please,” she rasps, straining against me. A deep red flush covers her chest, neck, and face. Tears slip down her face. She’s so fucking pretty when she cries. Her orgasms are always intense, and this one is no different. “Please, I need to come.”

Yes, because only I have that power. Only I can give her what she needs, what she was made for. “You’re going to let me knock you up?”

“Yes, yes!”

“And you’re mine? Forever?”

“Always.” Reaching back, she closes a hand around my neck and pulls me down for a deep, sloppy kiss that lifts my balls and starts the frisson of sensation at the base of my spine. I take her deeper and harder until the bed rocks under our writhing bodies.

She arches again, going stiff, hanging on that razor-thin line between torment and relief until the line breaks, and she falls back against me, her sweet sighs pairing with a flutter of muscles that milk me so tightly.

I have no choice but to give her pussy what it wants, letting go, releasing my hot, sticky fluid, bathing her womb in what’s going to make our baby. Blood rushes in my ears while I roar against her sweaty neck and my balls empty.

Nothing in the world compares to this. There’s no deal, no payday, nothing that can touch the all-consuming rush of pouring myself into her willing body. I could spend the rest of my life inside her and never feel I missed out on anything. This is enough.

“Shit.” I wind my arms around her trembling body and bury my face against the nape of her neck. “That was intense. I might not be able to get up for the rest of the night.”

Her laughter is soft, musical, and still a little breathless. “You meant that, didn’t you?”

“What? The baby?”

She nods, and I lift my head, then roll her onto her back so we’re face to face. Sweat has hair sticking to her cheek, and I brush it away while speaking carefully. “I don’t say things I don’t mean. It’s important to me that you have our baby. I want nothing more in this world.”

“Tatum is already grown up. What made you wait this long if you want a bigger family?”

She has a way of asking the most complex questions in an innocent way. I don't know whether I love her or hate her for it. There's something disarming about her. She makes me want to share everything. “That's not an easy thing to explain.”

“I'm not trying to be pushy. I only want to understand. What's so different now?”

The fact that she even has to ask means I haven't done a good job of showing her everything she means to me. I'll need to work on that. She makes me want to be the man she needs and deserves. I've already come close to losing her too many times. I don't know if I can go through it again.

When I think of it that way, pushing my pride aside and sharing myself doesn't seem like too big of a sacrifice.

There's a single word that sums up everything, the answer to her question and every uncertainty I've wrestled with for years. “You.”

Her forehead wrinkles the way it always does when she's confused. “I don't get it.”

“You're the difference. And I don't mean because you're young and healthy. It's taken me a long time to find a woman worthy of my trust.”

She follows me when I roll onto my back, resting her hand on my chest and propping her chin against it. I use my fingers to comb through her mussed hair.

“Remember in the beginning when we talked about getting burned?”

“And all your scars,” she whispers, tracing the ridges of my pecs with her nails. It hasn't been more than a few minutes since I came, but I'm already hungry for her again. It's overwhelming, this craving. Enough to drive me out of my mind.

“That's right.” I take her hand and kiss the tips of her fingers. Otherwise, I won't be able to resist her touch much

longer. And this is too important to brush aside. For the first time in my life, I want to share what's in me. It's dangerous. No one knows that better than I do, but somehow it feels necessary.

“Someone hurt you badly, didn't they?” There's sadness in her voice, and I know she isn't pretending. It hurts her to think of me in pain.

“All my life, I thought once I became the man I wanted to be, everything else would fall into place. By the time I was your age, I had already made a lot of money. Nothing close to what I have now, but enough that I never had to worry about going back to that old house again. I never had to live that life. I thought I had it made.”

I can't help but groan at the memory of that cocky, headstrong kid who reminds me of Tatum when I think about it. “And, of course, with the money came the girls.”

She nods, eyes twinkling. “Looking like you do; you couldn't have had any trouble.”

“My trouble was, I was too young and too naive. I let my dick do the thinking for me, and by the time I figured I was being taken for a ride, it was too late. I was already married, and Tatum was already here. I didn't have anybody in my life to teach me how to be careful around people who smile at your face while they have their hand in your wallet.”

I'm trying, really I am, but there's still bitterness in my voice. Resentment bubbles in my chest. I resent that younger version of me most of all. He made it so easy for her.

“I'm sorry she did that to you.” She cups my cheek, softly. The opposite of Amanda in every way. There was never any softness there. She was always hard and calculating. Out for herself. That hasn't changed.

“She admitted once things went bad that she only went through with having Tatum to lock me down.”

She winces. “That's terrible. I'm so sorry.”

“It's taken me a lot—and I mean a lot—to consider bringing someone into my life.”

“Then I’m honored that you think I’m worthy.” Coming from anyone else in the world, the line would come off corny. Forced. Calculating. I’d have no choice but to roll my eyes and tell her to get out of my bed and my life.

But this is Bianca, who I doubt has a calculating bone in her body. She’s too innocent to be anything but sincere.

“You are more than worthy,” I murmur. “I’m the one who should ask myself whether I’m worthy of you.”

I lace our fingers together on top of my chest. It looks right; her small hand joined with my much larger one. I’m her protector, and she is my sweetness, softness, the reason I do what I do. She’s become my reason to live, the thing that balances my life.

She snuggles against me, warm and happy and mine. All I can do is hold this precious thing in my arms and vow to myself that I’ll do everything in my power to keep her. Now I’ve seen what life is like with her, and I’ve gotten a hint of what it can be without her. I know what I prefer.

When my phone buzzes, I close my eyes and only hold her tighter. “The rest of the world can go away for a little while.”

“We’ve been here all day,” she reminds me with gentle laughter in her voice.

“And the world hasn’t burned down yet. It can wait.” When the buzzing ceases, I smile to myself—until it starts again.

“Motherfucker. I swear to God, this had better be good.” I let go of her as much as I don’t want to and roll to the side, yanking my phone from the nightstand, unsurprised to find Romero’s name staring up at me. “What?” I snap.

“She’s here.” He’s tense, his breathing harsh. “Someone must have let her in. She’s looking for you.”

“Who?”

He doesn’t need to answer the question. Not when the door flies open, and a whirlwind comes blowing through. A

whirlwind wearing couture I paid for before cutting her off. Someone I swore I'd never set eyes on again except in court.

She flips the blonde hair I used to be crazy about over one thin shoulder. Her crimson lips curve in a cold, knowing smile while Bianca frantically grabs at the sheets to cover her naked body. This bitch. This destructive bitch.

“Get the fuck out of my house!” My voice echoes through the room and probably carries out into the hall. “What do you think you're doing? This is not your home. You don't fucking belong here.”

“Sorry to interrupt,” she sneers while Bianca curls into a ball, her knees drawn to her chest. Amanda's cold, calculating gaze sizes her up. “A little young for you, isn't she?”

“I told you to leave,” I growl. Bianca is the only reason I'm able to keep my temper in check, but I'm getting closer to losing my grip with every breath I take.

How the hell did she get in here? How did she know what she'd find?

Who in the fuck has been tipping her off all this time?

“Get out before I have you dragged out,” I snarl. “This is your final warning.”

“Give me a break.” She rolls her eyes. “I didn't come here to see you. I came here to see my daughter. It's been too long, and I've heard rumors.”

Again, how?

Before I can wrap my head around what she's saying, her attention swings back to Bianca. “And by the looks of it, they're true. I guess you're the little slut who's been fucking my husband.”

BIANCA



Is it possible to feel like you've been hit when nobody laid a hand on you? The pain in my gut, the way all the air leaves my lungs at once. It's like she punched or kicked me. It physically hurts, and yet she hasn't laid a single hand on me.

"You fucking bitch." Callum gets up, still naked, dragging one of the sheets with him and wrapping it around his waist. "This is your last warning. Get out of my fucking house before I fucking kill you."

Sure, that's exactly the kind of thing he would say. That's who he is.

But it's wrong. It is not the response I needed to hear.

He didn't deny what she said. He didn't deny still being married.

He didn't deny it.

"From the look on her face, I'm going to assume she didn't know?" Amanda—nobody has to introduce us—laughs in my face when all I can do is try to stay calm and keep the last shredding pieces of my dignity. "I bet he calls me his ex, doesn't he?"

"Bianca, don't listen to her," Callum growls.

"Why? You don't want your little fuck buddy knowing the truth? You can try to hide the truth from her as long as you want, but it always comes out." She folds her arms across her chest and smiles. Smug, superior.

Callum's chest heaves with every ragged breath. "I'm going to give you to the count of three to leave this fucking room—"

"Stop with your threats and bullshit." She whirls on him and jabs a long, red nail against his bare chest. "By the way, nice job, sending somebody to spy on me. Was there a point? Or are you trying to blackmail me into signing the papers? Did you honestly think that would work? You're supposed to be this master manipulator, and you've been duped at your own game."

He slaps her hand away, baring his teeth in a snarl. "Don't you fucking touch me, you diseased cunt. How's your friend Lucas by the way?"

Her face turns ghostly white, and she falls back a step. "What are you talking about?"

"You know exactly what the fuck I'm talking about."

I can't take any more of this. It's killing me. "Stop!"

It's like he forgot I was here. His eyes widen when he turns to me. "You should go to your room and get dressed," he mutters. "Let me handle this."

"Is it true?" Because I need to know. There's a free-for-all going on in my head right now—screaming, panic, my thoughts racing in a hundred different directions. At the center of everything is that one single question. The one I need answered before I can move in any direction.

"Tell her the truth," Amanda murmurs, barely fighting back a grin as she tosses her hair again and sends its fragrance my way. "Did I ever sign those divorce papers? Or have you been breaking your back for ages, trying to force me into it?"

It's so strange, the look on his face. Like he's fighting between rage and helplessness. I've never seen him look so broken. "I... look," he murmurs to me. "Please, Bianca. You have to believe me. She's nothing, no one."

"Were you ever going to tell me you're still married?" I don't care if she's witnessing this. What's the use of being ashamed? I'm already sitting here naked, feeling like the

world's biggest idiot. Why not let her watch my heart break a little more? Everything's better with an audience, right?

"Of course I was, but the idea was to get the papers signed first." He snarls at her, forcing her back another step. "Any decent person would have signed them way before now. But enough is never enough. You always want more. I can't believe you have the nerve to pretend you give a shit about your daughter when all you wanted was an excuse to barge in here and fuck with my life a little more."

"This is all so touching." She sighs, fluttering her thick lashes. "Next thing you know, you'll tell me you love this girl, and that I should sign the divorce papers so the two of you can be happy together. Isn't that right?"

"Considering I know what you've done, you are treading on very thin ice," he warns. "My guy saw you together, you and that kid. Were you the one who came up with the idea to run her down?" He jerks a thumb in my direction without looking at me.

That's what does it. Listening to him talk so casually about the trauma I went through—and revealing he knew more about it than he let on. He can't expect me to trust him after this. The lies are piling up between us. Amanda and Lucas? How would she even know who he is?

Was. Past tense.

Before my brain can completely melt, I scramble out of bed, still wrapped in a blanket, and take off running. My feet slap against the hardwood as I race past the guards. I don't look at their faces. I can't. I'm too ashamed. This is something I want to end.

He wants me to go to my room and get dressed? That's what I'll do, because I will not sit around and watch my life crumble to pieces.

Lies. So many lies. About him, about her, about their marriage. Now he's making it sound like she had something to do with Lucas coming apart like he did. Whether or not that's true, he could've told me. *He should have told me.* If Lucas

needed help, I could have reached out to his parents. I could've done something.

In the end, it's all about him. What he wants, who he wants. There I was, telling him I'd have his baby, and he held all these secrets in his hand.

It will never get better. I feel the truth of it in my soul. He will never stop being who he is. Loving him isn't enough. Nothing ever will be because nothing will change who he is at his core. Secretive and manipulative. Violent and dangerous. The lengths he'll go to get what he wants are never-ending. At least I'm seeing it now and not when it's too late.

The desire to wake Tatum in the bedroom next door and tell her what happened consumes me, but there's no time. I'll have to do it later. After I've gone to Dad's, which is the only place I can go now. It's the only place I want to be because at least there I'll have somebody who really loves me, who doesn't lie and use.

Stupid. I'm so stupid. I was so desperate for love after years of being treated like I wasn't important that I looked the other way over and over, first with Lucas and now with Callum. I can barely see with the tears by the time I reach the bedroom and lock the door.

My heart is going to burst out of my chest. The pain is so intense it scares me. I don't want to leave, but I have to. Getting out of here is my only hope. I need to do this for myself.

Even though I love him. He turned me into the other woman, and I still love him. I'm just as fucked up as he is. No wonder I was always drawn to him.

Once again, I pack my things, this time taking every last item that belongs to me. I might have left a few things back in Tatum's room before I moved my stuff out for her return, but she'll get it back to me eventually. I don't even care right now. Nothing matters more than putting this behind me. Living with an overbearing parent sounds like heaven after what I've gone through.

He made me into the girl I didn't want to be. Stupid, naive, so easily led on. I never thought to question whether their divorce was final. Tatum never mentioned it. Why didn't I ask? Would he have told the truth if I had?

I know the answer, and it makes my molars grind together even as I heave with sobs. Stupid, stupid girl. My little crush ruined my life.

Not just mine. Lucas's might have been ruined, too. Like we were both pawns.

Another broken sob bursts out of me, and it's almost enough to make me crumple on the bed. I'm exhausted, body and soul.

Just a little longer. I only need to put up with this a little longer until I'm home. Then I can cry for days if I need to.

No. I go back to work tomorrow. Somehow, I have to pull myself together. Maybe that's for the best. I need something to take my mind off of all of this.

There I was, imagining our future.

And he did this to me. I'll never forgive him, just like I'll never forgive myself.

Instead of trying to sneak out once everything's packed up, and I've put on shorts and a tee that don't even go together, I fling the door open and march down the hall. I still hear voices shouting somewhere else in the house, the sound bouncing off hardwoods and high ceilings.

He's still fighting with her, distracted. That's one good thing that's come out of this.

Because I'm not sure I'd be strong enough to leave if he found me right now. I know he'd talk me out of it. I should thank her for setting this up. The thought makes me laugh—high-pitched, shrill—as I jog through the front door and out into the courtyard. Her car must be the bright red Bugatti. It's completely vulgar, just like her.

I don't care. Let them have each other. I only feel sorry for Tatum, with a pair of fucked up parents who only want to hurt

each other. I wonder if I was just another way for him to hurt her. A chess piece in an endless game.

No, I'm not going to do that to myself. And even if it's true, what's the difference? It's over now. It should never have started.

I climb into my car and toss all my stuff onto the passenger seat. My hands are shaking, and it takes me a second to get the keys in the ignition. The headlights from the car shine bright in the distance. My heart breaks a little more as I drive down the driveway.

I need to calm myself down before I get home because I know Dad's going to ask a million questions if I stay this distressed. Maybe I'll tell him I had a fight with the imaginary friend I was staying with, something simple. He'll pat me on the head and tell me everything will be okay in the morning, and I'll pretend I believe him. Whatever works.

Anything, so long as he never finds out the truth. I couldn't bear his disappointment.

And as much as I loathe Callum now, the thought of my father doing anything to punish him for hurting me is one I can't handle. I won't be the vindictive, scorned woman. I won't let Callum drag me that far down.

It's around nine o'clock by the time I pull to a stop in front of the modest house I grew up in. It was the best we could afford. Mom would have liked something bigger, but when he was demoted from detective lieutenant to a regular detective, it meant taking a pay cut.

I can do this. That's what I have to keep telling myself as I pull my things from the car and carry them up the front steps onto the creaking porch. *I can do this.* I've gotten better at lying to Dad, haven't I? Not exactly something to be proud of, but it's what I need to fall back on now.

The lights are on in the living room, and I can hear the TV blaring inside as I fish out my key. "It's just me!" I call out in a fake, cheerful voice as I open the door. You don't want to

burst in on a detective who keeps a gun in the house. That's a good way to get shot.

He's not in the living room, where a ball game is down to the final inning. I grab for the remote to lower the volume. "Do you need a hearing aid?" I ask the empty room. There is a trio of empty beer bottles on the end table next to his favorite chair, but that's the only evidence of him having sat there.

"Hello?" His car was in the driveway. He could've walked down to the corner store. That would explain the blaring TV, a technique to convince would-be intruders there's somebody home. "Dad? Are you here?"

I cast a look further back into the house, past the dark dining room that never gets used anymore. The kitchen sink is visible from here, and it's piled high with dirty dishes. There are more bottles on the counter, too, and a stack of filthy pans.

"What the hell has been going on around here?" The quiet house offers up no answers. I don't know if I should start cleaning or look for him first.

A soft thud from overhead decides for me. "Dad?" I creep toward the foot of the stairs and wrap my hand around the carved post. "You up there?" Only now does it hit me that there could be an intruder in the house.

Goosebumps pebble my skin, and the hair on the back of my neck stands up while I wrestle with the choice of going up the stairs or running out the door.

Running seems to be the way to go, but a voice coming from upstairs stops me before I take off. "Honey? Is that you?"

It's my father, but it isn't. His familiar voice is thick, slurred. How many of those bottles has he emptied tonight? My heart's in my throat as I hurry up the stairs, dreading what I'll find.

His bedroom door is open, and before I've entered the room, I can see the pictures spread out over the double bed he once shared with my mom. Sometimes, he likes to reminisce.

But it's not like him to get drunk before he does, and that sink didn't fill up overnight. He could've been spiraling all

this time while I was too busy screwing up my life to notice. I always think of him as having everything together.

A look at the bedroom tells me otherwise. There are dirty clothes all over the place and a layer of dust covering the dresser. The bed is messy, and there are more of those empty bottles on both nightstands and on the floor beside my dad, who's on his knees in front of an open box.

"Just the girl I wanted to see." He raises a bottle to me and narrows his bloodshot eyes like he's trying to bring me into focus. "You deserve to be here to celebrate with me."

"What are we celebrating?" His clothes are rumpled—he might've slept in them, judging by the looks. His normally clean-shaven face is covered in dark stubble, and his hair is a mess. A clump falls over his forehead when he looks down into the box.

Wedding photos. A quick search of my memory tells me it's not their anniversary or Mom's birthday.

"The most beautiful girl in the world." He picks up one of my favorites, a shot of the two of them walking down the aisle after the ceremony. "I'm telling you, when I saw her coming toward me on your grandpa's arm, my heart damn near burst."

He's beaming in the picture, and Mom is radiant in her full-skirted princess dress. I always planned on wearing it for my wedding someday.

"She could've been a model," I muse, kneeling beside him. God, he reeks of beer and sweat, the complete opposite of the joyful young man in the photo. This isn't like him. What don't I know about?

"She could have done anything, but she married me. A damn cop." He runs his thumb over her cheek before a tear drips from his chin onto the photo. I quickly wipe it away.

"What's happening, Dad? What are you celebrating?" And if it's a celebration, why is he crying?

I reach over and move the empty bottles on the floor before he can knock them over as he stumbles his way to standing. "I forgot to tell you. I finally did it." I don't know

where he thought he was going since he plops down on the bed with a thud.

“Did what?” I’m quick to gather up the things on the bed before he passes out on them. More photos. A baby blanket of mine.

“Found what I’ve been looking for all this time. I knew I would. Evidence... had to be out there...”

He’s swaying back and forth, and his head is drooping. “Why don’t you get some rest, and we’ll talk more about it in the morning?” The bed wasn’t made in the first place, so it’s nothing to ease him back until he’s lying down, then pull the flower-print blankets over him.

He gazes up at me, eyes squinted, his head on the pillow. “I did it. I promised her, and I did it.”

“Did what, Dad?”

“I finally found the evidence. I always knew he did it, and now I can pin it on him.”

“Pin what?” I ask, mostly to be kind.

“Your mom’s murder.”

My blood turns to ice, and a cold sweat breaks out on my neck. “Mom’s murder?” He always said she was killed in a drive-by. A typical wrong-place-wrong-time situation. I’ve never heard him use the word *murder*.

“I knew he did it. Everybody... knew... I was after him...” His eyes close as he continues muttering. “The only logical answer...”

“Who, Dad?” I whisper.

His eyes flutter open and lock onto mine. “Callum Torrio. He murdered your mom. I finally have proof.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J.L. Beck writes steamy romance that's unapologetic.

Her heroes are alphas who take what they want, and are willing to do anything for the woman they love.

She loves writing about darkness, passion, suspense, and of course steam.

Leaving her readers gasping, and asking what the hell just happened is only one of her many tricks.

Her books range from grey, too dark but always end with a happily ever after.

Inside the pages of her books you'll always find one of your favorite tropes.

She started her writing career in the summer of 2014 and hasn't stopped since. She lives in Wisconsin and is a mom to two, a wife, and likes to act as a literary agent part time.

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