

A close-up portrait of a woman wearing dark sunglasses. The image is lit with a mix of blue and red light, creating a moody atmosphere. In the top left corner, there is a crown icon above the text 'PRODUCED BY CAPRIONI queen'.

PRODUCED BY
CAPRIONI
queen

Gutter & Guns

INTERNATIONAL BEST SELLER
ELIZABETH KNIGHT

Glitter & Guns

ELIZABETH KNIGHT

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Glitter & Guns

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A strong woman looks a challenge dead in the eye and gives it
a wink.

—Gina Carey

Dear Readers,

Glitter & Guns is a book that contains quite a bit of darkness, that could be triggering to some people. If you feel like this could be a problem for you, please protect yourself.

No work of fiction is worth your mental health.

The full list of content warnings is available on my website.

Link found here:

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ONE



Everyone loves to read about a princess trapped in a tower, waiting for her prince to come save her.

Well, everyone but me, I guess. Personally, anyone who believes in that crap is an idiot—or maybe a hopeless romantic looking for a promise that one day they might also have someone come rescue them from the dull and boring life they live.

You know what I say to that...

Rescue your own goddamn ass! Get out of the tower and find your own fucking adventure because that's sure as hell what I did.

My father locked me in a large mansion in upstate Huntingford, away from all the prying eyes of Eastrose, where he resided. After losing my mother in an attack by a rival mafia when I was five, I could see why he'd want to keep his only legitimate child and heir safe under lock and key.

Or so he thinks.

Being Daddy's good little girl lasted until I was eighteen, then I got tired of waiting for Dad's perfect plan for my life to start. Instead, I decided to fill my time with something I enjoyed and was spectacularly skilled at.

Don't they always say the best thing to cure boredom is to get a hobby? Not sure becoming a jewel thief of the rich and famous is what they had in mind. Well, I always liked to do the unexpected. Clearly, people needed more imagination if they couldn't find something they truly loved to do. It's not like I wasn't being raised to live a life of crime once I was called back home. Hell, Dearest Daddy is Colmazio Caprioni, the boss of the Caprioni Family. The king of Eastrose, if you will, also known as the largest ruling mafia clan on the East Coast of the continent.

Shortly after I was born and it was known my mother couldn't have more children, I became target number one. It was well known my daddy doted on me every chance he got. If someone wanted to hurt the king, going after me was a sure-fire win. My mother, Natalina, saved my life by giving up hers. She fought against the attackers, giving my bodyguard time to get me away to safety.

It didn't take Daddy long before he smuggled Glenda, my nanny, and me out of the country and down into the upper-crust rural life of Apira. He came to visit me once a week until I was ten. He never blamed me for Mother's death. Instead, it

was obvious to anyone who saw us that he was a total pushover when it came to me. I was a daddy's girl to the max.

Daddy's dream was to one day have me be his right hand and take my rightful place beside him on the throne of the family business. Of course, there's still some pushback even though we live in the twenty-first century. Those craggy old-school assholes shouldn't give a shit if I'm a woman as long as I have the balls to run the family the way it needs to be run.

After Daddy announced his intent to hold the underboss position for me until I was ready, he stopped coming to see me. The flack he got for that statement nearly led to an internal war. Daddy refused to do anything that might risk them finding me through his visits. So I've been trapped here in a giant mansion with no family since I was ten, waiting until he's gotten rid of the opposition. In other words, the asshats who were against me taking my rightful place as the firstborn of the Caprioni Family.

The moment I hit sixteen, Daddy sent tutors to teach me every aspect of what it means to lead a crime family like ours. They covered everything from reading the books, knowing the players in the game, and the best method to get someone to talk with only using toothpicks. I started shooting all kinds of guns from the moment I was able to withstand the recoil of a gun. Then there was the self-defense training. It was rough, and no one took it easy on me. If anything, they went harder because I was the boss's daughter.

It almost got to the point where Glenda thought I might need to be homeschooled to keep people from noticing the bruises. That's when Daddy decided to tone down the training until I was out of school. No way was my daddy leaving his little girl defenseless even if I was hidden away from the world. Losing my mother and having to send me away was as hard on him as it was on me. In the end, I knew all of this was going to be worth it for us to be a family again.

It wasn't all bad. The training sure came in handy when I started stealing shit.

I'm not sure what Daddy would say if he found out about me becoming a notorious thief of all the things in my spare time. That would be thanks to Ryker, who dared me to steal something from Mrs. Gallagher when she was hosting a party at her estate. Growing up, I hated going to these parties more than anything in the world.

Daddy remarried three years after he lost my mother to a witch named Flora. Then he had the audacity to move her into the house with me. Everyone in our neighborhood, Huntingford Estates, believed my daddy was a construction tycoon working overseas. In a way, I suppose it wasn't a lie, nothing was built in Eastrose without him giving the okay. I know for a fact Daddy only married Flora for business. He didn't really love her at all, and I could see it in his eyes when he came to visit.

The way he solved that issue was by sending her away to be protected along with me and also kept her out of his way. It gave a better cover story for me as well as it allowed Flora to

still have a life in society. I've never understood why anyone would want vapid friendships that led to us going to awful, boring parties. Going to these things meant I had to wear a dress and smile as if I cared.

To make matters worse, my best friend couldn't come with me to these parties. That just meant I had to find another way to make it more interesting—hence, the stealing.

Ryker was my best friend and the boy who lived next door, kind of. He was the son of our butler of sorts. Darian ran the house and looked after us ladies as I grew up. It only makes sense that Ryker and I would end up being friends. There were no other kids for us to hang out with since we lived so far away from everyone else in town. Yeah, we had acquaintances at the private school we both went to, but those aren't the type of people you make lifelong friendships with. Ryker and I were best friends for life, even made a blood pact like they did in the old mafia days. It was a symbol proving you'd always have each other's backs no matter what happened in life.

That meant when Ryker dared me to bring him back something from the party, you bet your ass I did it. I found this really amazing pocketknife that had an elephant engraved on it and was filled with sparkling gemstones.

It was perfect.

Ryker loved elephants, and it would totally make him feel better about not being able to come with me. Seeing his face when I brought it back made me want to do it again and again, but getting something even better to make him smile. He

eventually yelled at me after the shock wore off and realized what I'd done. Apparently, he was talking about food, but why would I do that when this was so much better? Plus, I tend to do things to the extreme when left unsupervised.

Thus, my hobby was born. From that point on, I started going after items that made it more challenging. I began to scope out people's houses or what guests were wearing at parties. Then I'd steal them later. I found myself waiting until a full moon because it simply made it easier to see without bringing any light that would give me away.

Once the police started catching on, that's when it happened. I was now a wanted jewelry thief. In addition to that, the newspapers gave me a nickname—*Luna Selene*. It had such a nice ring to it I decided to encourage its use. So for added drama, I started to leave moonflowers behind as a signature.

Stealing became less frequent when I graduated high school. I was to begin the intensive learning curve of the Caprioni Family business to the point where I knew every single bit of information by heart. I was to be presented to the Family at the age of twenty-five. Daddy wanted me to come in guns blazing. He wanted to ensure they could find no fault in my abilities so he sent my uncles, his righthand men, to do the job. The downside to this was I was watched more closely by the security that had been doubled around our house and grounds. They caught me sneaking out once, and Uncle Athos was pissed.

Physical training became brutal as they taught me to survive torture, poisons, and to fight to kill whoever I was up against. The worst of it was that Ryker had been sent off to college back in Eastrose. Even though I tried to keep in touch with him, he didn't reciprocate, leaving me alone to deal with the hardest part of my life so far. It broke my heart to have him walk away, turning his back on our blood oath and me. Rubbing the scar on my hand became a habit. Almost like I was trying to wipe it off my skin for good, but it never worked.

Eventually, I learned I had to stop giving a shit about someone who didn't give a fuck about me. I learned an important lesson—you couldn't count on anyone to be there for you but you. My heart hardened as it was proven time and time again by men.

Hence, where my feelings about waiting for a white knight to come save me came from. My daddy and two uncles became all I needed in life. Even my stepmother left to travel the world and live her life as she pleased the moment I was eighteen.

What was it about me that made everyone leave me? Daddy was always in my corner, but he couldn't be around. A few times a year, I could communicate by writing notes in code only he and I used. We did this since the threat to my life was still high. He believed once I was introduced to the Family and given my title, it would end the fight over the position of underboss.

Personally, I wasn't so sure about that, but that was a worry for another day. For now, I had something else to focus on—my last night as *Luna Selena*. Letting out a heavy sigh, I looked over the property of the Michelson estate from my vantage point on top of their peaked roof. This was my last hurrah. Tomorrow I'm going back to Eastrose, Mansara. It was time to announce my ascension to second-in-command, the underboss of the Caprioni Family.

My target, Patrick Michelson, was known for his collection of stamps, and he'd just managed to acquire one of the rarest last week. He'd been so proud that he had a viewing party to show it off—it was incredibly foolish of him if you ask me. Plus, who really wants to come look at a damn stamp the size of a quarter? It was like he was begging me to take it as my last job before ending my time as *Luna Selena*.

It might also have something to do with the fact I learned he'd fucked over one of our businesses here in Huntingford. It seems Patrick dearest sold us supplies that weren't exactly up to code. Shit like that wouldn't fly with me, and I was in a unique position to retaliate without it causing any trouble for the Family.

Double-checking my harness and lines, I repelled down the wall of the three-story mansion to the second floor. My plan was to enter through one of the spare bedrooms near the office where the stamp was kept. Patrick loved his stamps so much he had a special room made that would keep them in perfect condition. The damn thing was even climate controlled. That made this job slightly tricky but so exciting when I pulled it

off. I'd have to get past the security of his office, then get into the secure preservation room behind a bookcase.

People really should stop putting things behind bookcases and fireplaces—it's the first place us thieves check out. Using my glass cutter, I made a hole big enough for me to fit through then, using the suction cup handle, I set the cut section on the nightstand. Once through, I put the glass back in the window, planning on getting out another way, and hit the button to send the rope back up to the roof. God, I loved technology and good toys to help with the job.

Having located all the cameras in the hallway ahead of time, I shot paintballs at them from a custom-made pistol for occasions like this. The motion sensors were the next trick, but there was a narrow section right down the middle of the room they missed. This is why you get a reputable company to install this type of shit. All I had to do was get to the desk, then I'd be in the clear. With the computer that was hardwired into the house, I could shut down the security where I needed to. Hacking wasn't my greatest skill, but I was forced to learn enough to manage issues like this, and most security wasn't overly complicated in the homes I targeted.

If I were going to try and steal from a bank or museum, that would be an entirely different can of worms. That shit I wouldn't be able to do without help. The other thing working in my favor was I don't stick to one specific thing to steal—doing so made it *way* harder to figure out who I'd target next. Last month, it had been a painting I just fell in love with at a

party. Not all things I stole were expensive. I just took what I liked, and apparently, I have high-class taste.

People think once you have a security system in place, everything else is just a precaution. That might be the case for some people, but not the idiots who leave the complicated password written down on a sticky note under the keyboard. Once I got into the computer, shutting down the security was easy. Whoever invented saving passwords for every website you use automatically was brilliant and made my job so much easier. Not wanting to alert the company to anything suspicious, I only shut off the motion sensors and left the rest running. This wouldn't raise a red flag since Patrick liked to work at odd hours of the night.

Revealing the preservation room door, I scanned it over to ensure I had what I needed. It was an old-school tumbler lock I could crack easily. Pulling the door open, I snorted at how small the room was—a specially made broom closet filled with his little stamps in their protective casing lined the shelves in neat rows. I double-checked to make sure there weren't any sensors or pressure triggers before taking the stamp I wanted. It really didn't look like much, but the damn thing was worth five million dollars. Tucking the case into my satchel, I zipped it shut, replaced it with my moonflower, and closed up the room again.

Looking around the office, I let out a deep sigh knowing everything would change when the sun came up. While I was excited to finally get to be where I belonged, I was sad not to be doing this anymore. I mean, over ten years of stealing was a

long time, even though the world thinks I started eight years ago thanks to my simple beginnings.

I would be giving up this life of hiding in the shadows and coming out as the heir to the Caprioni Family. Life would never be this simple ever again, but I was ready for the change. This had lost its challenge, and I wasn't going for a bigger job, no matter how much the dark web was willing to pay me. I didn't need the money, that's for sure. With my earnings from this and my family being billionaires already, I was set. I liked having my own money, though. You never know what life could throw at you, and having a few million stashed away was simply smart business.

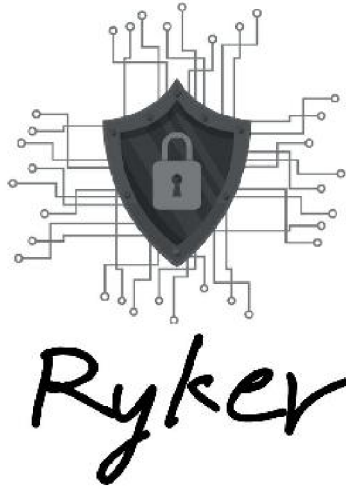
Swiftly, I left the office, jogged down the stairs to the first floor, and headed to the mud room where the doggy door was located. Bruno, their mastiff, passed away a few weeks ago, and they never remembered to do anything with this giant hole in the wall. I couldn't get in through this point with the motion detectors throughout the house, but I could leave that way. I waved goodbye, abandoning my rig on their roof, and ran through the woods beside their house. On the other side, I'd parked my blacked-out SUV I used for jobs. Normally, I like something with more speed, but this could handle anything I stole or the equipment I needed with that beauty.

Glancing at my watch, I had just enough time to get four hours of sleep before I had to head out. The movers would be coming to pack everything up and bring it back to Eastrose. According to the plan, I was supposed to wait for the security team to come get me.

Yeah, that wasn't going to happen.

I'd been stuck here for far too long, and I was getting the hell out of dodge on my own terms. So I was gonna take my powder-blue Aston Martin and drive my happy ass there myself. Might even make a few stops along the way to make up for lost time, keeping a low profile.

Two



My shoes tapped on the marble floor as I walked, the sound echoing down the hall to the boss's office. It was crazy late for him to call me to his office, but I knew things had been busy around here with the party scheduled for tomorrow evening. No one had a clue what the purpose of the party was, but when the head of the Caprioni Family says we're having a party, no one argues. I had a feeling I knew what was up with all the secret meetings the boss was having with Mathis and Athos.

It had to be about Astin.

My hope was after fifteen years of being kept away from her home, she'd be allowed to return. If this was a party for her homecoming, then shit was about to hit the fan and not only in the Caprioni Family. No, this was going to ripple throughout the criminal empire in the whole of Mansara and all of the East Coast. The Caprioni Family ruled not just our city but

most of Mansara as well, dictating what happened in the whole of Apria.

Looking down at my hand, I rubbed my thumb along the scar from my promise with Astin when we were kids. We'd become everything to each other as kids. What I couldn't tell her is that my father wasn't just the head caretaker of the Huntingford home but the head of her personal security. Dad wanted to keep what he was a secret from her so she wouldn't dodge him like she did all the other things designed to keep her safe and in her cage.

I never had the heart to tell my old man about her being a thief. Hell, it all started because of me. What right did I have to rat her out? Fuck, I'd been so in love with her that I wouldn't have given up her secrets for anything. Then I was ripped away from my safe little bubble with her and brought back into the fold of the Family. Her father wanted me to be in charge of her personal protection when she returned home. For this to happen, I had to be trained for what I am now—head security for the Caprioni Family.

For a while after I first left, she'd tried to write me letters, but I couldn't lie to her like that. I tried, goddamn did I try. I knew that with me gone, she didn't have anyone in her corner besides Glenda who was getting too old for Astin's shit. Boss caught wind that we were writing to each other, and he put a stop to it, telling me that if he couldn't talk to his daughter, neither could I. I'd gotten more time with her than he ever had, so I was just going to have to suck it up and deal with leaving my heart back in Huntingford. Of course, I didn't tell her

father I was head over heels in love with her and still was to this day.

No other woman could match Astin with her sharp mind, deadly skill, and sassy mouth always ready with a comeback. It didn't hurt that she was tall and drop-dead gorgeous, making men fall to their knees for the chance to be with her. For ten years, she was all mine, and I was the only one she ever wanted to spend time with, ignoring every other guy who even tried to get her attention.

Being head of security meant I got updates from our security team at the house. These just so happened to come with pictures and other bits of information about her life to appease her father. Since I got to look at everything first, I liked to pretend it was meant for me so I could keep track of how she was doing. The boss and I were the only ones who knew anything about her life right now. After her intensive training was completed four years ago and her uncles returned to the main house, they were again cut off from communicating. I took pity on them before and after they got back, including them on her life updates so they felt like they were still a part of her life.

I instructed my team to send highlights—pictures of her when she graduated high school, who her friends were, guys she went on dates with and when she dropped them—things like that. When my team sent along information sharing they thought she'd lost her virginity, I had to squash it. That type of update would cause the wrath of Colmazio Caprioni to come raining down on the nineteen-year-old asswipe who she

tumbled with. Astin picked him up at one of the parties her stepmother brought her to and snuck a tryst with him in one of the mansion's bedrooms.

Some things didn't need to be shared because I knew it wasn't her first time. I was the one who actually took her V card, but learning this told me she wasn't waiting for me anymore, and it crushed me in a way I didn't see coming.

I knocked lightly on the door before letting myself in. There, in a leather armchair with a snifter of brandy sat the king of the criminal empire of Eastrose. His gray hair was cut short since the top of his head was mostly bald, but he made up for it with a full beard. He raised his emerald-green eyes that matched his daughter's perfectly to me. The only difference was the hint of tiredness in his gaze.

He'd been running this empire for forty-five years, taking over at the age of twenty when his father was killed. He married Astin's mother later in life, but he loved Natalina more than life itself. When he lost her and had to send Astin away, it broke something in the boss that made him hard and cruel, or so my father tells me. This is the only version of the man I've ever known, and Colmazio was the boss, and no one questioned that fact if they wanted to live.

"Ah, Ryker." He smiled. "Come take a seat. Let's chat awhile."

When I returned from Huntingford, Colmazio took me under his wing and watched over my training personally. He needed

to make sure I learned everything I needed to keep the princess of the Caprioni Family safe.

“How are you?” I asked. “Seems a little late for just a simple conversation,” I pointed out as I sat on the leather couch across from him.

“Ha, I see you’ve finally decided to take me at my word and speak honestly when we are alone. Your father was always so good at doing that. I miss my friend dearly.” Colmazio sighed, swirling his glass.

My heart squeezed as I thought of my father who passed away last year from a sudden heart attack. We’d kept in contact regularly, but I didn’t get to see him in person before he died, and then I was looking at the man I’d idolized most in a casket. The world wasn’t fair, but I knew neither of us left anything unsaid, knowing the world we lived and operated in.

“Yeah, my old man was never shy to tell someone he cared about that they were being an ass.” I chuckled.

“My hope is one day you’ll be that same person for my Astin. I know you two were incredibly close growing up, even through high school,” Colmazio commented.

I looked down at my hand, rubbing a finger over the scar. “We were best friends growing up, but I don’t know about now... it’s been almost six years since I’ve seen her.”

“Ah, yes, I remember her telling me about your blood oath during one of my visits. It’s actually why I picked you for the job. Not that you didn’t already have good breeding and

loyalty to the family, but I needed her to trust you implicitly.” Colmazio got up and refilled his glass while making another. “She doesn’t like to be caged, and that’s all I’ve done to her since she lost her mother. I’m waiting for the day she rebels and does something utterly reckless that I can’t protect her from. This is where you come in. If she trusts you, hopefully, she’ll tell you what she’s doing.” He finished, handing me the second glass.

Taking it, I relaxed back on the couch. “Sir... I don’t know if we still have that same relationship anymore. As you know, she wrote to me when she thought I was sent off to college, and I stopped answering. I’m not an expert on women, but I don’t think that bodes well for me in keeping her trust.”

Her father nodded, thinking this over. “I believe you’re in love with her enough to put forth the effort that will be needed to fix things.”

“What?” I blurted, sitting upright.

Colmazio just gave me a deadpan look before taking a sip of his drink. “Did you think I’m that old and out of touch not to notice a man pinning over my only daughter? You’ve always kept her secrets. Your father and I appreciated you were more loyal to her than anything or anyone else. It makes you perfect to keep her safe.”

“So you’ve always known?”

“Let’s just say after a year of being in this house, you got much better at hiding your emotions.” Colmazio chuckled. “I

want you to go pick her up tomorrow... the drive will help you test the waters.”

Finally, finally, Astin was coming home.

I had a gut feeling this was what the whole party was about—her birthday and homecoming. Now I was allowed to let myself feel excited and slightly terrified at the thought of seeing her again.

Then the important part of what he said clicked. “Me? Are you sure that’s a good idea? She might not even get in the car if she sees I’m the one driving it.”

“Take Braxton.” Colmazio laughed, slapping the armrest of his chair. “He’ll be able to charm her if you piss her off.”

Braxton was one of the newer capos, or lieutenants, of the Caprioni Family and a good friend of mine. Since Colmazio had been cleaning house in preparation for Astin, a large influx of men in their late twenties and early thirties were being groomed to work under her. The boss knew the older crew would never stop trying to undermine her, so he was doing what he could for his little girl. Now when it came to people outside the Family, we’d just have to pray it doesn’t end up in a war.

“That’s a smart idea. He gets along with everyone,” I admitted.

“It’s about a three-hour drive, and I have our men watching the border, so you shouldn’t have any trouble getting through. They’ve been well paid to make sure no one knows our movements or who might be in the car,” Colmazio informed

me. “Finish your drink and get some sleep. Tomorrow is going to be an eventful day. I can feel it.”

Tossing back the brandy, I set the glass down and left Boss staring into the fireplace where the flames flickered. Even though it was late April, the weather still had a brisk chill at night, making the fire welcome. That, and though Boss would never admit it, he was losing weight and wore thicker fabric suits longer into the season. It wasn't my place to question our leader's health—he had people around him to do that—my job was to be focused on Astin and keeping her safe.



“So are you finally going to tell me why we're driving all the way to Apria?” Braxton asked with a yawn. “It's nine in the morning on a Saturday. This better be fucking important.”

Braxton let the seat fall back as he tried to get a little more sleep after having been out with Jace and Luca last night. I had texted and told him he needed to be ready for a job in the morning, but he didn't see it until too late. Braxton was in charge of skin—or as normal people called them strippers, prostitutes, and or escorts. He dealt with all the clubs we ran, making sure the clients and the merchandise were well taken care of. This meant he had an all-access pass to any nightclub, bar, or strip joint whenever he wanted. His favorite excuse was needing to check this place or another to see if the competition was doing things better than us, which they never did because Braxton was fucking good at his job.

“This is one of the most important jobs you’re ever going to be on,” I commented.

This caught his attention, bringing the seat back up as he looked at me expectantly. “Which is?”

“We’re bringing her home.”

“Holy fuck! You mean the two of us are driving to pick up the boss’s daughter?” Braxton all but yelled. “What the fuck, man? I can’t go with you to do this. Look at me... I’m wearing all the wrong clothes. I didn’t get a chance to shave or do my hair. I look like *shit*.”

“That’s what you’re worried about, your appearance?” I laughed.

“Fuck you. How many times have you told us how goddamn hot she is? I mean, there was that night you were almost black-out drunk and showed us a picture from one of the parties she went to. That ass is something men weep over, and you wanna laugh at me for being worried about my appearance? I’ll own it, hell fucking yeah, I’m nervous.” Braxton huffed, falling back in his seat, arms crossed. “I’m totally making you stop for coffee at Truebucks even though I know you hate it.”

Shaking my head, I couldn’t help but smile. It wasn’t often you saw the charming, overly confident Braxton lose his cool over a woman—hell, over anyone. He pulled out his phone and started to text someone.

“Whoa, who are you telling?” I snapped, my protective instincts kicking in.

“Just the media,” Braxton quipped. “I’m telling the other guys so they aren’t blindsided when she shows up tonight like I was.”

“Asshole, the whole world is going to be blindsided. No one has seen her since she was five,” I reminded him. “Besides, none of the others even know what she looks like. One picture flashed on a drunken night, and all you remember is her ass.”

“Legs. I remember her long, luscious legs too. Although I guess they’re attached to her ass...” He paused, tapping his chin deep in thought. “Does that make me a horrible person if I can’t remember her face, but I can remember her ass?”

I didn’t even bother to justify that question with an answer. “Tell them to keep it to themselves. No one else is supposed to know but you, me, and the boss.”

“Yeah, yeah, you know sometimes you have the biggest stick up your ass,” he muttered. “Trust me, it’s far more fun to have something else up there.”

“How many times do I have to tell you I’m not sleeping around with anyone? It’s not because I’m secretly gay, it’s because I’m already taken.” I sighed.

“Pft, I’m not gay either, but boy, do I love Jace’s dick, and he knows just how to use it too,” Braxton said, wiggling his brows. “As for being taken, dude, you haven’t talked to her in seven years. You even said she was sleeping with other guys.”

“And yet she’s never actually dated anyone since I left, just fucked around. What does that tell you?” I asked.

“She’s pragmatic, get in, get fucked, get out. A woman after my own heart. Sex is a physical need, and it doesn’t need to be a lifelong commitment,” Braxton stated, dragging out the same old argument he always does. “Jace doesn’t give a shit that I sleep with other people and crawl back into his bed. Just like I don’t bat an eye when he does it.”

“He’s also the only guy who it’s safe to fuck. If you got caught by any of the old crew, you’d be six feet under,” I pointed out, getting a glare from Braxton. “You know I don’t give a fuck who you fuck as long as it isn’t me. This is the world the boss is trying to change for Astin. Turning it into one that doesn’t kill people for being a woman or gay.” Braxton gave me a look, making me roll my eyes. “So sorry, I meant bisexual. It takes time, but he can’t do more without her here to fight with him and rally people like us to her side.”

“God, you’re so fucking whipped, and you aren’t even together. Let’s hope she’s all you guys hope she’ll be, or we’re all gonna die protecting our biggest failure,” Braxton commented as we fell into silence as we drove.

Crossing the border was a breeze, just as the boss had promised. We stopped to get Truebucks and made the last part of the journey. When we pulled up to the large Victorian mansion where I’d spent all my childhood growing up in, I smiled. So many good memories of Astin and Dad were here, and I was glad I got the chance to say goodbye to it all. The moving trucks were already loading things to take back to the main estate, and who the hell knows where else. We both got out of the car, stretched our legs after the long drive, and

headed to the front door. Glenda was there giving orders and yelling at movers to be careful as they carried the furniture out.

“There better not be one scuff on that table,” she ordered. When she caught sight of me, she stopped, and a wide smile bloomed on her face. “Well, look who the cat dragged home. Come here, boy. Give me a hug.”

I swept up the old woman who’d looked after me like the mother I never had.

“That old coot sent you to come get her, I see,” she commented when she let me go. “Hate to burst your bubble, but she’s already gone. I really should’ve expected this would happen after being cooped up for so long. She did her last nightly prowls and was gone before I even woke up. Took her personal bags along with her car,” Glenda grumbled, waving her hand dismissively. “I’m getting too old, I tell ya. Normally, I can hear when she opens the garage door, but you know her, she’s gotten quite sneaky.”

“Boss is going to kill me.” I groaned. “This is exactly what he was afraid she’d do.”

“Serves him right. She’s just like him.” Glenda cackled. “That boy couldn’t be told what to do by anyone but his mother, Lord bless her soul. She had a way of getting him to see reason.”

Braxton gaped at Glenda, having never heard someone talk about Boss like that. He looked at me then back to Glenda like

she shouldn't be alive after speaking about the leader of the Caprioni Family like she just did.

“What are you standing around gaping at me for? You better get going if you have any hope of finding her,” Glenda insisted, clapping her hands to hurry us out of the house. “Just so you know, she removed every single tracker they tried to put on her car so that won't be an option. She still wears her mother's necklace all the time, though.”

“Thanks, Glenda, see you back in Eastrose,” I called as we hopped back into the SUV.

“What the hell is happening?” Braxton asked as I floored it out of the driveway, kicking up gravel.

“Life with Astin Caprioni, my friend.” I laughed, excited for the hunt. “It's never gonna be boring.”

THREE



Windows down, Gucci sunglasses on, blasting “Bring Me To Life” and singing along at the top of my lungs, I flew down the highway way over the speed limit. Life couldn’t get much better than this. For a brief moment, I could forget about what I was driving toward and just wanted to live in the here and now. Once I was back at the family estate, I’d be trapped in its walls and rules that went along with who Daddy wanted me to be. However, right now, I was going to celebrate my twenty-fifth birthday in the city before I had to make it back to the house for the stuffy party Daddy was planning. With my personal things in the trunk along with two different dresses to pick from, depending on my mood, I couldn’t help but smile.

My car was untraceable, and I had at least a two, maybe three-hour head start on the idiots who were coming to pick me up. Did Daddy really think I would be waiting for them on the

front steps of my lifelong cage? If he did, then whoever he sent was in for a rude awakening.

It wasn't my goal to be an outright bitch or cause trouble, but it was my birthday, and I was going to do something fun. I had to make up for all those years I spent with Glenda and a boring birthday cake. This was my one chance to do something crazy before the whole world learned who I was. After the announcement, there was no chance of this happening without bodyguards.

The border crossing was easy. From my training, I knew they had officers in place who would turn a blind eye. Besides, I didn't mind letting Daddy know I was back in the country and on my way home—eventually.

“Identification, please,” the officer asked when I pulled up to the booth.

Plucking my forged Mansara passport out of my purse, I prepared to hand it over. It was under a pseudonym, but when I saw the last name on the officer's uniform, I paused, grabbed the real passport, and handed it over. The officer looked over it, and his eyes grew wide as he looked back at me.

“They only crossed over a half hour ago...” he murmured, looking at the cars behind me, trying to find them.

“Oh, good to know,” I chirped. “Is there anything else you need from me, Officer Tidwell?”

“No, Miss Caprioni, welcome back home,” he answered, handing me back my passport without having scanned it or

taken down my entry information.

I flashed him a smile, tucking it back into my purse. “If you hear from my father, let him know I’m fine.” With a parting wink, I entered Mansara for the first time in fifteen years.

I drove straight to Eastrose, where I was ready to start my birthday adventures. Since I turned twenty-one and could go out on the town, I kept myself up to date on the hottest nightlife and places I couldn’t miss out on once I returned. First stop was getting a room at the Le Mont Thomas. I’d always loved the look of it—a castle in the middle of the city—and people always talked about how wonderful it was, so why not have a place to get ready in style? The blend of neo-Renaissance and modern architecture was right up my alley. After checking in and getting settled in my room, I showered and started to get ready while dancing around the room to music. This was my farewell to the lighter side of life where I could be free of responsibility. Once the crown was placed on my head—so to speak—it would be seen as weakness to act like an innocent teenager, and I couldn’t afford to be seen as weak.

As I looked at the two dresses laid out on the bed, I tapped my chin, not feeling like either was the right fit for my mood. So I moved to the backup idea I knew would piss Daddy off, but it just put the biggest smile on my face—a pair of tight leather cigarette pants with a red satin corset and cropped blazer with accents of matte black crystals on the lapels. I paired it with a set of red snakeskin stilettos, and this outfit was chef’s-kiss perfect. Curling my dark chestnut hair, I braided and pinned

back one side to show off my long neck and preened in the mirror. Other than the stupid parties I'd gone to scoping out my next target, this was the first time I'd dressed up for myself. Taking a last look in the mirror, making sure my makeup was on point, I grabbed a simple black leather clutch and headed out.

Not wanting to drive, I had the hotel call a car to take me to the place I'd decided on for an early dinner since it was only five, but I wasn't wasting this night. Out of habit, I reached up and touched the only piece of jewelry I wore—a necklace from my mother that was a cameo of a starflower. Mother had it made when I was born since Astin meant starlike. When I received it on my sixteenth birthday, I'd gotten a chain long enough so it fell to rest nestled between my breasts, close to my heart. The only time I didn't wear it was on jobs. I never wanted to risk losing it and not being able to get it back. So it stayed tucked in the safe in my old bedroom. The most valuable thing I own, in my personal opinion.

The driver stopped outside the restaurant, The Bandit, which was also a jazz bar. I wasn't a huge lover of jazz, but they boasted having the best martinis, and I felt it was worth trying the place out. Entering the restaurant, I decided to head right to the bar. Tonight I wasn't going to stay anywhere if I wasn't feeling the *vibe*. So far, the live jazz music floating through the air was drawing me to stay.

“Good evening, miss. What can I get for you?” the bartender asked, coming over the moment I sat down.

He was about my age or a little older, attractive in that scruffy way hipsters seem to pull off so well. “I heard a rumor this is the place for a martini.”

“You’d be right,” he answered, flashing me a smile. “Looking for anything in particular?” I shook my head. “Would you be willing to have me make something special for you? If you hate it, I’ll make you something else. Promise.”

Oh, this man thought he had game, didn’t he?

“All right, I’ll give you a chance to impress me but make it good. You only get one shot,” I answered, leaning forward and resting my elbows on the bar.

This got an immediate response, sending him off to grab various bottles and pour things into a shaker. As I watched, another person walked up to the bar, setting an empty glass down. I ignored him, not feeling the need to be chatted up this early in the game. Later, I might find someone to have a bit of fun with, but I didn’t think this was the place for it. The Bandit struck me as a place for businessmen, and I’d be getting enough of that in the near future.

Impressively enough, the man didn’t bother me either, which made me beyond curious. *The whole bar was open so why choose to sit next to me if he didn’t want to make a move?*

“Here we are, best one I’ve ever made.” He paused before setting the drink down but decided quickly to make his move. “If you like it, do you think I can get your name?” the bartender asked, hope written on his face.

Smiling, I grasped the drink and pulled it over as I thought about his proposition. “Let’s see how the drink goes first. Then who knows, you might get more than my name.” Lifting the glass to my lips, I took a sip and was surprised with the hit of citrus then the warmth of the alcohol as it slid down my throat, making me hum.

“Fuck me,” the man next to me muttered under his breath.

Ignoring his utterance, I gave the bartender a bright smile and extended my hand. “I’m Astin, and that’s a damn good martini.”

“Nick,” he answered, dumbfounded as I shook his hand, then pulled it back.

“Nice to meet you, Nick. Looks like I’m going to have to come back here from time to time. I don’t think I ever had a drink that good,” I praised, enjoying the blush running up his neck.

When a waiter walked up, Nick left to deal with restaurant orders. Apparently, this gave the man next to me an opening to finally make his move. “So, is a well-made drink the best way to get your attention?”

Good vibes gone, I sighed internally.

Shifting in my seat, I glanced at the man sitting next to me. He was dressed in a navy suit with pinstripes, black hair slicked back, and a nose that was a bit too large for his face. Other than the nose, nothing was that remarkable about him. He was absolutely forgettable.

“It’s a good place to start, but then any man with something to offer is always welcome to try for my attention,” I commented.

Mr. Big-Nose scoffed, taken aback at my words. “Excuse me? Are you telling me I don’t have anything to offer you?”

Tilting my head to the side, I took him in for a moment. “Your suit is from last year, the watch on your wrist is a fake Rolex, and you can’t even be bothered to get your shoes shined. This tells me you’re cheap about your appearance or you don’t have that good of a job. Add on the fact that it took you almost fifteen minutes to make your move on me tells me confidence isn’t a default for you. Might be why you haven’t gotten promoted at work to afford the finer things. Did you really think after taking a look at me that I was even close to your league?”

“Fucking bitch!” He lifted his glass like he was going to chuck the ice and remnants of his drink at me, but I moved first.

Reaching out, I grabbed the back of his neck and slammed it down onto the polished wooden bar breaking his nose with a satisfying crunch. “You know, I was really having a nice time, then you had to go and ruin it, asshole.”

Getting up, I drained my martini, which was a crime, then I tossed two hundred dollars cash on the table. “I’m sorry about the mess, Nick. I’ll see myself out. Hopefully, the next time I stop by, it will be less eventful.”

“Ah yeah... bye, Astin,” Nick answered, stunned as he handed the idiot a wad of cocktail napkins.

Leaving the restaurant, I decided to walk down the street since it was full of bars, eateries, and music venues. It was late enough that all the business people were heading home and the lull between shifts in nightlife began. I pulled out a cigarette and lit it, taking a drag as I walked, enjoying the taste of the tobacco. I didn't smoke often, but sometimes it settled your nerves after an irritating encounter like I'd just experienced.

There was no way I was giving up on my quest for the perfect night out. I knew it was going to get better when I spotted a little hole-in-the-wall Italian restaurant, *Fatti a Mano*. As part of my education, I learned Italian, French, and Spanish, along with a moderate skill in Mandarin. These were the common languages I'd need for dealing with international business. It also came in handy when you heard your waiter speaking to the chef in Italian.

I called out to them in Italian, asking for some recommendations on what to eat. Giuseppe, the owner and chef, told me he'd take care of it and was off to cook me a meal. Twenty minutes later, I was gorging myself on chicken alfredo and delightful white wine, chatting with Giuseppe. He immigrated from Italy thirty years ago and started this restaurant shortly after getting settled. Giuseppe was so pleased to be able to speak in his native language that I got a free dessert out of it.

He tried to tell me not to pay for any of it, but that wasn't going to happen. I wanted this place to survive because it was about to become a favorite. Glancing at my watch, I knew the party Daddy set up was starting, but I wasn't done having fun

yet. I needed to find someplace to get at least one dance in and have another drink without morons bothering me.

“Giuseppe, where do the young people like to go around here to dance?” I asked since he told me he had kids around my age.

“There’s a place a few blocks down that all the young people talk about. They play music that’s just noise... I don’t know how they can stand it,” Giuseppe answered, shaking his head.

I had to hold back a chuckle since it sounded perfect to me. “Thank you for everything, the meal was amazing.” Kissing him on the cheek, I slipped him a hefty tip into his apron so he wouldn’t yell at me for doing it.

“Go on, have fun, and don’t go home with any strangers. You’re too nice of a girl to get into trouble like that,” he cautioned as I left, giving him a wave.

He hadn’t been lying when he said everyone liked to party at this place. There was already a line of people waiting outside the club. I didn’t bother waiting. Instead, I walked right up to the door with all the confidence that I’d be let in. The bouncer took one lecherous look at me, grinned, and opened the door, allowing me in.

The room was full of smoke so you could see the laser show they were doing throughout the place that moved to the beat of the music. My first stop was to get a drink, then I was going to dive into the mass of half-dressed sweaty people grinding on each other. Weaving my way through the crowd, I found the horseshoe-shaped bar. I leaned past a burly man in a fishnet

shirt with massive gauges and amazing eyeliner to be seen by the bartender. The big guy noticed and stepped over, giving me a little more room.

“Thanks, man,” I yelled, then motioned to my eyes. “I like your eyeliner... that shit’s on point.”

He gave me a toothy grin and motioned to my outfit. “That combination is dope... love a confident woman in leather.”

Laughing, I slapped him on the arm. “You know what, I like you. You have good taste.”

The bartender finally came over and got my drink order. The club was sweltering with all the bodies, so I made a judgment call. When the bartender came back, I slipped her a substantial tip. “Can you keep my jacket back here, please? I came solo and have no place to put it where it will be safe.”

“Sure thing, babe, just don’t forget it, or I’m totally stealing it,” she answered with a wink.

“That’s fair,” I answered and took my drink, leaving the bar to let someone else in.

Over the years, I learned money might not bring you happiness, but it sure made things easier. Besides, I had plenty, so why not give back to those who deserve good things to happen to them. You treat me right, and I’ll do the same in return. Cross me, and you’ll see an incredibly different side of this bitch.

Once I finished the drink, I slipped into the undulating sea of people, letting them pull me in and surround me. I drifted until

I came to a stop toward the middle of the dance floor and let my body move with the music. Most women who were on the taller side didn't like to wear heels as a rule of thumb. I didn't mind since it brought me to about six feet and helped keep my head above water in places like this. Over the years, I'd snuck out once or twice to a dance club, but none of them in Huntingford had been this epic. Relishing the freedom, letting the bass beat echo through my chest, I floated from one dance partner to another with no concept of time.

A new set of strong hands fell on my hips, and I let them pull me back to his body. When I leaned back into him, I realized there was something off when he didn't start dancing. He just held me there tight against his body and was noticeably happy about where my ass was rubbing.

"Astin, you're very, very late for your own party," a voice rumbled in my ear.

It was a voice I'd know anywhere, even if I hadn't heard it in seven years. "Ryker."

Twisting to face him, I looked deep into those copper and green eyes I knew so well.

A smile pulled at his lips as he held me, his hands tightening on my hips. "Hey, Tin-Tin."

FOUR



My heart pounded in my chest as the boy who was my best friend, first love, and the man who abandoned me to live the past seven years alone. *Why was he here? How did he find me? Was he working for Daddy this whole time? If so, why lie and cut me off?* None of this made sense.

All I knew was I wasn't going anywhere with him, no matter who sent him. I needed to go home. He was right about that, but I certainly wasn't going to do anything he told me to do as if nothing had happened between us. Plastering on a fake smile, I pulled him close like I was going to hug him, then rammed my knee right into his dick.

"See you at the estate, Ry-key-kins," I shouted as I left him there hunched over, trying to remember how to breathe.

Out of the sea of people, the guy I met at the bar appeared. "You all right?"

“She’s fine. We just came to take her home,” a stranger announced from behind me.

Glancing over my shoulder, I found an attractive man with a shadow of a beard and a pompadour hairstyle cocking a brow at me. His dark brown eyes danced with humor as if he was enjoying all this. Seems Ryker didn’t come alone to fetch me.

How the hell had he known I was even here?

Giving the new arrival a warning smirk and wink, I turned back to my large friend. Prepared to play the part of a lifetime, I grasped his arm, panic filling my voice. “I don’t know who they are. They keep trying to take me somewhere after I told them no. I need to get out of here. Please, will you help me?” I gave him wide desperate eyes, hoping he’d keep my daddy’s dogs off me.

“Go get your jacket and get out of here. I’ll keep them busy,” he answered, cracking his knuckles dramatically.

Standing on my tiptoes, I brushed a kiss on his cheek and took off, leaving my knight in black mesh to deal with tails. Rushing up to the bar, I waved over the girl who had taken the jacket, and she nodded, returning with my garment. “Too bad I was getting kind of attached.”

“Who knows, I might be back, and you’ll have another chance to get lucky,” I answered.

“With the jacket or you?” she teased.

I blew her a kiss, and I turned to leave. “You never know in this life.”

Using all my skills, I dodged people on my way to the back exit, knowing if they dealt with my bouncer buddy, they would be waiting at the front for me to leave. I whistled for a cab to stop and hopped in, heading back to the hotel to gather my things. If they found me once, they'd be able to do it again until I figured out where the fucking tracker was.

Back in the bedroom, I thought about changing for the party, but I just freshened up a little then checked out. The last time I'd been at the estate was when I was five, but I knew it the moment I saw it. Memories of the attack and losing my mother flooded back as I pulled up to the front door. Shaking my head clear, I handed my keys off to the valet and took a deep breath.

This was it, my last moments of being Astin Capaldi, the obedient honor student, and *Luna Selene*, the shadow who stole from the rich for no other purpose than I was good at it.

The Caprioni Estate was still in the city, but in the section of woods where it was built gave acres between us and the next home. The mansion itself was massive, made out of stone, three stories high with pillars and a tiled roof making it seem like a home out of its time compared to most found in our city. It had been in our family for generations, and one day it would be mine when my father passed.

I entered the front door and walked up the marble steps to a filigree-patterned wrought iron security gate with double doors. It had been added for security if the enemy breached the front doors. It was unlocked and open for the party but

reminded you who owned the place with a large family monogram right over the doorway.

The murmur of people talking and the sound of a string quartet told me just how much I was going to stick out in this outfit. Honestly, that suited me just fine. They needed to know right away that I had ideas and plans for this family. I wasn't going to be walked over or dismissed because of my gender, no matter what I wore.

Just as I was going to step into the grand salon where the party was being hosted, a hand grabbed my arm and yanked me back. It took everything in me not to react and take this dipshit down for daring to lay hands on me. After spending my whole life preparing for someone to come after me, it was a testament to my skill that I could hold back. My fingers itched to go for the knife I had tucked in my low back sheath, but I wasn't sure this was the first impression I wanted to make.

“This is a closed party,” a deep voice growled. “I’m sorry you came all this way, but whoever your client is shouldn’t have asked you to come.”

I let out a huff of laughter. *This prick thought I was a fucking escort.*

Shifting, I looked at the man who dared to think I was a whore, let alone have such a tight grip on my arm. He was dressed in a suit, but all the men working for the family wore them. It was our dress code of sorts. The interesting thing was he didn't wear a button-down shirt. Instead, it was a V-neck that showed off all his muscles and tattoos. A bird of some

kind spread its wings around his throat and bled into words written across his chest I didn't bother reading at this moment. There would be plenty of time later as he begged forgiveness for what he was doing to examine him closer. His head was buzzed, only leaving enough to show his hair was a dark blond color. The shaved hairstyle made his angular features stand out more prominently along with his dark blue eyes. His beard was trimmed short and only along his jawline, making it even more pronounced, or maybe it was because he was glowering at me so fiercely.

"I can assure you I am *absolutely* supposed to be at this party," I said, my voice even and cold as ice. "One might even say this *is* my party. Also, I believe it would be in your best interest to remove your hand from me if you plan on keeping it."

This only seemed to make him even more upset. "Really, and who's going to remove it if I don't let go?"

"He's right, you know, with a threat like that, you must have the means to back it up," Daddy's voice called out. "If not, then he has every right to remove you from this gathering."

I really had to stop calling him Daddy in my head. If I didn't, one of these times I was going to call him that out loud, which wouldn't do either of us any good.

Taking my eyes off the rude man, I shifted them to my father. After fifteen years, there he was, dressed in an impeccable tan color suit with a light blue shirt and white tie. Daddy had always been fastidious about his appearance, and it seems he

hadn't changed. Everything about him screamed power and authority—the only thing that gave him away from his standoffish appearance was the pure delight in his eyes. He wasn't going to give me away until I dealt with this situation. *Ah, the first of many tests. Goodie.*

Rolling my eyes at my father, I kicked out my right leg, dropping the man to his knees and spun around so I was behind him with my knife at his neck. “At this point, I'm irritated enough to just kill you,” I muttered to the man.

“Come, daughter, leave him be. I just had the carpets cleaned for the occasion, and I don't want to call them out again.” Father chuckled, waving for me to follow him. “You know you're three hours late, don't you? Seems you gave Ryker quite the run around today as well.”

The man at my feet released me instantly when he heard Daddy utter the word *daughter* but didn't move since I still had my knife on him.

“I always intended to be here,” I commented. “Do you blame me for just wanting to have a little fun first? It's *my* birthday, after all.” Dropping my arm, I stepped back as he stood rubbing his neck unconsciously. “What's your name?” I asked, cocking my head.

“Jace,” he answered simply, keeping his eyes lowered.

Jesus Christ, pull a knife on a guy, and he turns into a whipped puppy.

“Word of advice, Jace, never assume you know who or what a person’s role is in this house. It could get you killed one day,” I shared, patting him on the chest and followed after Father.

He paused to take my arm and tuck it around his as we continued down the hall. “I’m impressed. He’s not a man to be caught off guard like that.”

“That’s me, full of surprises. Are we not joining the delightful party I’m late for?” I asked as he led me into another room, where I found my two uncles waiting.

I let out a squeal of excitement and rushed to hug them. Mathis was my father’s younger brother by three years, and Athos was a half-brother by grandfather’s mistress with ten years between him and Daddy.

“Oh, it’s so good to see you,” Mathis said, picking me up and spinning me around. “God, it’s only been four years, but you’ve grown, squirt.”

“Don’t hog her,” Athos grumbled, pulling me into another bone-crushing hug. “I can hardly believe you’re finally home, ya little brat. Couldn’t just make this easy on all of us, could you?”

When they finally let me go, I found Father patiently waiting for his own hug. I let him envelop me in his warmth, breathing in the comforting scent of cigars and brandy. “I missed you so much, Daddy.”

“Oh, my little girl is finally home where she belongs, but she’s not so little anymore,” he murmured as he kissed the top of my

head. “As much as I hate to cut this short, we do have to make an appearance at the party. I figured this was the only way to keep your uncles from making a scene and embarrassing me in front of important guests.”

“How did you know I was here?” I asked, pulling back to look him in the eye.

“If you haven’t figured it out yet, I’m not going to tell you. Then I’ll never know where you are.” He chuckled, tweaking my nose. “Come on, let’s get this over with so I can steal you away for myself. We have so much to catch up on, you and I.”

“Yeah, letters four times a year really doesn’t cut it.” I sighed, letting him lead me back to the hall.

When we got close to the room, a group of men around my age stood watching me intently. Then I noticed Ryker was among them. *So he did work for Daddy, after all. Boy, did he have some explaining to do later if he wanted to live.*

“Busy night, boys?” Father asked with humor in his voice. “Allow me the honor of introducing you to my daughter, Astin Marzia Caprioni. Astin, these are our lieutenants and under your direct command. All are hand-picked by me to assist you in your rise to power. You already know Ryker, he’s head of security here and at all of our businesses. Braxton is our nightlife man in charge of skins, clubs, and restaurants we own. Jace runs any and all of the underground gambling as well as assisting in security when needed. Gunner works with the construction side of things, dealing with contractors and the legalities that come with using them. Atticus is our money

man. He keeps the books and ensures I always have plenty of money to run my empire while keeping it out of the government's hands. Finally, we have Luca, who's our international connection on drugs and guns getting them in and out of the country then into the hands that need them." Turning back to me, he smiled. "I know it's a lot, but you'll have time later to get better acquainted. I wanted you to put names to faces since I held these back from your education."

Father lifted his hands to rest on my shoulders. "If you're ever in trouble and your uncles or I can't help you, these are the men I trust with your life. Do you hear me, Astin?" he questioned, giving me a stern look. "These six men, right here. No one else."

"I understand," I answered, knowing this was important for him.

With a nod, he tucked my arm in his once more, and we entered the party. While I'd much rather stand back there taking my time staring at six of the hottest men I'd ever see in my life, I had an empire to take over. I'd thought Ryker was mouth-watering, but damn all of them were enough to get any woman excited about spending time with them. That realization made me glance at my father from the corner of my eye. *Did he have other plans for these men besides being loyal subjects to my ascension to the throne and me?* I didn't have much time to dwell as I was led to the front of the party near the quartet, which stopped playing upon our arrival.

“Good evening, everyone. I’m sure you’re all wondering what the occasion is that you’ve all gathered here for tonight. It’s to celebrate two joyous things... my beloved daughter’s twenty-fifth birthday and her appointment to the position of underboss in the Caprioni Family,” Father announced to the room.

You could hear a pin drop as they all gawked at me with wide eyes, clearly in a state of shock. I knew each and every one of these people from my training and dealing with documents on current issues within the company. As a few moments passed, some expressions turned angry, and I marked those in my memory for later. Others seemed pleased with the news, and some just didn’t give a flying fuck who or what I was—clearly, they were just here because they were told to be. Finally, someone started clapping, and the spirit of the party was revived as someone wheeled in a massive cake with sparkling candles all over it.

“Come, my girl, blow out your candles and make a wish.” Father cheered as it stopped in front of me.

I closed my eyes a moment and prayed to whoever or whatever was listening that I was ready for the shitstorm I knew would come once this news spread.

FIVE



Jace

*S*he just had to be the boss's fucking daughter. Why hadn't I demanded that Ryker send us all a photograph so we knew what she looked like, for fuck's sake? Feeling her release me from her hold and step back, I stood in a daze rubbing at my throat.

"What's your name?" Her question caught me off guard as I was still trying to wrap my brain around what just fucking happened.

"Jace," I answered, not willing to do anything more to piss this woman off.

"Word of advice, Jace, never assume you know who or what a person's role is in this house. It could get you killed," she shared, patting me on the chest like I was an idiot and followed after her father.

I let out a breath I didn't know I'd been holding as I watched one of the sexiest women I'd ever seen walk arm in arm with

the most powerful man in Mansara. Groaning, I fell back against the wall, hand still on my neck as I felt the burn of a nick where she'd held the blade. How had I fucked this up so badly? I knew she would be here tonight, but I assumed it would be with Ryker and Braxton, who were supposed to be locating her. Fucking hell, where were those two idiots?

Normally, a move like that wouldn't have worked on me, but I was caught off guard with the boss involving himself in the situation. That should have been the only clue I needed to know something was wrong. Knowing Colmazio Caprioni, if he didn't think I was worth the effort, he would've let his daughter kill me for putting a hand on her. Life in the mob wasn't easy—one moment you were in and things were going fine, the next, you fuck up like I'd just done, and it was all over. When I'd been pulled into the upper ranks with a few others, Boss had told us he had plans for us. He didn't really go into detail with anyone other than Ryker, who then filled the rest of us in.

“Jace, you seen a woman come in here wearing black pants and a red corset, hot as fucking sin?” Braxton asked as he appeared in front of me breathing heavily like he'd run all the way here.

I just narrowed my eyes at him and grunted.

“Seriously, don't go all dark and broody on me. I don't have time to fuck you and make it all better,” Braxton teased, leaning into my space and cupping my dick. “Fuck, she must be here. You're hard as fucking steel.”

“Yeah, she’s here all right... nearly took my head off in front of the boss.” I growled, shoving his hand away so I could advance on Ryker, who just showed up. “Why the hell wasn’t she with *you*?”

Ryker’s eyes widened at the snarl then narrowed as he scanned the hall for danger. “What happened? Is she okay? Did someone attack her?”

I couldn’t help but laugh at the idea of her needing Ryker to save her. “That woman doesn’t need our help. Instead, I think she needs a warning label... sexy as sin but extremely stabby.”

“What did you do?” Ryker accused, getting in my face.

It always interested me to see the darker side of Ryker. It didn’t come out often, but when it did, no one stood a chance. I should’ve known if it had to do with Astin, Ryker’s switch would be flipped instantly.

“Nothing,” I snapped. “I didn’t know who she was coming in late looking like that. I thought she was someone’s mistress or a hooker. Told her the party was closed and planned to escort her out until the boss walked up and taunted her. Next thing I know, I’m on my knees with a knife at my throat.” My hand returned to my neck as it felt like the blade was pressing there once more. “She’s goddamn fucking fast for wearing five-inch stilettos. Didn’t see it coming, that’s for fucking sure. I don’t even know where she pulled a knife from. Those clothes don’t leave much to the imagination.”

Braxton let out an impressed whistle. “I love a dangerous woman.”

I just groaned, knowing how easily Braxton got fixated on people who piqued his interest. This wasn't the woman for him to be sniffing around, especially when she was the boss's daughter. I still couldn't figure out why they were calling her back now after being gone for so long. You'd think, as her father, he'd want her out of danger, not in the middle of it.

"Where are the others?" Ryker asked, pulling me out of my thoughts. "The boss wanted to talk to us all when she got here."

"Probably in with the other guests. I'll go grab them," I muttered, not looking forward to spending time with Gunner and Atticus.

Over the past three years, Boss brought in six new lieutenants, including myself, saying he wanted people of the next generation running things. It made sense, but it was out of character with how most mafia bosses ran their businesses. Many of them like it being a good-old-boys' club with the veterans doing things as they've always done them. Colmazio Caprioni was a different breed on many levels, but it made me respect him more for doing what was best instead of what was easy.

Atticus was the easy one to find. I just had to look in the corner where no one was. The guy might be brilliant, but his people skills were shit, and the only reason I could see why the boss kept him around was that no one could do what Atticus did. That man could do math in his head faster than lightning and was always right. After a year, they finally stopped

double-checking when he did it in his head during meetings. Now we just took him at his word. He also had no concept of lying in any form. He always told things exactly as he saw them, which has led to Ryker and me having to protect him from getting punched out on the regular. We stopped taking him out with us when he almost got himself in a brawl with the local biker gang that ran the drugs we imported.

“Hey, find Ryker in the hallway. Boss wanted to tell us something when he’s done talking with his daughter,” I told him, jerking my thumb toward the door. “Don’t leave Ryker’s side until the boss shows up. We don’t have time to track you down again.”

“Why would I leave if I haven’t heard what the boss wanted to say?” Atticus asked, frowning.

I noticed he was holding a glass of whiskey in his hand which was odd because he doesn’t drink. “What’s with the liquor?”

“Luca told me it would help me blend in. Was he incorrect?”

“No, he wasn’t wrong, but you won’t need it anymore. I’ll take it,” I said, holding out a hand.

“Thank you, I was getting tired of holding it, and the smell of it is incredibly unpleasant. I’ll go find Ryker now,” Atticus stated with a nod and headed for the hall.

Groaning, I tossed back the drink, needing it with how my night was going. Scanning the crowd, I wasn’t surprised to find Gunner in a heated conversation with one of the governor’s men who had been invited to the party. That

asshole didn't know the concept of taking a night off, always finding some way to turn our fun into something work-related. Walking up, I dropped a hand on Gunner's shoulder as their voices got a little *too* loud for what was appropriate for a party. "I already told you we can't take that off the table. It's gone too far through the voting process with the city council and the mayor," James snapped.

"So sorry to interrupt, James, but I need to steal Gunner for a moment," I cut in before G-Man could open his mouth to argue.

James threw up his hand in exasperation. "Please take him away. I came for a party not to be interrogated for a problem we can't do anything about."

Turning the reluctant lieutenant toward the door, I spoke in a low voice. "The boss's daughter is here, and he wanted to speak to us once he's done talking with her. The others are in the hall, any chance you've seen Luca?"

"That bastard knows how to hide better at these things than Atticus does, so good luck," Gunner grumbled, jerking out of my hold.

Gunner might be a shrewd businessman, and his confrontational personality might get deals closed, but it makes liking him extremely difficult. Out of the five other lieutenants, there were only two of them I liked and hung out with. Luca would join us on occasion and wasn't a bad guy, but Atticus and Gunner weren't interested in making friends.

“You were looking for me?” Luca’s voice asked from behind me.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” I swore, jumping at his sudden arrival. “You seriously need to stop doing that to me. One of these days, I’m going to shoot you by accident.”

“I’d never let you shoot me,” he answered, walking past. “You’re not bad with a gun, Jace, but you lack awareness. Which is why I can sneak up on you all the time.”

Running a hand over my head, I growled and followed after him. This night just couldn’t get any worse—right? As I joined the others, the back sitting room door opened, and out came the boss arm in arm with his daughter, flanked by Mathis and Athos, the cream of the crop when it came to the Caprioni Family all in one group. The only one who was missing was Jamison, the boss’s bastard son he had with his long-term mistress, Casimira, who also wasn’t at this party. It wasn’t like either of them were a secret. Hell, Casimira was seen with the boss more often than his witch of a wife. Jamison was six years younger than his daughter, but the boy didn’t have what it took to be a part of this world. Too soft and too stupid—the Family would be destroyed within days if he took over.

“Busy night, boys?” Boss asked, directing his question at Ryker with a smirk on his face. “Allow me the honor of introducing you to my daughter, Astin Marzia Caprioni. Astin, these are our lieutenants and under your direct command, hand-picked by me to assist you in your rise to power.”

My heart skipped a beat hearing what the boss just said. Telling her that could only mean one thing—at long last, the position of underboss was going to be filled and by none other than his daughter, Astin. Boss carried on introducing each of us to her, but I couldn't move past the bomb that was just dropped here in the hallway. Now, the party and who was invited made so much more sense. Ryker had told us it was Astin's birthday, but the people selected to be here tonight were strategic. Having them learn this knowledge first would make it clear to everyone he wasn't fucking around with this announcement.

Holy fuck, I'd just tried to kick out my new boss from her own party and called her a whore. I deserved to have my ass handed to me, and her comment about not assuming who people were was absolutely a warning. *Could this night be over already?* I needed a few more stiff drinks to pass the fuck out so I could try again tomorrow.

“If you're ever in trouble and your uncles or myself can't help you, these are the men I trust with your life. Do you hear me, Astin? These six men right here. No one else.” The sharpness in the boss's voice grabbed my attention.

Reality was sinking in as I turned over every conversation I'd had with the boss in the past year. He'd been telling us all without saying what he was going to do, making sure none of us had any issues with women in power. Each of us was trained to handle guns—even Atticus—who was scarily precise, claiming it was all in the math. Whatever that means.

The fact each of us was around her age, mostly older, but not by a whole ton, meant we could relate to each other generationally in our views. Boss had been hard at work setting the stage for the past three years to bring his daughter into power, even killing those who would be the biggest threat. There were still some but none who had the power to make it happen quite as easily as those who were six feet under.

Numbly, I followed them back into the party, where they headed right for the stage where the musicians were performing. With the music silenced, the boss's voice rang out clearly for all to hear as he announced his daughter to be his successor and righthand man. He welcomed her home as publicly as possible so no one could deny what just happened.

I glanced at Braxton standing next to me smiling from ear to ear, loving the chaos this was about to create. "Better forget the thought of ever having a chance to get in her bed now that she owns us," I muttered.

Braxton merely kept smiling, not at all bothered by my words. "Hell, for the chance, I'll let her put a collar on me and call me Fido if she wants. That would be the fuck of my life right there. All that danger, power, and the knowledge I might not survive to see another day is the perfect aphrodisiac if you ask me. It's like jumping out of a plane or hang gliding. You might die, but if you make it through, you'll have the best memory for the rest of your life. Not to mention the story to go with it."

"You're fucking crazy," I muttered, taking a drink from the tray of one of the roaming waiters.

Warm breath on my neck and lips brushing my ear sent shivers down my spine. “That’s what you love about me, though, isn’t it? Who else could you fuck in the dark corners of a nightclub or have a quicky in the bathroom at one of the casinos while you’re working? Not many women like the thrill of almost being caught. Hell, most don’t even like being watched, but you wanna know what I think?” he asked, nipping at my ear. “That woman right there, the one who’s going to rule over it all, she’ll play with us, mark my words. No way you can be that confident and not be a thrill-seeker.”

Braxton’s words whispered in my ear as he built this sordid tale were going to make me cream my pants right here, right now. The crowd erupted in cheers as Astin blew out her candles and smiled at everyone until her gaze landed on me. That’s when I felt Braxton’s hand slide down my chest and grab my dick, rubbing it as she watched, her brows rising ever so slightly, the only hint of surprise. Braxton kissed my neck using his teeth to scrape behind my ear, making my eyelids droop in pleasure. Then he was gone, leaving me standing there, panting, having a stare down with a woman who had the most beautiful emerald eyes shimmering with heat at what she’d witnessed.

The bastard was right. I imagine she’d totally play our game and do it better than anyone had before.

Giving her a smirk followed by a wink, I left the room, knowing Braxton would be waiting for me in my bedroom, begging for me to fuck him into the mattress. He was going to get his wish and then some for pulling that trick. He knew

better than to play that game where others of the Caprioni Family could see. Times have changed, but that didn't matter to the mafia, being gay or bi, as was our case, wasn't accepted or appreciated. Let's hope our new queen was as open-minded as she appeared to be.

I took my time, seeing no need to give the cocky bastard what he wanted until I was good and ready to make him eat the mattress. Everyone's view on sex was their own, and I believed people should do what made them happy. For me, I was never the one to be fucked. I always did the fucking. I could be a relaxed guy when it came to everyday things, but you step into my domain asking me to fuck you, then you better damn well be ready to get fucked.

The lights were still off in my room, but I knew better. Braxton wouldn't miss a chance like this. Not after getting me riled up in front of the one person I made myself look like an ass in front of. Flicking on the lights, there Brax sat on the edge of my bed like nothing in the world had happened. Only the smirk on his face and the excitement shining in his eyes told me how eager he was.

“You think it's smart to pull shit like that on me?” I demanded. “Get your ass off my bed. You haven't earned the right to after that performance.”

Brax got to his feet instantly, licking his lips with anticipation. It wasn't long into our physical relationship that I discovered he was the perfect sub and loved to be dominated in bed.

Outside of this room, we were on equal footing, but when he came here, he understood the rules.

“Get on your knees, pup,” I ordered.

Without question, he did as he was told, resting his hand on his thighs and waiting for my next order. I walked up to him until my covered cock was right in his face. “Do you see what you did back there? You took it upon yourself to get me fucking hard in front of all those people when you knew *she* was watching. Is that what good little pups are supposed to do?”

“No, Sir,” Braxton answered.

I grunted in response then grabbed his face and shoved it into my crotch. “You think you deserve to get fucked after pulling a stunt like that? Are you gonna earn the right to get your tight fucking hole used?”

“Yes, Sir, please forgive me for being a bad pup,” Braxton said, his voice muffled by my pants.

Grabbing his hair, I pulled back so he was looking up into my face. “Then take my cock out and show me how sorry you are.”

Not even fighting my hold, he fumbled until he unbuckled my belt, popped the button, and slid the zipper down so my pants fell around my ankles. He tugged down my boxers, freeing my cock which smacked him in the face with how close I was holding him. The piercing at the tip almost caught him in the eye, so I shifted him back out of danger. I wanted to control

him but never would I purposely hurt him in a way we hadn't already agreed upon.

“Now suck it. I want to feel you gagging it's so far down your throat,” I ordered.

His one hand wrapped around the base of my cock, and I released his hair to allow him the freedom to do the work. The feel of his mouth on my cock was my favorite—he could do things with that tongue no one had ever tried before. It didn't take him long to get warmed up and swallow me down to the point he gagged. The sloppy gawk-gawk sound filled the room as he gasped, pulling back to catch his breath. At one point, I put my hand on the back of his head and slammed him down until his lips kissed my body. I held him there until he squeezed my leg, letting me know he needed to breathe. Releasing the pressure, I pulled him off me then gripped his throat to force him to stand as I ravaged his sloppy mouth.

“That's a good dirty fucking pup,” I praised. “Now get fucking naked and give me your ass.”

As Braxton did as he was told, I stripped out of my clothes and headed to my dresser, where I kept all our fun toys and supplies. I grabbed the lube and a bejeweled butt plug I gave Braxton for his birthday last year. Returning, I paused to grab my belt, folding it in half as I approached my partner.

“Do you feel like you've apologized enough, pup?” I asked, letting my hand rub over his perfect round ass.

Braxton peeked at me from where he was kneeling, ass up, head on the mattress, waiting. I cocked a brow at him, and he

shook his head. “No, Sir, I haven’t apologized. What I did was wrong, and I embarrassed you in front of her. Again.”

The cheeky bastard knew exactly what he was doing. It has been awhile since our play has been this rough, and it seems the bad little pup needed some discipline in his life. Rubbing my hand over his ass again, I quickly pulled it back and slapped it three times in a row on the same cheek, turning it bright pink.

“I think my good little pup is teasing me. Seems that punishment is indeed what you need, but first, I want to prep this fucking hole I’m going to use later. Can’t be using it raw, or I’ll have to find another hole to fuck, won’t I?” I taunted, squirting lube over his asshole.

With my finger, I pressed against the entrance working the thick lube inside. As he relaxed, my finger started to slide in easier until I could get the whole digit in. Then I added a second, working him harder, deeper, and faster, making him groan with pleasure. I used more lube and shoved his ass down so I had a better angle to finger fuck him. Reaching around, I grabbed his cock feeling the Jacob’s ladder he had pierced along the underside.

I’ve learned to tell by how hard he is, how close he is to coming, and I wanted him right at the point before he was going to explode. The louder his cries got, I knew I had to be close, then I felt it. The moment his balls started to tighten, getting ready to shoot out his cum, I yanked my fingers out and shoved in the butt plug. Then I took half a step back and

let my belt fall on his ass. Left then right, then right to left, with various speeds and force so he never knew what was coming.

I took my lubed hand and stroked my cock as Braxton sprawled out on the bed humping it hoping for the release I stole from him. He knew better than to touch himself, so instead, he fisted my sheets and begged.

“Please, Sir, let me come. I’m sorry I was a bad pup. I promise I’ll be good,” he mumbled, his eyes glassy with need and being fully overrun by his subspace mind. “Sir, I beg you to let me come. You can use me all you want, fuck my ass, and fill it with your seed. Please, please, please, let me come.”

I tossed my belt with the rest of my clothes and draped myself over Brax. “Is my pup going to be good now?” I crooned, letting my hands stroke down his stomach but not letting them wander far enough down to touch his cock.

“Yes, I’ll be the bestest boy, I promise, Sir,” Braxton whimpered.

Turning his head, I kissed him, sliding my tongue into his mouth and taking what I wanted from him. “Okay, pup, I’ll let you come as I fuck your ass so hard you scream so loud everyone at that party will know what I’m doing to you.”

“Oh God, yes, that’s what I want. I want her to know you’re fucking me,” Braxton agreed, wiggling his ass in excitement, which is how he got his nickname.

Sliding my hand between us, I removed the butt plug and lined myself up. Grabbing both hips, I slammed into him balls deep. Brax's head shot up as he let out a deep guttural moan of pleasure. I did it twice more, and the man was already coming, letting his cum splatter all over my sheets. Grabbing his cock, I milked him as I pistoned in and out of him, knowing I wouldn't be able to hold off my climax much longer. The whole process of getting to this point was foreplay for me. When it came time to do the actual fucking, I was halfway there already. With a roar, I bit down on his shoulder as I rutted up into him, breeding the fuck out of his ass while he came again in my hand.

Both of us tumbled onto the bed sweat-soaked and out of breath. We lay there for a moment as I kissed along the skin I had access to while murmuring how good he'd been. Then I slid out of him and hoisted the man up. He and I were about the same size, and I worked out to make sure I could do this for him. As all Doms know, the after care is just as important as the consent. I settled him in the tub, got the water running, and added his favorite bath salts before I joined him. Taking the washcloth, I gently scrubbed every part of his body, kissing any marks I left.

"Do you think we have a chance with her?" Braxton asked, surprising me.

"Brax, since when have you ever asked that?" I challenged. "The only way you'll know is if you go for it. That being said, it might be smart to let her have a day or two to adjust before you make a move."

Brax leaned back to look at me. “Really? You’re going to give me advice on sleeping with her?”

“Only if you invite me to play too,” I teased, kissing him on the cheek. “You know I don’t give a fuck who you sleep with because you’re always in my bed the next night. Plus, I think adding a third would make for some interesting nights.”

He let out a bark of laughter and relaxed into me, enjoying the pampering. *What would our new boss think of our dynamic? Would she submit to me too, or would we be at an impasse?* Like I told Braxton, only one way to find out.

SIX



As I expected it to be, the party was dull and boring only without the added bonus of finding something to come back and steal later on. The only spark of entertainment was catching two of the men Father introduced to me copping a feel right in the middle of a crowd. I wasn't shy about my needs by any means, happy to take what I wanted from the men I'd slept with. Still, we all have those dark fantasies, and one of mine had been to find a pair to play with.

Guys typically were open to having a threesome, but there were certain rules about interaction that kept them from letting loose and trying new things. They didn't want to appear gay and screw it up, turning the woman off if they touched each other. Whoever told men women didn't like some guy-on-guy action should be shot.

However, those two, Braxton and Jace, seemed to have zero issues with getting physical. The question was, did they play

both sides or just for one team that needed a cock between their legs?

After the cake and following Father around the room being introduced to people I'd been studying for the past several years, I was finally given a chance to leave.

"Come on, squirt, let me show you to your room. You're putting on a good act, but I can tell you're dead on your feet," Mathis whispered as he guided me away from one of the councilmen who'd been hitting on me for the past fifteen minutes.

"You're a godsend." I sighed and leaned into him. "I don't think I could have kept pretending to laugh at his horrible jokes, but I know he's one of the men who can change the vote on the zoning issue."

Mathis simply looked at me with a raised brow. "Your old man really has been making sure you keep up with current events."

"It would seem the only thing he kept from me was the new lieutenants he brought in to work specifically with me," I grumbled. "I feel like there's more to it than just wanting men who wouldn't look down on me as a woman for being in charge."

"I wouldn't be too worried," he commented, patting my arm. "This isn't the old days when you get bartered off into a marriage for a business deal. The only reason your father did that the second time was he couldn't see himself ever marrying someone he loved as much as your mother."

“Sometimes I really wish I could have known her better, and then I’m grateful I didn’t because now I don’t live with her ghost either,” I admitted. “You know Daddy best... where does Casimira fit into all this? It’s one of the only things he won’t really talk to me about.”

Mathis’s face turned into a scowl at her name. “She was your mother’s best friend and spent time around the estate keeping Natalina company as your father traveled. Honestly, I think he keeps her around because she’s one of the only women he can talk to about your mother. I’ll hand it to the woman... she doesn’t cause trouble, knows her place, and not once have I ever heard her ask for her son to be more than what Colmazio’s given him.”

“Why didn’t he marry her instead of Flora? Sounds like he might actually have feelings for Casimira,” I commented. Mathis just let out a sigh and shook his head, refusing to comment. “I wonder if she’d be up to talking to me about Mother. It would be nice to know a little more about her from a friend’s point of view. I always wonder how similar we are or if she’d be proud of me becoming the underboss.”

“She’d be so proud of you, Astin,” Mathis said, pulling me into a side hug as we paused in front of a door on the third floor of the house. “This is you. Your old man’s room is on the other side at the end of the hall. He wanted to give you some space so you didn’t feel like he was crowding you but close enough if you ever needed him.”

Mathis opened the door and stepped back for me to take a look at the room. The first space was a sitting room with an overstuffed couch and armchair facing a television with bookshelves on either side. It looked like someone already started to unpack my things from the New York house. The room's color palette was of soft pinks, grays, and creams with fluffy blankets making the whole space inviting and someplace I could escape to and relax. Moving further into the space, I found double doors that led to an office decorated in all grays with a more modern touch with built-in bookcases and large windows facing the backyard, making it feel more open. Through the office was the bedroom that carried the same colors as the office but more white and light blue. The bed was giant and had a cushioned platform frame around it so it looked like it was sunken into the floor. All the furniture was white with simple, clean lines, but like the sitting room, everything was soft fabric and begged me to snuggle in. More windows from floor-to-ceiling took up one wall, hiding the French doors that opened onto a patio overlooking the pool.

“Dare I even ask why the bed is big enough to fit a whole family?” I chuckled, turning to look at my uncle.

He just shrugged and shook his head. “He hired a designer, and they said it was the latest trend to make the bed a statement feature. Kept telling the old man he had a vision for the room that would be perfect. Clearly, they thought you needed a bed big enough for any size slumber party you might want to have.”

“This has to take custom sheets and everything.” I laughed. “Oh God, Daddy got suckered into buying something ridiculous, but I love that he tried.”

Opening one of the doors in the sleeping portion of my room, I found a walk-in closet that was more like a mini boutique. All my clothes and accessories were put away along with new additions I was going to have to check out later. The other door led to a bathroom that should have been in a resort spa, not my bedroom. Although I couldn't argue that the tub was everything a tub-loving woman could dream of.

“Is this the last of it, or is there a trap door somewhere I'm missing to the super-secret hideout?” I called as I returned to the sitting room where Mathis was relaxing on the couch.

Grinning, he patted the spot next to him. “Nope, I think half a wing is enough space for one person, don't you?”

“It's massive,” I agreed, plopping down beside him. “Like having my own apartment inside the house. It's just missing a kitchen, then I'd never have to leave the place.”

We both laughed and enjoyed the fact we were back together again. The smile on my face faded as I looked at my uncle with a serious expression. “So, you gonna give me a heads-up on how bad the fallout's gonna be? Or do I just get to find out when I show up at the next meeting with bullets flying everywhere?”

Mathis pulled me against him, and he rested his head on top of mine. My uncles have always been extra affectionate. With the training they put me through after high school, they used it as

a way to show me no matter how hard they pushed me or how rough things got, we were still family. Being the only girl out of the kids in our family doesn't hurt either. I guess you could say I was a tiny bit spoiled.

“Your old man did everything he could to get things ready for you to take your place, Astin. Problem is, he was reaching the point where leaving the spot open was causing problems. They were trying to get your half-brother into the spot instead of you. The boy is much easier to manipulate, whereas they don't have a clue what to expect with you. Being the first woman in power is more than a statement, it's changing all the rules. So many of them, even the younger generation, are brainwashed by their fathers to believe women can't run a business. Obviously, *we* don't agree since we've been fighting for you to do this the whole time.”

“That still doesn't answer my question.”

“It's not going to be pretty,” he stated. “They're going to push you to the breaking point, squirt. You're in the big leagues now, where all the players have bloody hands and don't mind shedding a little more if it gets them what they want,” Mathis continued, not really telling me anything new. “The best we could do is create a support system with your lieutenants. The plan is your old man will be working with the other heads of the allied families, leaving the rest to you. When those bastards hear the news, it will be a waiting game to see who will retaliate first.”

“You mean like the bikers who run drug distribution or the Aprians who think they rule the border?” I questioned, trying to figure out who would be the bigger threat.

“Don’t forget the local gangs who are the dealers and don’t like being the small fish in the city. They give us our cut for getting the goods here and keeping law enforcement off them, but if they feel like they have a reason to rebel, they will. We don’t know when it’s gonna happen or if it will. All that depends on how you handle yourself right out the gate. I know you’re trained to be as deadly as we could make you, but training versus actually having to kill someone are two extremely different situations.”

“Mathis, are you worried I won’t follow through?” I asked as I pulled away from him to see his face. “I know I haven’t always shown it, but this is what I want for my life. Already I can see how to improve things for the family, better ways of doing business as well as new avenues to gain power and leverage. The only way I’m not going to run *my* family business is if I’m dead. Don’t worry about me. I’ll make sure they know messing with me is the last thing they want to do.”

He kissed my forehead and got up from the couch. “Glad to hear it, squirt. I always hassled your old man about never asking you if you even wanted to do this. It puts me at ease to know you do, and whatever happens next will be worth getting you to this point. Get some sleep. You have your first meeting with your lieutenants after breakfast.”

Mathis opened my bedroom door then paused, looking over his shoulder at me. “Oh, I should probably mention they live here in the main house and not just on the property like Athos and I do. Your old man wanted them to be at your beck and call no matter the time of day.” With a wink that had me even more suspicious of Daddy’s motives regarding these men, he left.

I decided that was a problem for another day, and I was wiped out after all the excitement. Glancing at the clock, I saw it was two in the morning. Father always had breakfast served at seven-thirty sharp—he didn’t give a shit what happened the day before. The man had a cruel streak when it came to routine—if you didn’t follow it, you went without. He’d made sure Glenda upheld his routine even in the Huntingford house so when I got home, it was normal life.



The shrill sound of my alarm pulled me out of a deep sleep, the kind where you don’t know what day it is or where you are when you open your eyes.

Of course, being in a different room doesn’t help things either, but after a moment, I remembered I was back home in Eastrose at the family estate. Groaning, I crawled out of my giant bed and shuffled into the bathroom where I looked at myself in the mirror. I’d been so tired, I broke the cardinal rule of skin care. I didn’t wash my makeup off before going to bed, so I looked like the girl from *The Ring*.

“Oh God,” I muttered, brushing my hair back out of my face.
“Shower, we need a shower, stat.”

The shower was one that didn't have a door—you just walked around the curved wall into the wide-open tiled space. I fiddled with the overly high-tech panel to get the shower on and found the whole ceiling was the showerhead. Another button turned on the sprayer heads in the walls, so no matter where I stood, I wasn't left out in the cold. Whoever came up with this concept was a godsend, and I'd kiss them for making this experience happen. As much as I wanted to linger, I knew I didn't have time. I'd only given myself thirty minutes to get ready and make it downstairs to the dining room on time. I'd spotted it last night on the first floor and guessed that's where we'd be eating.

Once I was clean, I blow-dried my hair and was thankful for its ability to pin straight naturally, leaving me with less work in the end. Quickly, I put on a simple combination of makeup and headed for the closet. Today would most likely be full of meetings and getting up to speed on what was happening in the family business. Then there was the whole figuring out what the hell to do with the lieutenants.

Slipping into tight black slacks and a silk ivory wrap shirt, I wanted to keep business casual but added a little flair with the metallic rose gold heels. Grabbing my phone, I headed out into the hall, moving swiftly down the stairs trying to clasp my watch and ended up crashing right into someone. I bounced off them as the impact knocked me off balance, and just when I

thought I was going to eat shit, a hand wrapped around my arm and pulled me back against their chest.

“Whoa there, Tin-Tin,” Ryker chuckled. “Someone’s cutting it a little close to breakfast.”

I groaned internally. Of course, it would be Ryker because the universe was just that cruel to me. “Clearly, I’m not the only one if you’re here and not already in the dining room.”

“Your father asked me to come get you in case you didn’t know where the dining room was,” Ryker explained with a creased brow, clearly surprised by my snarky attitude.

The two of us always had an easy friendship. He’d never been on the receiving end of the tongue lashings I gave to others when they deserved it. “We just going to stand here, or are you going to show me where to go?”

“Tin—”

“Don’t. Don’t call me that,” I snapped, unable to hear him using his nickname for me like nothing had happened between us. “Only my best friend called me that, and he decided to lie about a few things while abandoning me for my own father.”

Hurt flashed across Ryker’s face as if surprised I was upset with him. He should’ve known better. I wasn’t a woman who forgave others easily. Stepping around him, I moved across the landing to the stairs to the first floor, ignoring him as he opened his mouth to say something. This wasn’t the time or the place for us to hash out our issues. It was too public, and everyone was watching my every move until they formed their

opinion about me. Thankfully, he kept silent, but I could feel him close behind me as if he wasn't willing to let me ignore him completely.

The second I passed through the door and entered the dining room, a pleasant smile quickly appeared on my lips as I realized we were the last to arrive. "Good morning, everyone. My apologies if I kept you from being able to eat."

"You're forgiven, dear daughter. It's your first morning here, after all," Father greeted me, motioning for me to take a seat to his right. This was the spot reserved for the underboss and the underboss alone—the title I now carried.

Slipping into my seat, I shook out my napkin and placed it on my lap as a woman came over with the coffee pot to fill my mug. As if on cue, the platters of breakfast food were set on the table, and everyone dug in as a separate plate was set before Father. His food was portioned out and tasted like they used to back in the medieval days to check for poison.

To my surprise, another plate was handed to me as well, after I'm assuming someone tasted it. My gaze lifted to meet an identical pair of emerald eyes. Father just shook his head slightly, telling me to leave it alone, so I did. It would seem becoming the first female underboss would be as dangerous as being the boss himself. *Oh goodie.*

SEVEN



The table was quiet as we started to eat, the only sound was the silverware scraping on the plates and the clink of glasses. The men I was now to oversee seemed stiff, unlike my uncles and Father who were totally relaxed. From where I sat, it gave me time to take a good look at all of them from under my lashes. I was curious as to what each brought to the business that my father felt was enough to have this position. Lieutenants were the inner circle and ran the biggest parts of what brought money into the family. Each of them were paid handsomely and lived here in the house, most likely on the second floor, leaving the third floor to Daddy and me.

“After breakfast, I figured it would be best to have you and your lieutenants talk business,” Father said, breaking the silence. “You boys will show her where the leaders’ conference room is, won’t you?”

“Of course, Boss,” the suave man, Gunner was his name, answered far too eagerly.

Oh, he was a brown-noser of the highest quality, making sure he was the teacher’s pet at all times. Well, he was soon going to find out I wasn’t easy to impress. After what I’ve seen and done in my short life preparing for this role, I valued authenticity above all else.

“Boss, are we to assume that Miss Caprioni doesn’t know anything about the business if you want us to educate her? It would seem highly impractical to go over that much detail otherwise,” a man stated at the end of the table.

I tilted my head as I observed him for a moment and found only honesty in his eyes. He wasn’t trying to make a dig at me for being a woman or getting put into a position over him, he truly wanted to know the answer. His dark blue eyes hidden behind a pair of stylish round glasses met mine without flinching.

“I think it would be best to assume I know everything you know, but take this meeting more as a way for me to get to learn your skills, what *you* bring to the table,” I suggested.

“It would be impossible for you to know everything I know. Even Boss doesn’t know everything I do,” Atticus pointed out. “Although I do acknowledge your strategy to have me prove my skills to you since you don’t know how intelligent I am.”

A genuine smile grew on my face as he spoke. This man was an unexpected gift, and he probably didn’t even realize it—no, I *know* he didn’t realize it. Deception wasn’t something he

probably understood or saw the point in practicing. “Atticus, correct?”

“Yes, Miss Caprioni.”

“Please, call me Astin. I’d very much like us to be close friends,” I said, perching my chin on the back of my hand.

“It’s quite refreshing to meet a man with your obvious intellect as well as upfront manner of speech.”

Atticus blinked at me a few times before the corner of his mouth pulled up in what I might guess was his version of a smile. “I’m glad you appreciate my direct manner. Many people tell me I lack the social skills needed to interact well with people.”

“Then they don’t realize the joy of knowing exactly where you stand with someone,” I answered, sitting back in my chair as I looked at the others. “You guys want to know the key to working with me? It’s simple really, but few have the balls to pull it off. Own who you really are. Don’t give me what you think I want from you, be your true self. Do that while giving me your best, and I’ll respect you far more. To have someone real enough to tell me I’m being an idiot is worth more to me than having my ass kissed and fail, even though you knew it was a bad idea from the start.”

The guys all looked at each other like I had three heads. Well, everyone but Ryker, who just watched me with a smirk. He was well aware of this skill, having been that person in my life, but he would have an uphill battle proving to me he deserved to be in my inner circle once more.

Father reached over and patted my hand lovingly, giving me a wink when I met his gaze. “I have my own meetings to deal with, but when you’re finished with them, come find me in my office. There are other meetings this afternoon we’ll need to do together. I tried to make your first day as easy as possible, but I have a feeling the rest of the week will get rather exciting.” Having said what he needed to say, Father pushed back from the table and left with my uncles following after him.

“Everyone finished?” I asked as I motioned for my coffee to be refilled.

They all murmured their agreement and rose from the table, pushing their chairs in. It made me smile to see how Father’s obsession with good manners has trickled down to those in the inner circle. Sipping my coffee, I trailed after them as we walked to the back portion of the house. We stopped where a set of thick, carved wooden doors greeted us. Ryker typed in a code and placed his hand on a scanner before the doors opened and revealed the inner sanctum of the Caprioni Family business.

“At some point today, I’ll need to put you into the security system and have you create a pin number. There are a few secure locations on the property that will require this method of entry,” Ryker informed me, his tone all business, unlike earlier.

Calling this place a conference room wasn’t really fair to the space. It had high vaulted ceilings with a library on the second

story full of all the information we could possibly need about the business—in code, of course. The only people who could read it were those with the last name Caprioni so no one could use it against us. The entire space was designed with deep polished wood, black metal accents and railings, giving off a sense of power and masculinity. The table itself was massive, with twelve leather armchairs set around it, taking center stage in the room. Off to the side was a bar stocked with everything a person could need, ready for a late night of work or celebration at the success of a deal. I went to the head of the table furthest away from the door where my father would sit if he were here. Seeing as he wasn't, I decided it wouldn't matter all that much if I used it.

“You can't sit there,” Atticus called out the second he saw my ass hit the chair. “Only the boss sits there.”

“Normally, I'd agree with you, but seeing as he isn't here, and I hold the position of underboss, I'm the highest-ranking member here,” I challenged to see what he'd say.

Atticus paused and seemed to process my words. Nodding, he sat once again at the end of the table. The others found their spots which were also the same as they were when we had breakfast.

“What's the ranking?” I inquired, leaning forward onto my elbows.

“What?” Gunner responded.

“Clearly, there's some sort of ranking in the way you all sit at the table. It seems Atticus is the lowest member of the group,

even though he deals with the money. To me, that seems like it would give him a higher rank, so it isn't about your role. Hmm... maybe it's social-based, but that doesn't make sense either since Gunner would be down with Atticus. It's clear no one likes you." I mused aloud.

Gunner spluttered at my words. "What do you mean no one likes me?"

Rolling my eyes, I gave him a knowing look. "Really? No one likes a teacher's pet, and you, my man, are absolutely filling that role to a T. It might work with my father for whatever reason, but that shit won't fly with me. Keep it up if you want to see how long you'll last."

Gunner gaped at me like he had no idea how to respond, his mind short-circuiting. Ryker couldn't hold back his laughter any longer and tossed back his head, the rich sound I'd missed filling the air. *Fuck*, I couldn't be this bad. His laughter shouldn't affect me the same way it always had to the point I craved hearing it. Ryker might have been my first love, but I was a different woman now. My guess is he's changed quite a bit as well.

Clearing my throat, I went back to the question I'd asked before getting sidetracked. "So who's going to fill me in on the secret code?"

"It's a combination of things... those who the boss calls on more often than others, who has been around longer, and yeah, who gets along well with each other," Braxton shared while Ryker tried to compose himself. "The boss lets us choose our

spots except for the one reserved for the underboss, which turned out to be you.”

That comment had another question pop into my head. “Were any of you gunning for my place? Remember, I told you to be honest with me. I’d rather know now.”

“No, Miss Astin,” Atticus answered, his tone firm. “Boss made it clear he knew who was going to take that spot, and no one would measure up. If any of us even considered jockeying for that position, we would have been killed.”

“Huh, definitely sounds like a good reason to leave that temptation alone. Well, good,” I said, clapping my hands together. “Glad I don’t have to worry about watching my back or killing one of you in my first week on the job. I’m counting on there being others I’ll have to deal with, but having to find a new lieutenant would be so much work when Father already hand-picked you all.”

“You would kill one of us that easily?” a new voice asked.

Looking down the table at the speaker, I found it was Luca. Those were the first words he’d spoken since I met him last night. I had a strong hunch that silence was the norm for Mr. International. Being in charge of smuggling anything and everything in and out of the country meant keeping your mouth shut. He’d been charged with handling some of the most dangerous people—silence was a wise move.

His hair was short but not shaved off like Jace’s. Instead, it was tight on the sides showing skin but enough on the top for some product. The hoop in his nose gave him an edgy look

that added to the fact he was completely covered in black and white tattoos. Since I hadn't seen him naked, this was my best guess, but from what I could see with his sleeves rolled up and the buttons undone, had me pretty sure.

Luca's image was the poster child for the mafia aesthetic, and what he lacked in bulk he made up for with the darkness I could see hiding in his amber eyes. This man has killed many times over and would lose no sleep doing it again if it served his purpose.

Why did that thought make me want to rub my legs together to get some friction on my extremely interested lady cave?

“Do you really think I was raised by a mob boss and not taught that life was fleeting?” I asked in return.

“That's not an answer,” Luca pressed, narrowing his eyes as if he sensed weakness in me.

I closed my eyes for a moment and reached deep inside myself where I hid the reality of my upbringing. After high school when no one would notice the evidence of my training, I was shown the reality of my future. I sometimes wondered if what I'd gone through was how they trained soldiers who needed to understand not to fear death or the feeling of dying. The logic being that getting lost in the panic would kill you faster. Those days were filled with memories I didn't want to relive, but I needed to pull that cold, detached darkness to the forefront. When I opened my eyes, I met Luca's gaze, allowing my darkness to greet him. He wanted an answer, so I showed him that what he saw on the outside wasn't all I had going for me.

His brows rose slightly, the only sign he got the answer he wanted. “All right then, I’ll keep that in mind.”

“What the fuck was that? Some kind of Jedi mind trick or something? What do you need to keep in mind?” Braxton blurted, his head swiveling from left to right, trying to figure out what he missed.

Braxton was an interesting character to me. I know he was the one who instigated that stunt with Jace last night, but Jace had welcomed it, taunting me with that knowledge. Braxton was a playboy, the life of the party, the one everyone wanted to be around. People sought out his attention, craving to be acknowledged and included in the ‘cool’ circle. The funny thing was, I knew it was all an act. The playboy was putting on a good show, creating a wall so no one truly knew who he was. Being flashy enough on the surface kept anyone from trying to look behind the curtain, believing his lies.

“Nothing you need to worry about, pretty boy. Luca and I just came to an understanding, is all,” I dismissed with a wave of my hand.

“Gunner,” I called, snapping him to attention. “I want you to switch spots with Atticus. Luca, you and Jace switch as well. For now, this will be the order you’ll sit in until I ask for it to change.”

“Why?” Atticus asked as he got up and moved to sit to my left.

“That’s for me to know and you to follow orders,” I responded, trying to keep a blank face. “One day I hope you’ll

just trust me when I make requests like this. I want what's best for the business as well as for all of you.”

What would they do if they knew it was because, at this moment, those two were my favorite, and I wanted to sit next to them?

The others were going to have to work for the honor of being my favorite. Although the whole thing will be obvious once they do something to piss me off and banish them to the end of the table. My intuition told me these men were going to be a fun puzzle to figure out. If Father wanted me to trust them with my life, then I would need to know everything about them. There would be no secrets these men have that I don't know about. Otherwise, I'd have to find people I could trust instead.

EIGHT



Gunner

Sitting in my new position at the foot of the table, furthest from our new underboss, I tried not to show just how pissed I was. First, she called me a brown-noser, saying no one liked me, and then she cast me to the back of the bus like a disobedient child. I had zero fucking problem with her being a woman or in a place of power, but I took issue with her not showing us an ounce of respect. Every one of us busted our asses to earn the right to sit at this table and be her lieutenants.

What do I have to show for that? Being scolded in front of the others I knew didn't appreciate me either. I know exactly what they thought of me, but shit like that didn't matter when there was work to be done. Braxton could grow his whole area tenfold if he stopped dicking around figuratively and literally. None of these men, except Atticus, put in the work they needed to for this kind of job. When you got to where we are in this world, it wasn't the time to slow down and live it up.

You never know when the next up-and-comer will try to take our place.

“Where would you like to start this debrief?” Astin asked, picking up her coffee and taking a sip.

While I might not see what the boss was thinking putting her in charge yet, at least she was easy on the eyes. Her full lips shouldn't make drinking out of a China mug look so erotic. Astin seemed to have this flawless beauty about her, something that came from an inner confidence no one could teach. I watched as her emerald eyes scanned the table waiting for one of us to speak up first. Normally, I started things off, but that wasn't going to happen today after what she'd said to me.

“I believe for someone to effectively run a business, no matter what kind it is, they need to know the flow of money,” Atticus spoke up. “Many don't agree with that logic, but they're also the people who file for bankruptcy two years after opening.”

The smirk on Astin's face made me feel irrationally jealous of Atticus, something I *never* expected to have happen. *What was the brain doing that made her react like that?*

“You make a valid point, Atticus. Let's start with the financials then. While I have no doubt you're aware of personal accounts as well as business, I like to stick strictly to business information at this moment,” she instructed, making her wishes known while acknowledging his value.

Normally, it took people some time to adjust to how best to interact with Atticus. The man took everything at face value—

what you said is what you meant in his mind. Each of us struggled when we started to work together as it became apparent Atticus couldn't read body language or subtle hints you could normally make to let someone know to change their behavior. The worst was when he was sharing information and abruptly stopped, telling the person he wasn't permitted to speak more about it. During a few meetings with outside companies where I needed to have him along to go over their financial reports, it had ruffled some feathers in the wrong way. I'll hand it to the guy, he learned fast once he understood there was a problem.

"If you could please set your rules and expectations for these meetings, it would be of great help to me," Atticus informed Astin.

She cocked her head, slightly confused. "Could you please elaborate on that? I just want to make sure I'm giving you the answers you're looking for."

My jaw dropped at how smoothly she maneuvered around that question. Most would start to get frustrated or expect him to answer the original question asked.

"Certainly, Miss Astin," he replied before pulling out his phone to read off a list he'd made. "These are just the major issues I was looking to have addressed."

"Would you mind if I read over them quickly, some might be faster to cover than others," she suggested, holding out her hand.

Atticus handed it over willingly which was even odder since he didn't let anyone touch his phone. Always said it held too many secrets, even if they were encrypted.

“Okay, let's start with the simple ones. If you need to go to the bathroom, please just let me know before you excuse yourself from the meeting. There are absolutely no issues with eating or drinking if we are in here for over an hour. Honestly, you wouldn't need to wait that long. I feel after a half hour, snacks are needed. Hmm,” she hummed, glancing over the rest. “We already covered seating arrangements and that I prefer to be called Astin. At any time, if you need to grab files, laptops, or tablets, please do so just keep me in the loop if it's not in the same space we are meeting in. Oh, this is a good one to bring up. When is it acceptable for us to summon you from your bedroom or wake you up?”

She handed the phone back before pulling out her own, and a message appeared on my screen.

Unknown Number: *Astin— winky face emoji.*

“Now you all have my number and obviously I have yours,” Astin shared. “This isn't a normal job... we don't work nine to five. The Caprioni Family business is running twenty-four-seven worldwide in many cases. If you have even the slightest inclination that I'm needed, you call me. If I don't answer and it's the middle of the night, wake my ass up out of bed. If you men, as my lieutenants, can't handle something, then I step in.

The boss is now my problem, and I'll decide when he gets looped in on a situation. This will be new since you haven't had an underboss to go to, but you do now."

All of us nodded, knowing our acknowledgment was expected on such a matter.

"Delightful," she said with a smile. "Now, let's carry on. I know you all have important things to deal with, and this meeting will take longer than normal."

There was no way this meeting wouldn't last all day if she were starting with Atticus. He covered every single cent that went in and out of this operation. If he felt like he needed to prove himself, he'd give her everything he had.

"Excuse me while I grab the tablets so we can all follow along," Atticus explained as he got up and collected the tech from their charging ports.

We should have grabbed them when we got in like we normally do, but I feel like all of us are a little off-kilter. Boss ran things on a tight schedule, but Astin didn't seem to favor that side of her father. Or so I thought, but that opinion changed once we got into the meat of things. Two hours later, we'd gone over money, clubs and skin, gambling, and were almost finished with Luca's import-export and distribution business.

"Let's wait to see how things go after the announcement of my arrival and appointment have had time to circulate. I know there have been issues with the border crossing and stopping our ships before they make it into our country's waters," Astin

said, looking over the log of the two ships stuck out in the ocean unable to pass through Aprian waters to get to us.

Luca nodded and sat back, setting down his pen. “That’s all I have for you unless there was something else you saw as we covered things.”

“I’m curious... what if we reached out to Wakesh to see if they would be interested in letting us build a harbor there? Yes, it will mean we have to truck the goods in and across Mansara, but we could avoid this whole issue. It’s a small fishing village, and right now, the economy isn’t supporting their needs. We could even offer to truck in their fish as well to sweeten the deal. Once word gets out there’s another port, and we don’t need to even get close to Aprian waters, it will be a win-win,” Astin shared, clearly having thought about this before today.

There’s no way she could handle all this material without having spent a massive amount of time catching up. Knowing the boss, my money was he’d been grooming his daughter for this job for far longer than we realized. When she told us at breakfast she knew everything already, it was obvious she wasn’t kidding.

Luca scratched his chin, mulling over her idea. “The people of Wakesh are remnants of the original people who lived in Mansara before the rest of the world started to colonize it. Many of them are wary when it comes to dealing with big city folk for a good reason. They’ve been fucked over one too many times.”

“All I ask is that you think about it, maybe send out a feeler or two. If it means going out to meet them and talking face to face, we’ll make that happen. Just do me the favor of giving the idea a chance before we toss it in the trash. You never know when people might surprise you,” Astin commented before turning her gaze to me. “Looks like you’re up, Gunny.”

I grimaced at the nickname but let it slide since I did have a matter to go over with her. “Currently, all our projects are right on schedule. The weather has been clear even though it’s spring, helping to keep things moving along. We have a few big clients that are in talks about creating an amusement park near the shoreline. There’s a massive stretch of land that’s been left abandoned, and they want to go for it.”

“I feel a *but* coming,” Astin teased with a grin as she popped an M&M into her mouth.

“But, the land was once where an oil refinery used to be located. Another developer managed to get the building and everything demolished and cleared. When they did the testing, it was found the ground was potentially toxic, and they feared removing any soil from the site might contaminate more. Then a NDF or Natural Defense Fund stepped in, saying that the contamination might be leaking into the ocean,” I shared, laying out the whole matter as it stood now.

Astin tapped her chin with her pen as she frowned down at her tablet. “Has a third-party group done their own investigation into the land or the claim about the water issue?”

“No, I tried to get the city to add it to the ballot, but they said what’s on there is fixed, and they can’t change it,” I answered. “We even tried to offer a whole campaign to prove the project was going to give the plot of land new life. Everything would be paved over so there wouldn’t be a risk to the people at the park. They didn’t go for it, saying it didn’t look good to ignore the problems and just cover them up.”

“They’re right,” she stated. “What needs to happen is we hire a third-party group that has no ties to any government program or activist group. I mean, the science people who only care about getting the truth and telling it like it is. Once we have an answer from them on how bad the problem is, we can decide if it’s worth the fight. If it is, then we have the report to hand in and have our client pitch the new life bit, leaving the mayor out of it. Once we have the people’s backing, they’ll have to cave and switch the zoning.”

The room fell silent as she finished explaining her plan. Somehow, she’d seen what we’d all overlooked without needing to use the Caprioni name or funds, keeping us clean of any backlash. Everything would be handled by the client, and all we’d need to do is estimate the cost of things into the loan they were asking for.

“That’s rather brilliant,” I offered. “I know just the team to have investigate the land. They’re the best and aren’t tied to anything that would bring their findings into question.”

“Good, my job on the surface might be to keep things running day to day when it’s really all about protecting the business,”

Astin explained. “While these might be big clients, if this project is too risky, then it will fail, and they’ll never pay back their money. Better to have the information in our hands and be fully informed before we give up any cash, risking our asses. Idiots who want a cheap piece of land aren’t the clients we want. Besides, that shit might give all people six toes or create some deadly disease that could turn them into zombies.” Astin pointed out, keeping a completely straight face as she spoke.

“Miss Astin,” Atticus cut in. “You do know that zombies are a work of fiction. There has never been a case of modern medicine reviving tissue in such a manner.”

Astin let out a heavy sigh. “Thanks for crushing my dreams, Ace.”

“You must have me confused with someone else, I’m Atticus. Are you feeling unwell?” Atticus questioned, his concern for her health fascinating to me. “We have been covering a vast amount of information... is it possible you’ve acquired a headache?”

Astin laughed as she reached over and took Atticus’s hand. “I’m just fine, but thank you for being worried. When I called you Ace, it was my attempt at a nickname. If you don’t like it, I can try something else.”

“Why would you want to give me a nickname? I believe this is something only people who are close friends do,” Atticus challenged.

Astin tugged on his hand, bringing it closer to her, and clasped it in both of hers. “Remember I told you I hoped we could be friends? Well, in an effort to speed along the inevitable nature of our friendship, I wanted to give you a nickname. Are you okay with that?”

Atticus actually took a moment to think her request over before giving one sharp nod of his head. “I’ve never had a female friend before, but I think it would be nice. As for the nickname, I’m not sure I enjoy being called Ace. My mother used to call me Atty. I think I’d be more comfortable with that option.”

“All right then, Atty it is,” she announced. “Would you do me the honor as my friend just to call me by my name without the miss?”

“Since we are friends, that sounds reasonable to me,” Atticus agreed.

Astin’s face lit up as she released his hand and stood up. “Well, I believe that should cover things, don’t you?”

“Astin,” Ryker commented, clearly having been skipped over.

“See you all at dinner?” she asked, ignoring Ryker entirely. When we answered, she gave us a wave and left the room.

Braxton burst out laughing and slapped his friend on the back. “Oh, man, you’re so in the dog house. How the fuck are you going to get yourself out of this situation?”

“She forgets, I know her better than anyone,” Ryker muttered. “Looks like I’m going to have to pull out the big guns for this

situation. I'm not going to let up until we hash this shit out. She's going to have to talk to me at some point. There's no way she can ignore me forever."

"This I can't wait to see," Braxton said, leaning back in his chair, snickering. "She's going to eat you alive."

NINE



The meeting with the guys had been an enlightening view into their skills. While I knew all the issues they brought up already, it was nice to finally have someone to share my ideas with. The one I'd been thinking about the most was the issue of getting our inventory in and out of the country. Having to deal with our fucking nosy neighbors getting all up in our shit was becoming a problem.

Luca had been more than willing to let me share, and when he hadn't shot it down right away, I was thrilled. Having all the knowledge and keeping up with the changes in a business wasn't the same as working with the team firsthand. Then when Gunner brought up the whole zoning issue, I wasn't sure if this project was actually something we wanted in the first place. Yes, the people wanting the money were a safe group to take a risk on since their track record was stellar, but I still didn't see this happening. Times like this I'd always wished for more information, and now I could make that happen.

Still deep in thought, I headed up the two flights of stairs assuming Daddy wanted to talk with me in his private office. Without thinking, I knocked on his door and stepped into his study, making me pause. When I was little, this had been Mother's room, where she spent her day drawing or working on her poetry. She was the next Shel Silverstein, Daddy used to tell me when he talked about her. From the vague memories I still have of her, I remember her always loving to read to me in this room. Now it has been changed into something that was clearly Daddy's domain.

When I didn't see him, I took a wild guess and assumed our room setup was similar, and I walked over to the door that should lead to his office and knocked. When I didn't hear an answer, I opened it just in case he was on his phone or something, but instead of finding my father, I found Casimira coming out of Daddy's bedroom. Both of us paused at the sight of each other, and a smile bloomed on her face.

Casimira was a stunning woman, even at her age, with long silver hair that hung down in thick waves. She was wearing a button-down blouse with a forest green skirt that had a little flare to it so it swished around her long legs.

"Astin, oh darling, it's so good to see you," Casimira gushed as she reached out to take my hands, kissing me on both cheeks in greeting. "Here, I thought I was going to have to wait until after dinner to be able to see you."

"Ah yes, I was looking for my father. He said he'd be in his office. I suppose I assumed it would be this one," I stated,

trying to work past the shock of seeing her so at home in this space.

While I *knew* my father and Casimira were together, it was a far cry from seeing it right in front of my face. Flora didn't bother me because I knew Daddy didn't really care about her, so they lived separate lives. Casimira, on the other hand, she's had a child with Daddy even though he made sure I knew I'd always be his firstborn.

"Oh, I'll bet he's in the public office since he's been in meetings all day. I suppose he wanted you to join him, hmm?" she inquired, resting a hand on my arm. "Come on, I'll show you where it is on the first floor. This house is a little tricky to navigate with how massive it is, but I don't need to tell you that, do I?" Casimira rambled. "I'm sorry, dear, it's just I've been so excited, and if I'm being honest, dreading this day of our meeting as adults."

I frowned at her as we left the rooms for the main hall. "Why would that be?"

Casimira paused and looked me in the eye. "I need you to know that your mother was like a sister to me. The two of us had been friends since we were twelve years old, and she was my family. There's no way for me to tell you what to think or how to feel, but I just hope you'll give me a chance to be someone in your life. A friend, someone who's cared about you like my own child since the day you were born. More like an aunt, I suppose, not at all looking to compete with the saint who was your mother."

Watching her as she spoke, I got the feeling she genuinely loved my mother, and she did care about me. I appreciated what she was trying to say, but I hadn't quite made up my mind how I felt about things just yet.

"Why don't we give each other some time," I offered. "It's a lot coming back here, starting this new role, and finding where I fit once more in this house. It's been twenty years since I was back home, and a lot has changed. I think I just need a little time to settle in, and then maybe we can work on what we want to be to each other."

She beamed at me. "That's a fair request and one I can gladly agree to. Just know that if you need anything, I'm happy to help however I can. It's hard to know who our friends and foes are in this line of work sometimes."

"Yes, yes, it is," I agreed as we headed back down to the first floor.

Casimira led me through a maze of halls, past so many sitting rooms and doors I wasn't sure where I was in the house. I was going to need a set of blueprints so I could look over them and get a better sense of the layout. Using them for my nightly prowls, I'd found how useful they were once I got used to reading them.

"Here you are," she announced, stopping at a set of double doors with one slightly ajar.

I could hear voices from inside, but I recognized them as Father's and Athos's. "Thank you. It would have been hell trying to find it on my own."

“You’re very welcome, darling. I’ll see you at dinner,” she said, giving me another smile and pat on the arm before leaving.

Pushing the door open, I entered the office and found Daddy, my uncles, and Ryker all chatting casually together. They looked up, and everyone smiled upon seeing me but Ryker. He just smirked like he knew I’d gotten lost.

“Hi, everyone,” I greeted and sat next to Daddy on the couch. “How’s everyone’s morning been?”

“Oh, you know, one enlightening meeting after another,” Mathis muttered. “Sometimes I wonder how people ended up in the positions they’re in.”

The men laughed, and Athos elbowed Mathis. “Careful, some people could say the same about you.”

“Fuck off. We’ve got one more of these phone calls to get through then we can move on to other issues,” Mathis grumbled.

I looked questioningly at Mathis, but when he didn’t share, I looked at Daddy to see if he was going to enlighten me.

“While we are our own people and run our own business, we still have to inform the motherland about major changes in power,” Daddy explained, rubbing his jaw. “These men are older than the dawn of time. So explaining that you’ve been appointed my heir and underboss has taken some navigation we didn’t plan on.”

Nodding, my gaze fell on Ryker. “What brings you here?”

“Since our meeting got done much faster than any of us expected and Boss still has another phone call, I thought we could do your security intake,” Ryker shared.

“You couldn’t have mentioned that when we ended the meeting?” I shot back.

“Oh, I absolutely would have shared this information, but since you decided to ignore me, I came here. Figured Boss would agree it was a good use of the time while they did the formalities,” he reasoned.

Glowing at him, I crossed my arms. “Right, and it had nothing to do with letting it slip to my father that I blew you off?”

Ryker’s eyes went wide, and he placed a hand on his chest. “Why on earth would I do something so childish as that? We’ve grown up in the last seven years gaining the ability to handle things like adults.”

“Okay, you two had to have dated back in the day to fight like that,” Mathis commented. “Wait, have you slept together?”

“Mathis,” Father snapped. “We’ll not be talking about such matters. While I’m not oblivious to the fact that neither my daughter nor Ryker are still virgins, there’s no need to bring up such matters. What happens in Astin’s personal life is left for Astin to deal with personally. There will be enough people in her life trying to tell her how to do things, and we’ll not be one of them when it comes to this area.”

Mathis looked properly scolded, and I knew he didn't mean any harm by it. Over the three years I trained with them before they had to return to the estate, we'd developed a rather sarcastic comradery. Poking fun at each other kept things light and easy between us when what I was forced to endure was anything but.

"It's all right, Father. I'm more than able to put my uncle in his place. I've done it many times before," I reassured Daddy, resting a hand on his arm. "Although I do appreciate you not feeling the need to monitor that aspect of my life."

Daddy looked at me, his eyes serious, making me sit up slightly straighter, realizing he was about to say something important. "Astin, what I want most for you is to be happy. Selfishly, I want you by my side, working to help me take this empire to the next level. I knew making you the underboss meant it would be much harder for you to have someone special in your life. Find your happiness however it works for you, my dearest daughter, no matter who it might be with. Hell, I don't care if it's with a man, woman, or more than one partner, just find what will make you happy."

While I'd known my father was progressive in many ways, this stunned me. He'd given me blanket approval, trusting I'd choose what worked for me no matter what it looked like.

"Thank you, Daddy," I whispered, meant only for him to hear.

Daddy took my hand and pressed a kiss to the back of it. "I want you to be able to love like I haven't gotten to. Now go with Ryker. What he needs to go over is incredibly important

and will enable you to have access to everything pertaining to the Caprioni business.”

Begrudgingly, I nodded and stood. “Should I come back here when we’re done?”

“Truthfully, I was expecting you to keep them until lunch. I scheduled all our joint meetings after that at one. Feel free to join us in the dining room or take lunch in your own room if you have things you wish to look over. Breakfast is mandatory as well as dinner unless there’s another urgent matter,” Father informed me. “If you wish to have lunch in your room, just let Gerald know or use any of the phones to dial pound zero-one. That will connect you to the kitchen, and the staff will answer.”

“Swanky,” I said with a grin and leaned down to kiss his cheek. “I’ll see you later then.”

Following Ryker to the security office, neither one of us tried to start a conversation. Instead, I spent most of it taking in the features of my home, trying to create landmarks to find my way back. When we came to the back of the house, I was confused as to where we were going until he stepped out onto the back patio. Off to the side was a small building the size of a two-car garage that held all the security for the house.

Ryker opened the door and ushered me in first, causing four men to snap to attention, leaping out of their chairs. I tried not to smirk at the terrified look on their faces as they gawked at me then realized that Ryker was there too.

“Mr. Ryker,” one of the men greeted, nodding his head to the man. “Is there something we can do for you both?”

Stepping forward, I reached out a hand. “Astin Caprioni, nice to meet you.”

“Kevin, madam,” he said as he tried to grasp my hand for all of a second.

I wasn’t going to let him give me a limp-fish handshake because he was scared to hurt me, so I caught his hand, refusing to let him pull it back. “Kevin, can I give you a piece of advice?” I asked, keeping a firm grip on his hand still.

“When you shake a person’s hand, you tell them a lot about yourself. This is why you need to think of it like your first impression. Now tell me, the handshake you gave me, what do you think it says about you?” I asked.

It was almost as if I could hear him gulp, trying to figure out how to answer my question. “Ah, I suppose it didn’t really put my best foot forward. It was timid, kind of clammy, and might make you think I was afraid to squeeze too hard.”

“That was a fabulous answer and tells me you’re an incredibly introspective man,” I praised with a smile. Then I shifted my grip so when I squeezed, it ground his hand bones together, making him cry out in pain and drop to his knees. “Now, Kevin, what would you say my handshake says about me?”

Kevin didn’t answer right away as sweat broke out on his forehead, and a groan of pain leaked out of his mouth.

“I’m sorry I missed that. Can you speak up?” I pressed and leaned in closer.

“You’re in charge and not at all fragile,” Kevin wheezed out through the pain.

Releasing his hand, I tossed it away from me and looked at the other men in the room. “Did you hear that, boys? When I walk into a room, I expect to be greeted *before* my lieutenant. He might be your boss, but I’m his. We got that?” I demanded.

All the men nodded and mumbled a bunch of yes madams at me.

“For fuck’s sake, you’re all running security for the Caprioni Family, and yet you’re a bunch of mumbling idiots? Speak up, talk clearly, and for the love of God, stop calling me madam. You will call me Mistress or Lady Astin, take your pick, but nothing else unless I say otherwise,” I ordered. “Now let’s try this again. Do you understand the rules?”

“Yes, Mistress,” all four men said in unison.

“Delightful, now get back to work. Ryker or I will let you know if we need something,” I informed them and turned to my lieutenant. “After you.”

Ryker smirked and headed for a door where he punched in a code and used his handprint to open it. Behind the door was something I’d expect to find in the FBI or something. Screens were placed on one whole wall and flipped through various locations’ security cameras. There was a large desk I assumed

Ryker used since he sat behind it and started to type away on the keyboard.

“You’re not going to say anything about what just happened?” I asked, hands on my hips.

Ryker glanced at me and shook his head. “No, Mistress, I believe you were in the right to do what you did. It’s going to take time for the men to figure out you’re not a person to fuck around with. Correcting their behavior is going to have them talking, and word will spread faster, making it so you don’t need to keep doing shit like that.”

I just cocked a brow but decided to let it go, taking a seat in one of the chairs across from him. “So what do you need from me?”

Rolling his chair to a set of shelves, he grabbed a scanner and set it on the desk, plugging it into his computer. “When this turns green, place your right hand on the surface as flat as you can make it. Keep it there until it blinks and turns red, then you can remove it.”

The longer he avoided talking to me about anything personal, the more irritated I was getting. I knew Ryker, and he wasn’t one to let sleeping dogs lie. When we were kids, if I was pissed at him for something, he wouldn’t leave me alone until I told him what was wrong. Now here he was with the perfect opportunity to trap me in this room and air out our issues. Instead, he was silently typing away as I let this scanner memorize my palm print.

“The screens, are they showing all the businesses or only certain ones?” I asked, unable to leave the room silent.

Being at the house with only the staff and occasionally Flora after Ryker left, I didn't really have anyone to talk to. Now I was back home in a place full of people, but it seemed I might still end up alone. Being a leader meant that people needed to respect you, but friendships weren't always possible, especially in this world. The moment someone tried to be too friendly, they wanted something from you and were trying to butter you up. It had been happening all my life when kids at school found out how rich Daddy was. Many of them believed if they were my friend, I could help them out when they needed it. Too bad for them a suck-up was the last person on the face of the planet I'd help.

Which had left me with Ryker as the only person in my corner. Until he abandoned me to work for Daddy, choosing to lie and tell me he was going to college. Some best fucking friend he was. Fuck the blood oath, it was stupid anyway. Daddy wanted me to be happy and find that person who I could count on. Well, I wasn't sure that person existed for me.

“Astin,” Ryker called. “You can take your hand back now.”

Shaking myself out of my spiraling thoughts, I pulled my hand off the scanner and onto my lap. “I believe you said you needed a code or password as well?”

“Are you okay?” Ryker asked. “You seem a little preoccupied.”

My gaze snapped up to his, and I frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean? It’s my first day on the job. Of course, I have a lot on my mind, Ryker. Fuck you and your judgment right back on the high horse they came riding in on,” I snapped.

Ryker opened his mouth to say something but closed it and turned back to his computer. The bastard really had changed. It seems becoming Daddy’s pet student didn’t get him a position under him like he’d hoped. Now he’s stuck with me—the bitch he left behind.

“Preoccupied,” I muttered with a scoff, my anger chomping at the bit for a fight. “Just hand me the keyboard, and I’ll enter what you need me to and be on my way.”

He slid the keyboard over. “I need a five-digit code only you’ll know, so no birthday, social, or phone number combinations.”

Without having to pause, I knew exactly what I was going to use and typed it in.

“Now hit the tab and enter a password that’s thirteen characters long. It also has to have the normal additions like uppercase, number, symbol, and again, nothing anyone will know,” Ryker explained as I was already typing away and handed him back the keyboard before he finished speaking.

“Okay, I guess you already had something in mind. Now I have to check to make sure I can’t figure out what they are. If you manage to keep me locked out, then you can leave. If I crack either one of these, then you have to have lunch with me.”

Leaning back in the chair, I crossed my arms. “Go ahead, and I hope you have a backup person to have lunch with because it won’t be me.”

“Astin, I’ve known you for how long? You used to use the same password for everything, I doubt you’ve changed all that much,” Ryker challenged as he started to input the password.

An error sign popped up telling him he had two more tries or he’d be locked out. Clearing the space, he tried again with the same result. He then switched over to another screen and tried the five-number code, ending with the same result.

“Don’t even think about trying again so I have to change it,” I warned as I stood. “Seven years is a long time, Ry. Maybe you don’t know me anymore.”

“Not possible,” Ryker muttered as I left his office.

TEN



Not feeling like eating lunch or hiding out in my room, I paused before leaving the security room and caught the eye of one of the men. “Two things... I need blueprints of this house and to know if there’s a gym I can use.”

“Of course, Mistress, would you like me to send the blueprints to your secure tablet?” he asked.

“Was Ryker supposed to have given me one?” I questioned, ready to throttle him if he’d purposely held something back to make me go back in there.

“No, Mistress, it’s in your personal office. We set up your computer and tablet with the basics before they were delivered to your rooms,” he answered promptly.

Huh, what do you know? Someone was planning ahead.

“Go ahead and send me that information and anything else you have on the layout of the house and the grounds. I like to be

able to check over all my lieutenants' work and how they're operating their teams," I shared, letting that bit of information wiggle its way into their brains that I'd be watching them just as much as Ryker was.

"It will all be sent over right away. Some things I might need to dig for but most of it should be at your disposal by the time you make it back to your office," he said with a bob of his head.

I gave him a smile and a wave as I left the building and headed for the house. He didn't answer my question about the gym, but I'd be able to figure that out once I looked at the blueprints. The only thing that could get me out of this funk right now was a good solid workout, something to take my mind off all the personal shit that had reared its ugly head today. First Ryker acting all weird, then Daddy's mistress trying to be my friend. I just didn't know what to make of it all, so what better way to fix things than getting my sweat on?

Only getting turned around once as I made it back to my room, I felt rather proud of myself. This house was built to disorientate anyone who didn't live there. It was supposed to slow the enemy down if they broke into the place, one reason why the guests hardly ever made it past the ballroom and the first two sitting rooms without an escort. Plopping down in my office chair, I noticed the laptop with the tablet sitting on top of it, waiting for me. Flipping back the cover, I turned on the trusty piece of technology when the screen popped up asking for my passcode. Guessing it was the one I set up, I entered it only for it to tell me it was an error.

Motherfucker, Ryker put in his passcode for this just to piss me off, didn't he?

I was pretty certain I knew what he'd use, but I was left with two tries and three possibilities. Earlier he'd talked about us knowing each other, and once upon a time, we did, but if he still felt that way, there was only one code he'd use. I typed in the numbers, and the tablet opened, making me groan at the fact I still remembered the date and so did he. How many other women remembered the exact day they lost their virginity? Clearly, this was a sick joke just to prove he *knew* me better than anyone. Joke's on him since all he was doing was making me ensure it never happened again.

Looking through what had been sent over, I found far more than I'd been hoping for. There were multiple blueprints showing the original home structure and every add-on since, up until its current form. I'd come back to look at those later, but right now, I needed the gym more than ever. Scrolling through the images trying to find what I was looking for, I couldn't help but smile when a simple map appeared. It even had a path drawn on it from my room to the second floor where there was a private gym only used by the higher-ups.

I should have asked his name. He deserves a pat on the back for that kind of initiative. Heading to my closet, I changed into workout clothes—leggings and a sports bra—then piled my hair up in a messy bun. Tying up my shoes, I was good to go but glanced at the map once more to make sure I wasn't going to end up someplace I really didn't want to be.

When I reached the gym, I was pleased to see it was stocked with water bottles, towels, and all the latest equipment a person could need to keep in shape. Slipping in my earbuds, I scrolled through my workout playlist before I landed on “Bad Girls” by M.I.A. and started my warmup on the treadmill. I let my mind zone out just listening to the music and the feel of my feet as I jogged at a quick pace, feeling the tension lessening in my body. I used to hate the workouts I was put through all the time. Now I don’t know how to function without at least one workout a day.

Once I was done on the treadmill, I headed over to the pull-up bar and started to do my routine for my upper body. Women naturally are stronger in the lower body and need to work harder to beef up their upper body. Just like men should never skip leg day unless they want a bulky-ass top half and chicken legs to hold them up. When I’d gotten my reps in, I swung so I was hanging by my legs and started my crunches. The rhythm of breathing in on the way down and letting it out on the push upward was as cathartic as yoga to me.

Then my music stopped. Opening my eyes, I realized I wasn’t the only one in the room anymore. Jace and Luca were standing there with expressions I couldn’t quite read. “Can I help you?” I asked from where I was still hanging.

“Ah...” Jace started but paused like he wanted to ask a question but wasn’t sure he should.

Groaning, I dismounted off the pull-up bar with a simple flip, landing on my feet. Jace still seemed to be nervous about what

happened last night and didn't want to piss me off further. Luca, on the other hand, offered me a towel which I was grateful for and cleaned off my face. "What? Spit it out already."

When he didn't answer right away, I walked over to the glass-doored refrigerator and grabbed a water, draining half the bottle in one go.

"He wants to know if you can teach him how to do those moves," Luca answered for Jace. "We walked in here twenty minutes ago when you were still doing pull-ups. I think all the blood rushed from his head to his dick so words are difficult at the moment."

Jace rounded on the guy, grabbing him by the shirt. "What the fuck, man? How can you say shit like that when you're just as turned on as I am? Asshole, making me sound like I'm the perv."

"Did I say I wasn't hard as a fucking rock?" Luca asked with raised brows. Jace just growled and shoved him back in frustration.

Clearing my throat to gain their attention, I tossed the towel over my shoulder. "Well, now that we've covered the status of your dicks, was there something else you needed?"

"Boss wanted us to give you a heads up your first meeting is in thirty minutes," Jace informed me. "Said something about you losing track of time when you work out."

So that kind of information did get into his reports. How nice.

Glancing down at my watch, I realized I'd been up here for an hour and a half. My run must have been longer than I thought if I only made it this far into my routine. "Seems we all need to take a cold shower before we continue on our day, doesn't it? I'd invite you to join me, but since I only have half an hour, I need to be quick. Really, it's a blessing for you two because if I found out either of you could be that quick, I'm not sure I could look at you the same," I explained, giving their bodies a languid look. "That would be such a tragedy for me. Best we all shower separately, don't you think?" I asked, cocking my head.

The heat in Jace's gaze had me wanting to rub my legs together, but it was Luca who stole the moment. Stepping forward, he grabbed my hand and placed my phone in it, letting his fingers glide over my pulse as he pulled his hand back. "You're right, thirty minutes wouldn't be nearly enough time for what I'd do to that body of yours. Plus, if you can walk let alone attend meetings after I'm finished with you, then I didn't do my job right."

Good God, does that man know how to make a woman's pussy sit up and take notice?

"Duly noted," I murmured, holding his gaze as the tension between us started to crackle.

"Hey, Tin-Tin, did you get that tablet open?" Ryker's voice cut in, shattering the moment between Luca and me.

I growled in frustration, squeezing my phone so hard I worried it might crack. Yanking the towel off my shoulder, I marched

out of the gym, slapping Ryker in the face with said towel as I left. “Asshole,” I snapped.

“What the fuck was that for?” Ryker asked.

Stopping on the stairs, I twisted to look back at him, noticing Jace and Luca were watching the whole interaction. *Fine, he wants to play this game, then I’ll play just as dirty.*

“Let’s just clear this up right now since you seem to feel the need to mark your nonexistent territory,” I snapped, walking back to get right up in his face. “We were teenagers, high on weed, bored and horny with nothing better to do with our time. Yeah, you were the first guy to fuck me but certainly not the last, which I’m sure you’re fully aware of. Why would I ever wait or hold on to a dream of a man who left me and lied to my face? For what, becoming my father’s pet? That worked out well, didn’t it? Now he’s cast you off and stuck you with me because we have history, right? Well, doesn’t that fucking suck for you? I’m really gonna need you to fix your shit and get over it real quick because I’m not going anywhere,” I seethed. All the anger and hurt over that time of my life bubbled up within me.

“Ast—”

I raised a hand, cutting off whatever he was about to say. “You may call me Mistress or Lady Astin unless I permit you otherwise. Test me on this, and I’ll stab or shoot you depending on my mood. *Comprende?*”

Pain and betrayal flickered in his eyes. “Yes, Lady Astin,” Ryker answered.

“Don’t you dare look so betrayed, Ryker. In this world, people are going to turn their back on you to do what’s best for them. So get used to it,” I ordered, then shrugged carelessly. “I did.”

Having nothing else to say, I jogged up the stairs to my room and got ready for my afternoon. All the emotions I’d just burned off in my workout were back tenfold. This could be good or bad, depending on who you were and if you managed to piss me off. Something told me that the chances of someone getting stabbed today were rather high as I strapped on my thigh sheath. This was a custom piece I had made. It had the blade’s handle pointing down since it was meant to be used when I wore a skirt. I also decided to add my gun since I’d be wearing a blazer, keeping it concealed.

The black pencil skirt I wore had a slit up the front instead of the back that went to mid-thigh, leaving me with easy access to the knife. I paired it with a white silk tank and a blood-red blazer that set off the contrast of my fair skin and dark chestnut hair. While in these meetings, I wanted there to be no doubt in their minds that I was indeed a woman. This bitch wasn’t playing pretend, trying to be the son Daddy never got. No, I was proud to be all woman all the time. Finishing the outfit off with my black-studded Louboutin red-bottom shoes, I was unstoppable. Men have armor, women have fashion and makeup. We put on our warpaint and uniform, proud to fight for our place in the world. A fight the mafia never saw coming in the form of little old me.

As I made my way down to the first floor, Braxton was coming up reading something on his phone. He spotted me at

the last second and stopped, eyes wandering over my body with appreciation. “Damn, what I wouldn’t give to be a fly in that office for these meetings. They’re never gonna know what hit them.”

Grinning, I gave him a wink. “Why thank you, Braxton. I think this is gonna be fun too. All this time and effort learning everything and never having a chance to apply it. I feel like a kid in a candy store waiting for the first man to step on my carefully placed land mine.”

“If you’re interested, there’s a new club we’re opening tonight. Care to join me, blow off some steam, and see the newest investment of the Caprioni Empire?” Braxton asked. “You never know what kind of fun you could find yourself having.”

I thought about it a second then nodded. “Text me the time and where to meet. I’ve got a lot of catching up to do in the nightlife department.”

“As you wish, Mistress,” Braxton said with a smirk and a little bow. “I can’t wait to see what the evening will hold for us.”

Heading down the hall, I couldn’t help but feel a little better knowing I had something to look forward to. After all, what was the point of being freed from my cage if I didn’t experience life? The taste I got last night before I was so rudely interrupted just wasn’t enough to tide me over. Braxton gave off the vibe he knew how to live life to the fullest, and that was the type of people I wanted around me. Work hard and play harder, knowing we have one life to live, so try it all!

This time when I approached the office, two men were standing at the door with the whole mafia goon vibe going on—black suits, tattoos, guns hidden under their jackets, and hands clasped in front, standing at attention. They nodded to me before one of them opened the door, allowing me to go in. Before I entered, I took a moment to scan them over, making sure I knew their faces. If there came a time shit hit the fan and we needed backup, I wanted to make sure I didn't kill our people.

“Did you need something from us, Mistress?” the man who opened the door asked.

Well, that traveled around fast.

“No, just making sure I know my friends from foes, is all,” I answered with a soft smile. “Although I should probably mention that these meetings might get a little vocal. As long as it isn't me or the boss sounding like we're in pain, I've got it handled.” I had to hand it to these men, they didn't even bat an eye about my statement. They simply nodded.

Entering the office, I found Daddy sitting behind his desk looking over some papers with my uncles sitting off to the side. They both smirked at me, and Mathis gave a thumbs-up regarding the outfit while Athos scowled slightly. That means I'd hit the combination of a sexy-business-professional look right on the money.

“Astin, come stand by me, please,” Daddy requested. “Our first meeting is going to be with Big Time, the president of the Red Tigers MC, and his VP, Crow. As you know, these men

are the ones who distribute our drugs and guns all over the country. We supply them, they give us thirty percent of the profit, and we stay out of their business as well as keep the law off their backs.”

I walked over to him and perched on the armrest of his leather wingback chair. “Seems you wanted to start with the tough crowd first, I see. They’re even worse than the mafia’s views on women in power.”

“They are also the ones who have been giving me the most trouble wanting to lower the percent of our cut, saying we aren’t doing much protection for them,” Daddy grumbled, looking up at me. “I assume you’re aware of all of this?”

“Yes, I’ve been keeping track of everything I could on this matter. If we lose them, it will hurt business quite severely, having no one to move the goods once we get them in. I’ve had a few ideas on the subject but getting to meet these men in person will be helpful,” I answered.

Daddy patted my leg approvingly and felt the blade under my skirt. He looked at me with a questioning brow, and I just shrugged. “Better to be safe than sorry, don’t you think?”

“If they cause that kind of trouble, then we have an even bigger problem,” Daddy pointed out.

I leaned down and kissed him on the cheek. “It won’t be anything I haven’t been trained to handle. Just don’t be mad at me if I make a bit of a mess by the end of the day.”

Daddy chuckled and hit the intercom button on his phone.

“Liu, send them in, please.”

“Right away, Boss,” a man named Liu answered.

ELEVEN



A moment later, the door opened, and two men in jeans, T-shirts, and leather vests with patches and logos all over them entered. Big Time, as declared on his cut, had a full wild salt-and-pepper beard with a shaved head. He was older, probably in his fifties with wrinkled skin that had seen lots of sun and reeked like stale cigarettes. Crow was younger, probably in his late thirties, clean-shaven, and had a bald head covered in tattoos leaving random spots of un-inked skin. Crow looked like he was trying to compete with Arnold Schwarzenegger for the buffest man alive. The leather cut hardly seemed to fit, or maybe it was the muscles that didn't allow him to put his arms down.

“Colmazio,” Big Time greeted with a nod. “It’s about damn time you and I had a face-to-face meeting. You’ve been stonewalling for weeks.”

“Big,” Daddy greeted, ignoring the rudeness and gestured to me. “Allow me to introduce you to my daughter, Astin, newly appointed underboss. She’ll be working alongside me on all matters pertaining to the Caprioni business.”

Rising to my feet, I stepped around the desk and reached out a hand to Big Time. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. I hope we’ll be able to work well together.”

Big looked at my hand then back up to my eyes and snorted. “You have to be joking. Why the fuck would you have a woman in such an important position? She won’t be able to handle things when it comes down to it. I’ll bet she faints at the sight of blood.” He laughed, and Crow joined, adding his husky laughter.

“Goodness, it seems you don’t have a very high opinion of my father if you feel he’d give such a valuable position to someone who couldn’t handle it,” I commented, resting my hip on the corner of the desk.

Big tried to puff himself up, attempting to use his size to intimidate me, but I just sat there holding his gaze. “Listen, little girl, I don’t give a flying fuck about what your old man does in his business, but when it affects mine, then I take issue with it.”

“Really? What have we done that’s affecting your business?” I asked, propping my chin on my hand, waiting for his answer.

Crow stepped up, drawing my gaze. “We don’t talk business around women.”

“Oh, is that because we’re too stupid to understand or because my legs are too distracting for you to concentrate? I can go back behind the desk again if you like,” I reasoned.

Crow snarled at me, taking another step forward, but I sat up and let my gun peek out of my jacket as I moved. It wasn’t an outright challenge, but it let him know I was packing heat. Crow paused, looking from the gun up to me as if considering his chances. “I bet you don’t even know how to use that.”

“Problem is, by the time you figure that out, you’ll be dead,” I pointed out. “Now, I think we all need to take a deep breath and get down to the matter at hand.”

Big was the one I’d pissed off this time, trying to reach out and grab for me, but I hopped off the desk and out of his way. Father shot out of his chair, slamming his hand down on his desk. “Lay one finger on her, and I’ll let her kill you before I destroy the Red Tigers for good.”

This had Big’s face changing colors as he stepped back from me and took a seat as did Father. “You better teach the bitch her place, and I won’t have to do it for you.”

I tossed my head back and laughed. “Oh fuck, if only you knew just how good of a job he did teaching me about my place in the world. Trust me when I say my education isn’t lacking in the slightest.”

No one really knew what to say to that, so I resumed my place standing next to Father. We wouldn’t get anywhere if I kept trying to lead this meeting, so it was better to just let the boss speak.

“Did you have matters to discuss with me or not? She’s not leaving the room, so either say your peace or get the fuck out of my office. I have other things to do with my day than worry about your issues with women,” Father stated as he placed his hands in his lap, looking completely relaxed.

“The economy has changed, and you taking thirty percent is too much. It’s cutting our legs off, leaving us unable to grow our crew,” Big informed us. “Not to mention that whatever you’re doing to keep the cops off our fucking back isn’t doing a damn bit of good.”

What Mr. Big Time didn’t realize is that the old police commissioner stepped down to retire, and the new man in his place isn’t seeing the benefit of the same deal his predecessor had. Of course, we weren’t going to tell anyone else that since it would reflect poorly on us, but it was part of my duties to help our new friend see reason or replace him.

“If your men didn’t think because they have my protection, it means they can be idiots that would help,” Father commented. “One of your prospects was trying to deal on school grounds. That’s an amateur move for anyone, not to mention bad for business. So you’re correct, I didn’t protect him. He deserved to deal with the consequences of that kind of stupidity.”

“That prospect is my nephew,” Crow interjected. “Now he’s serving ten years on his first offense.”

Father leaned forward on his desk, looking the man dead in the eye. “That isn’t my problem, Crow. If he’s blood, then he should have fucking known better than to pull that kind of

stunt. My guess is he was trying to impress you but got caught with his pants down. I leave your business alone, the Caprioni Family has no say in how you run your crew, but as you said, when it affects my business, then I have a problem.”

“If we had the protection, then he would’ve only served a year or two which would have been fine but *ten years*? The idiot’s never been pinched before. This was a power move, and you let it happen,” Big argued. “That judge knew he had the perfect opportunity to stick it to me and mine, so he slapped the full sentence on him.”

“Actually, the full sentence would have been fifteen years,” Athos commented. There were many times I forgot he went to law school, using that skill to help keep us out of hot water even if he didn’t take the Bar.

The president didn’t seem to like that correction, and I was happy to see I wasn’t the only one who got the murder eyes. It made me feel less singled out in the group, but this man needed to be reminded that the Caprioni Family was the big fish in this pond.

“You say that our thirty percent is taking away from what you need to grow,” I spoke up, bringing the conversation back to the real matter at hand. “What do you feel is more reasonable?”

Big Time frowned at my directness, and I knew he didn’t want to answer my question, but Daddy would have asked it all the same. “We were thinking fifteen.”

A burst of laughter popped out of my mouth at his number. “No, really, be honest and tell us what your number is?”

“That was my number, you little bitch,” Big snarled, shooting up from his chair. “You dare laugh at me, the president of the Red Tigers?”

Mathis started to stand, not liking how aggressive Big was acting, but I waved him off. I wasn’t scared of this overgrown thug. He liked to push his weight around, but I wasn’t going to be that easy to maneuver. “You could be the Queen of Revalia, and I’d laugh at a number like that. Do you know what it costs for us to bring the drugs, guns, and women you receive from us? Don’t answer that because I know you don’t. Let’s just say your measly thirty percent doesn’t begin to cover it. You don’t even pay for the fuel it takes to have the boat get here for our provider. Yet you expect us to consider dropping our tax in half?” I demanded.

I moved around the desk so I wasn’t trapped between it and the wall if I managed to make him pull his gun on me. It seemed likely as his face started to turn purple, and his hands were balled into fists. “You have more revenue streams than a whore has clients. We’re supposed to be partners in this, and you’re not doing what you promised. I think it’s only fair we ask to lower the tax on principle.”

“Oh, who fed you that load of garbage? We’re the motherfucking mafia... you think we give a shit if things are fair for you?” I demanded. “The Caprioni Family honors their commitments, and we *do* protect your asses from many, many

things. So your VP's nephew got put in the clink, he was a moron. Let's instead talk about the drug raid we stopped two weeks ago on one of your crack houses. If we hadn't been doing our end of the deal keeping you safe, then instead of them finding your competitor's place, it would have been yours," I explained, waving a hand, dismissing them. "You know what, take your fifteen percent and shove it up your ass. We have the Rebel Order's president and VP coming in to talk to us. They were happy to give us thirty-five percent for the same deal we have with you."

"What did you just say?" Big Time roared, charging at me.

Pivoting, I used my spike-covered heel to slam into his foot, making him grunt and his knee buckle. I used his unsteadiness to slam his head into the corner of Daddy's desk, making him howl with pain as I broke his nose. Kneeling before me, the president clutched his bleeding face, eyes tearing up with the pain. Crow made his move, but with how big and bulky he was, nothing moved too fast. He pulled out a gun, and I took a step around the bleeding president and gripped the handle of Crow's gun, dropping out the clip.

"Oops, clumsy me. I hit the wrong button, and you lost all your bullets. That's unless you put one in the chamber already. Let's check." Grabbing his wrist, I twisted it down and back behind him and lifted it.

Aware I couldn't put too much pressure on his arm since I didn't want to dislocate his shoulder, I gripped the slide of the gun and pulled it back to see a bullet pop out, clattering to the

polished hardwood floor. “Would you look at that, you did have one ready to go. You’re not a complete and utter buffoon,” I praised the VP. “Now, I think it’s best if we all took our seats and calmed down, don’t you?”

Taking the gun from his grasp, I shoved Crow back down to his chair with a grunt. Using the butt of the gun, I pistol-whipped him across the back of the head and knocked him out. The president was still trying to figure out what to do about his nose, but I crouched in front of him.

“Listen up, twinkle toes,” I ordered, grabbing the older man’s beard and pulling it so he looked at me. “There are more biker gangs in this city than you. If you don’t like the deal we have, fine, we’ll find someone else who’s willing to work with us. Younger, smarter crews are chomping at the bit to impress a shark like us, knowing they’re the little bitty minnows we’ll swallow whole if we don’t like what’s going on. So here’s the new deal. The tax is still thirty percent, we will ensure the police don’t bother your operation, and you’ll show me some goddamn respect. Don’t like it? Then we’ll find someone to replace you,” I whispered that last part, patting him on the cheek roughly.

Big spat a wad of blood at me, but I saw it coming and shoved him out of the way. The offending loogie of blood landed on the point of one of my favorite pairs of shoes. Furious he’d dare to spit on me, I grabbed his beard in my left hand, drew my blade with my right, and sliced off the hair. I nicked his chin with how close I got, leaving him with two tufts of hair on each cheek. Then because I just didn’t feel like that was

enough for bleeding on my Louboutin's, I punched him right in the eye hard enough I felt his cheek bone crack. President Big Time slumped to the floor, groaning as I used his shirt to clean off my shoe.

“Fucking savage, does he have any idea how much these cost? Red-bottom shoes, asshole, they're sacred,” I snapped, walked back over to Father, and leaned against his chair. “I think that went well, wouldn't you say?”

Daddy looked up at me with a questioning brow. “How did you know I had a meeting with the Rebel Order later this afternoon? I know for a fact no one but your uncles knew that, and we didn't send along that information to you.”

“Isn't this what you trained me for, to think like you only better?” I asked. “The Red Tigers are on the downhill slide, and it would only make sense to bring in eager fresh blood who understand the honor of being chosen.”

He chuckled and hit the intercom once more. “Liu, the Red Tigers are ready to leave, but you might want to bring help to carry them out of here. Oh, and someone to help clean up a little.”

“Right away, Boss,” Liu responded.

“Do I get one of those?” I asked.

Daddy looked at me confused. “An intercom?”

“No, a Liu. He seems incredibly helpful,” I clarified.

“You have six men who now work for you, use one of them. You can't poach my favorite assistant,” Daddy said, brushing

off my request.

I stood and crossed my arms. “Why are you trying to force me to interact with them so much? I understand as a good leader I need to know and trust my people, but that’s not the vibe I’m getting from you.”

“Vibe? Really, Astin,” Father scolded with a chuckle before he became more serious. “The one thing I wish my father had done for me is teach me how I needed the right support. Thankfully, I had your uncles in my corner since day one watching my back. Over time, I gained the respect of the rest of my council, but they were never *my* people. They’d gotten their position from my father or deals I had to stand behind. When I decided you were going to step into this role, I wanted you to have what I didn’t.”

“Those aren’t my men,” I argued.

Father gave me a knowing look. “You haven’t even tried, Astin. While you might have put the fear of God into them after your little display with Ryker, you have a long way to go to earn their respect. Once you do that, then the next step is their loyalty. I might have picked them, but they aren’t loyal to me personally. They respect the Caprioni name and the power we have, but they’re still wild and free. Those boys need a firm hand to take all their passion and knowledge and funnel it into something good.”

“You’ve really thought a lot about this, haven’t you?” I realized. “Why these men? There has to be more to them than just not caring I’m a woman and not having true loyalty to

anyone. Out of everyone in this whole organization, you hand-picked these six men.”

“That, daughter, is for me to know and you to find out,” Daddy answered with a glint of humor in his gaze.

There was a knock before a smartly dressed and handsome man entered, took one look at the mess I’d made, and signaled to someone. “We’ll need to take the trash out the back. Can’t have anyone getting cold feet when they realize the new underboss isn’t as soft as she looks.”

A grin tugged at my lips at his words. By his voice, I guessed he was Liu, but what I was surprised by was how young he was to have the position of personal aide to my father. Liu had to be maybe a year or two older than me, making me wonder who his family might be that he was so comfortable in his place here.

Two bulky men, not the guards watching the door, grabbed the bikers. The one picking up Big Time took a look at his new shave then glanced at me. “Is this a sign we shouldn’t grow beards?” the man asked.

“Not at all, I like a man with a well-groomed beard. It just can’t be attached to a mouth that says rude things to me and the boss,” I explained. He nodded and dragged the president out of the office without another word.

Liu walked up to the desk and extended a hand to me. “It’s nice to finally meet you in person. I’ve heard much about you from your father, and I look forward to working alongside you in certain matters.”

“Lay-oh,” I said, sounding out his name as I shook his hand.
“What’s the origin of that?”

“My mother is Chinese, and my father is Italian. She told my father the third child she’d get to name after her family,” Liu explained.

“Oh,” I gasped, realizing who he was. “Your mother is amazing. I’ve been following her campaign to be re-elected as senator. I don’t see her having any issues. Her opponent is a joke.”

“She’d be delighted to know she has your support as well as your father’s. The Caprioni Family has always been a proud supporter of my mother and her goals for the country,” Liu said, sounding like he was reading from a script or something.

I blinked at him a few times, unsure of what exactly to say to that. “Wow, how tight is that tie of yours?”

“Excuse me?” Liu asked as a woman with a bucket of cleaning supplies entered. “Ah, Kate, thank you for coming. The incident occurred in front of the desk. I don’t think much got on the carpet this time.”

“I was asking if you’re always this high-strung,” I commented when his dark-brown gaze returned to mine. “Trust me, I get it. Working for my father is a huge responsibility, but I’m not your boss nor do you need to tow the family line with me. I’m not going to rat you out to your mother if you tell me she’s a witch who runs your household and only makes it look like your father has any say in things so she doesn’t look bad to voters.”

Liu frowned at me. “Have you been looking into my family?”

“Hi, I’m Astin, underboss to the Caprioni Family. I look into everyone’s family who has a connection to mine. Funny thing is they don’t mention you, ever,” I stated.

What I said might come across as me being a bitch, but what I was really trying to do was show him he didn’t need to keep up the act with me. If Daddy trusted him enough to be his personal assistant, then that said more than enough about his loyalty and abilities. I wasn’t looking for him to prove anything to me, just for him to be himself.

“My mother is an absolute bitch who’s amazing at her job,” Liu announced, turned on his heel, and left the room.

Confused by our whole interaction, I looked at my father who seemed to have a contemplative look on his face. “What was that?” I asked, taking a seat on the corner of his desk.

“That, my dearest daughter, is something I’ve been trying to get him to admit for nine years,” Daddy murmured, rubbing his chin. “I took him in when his mother announced she was running for governor. He was the child she couldn’t control. Liu’s too smart for his own good. He needed his brilliant mind to be put to good work, so I took him under my wing, and he’s become invaluable to me.”

“Wait, he’d never admitted his mother is a twat before?” I inquired. “I feel like anyone who pays close enough attention would, but like he said, her politics are flawless, and she has done some amazing things in her first term.”

“It’s never an easy thing to admit your family tossed you away,” Daddy pointed out. “I wonder why he said it to you?”

“Guess that means I’m just going to have to become his best friend or annoying sister and find out, now won’t I,” I shared with a smirk. “You and I both know when I pick someone to win over, I won’t lose.”

Daddy groaned. “Why can’t you do that for your own people and leave mine alone?”

“That’s no fun, but if you must know, Braxton and I are going out tonight,” I commented.

“I’m not sure if I should be relieved or worried... he was one I knew you’d be able to befriend easily. He’s just as good at winning people over as you are, and my bet is you two will become pretty close fairly quickly,” Daddy predicted and smiled as he hit the intercom button. “Liu, send in the next meeting.”

“Right away, Boss,” Liu answered like nothing at all had happened.

TWELVE



I watched Ryker pace the rec room we used as a common space for those of us who lived on the second floor. Really it ended up just being me, Jace, Ryker, and Luca on occasion. Atticus didn't socialize, Gunner was a golden boy, and Liu had zero free time working for the boss. What was interesting, though, is that right now all of the lieutenants were here watching Ryker lose his shit over Astin.

“What do you mean I can't go tonight? I always go to opening nights with you guys,” Ryker snapped.

I held up my hands as if they would ward off the bad juju that was oozing out of him. “Dude, you need to smoke a joint, drink some whiskey, or rub one out to take off the edge. You have been going about this all fucking wrong. While I've been enjoying watching you crash and burn with the woman you've been pining over for years, you're not going to fuck up my chances,” I explained.

That brought him to a screeching halt and he turned on me.
“What did you just say?”

“She’s fucking pissed at you. If I bring you with, then she’ll be pissed at me. Astin being mad at me over you is going to kill any chance I have of getting her to notice all I have to offer,” I reiterated in a more simple fashion.

Of course, that wasn’t what he meant, and I knew it, but ruffling his feathers like this was just too fun. While I might be a fuckboy, I’d never step in the way if I thought Ryker had a chance, but from what I heard about their fight on the stairs, he didn’t. Astin was a fucking stunning woman who was unattached, and I wanted to put my name in the running if she ever needed uncomplicated sex. That was my specialty.

“You can’t make a move on her. What about Jace?” Ryker challenged.

“What about me?” Jace asked, crossing his arms. “My thinking is the same as Brax. I’m down to fuck if she is. Hell, I’d volunteer, especially if she wanted a threesome... that would be epic.”

Ryker let out a growl of frustration, running his hands through his hair. “You all know I’m in love with that woman, right?” All of us nodded our understanding. “Then how can you say you’re going after the only woman I’ve ever wanted?”

Atticus raised his hand, shocking the shit out of us all. That man never had anything to say on personal matters. He believed if it didn’t involve him, there was no need to share an opinion.

“What, Atticus,” Ryker muttered.

“I believe there’s a flaw in your logic. While you have been waiting for her, knowing that when she came back, you expected to be together, she’s not of the same mind. It’s illogical for you to assume she’d wait for you when you gave her no indication of your interest,” Atticus reasoned. “Furthermore, she’s not bound by any established relationship with you, meaning you have no grounds to be upset if she chooses to interact with another male.”

Damn, Atticus just let Ryker have it.

“Why the hell are you even getting involved in this? I thought it was your policy to never speak on personal matters,” Ryker challenged.

Atticus frowned, then looked at me. “Is it not customary to defend one’s friend? Did I insert myself in a matter I shouldn’t have on Astin’s behalf?”

There was no way I could hold back the shit-eating grin I knew was on my face. “No, Atty boy, you did exactly right.”

“Don’t call her by her name,” Ryker snapped. “She said we could only call her by the titles she chose.”

“Unless instructed to otherwise. I was expressly told to call her Astin,” Atticus countered. “I believe she requested that of me more than once.”

Ryker opened his mouth to argue, but he couldn’t. No one ever won a battle of facts when it came to Atticus. The genius was always right, and to fight him on it would be pointless.

“Fuck,” Ryker swore, kicking a pillow that had fallen off the couch across the room. “How did I fuck this up so badly?”

I leaned back on the sofa and laced my fingers behind my head. “Do you really want to know the answer to that?”

He glared at me, but I knew it wasn’t serious. If the dark side of Ryker came out, I’d tread more carefully, but right now, it was just butt-hurt Ryker. “If you tell me it’s because I thought I had a shoo-in from being childhood friends, I’m going to punch you.”

“No, actually that wasn’t what I was going to say, but I’m sure that didn’t help things,” I agreed. “Where I think you went wrong is all the way back at the club when we went to bring her back home. It was obvious she was having a good time, but you had to charge in and chase her out of there before she was ready. Then there’s the fact you still have yet to apologize.”

Ryker’s jaw dropped as he looked at me with the most stunned expression. “She expects me to apologize?”

Gunner burst out laughing. “Oh God, you’re never going to fix this if you don’t even realize that’s your number one problem.”

“Why the fuck are you even here, G-Man, or didn’t you hear that no one likes you?” Ryker grumbled.

Gunner just shrugged. “This is my effort to prove to her she’s wrong.”

“Yeah...” I mused aloud. “She’s not. We *really* don’t like you for many, many reasons.”

“What the hell, man? I haven’t done anything to you guys. You can’t hate me,” Gunner shot back. “It’s because you’re jealous I get more attention from the boss since I’m so good at my job.”

I whipped a hand from behind my head and pointed at him. “That right there, what you just said, is what we fucking hate about you. It’s important for the boss to be pleased with our work, but you don’t need to crawl so far up his ass. You’re as high up the food chain as you’re going to get. Astin is the underboss and then there’s us... where else do you think you’re going to climb to?”

This is the part of Gunner I really couldn’t figure out—he’d reached the top of the ladder. Just be happy with that and do what’s asked of you. People would kill, literally, to be where we are right now, so why couldn’t he be happy with that?

“What are you talking about? I’m perfectly happy with my place in the Caprioni Empire. Why would you think I want more?” Gunner asked, the look on his face told me he was truly confused by my question.

Luca leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees as he stared Gunner down. “You’re shitting me. Is it possible you’re fucking clueless as to how you come across to everyone around you?”

“Clearly not since I’m asking,” Gunner retorted.

“Damn, that really sucks for you. Have you ever had friends in your life?” I asked, feeling like this couldn’t be the first time he’s encountered situations like this.

Gunner shifted in his seat, pulling at his shirt sleeves, clearly not liking the question. “No, not really. My mother used to say it was because my brilliance and work ethic intimidated them.”

Laughter erupted from me at his words. I laughed so hard I started to cry as I nearly fell off the couch in my hysterics. “Oh fuck me sideways, you’re mother gaslighted you so good that you still believe her to this day. I bet all the money I have in the bank she inflated that ego to where it is today. Let me guess, did you get gold stickers for everything you did? What about a participation award even if you fucking sucked?”

Gunner shot to his feet, glaring at me. “Don’t you dare talk about my mother like that... she’s a saint.”

“That’s impossible, only the Pope can label someone a saint, and that happens after they’ve died. Is your mother currently living?” Atticus asked.

Gunner blinked at him a moment then shook his head. “Yes, my mother is still decidedly alive and in perfect health.”

“Then she’s not a saint,” Atticus clarified.

“It’s a figure of speech,” Gunner explained, throwing his hands up in exasperation. “It just means she’s a person of pure intention such is the manner of saints.”

Atticus opened his mouth. I’m sure to correct something else he said, but Gunner raised a hand to stop him. “No, enough, Atticus. My mother is a single parent and raised three of us

after my father was killed in the military. Think what you like of me, but I won't allow you to speak ill of her."

Ryker walked up to Gunner and patted him on the shoulder. "We get it now, man. Braxton can be an ass, but no one really thinks bad about your mom. Take a deep breath and maybe think about what we've all said. Our perception of you is that all you want is more power and recognition, but the guy I just saw stand up for his mom is someone I wouldn't mind so much. Loyalty is something we all understand, but so far, all we've seen is a tendency to look out for only yourself."

Gunner seemed to deflate a little at Ryker's words, but they were the truth. The idiot might not be able to see the truth about his actions, but he could read people like none other.

"Yeah, all right, I'll think about what you guys said. Have fun tonight. I've got some things to work on to get the testing done on the property," Gunner said as he nodded to us and left the room.

"Seems we're dropping truth bombs all over the place," I said with a chuckle. "You got anything to share with us, Luca?"

Luca looked at me then shrugged. "Guess I should just say I wouldn't say no if Astin invited me to her bed."

"I'm shocked. Do you see this face, complete and utter shock," I deadpanned. "Jace told me all about you calling him out at the gym, and your added information about... how did she put it? Oh yeah, the status of your dicks."

“We had a moment, and who knows, I might have been able to talk my way into her shower if cockblock over here didn’t butt in,” Luca commented, giving Ryker a sideways glance.

Ryker crossed his arms and scowled at us. “You’re all dicks, you know that? I can’t believe you guys would do this to me.”

“Bro, a woman that powerful can have whatever or however many men she wants,” Jace reasoned. “Maybe you need to adjust your logic and be open to sharing. Astin’s been trapped in hiding for the first quarter of her life, so she’s not gonna be looking to settle down until she’s lived a little.”

“Actually, that’s a pretty sound logic,” Luca pointed out. “If she wants to fuck around and have a good time, we should keep it to us. People we trust won’t use it against her. Once people know who she is and how fucking hot she is, they will be swarming her. I say we offer our services and keep her safe while we’re at it.”

Smirking at Luca, I had to hand it to the man, he was one sly motherfucker. “Doesn’t hurt that we get to cockblock every other man who will be drooling over her in the name of protection. Sounds like the best plan anyone of us has ever come up with.”

“What! So we’re agreeing she can fuck any of the six of us but no one outside of that? She’d never go for that,” Ryker challenged.

I snorted. “You think we’re going to tell her? Nah, man, this is a bro-code moment, not to mention the boss made it clear we

are more than her lieutenants. He wanted us to protect her as added security, which is why we all got the added training.”

“Fine, whatever. You guys do what you want, but don’t come crying to me when she sets her eyes on someone, and you have to change her mind. Astin is stubborn as fuck, and no one, and I mean no one, has ever gotten her to let go of something once she makes up her mind,” Ryker announced.

Pushing myself off the couch, I patted him on the shoulder. “That, my friend, is why you need to be the person or persons she picks. Ship’s sailed for you, but the rest of us haven’t fucked it up yet. Order a pizza and watch your stupid-cooking shows all of us hate since you’ll have the room to yourself.”

“Asshole,” Ryker muttered as I headed to my room, needing to get ready for the night out.

THIRTEEN



The rest of the meetings were uneventful and rather boring. Everyone was on their best behavior or caught on quickly that I wasn't someone to fuck with. Daddy had been right when he said the meetings were pretty straightforward today. Most of them were merely introductions and setting expectations going forward that I'd be the new contact person, and if I couldn't deal with it, then Daddy would be brought in. The whole reason for having an underboss was to take some of the weight off the boss's shoulders. I felt like about half the groups we met with would follow the new order while the others would take some time to learn.

"Is that the last one?" I asked, flopping into the chair the union leader vacated moments ago.

Daddy nodded, looking down at his watch. "Looks like dinner should be ready shortly. Why don't you walk with me to the

dining room?”

Standing, I wrapped my arm around his as we headed out of his office. “I forgot to mention it before, but I ran into Casimira earlier. When you said your office, I assumed it was your personal one, but she led me down here.”

“She’s been pestering me for weeks to know when I was bringing you home,” Father shared. “I thought it was best to let you get right to business and deal with personal things a little more slowly. Was that wrong of me?”

“No, it’s not like I didn’t know she existed. You’ve always been incredibly honest with me, even sending me pictures of Jamison when he was born and growing up. While I haven’t met my half-brother in person yet, I’ve known he’s out there. Seriously, you even told me that others have tried to convince you to make him underboss,” I said, not wanting him to doubt how he handled things. “I’ll just need some time. I want to get to know them. It’s just I’m not sure that’s going to be a priority for me right now.”

“That’s quite understandable. When the time is right and you have questions, I’ll answer any of them you have. There are no secrets between you and me, Astin. Some matters I might not be able to discuss with you right away but know that whatever I know you will know in time as well,” Daddy assured me.

“I know, Daddy,” I murmured, keeping my voice low. “Damn, I really need to stop calling you that.”

He stopped and looked at me, perplexed. “Why on earth would you need to stop calling me that?”

“You’re the head of the Caprioni Family,” I reasoned.

“Yes, but first and foremost, I’ll always be your father. If anyone has a problem with my daughter addressing me as such, then that’s a conversation I’ll have with them personally. So don’t you dare get all formal on me. I’ve been waiting fifteen years for the chance to hear you call me that again in this home,” Daddy announced as we resumed our journey to the dining room.

“I’ve missed you so much, Daddy,” I said, leaning into him.

“Not as much as I’ve missed you, but that phase of our life is over now,” he reminded me as he patted my hand. “I believe we’re having salmon tonight. Simon makes the best fish, part of the reason I hired him.”

Clearly, Daddy was over the emotional conversation and wanted to move on to more neutral topics. “It’s been ages since I’ve had any seafood. Glenda hates it. Where’s the old battle ax anyway?”

“I felt like she deserved a vacation after putting up with you alone for so many years. I believe she’s boarding a cruise for some tropical island tomorrow,” he answered.

“Together so many years, and she couldn’t even say goodbye before she left.” I sighed.

Daddy just chuckled as we entered the dining room, where Casimira was already speaking to a young man. When she turned toward us, I realized she was with Jamison, my half-

brother. *Nice of the old man to give me a heads up he'd be here too.*

“Darling, Astin,” Casimira greeted with a soft smile then turned back to Jamison. “Sweety, this is your older sister, Astin.”

Jamison took a step forward and offered his hand. “It’s nice to meet you.”

The nineteen-year-old was tall and gangly like he’d had a growth spurt but hadn’t filled out quite yet. He had his mother’s eyes, but his face reminded me of Father’s, making it clear I was indeed related to him.

“Same,” I answered, taking his hand.

The handshake he gave me was limp and lifeless, making me worry I might hurt him. *Lord, has no one taught him the importance of first impressions?*

“Are the others coming down, or is this a family dinner of sorts?” I asked, feeling uneasy being stuck with these people.

The whole situation left me in an odd spot with them knowing so much about me, my family, and what goes on here while I’ve been hidden away in another country. Coming back here, I’d known there would be some challenges when it came to this particular issue, but I didn’t think I’d have to face them so fast.

“Liu is going to join us, but your lieutenants have some things to finish up before you join them for the opening,” Daddy explained.

I plastered a smile on my face as I groaned internally. “Sounds lovely.”

Apparently, when Daddy said he took Liu under his wing, he meant like an adopted son. Seems I have more siblings than I realized.

“Forgive me for being late, the Red Tigers woke up and weren’t pleased with how the meeting ended. I informed them if they wished to speak with Lady Astin, they would have to schedule another meeting,” Liu informed us as he entered the room typing something on his phone.

As we moved to sit, I grabbed the seat to my father’s right but so did Liu. I paused and backed up. “Sorry, still learning the routine,” I commented and moved down one so I sat across from Jamison.

“No, I was in error. This seat belongs to you now that you’re here,” Liu corrected, gesturing for me to take the seat.

While I realized I shouldn’t read into the fact that while I was gone, that was his seat, it still smarted a bit. I’d been the one forced to sacrifice everything for this family without even being given a choice. Growing up, I didn’t always understand Daddy’s choice, and I was furious at him, even to the point one year I didn’t write to him once. He, of course, still sent his letters, never getting upset with me, only sending his love and regret that this is how things had to be.

The problem was I grew up without a family, and he built himself a new one. I might be his firstborn, but I wasn’t his only child, and they got to grow up with him. Then Liu was

plucked out of his circumstances and given another family who cherished the person he was. I could see it in the way Daddy interacted with him throughout the day. It was clear the pride I'd seen in his eyes that made jealousy raise its ugly head. Now I've witnessed how he was given the seat of privilege over my little brother. Another reminder I needed to cling to my solemn truth.

The only person who will look out for you is yourself.

"It's fine, Liu," I stated, my tone brokering no argument.

Daddy tried to catch my gaze, but I *wasn't* going to get into this now. All I had to do was survive dinner then I could head out with the others and leave this all behind. Once we were settled at the table, the food was brought in and, unlike breakfast, placed on the table for all of us to serve ourselves. It seemed odd to me that food was tasted in front of my uncles and lieutenants but not the 'family.'

"Daddy, why aren't Mathis and Athos here with us?" I asked.

Having them here would've made this so much better—there'd be someone I could talk to comfortably.

"I wanted tonight to just be about the five of us having time to get to know each other," Father answered.

Interestingly, he hadn't mentioned once that Liu was anything more to him than an assistant.

"I see," I answered, taking the bowl of rice from Liu. "So was the food being tasted only for show, or is that something I need to worry about with my lieutenants you told me to trust with

my life?” I inquired, unable to keep some of my bad attitude from leaking out.

Father sighed and set down his fork, clearly aware I was bothered by something. “During the day, there’s more staff in the house, but after five o’clock, everyone who isn’t senior staff is sent home unless there’s an event. The people who have prepared this meal have been with us for many years. If they wanted to kill me, then it would have happened long before this.”

“Well, that clears that up then, doesn’t it?” I said with a bright smile and picked up the platter of asparagus that had been set near my elbow.

“I realize it will take some time to get used to how things work here, but I have all the faith you’ll adapt quickly,” Father added when the table fell into an awkward lull. “Jamison, I believe you’re gearing up for finals in the next few weeks?”

“Yeah, Dad, it’s the worst,” Jamison mumbled.

I gazed at him with raised eyebrows, surprised at how he was acting toward our father. While I might not be pleased with him right now, I’d never sound so dismissive, certainly not to his face. Glenda instilled in me that no matter if he was my father or not, he was a powerful leader and deserved respect. That being said, I have no doubt at some point, Daddy and I will have it out, but it would be in private with the walls as our witnesses.

“What are you going to school for?” I asked, curious to see if he spoke to everyone in such a manner or just Father.

Jamison poked at his food, giving me the impression he wasn't a fan of salmon.

"Honey, your sister asked you a question," Casimira urged when it didn't seem like he was going to answer.

He let out a heavy sigh and looked up at me. "I'm going to Eastwood Technical Institute, finishing my first year of a computer science degree."

"Oh, that's cool. Have you always liked working with computers and programming?" I inquired, trying to show I was making an effort so we wouldn't have to do this again anytime soon.

He shrugged as he sat there shredding the chunk of fish he'd taken. "I guess."

Wow, if someone didn't smack the shit out of this kid, then I was going to have to be the one to do it. How the hell has he survived in this world acting like that?

"Jamison's just being modest," Casimira interjected. "The school pursued him after the work he did with the program he wrote for his robotics club. He's just upset about the whole thing because he wanted to take a year off to travel, but they would have retracted the offer if he did."

Right, I'm sure that's what happened. Something told me mommy dearest was the one who didn't want him to travel.

"Guess that makes two of us. I wanted to do some traveling after I graduated. Instead, I got mafia boot camp," I shared before I popped a piece of fish in my mouth.

“Yeah, well, I figured with him having you, I could be free to do what I wanted,” Jamison mumbled.

The fork I’d been holding slipped out of my hand and clattered to the plate.

“*Jamison*,” his mother snapped. “How dare you say something like that to her? It was rude, mean-spirited, and I won’t stand for it. Apologize,” Casimira ordered.

Jamison just crossed his arms and glared at his mother. “Seriously, we need to cut the crap. We don’t do family dinners like this. You know I hate fish, and I’m not going to waste the time getting to know a person who’s been MIA my whole life. And don’t you think being compared to someone you’ve never met is just bullshit? She can have it all. I never wanted anything to do with the mob or the shit that comes with it.”

Daddy’s face looked like a thundercloud of anger as his hands balled into fists at Jamison’s outburst. “That’s quite enough, son.”

“Why couldn’t we do this at our house instead of needing to be here? It’s the weekend you always stay with us, and Mom would have cooked something normal,” Jamison grumbled, shoving his plate away. “Bro, come on, back me up here. If we’re supposed to be getting to know each other, why not at least let it be the truth?” Jamison demanded, talking to Liu.

Bro? Another house? Weekends? What the actual fuck is happening right now?

“While I won’t know what a real family looks or acts like, having been abandoned by mine, I’d say you’re all making the truth of the matter loud and clear,” I stated, rising from my seat. “I’m going to finish my meal in my room. It seems the *family* has some things to discuss.”

“Astin,” Daddy barked.

I lifted my gaze to his and shook my head. “No, I’ll take whatever punishment you feel I deserve, but I won’t sit here a moment longer. When no one else is going to look out for you, then you have to do it yourself. That’s what my family taught me.”

Picking up my plate, I headed out of the room, shutting the door behind me. Needing a second, I leaned against it trying to compose myself.

“Jamison, how could you? We told you time and time again we needed to be sensitive to her feelings?” Casimira yelled.

“Why the fuck am I getting in trouble? It’s not like she wasn’t going to figure out what was going on. There’s no point in all this fake bullshit. How is this my fault?” Jamison shouted.

“Don’t you raise your tone at your mother, boy,” Father snapped. “Astin has no knowledge of my second residence where we live or that Liu is really her adopted brother. I didn’t feel it was fair for her to be slapped in the face with all of that at once. Thank you so incredibly much for dispensing with the bullshit and blindsiding her. I’m sure this will help matters move along so much faster.”

“You should’ve been honest from the beginning. Did she think you weren’t going to have a life just because she didn’t?” Jamison shot back.

Unable to hear anymore, I pushed away from the door and headed up to my rooms, where I’d be blissfully alone once more. All I’d wanted for fifteen years was to return home, to be with my father and uncles—the three men I believed wouldn’t let me down. Then right there before my eyes, the one man I thought I could count on to forever be in my corner lied and abandoned me just like Ryker.

Entering my room, I kicked the door shut and went to my office. I knew there was a wet bar in there, and I desperately needed a drink. When I opened the door, I found Mathis sitting there holding out a glass to me.

“You lasted longer than I thought,” he commented. “Who spilled the beans?”

“Do you really need to ask that question?” I mumbled, snatching the glass and gulping down the amber liquid. Setting my plate on my desk, I dropped into my chair and slid the glass over to my uncle for him to refill.

“I suppose not. The twit has never had anything going on between his ears,” Mathis said with a sigh.

Crossing my leg over the other, I placed my hand on my lap, glaring at him. “Why didn’t you tell me? You were with me for four years, you’d think it would come up in conversation.”

“Really, you think with everything else we were putting you through, it was a smart idea to take away your driving force to make it to the end?” he challenged.

Shooting to my feet, I slammed my hands on the desk. “I think it’s a smart idea to tell me I might want to allow for the possibility that my father was moving on,” I shouted. “Here I am, the poor little abandoned girl thinking my dearest father is still mourning over my mother’s loss and taking comfort in her best friend who, oops, they had a kid. The old man was upfront about that. Why couldn’t he tell me he decided to buy a normal house and live the fantasy with a white picket fence and the two-point-five children? Which now I get how that math can happen... if you adopt someone, then they’re only half yours, right? Not your DNA but you treasure them in your heart.”

“Squirt,” Mathis groaned. “Don’t make this worse.”

I burst out a harsh laugh. “It can get worse? Please tell me how it can get worse. Do I have more siblings? Am I adopted? What, is my mother not really his treasured wife who died in the valiant effort to protect me? Please, I’d love to know if my entire life is a complete and utter crock of shit.”

Mathis poured his own glass and tossed it back then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Casimira wasn’t just your mother’s best friend so she was around all the time, she’s your father’s second wife.”

My brain stalled for a moment as his words hit home. “Run that by me again?”

“Your father has two wives, always has. He’s just only been legally married to one. Apparently, the government as well as the mafia frown on that lifestyle,” Mathis explained.

Stunned, I flopped back into my chair. “She’s his wife?”

“As I said, in the government’s eyes, Flora is his wife, but in a private religious wedding, he married your mother and Casimira at the same time. Only one name made it on the certificate, but they both have rings. She just wears hers on the other hand,” Mathis added. “The house was bought shortly after since they couldn’t live together here so they spent the weekends together there. You’ve been there yourself a few times, but that happened less and less when you were born. The night your mother died wasn’t the first attempt on your life.”

“Why? Why keep this from me? If he’d just explained it all to me as a child, none of this would have come as a shock,” I mumbled, my brain working a million miles an hour as it tried to figure everything out.

“I’m sorry, squirt, you deserve better from us after everything you’ve been put through,” Mathis admitted as he stood. “Your old man forbade us from telling you. He made us swear on our honor we wouldn’t utter a word about that part of his life. Didn’t want you to deal with keeping it a secret.”

“Yet she’s openly his mistress,” I commented.

Mathis shrugged. “Yeah, and no one’s gay either. They see what they want to see and persecute whatever they find that makes them uncomfortable. The world’s a fucked-up place,

kid, but trust me when I say he'll never judge you on your personal life. He can't."

"That's what he meant, isn't it?" I said, looking over at him. "He wanted me to have what he can't, meaning he could never tell anyone that Casimira was his wife along with my mother."

"Not if he planned on staying in power," Mathis agreed. "To be clear, I don't have any issues with him loving two women and committing to them. What I take issue with is how he handled it with you. He owes you so much, and the truth is a small price to pay."

"You're not in trouble for telling me, are you?" I asked.

My uncle looked over his shoulder and cocked a brow. "What was it exactly I told you?"

"That my little brother's a twat," I answered with a smirk.

"God, is he ever. Damn! That boy got none of your father in him, that's for sure," Mathis muttered. "Have fun tonight, will ya? Let loose and live a little. You only have one life, find some time to enjoy it."

"Now that's some wisdom I can get behind," I called after him as he waved goodbye and left.

As I finished my dinner, there was a lot for me to think over. The revelation about my father was shocking, but it helped some things fall into place. I wasn't any less furious at him, but more so gave me his viewpoint, shitty as it was. The thing that had me even more curious was why he didn't marry Casimira when Mother died? He'd made it incredibly clear to

me that Flora was business, and they would be happy to live their lives entirely separate. He needed her to stick around while I was young to put on a good show, but the witch never once tried to be remotely motherly.

Then it brought me to Liu. The surprise sibling of sorts I seemed to have acquired. Something told me the powers that be in the wings of the Caprioni Family business would have been happy to put him in power. Was it simply that my father had promised the spot to me? Liu was wicked smart and clearly capable, but he had ties to a cut-throat politician. I suppose there's something to be said for the blind loyalty of a daughter to her father. Only problem is this daughter wasn't so blind anymore.

“Enough brooding, Astin,” I said aloud to myself. “After all, tonight we are going out, and no one is going to ruin my dancing this time,” I declared as I headed to the bathroom to get ready.

FOURTEEN



Once I had my hair and makeup done, I grabbed my phone and texted Braxton.

Me: *Hey, what kind of vibe does this place have?
I didn't really ask what kind of club this was.*

While I waited for a response, I headed for my closet, taking in the clothes I'd brought from home and the new ones that had been added. Clearly, Daddy didn't look at them since there were some dresses and other items he'd never have picked. My phone buzzed in my hand, and I looked down at the screen, surprised to see he answered so fast.

Braxton: *The place is called Club Illusion. It's an underground venue that's all about getting lost in the music and dancing. Although I'm pretty sure*

not knowing a thing about the place, anything you decided to wear would be fucking sick.

I smirked, enjoying his subtle way of flirting. He had good taste which is why they put him in charge of nightlife and entertainment. A smooth talker, but he didn't seem to bullshit me either. Quite the opposite, letting his honest opinion be the first thing out of his mouth.

Me: *Thanks (kissy face emoji), I'll be ready in fifteen. Should I meet you at the front entrance?*

Braxton: *Yup!*

Well, that was a simple enough answer.

Setting my phone on the vanity, I flipped through the dresses, liking them all, but I wanted something extra special for tonight. This was going to be my first official outing to a club my family owned. Nothing about this night was going to go unnoticed by friends and enemies of the family alike. If I were going to be watched all night, I might as well give them something worth looking at.

Then I found it, the perfect dress. I bought it thinking I was going to sneak out for my twenty-first to hit up a club. Plans changed because my uncles took me out instead, and I'd never had the chance to wear it. The dress was black with silver sparkles all over it, making it look like the night sky. It had

long sleeves and came to a stop slightly above my knee, but as conservative as it looked on the hanger, it was vastly different on. I almost didn't try it on, but when I did, I fell in love. The back was all lacing showing off my skin, then the lacing curved at my lower back to go over my hip and down my leg, showing a large swath of skin. You couldn't wear a bra or panties with this beauty as it would throw off the illusion.

Slipping on a pair of silver glittered-out platform wedges I knew I could dance in, I was ready. I grabbed a simple black clutch that would hold my phone. I took one last look in the mirror and looked over my hair, curled and full like a Victoria's Secret model. I kept my makeup on the simple side, knowing I wanted my outfit to be the statement piece.

It had taken me time to get over the fact that after all the training I went through, I had some prominent scars as a reminder of what happened. Each scar told the story of what I gave to be where I am today. It's what kept the darkness from taking me over completely once I'd let it out. My trainers, or torturers as I viewed them, did everything to break me to crack open that part every human has where they either chose to give up or face death head-on. My darkness wasn't something I wanted unleashed on the world. I'm not sure anyone would survive it.

Shaking myself out of that train of thought, I grinned at my reflection and winked, knowing the past was behind me. It had taken time, but once I got there, nothing could be better in the world than knowing you felt comfortable and confident in

your own skin. If you couldn't love yourself, then how could anyone else? I mean, if I wanted that sort of thing.

Padding my way down the stairs, I spotted Ryker leaning on the second-floor landing. His eyes grew wide as he took me in from head to toe with desire and sadness in his gaze when he met mine. "Don't worry, I'm not going to crash your night. I just wanted to apologize for how I acted earlier. You're right, I don't have any say in what you do or who you spend time with. Guess I was so excited to finally have you back in my life that I didn't think about how you would view my leaving."

"Thank you for the apology, you have quite a few more left to make before I'm ready to consider forgiving you, but it's a start," I offered, not wanting to deal with more drama. I'd had quite enough of that for one night, thank you very much.

"Have fun tonight and stick with the guys if you can," Ryker said, then reached out, took my hand, and flipped it over to show the scar. "I know you're still pissed, and I get it, but just know that what we promised each other when we did this still stands. No matter what, I'm always in your corner, my loyalty will always belong to you, Astin." He released my hand and headed down the hall without another word.

What the fuck is going on with this day? Whatever, I had better things to do like go to a club opening and get my dance on.

Reaching the main hall, I headed to the front entrance and spotted Braxton, Jace, and Luca waiting there. If I'd thought they looked good in their normal suits, this was a whole other level of sex on a stick. Jace had this careless look going with

ripped black jeans and a loose white button-down with the sleeves rolled up and one side tucked in. Luca had the whole retro prohibition mafia look going on that I'm not sure just anyone could pull off. He wore tight-fitted dress pants and a white tank top, finished off with black suspenders. This look showed off just how covered in tattoos he was, and I feel confident they're on every inch of his skin, even if I couldn't see it all. Then there was Braxton, our suave silver-tongued fuck boy with the heart of gold. There aren't many people, in my personal opinion, who can pull off leather pants and not look like a douche. Braxton was one of those people. The sassy grin on his face told me he knew he looked good as I perused his attire. His shirt was this semi-sheer mesh, long-sleeved, button-down in a metallic silver color.

"We're in so much fucking trouble." Jace groaned as he rubbed his face with his hand.

Cocking my head, I frowned. "Why, we haven't even left the house yet?"

"Something tells me if we want to continue living, we shouldn't," he added.

"Would you please find the balls I know you have and let's get going?" Braxton demanded as he held a hand out to me. "Can I have the honor of escorting you, Lady Astin? Might I also add I was right to assume whatever you chose to wear was going to be absolute perfection."

I rolled my eyes at him but took the offered hand. "We're off the clock, just call me Astin."

“With pleasure,” Braxton said, leading the way out the front door.

Waiting for us was a stretched Rolls-Royce. The second the driver spotted us, he opened the door and gestured for us to get in. To my surprise, Jace and Luca slid in, then Braxton helped me, ensuring I didn’t need to scooch down the line in this dress. It seems these boys did have some old-fashioned manners, after all. Luca grabbed a bottle of champagne and opened it, pouring glasses for everyone.

“To the new underboss and the first woman in power. It’s about time the mafia got their shit together,” Braxton toasted, making me laugh as we clinked glasses. “I hope tonight can make up for the lame birthday you had yesterday. Everyone needs to live it up on the one day that’s all about them.”

I cheered and let out a whoop. “I couldn’t agree more. Let’s make this a night to remember.”

“Or not,” Luca added. “Depending on how you hold your liquor and all.”

Scowling, I pointed a finger at him. “Do you think they wouldn’t ensure I wasn’t a lightweight in all that training I did? Hundred bucks says I can drink you under the table.”

He grinned at me. “Why don’t we save that challenge for another night? Normally, we have Sundays off, but this week with everything going on, we’re expected to be at breakfast bright and early like always.”

“Ah, fuck!” I groaned. “That means I really can’t get a hangover, or someone will end up dead tomorrow.”

“Might not be all bad, depending on who it is. I could give you a list,” Braxton offered.

“Brax,” Jace warned. “Not her first week.”

“Why not my first week?” I asked. “Wouldn’t it set the tone that I’m not to be fucked with?”

“Oh, that message is getting around just fine,” Jace commented. “My only point was this week it’s the people who are major players in the family or the business side of things. Killing one of them, deserved or not, would start a war. Just feel like that should wait for week two is all... get to know the people in person not just on paper, if you will.”

Shifting in my spot so I could see the man better, I was impressed. “Would you look at that, the gambler is playing his cards right.”

He shrugged. “Have to know when it’s better to fold and hold onto what you have than put them all in when you’re not sure you have the winning hand.”

I think these three might not be so bad after all. Tonight might be more fun than I expected. Here’s to hoping they can dance.

For the rest of the drive, Braxton shared his vision for this club and who he worked with to get the job done. Just when I didn’t think I could be more impressed, he listed off the DJs who would be playing tonight.

“Hold on, you got DJs Trill and Impulse to show up at the same club? Don’t they hate each other?” I questioned.

Braxton grinned and leaned in like he was going to tell me a secret. “That feud was a publicity stunt, and tonight is their make-up collaboration.”

“Are you the one who suggested the feud or just that it should end the night you have an opening?” I inquired, utterly impressed with his forethought.

He let out a sigh and sprawled in the corner of the limo. “No, I didn’t come up with the original idea, but I should have. A fight like that at one of our venues would have been epic.”

“I’m sure there will be another chance for you,” I assured him, patting his firm leather-clad thigh.

Damn, clearly the gym wasn’t for show.

When we pulled up to the building, it was showered in purple and blue lights with the name Club Illusion projected on the building with different animations changing it into different shapes. There was already a line down the block with police making sure they didn’t get in the way of traffic. Four bouncers stood at the top of the stairs that led down into the club, checking IDs and bags before letting people enter.

“Braxton, this is amazing,” I gasped, gawking out the window.

We pulled to a stop, and the driver opened the door allowing Braxton out first. He then turned and offered me his hand, helping me out of the limo onto the sidewalk. Music was playing from speakers outside the building, giving those who

were waiting something to listen to. Another car pulled behind us, and three men dressed in all black exited and spread out. It would seem my days of being anywhere without a bodyguard were over.

I took a moment to take in the city around us, noting it was in a warehouse district. That meant it didn't have the same noise ordinance a more populated area would have.

"Shall we?" Braxton asked, offering his arm.

Smiling, I nodded. "Yes, let's."

With the other two flanking us and the bodyguards trying to stay out of sight, we made quite the scene.

"Astin. Hey, Astin," a man hollered from the line.

I looked over and spotted Nick, the bartender from the martini jazz bar. Grinning, I waved back as I released Braxton's arm to wander over and greet him. "Hi, what are you doing here?"

"What do you think, trying to get into the hottest new club in Eastrose," Nick answered. "Wow, you look amazing."

"Aww, thank you," I responded, taking in his tight jeans and shirt hanging half open. "Lookin' good yourself. Come on, I'll make sure you get in. Least I can do for the drama I'm sure I caused the other night."

"You sure? I don't want to get you in trouble or move in on your night," Nick commented, glancing at the guys behind me.

Grabbing the rope, I unclipped it and waved him to step out of the line. "Let's go, or else I'm gonna leave you here on your

own. Could be hours.”

He gave in and stepped out, making others around him irritated. “What the hell, bitch. Why does he get special favors?”

Clipping the velvet rope back in place, I just gave the man a disapproving look. “First off, because he didn’t call me a bitch, and second, it’s none of your fucking business.”

“Yeah, it’s my fucking business when some piece of ass like you comes and plucks your fuck boy for the night out of the line when you already have three other guys who I’m sure were under the impression they paid for your undivided attention,” another prick yelled, shoving forward to get right up in my face.

That would be the moment one of the bodyguards stepped up next to me, his large bulk hard to miss. I held up a hand, letting him know I had this.

“You two must be friends, right? I’m guessing you tried to find dates to come with you tonight, but you struck out, and now you’re taking it out on me. Word of advice, you might find the fairer sex is more open to going out with you when you don’t actually hate them,” I suggested.

Prick one puffed up while Prick two seemed to catch on that maybe I wasn’t someone to mess with as he glanced at the bodyguard. “Chad, let it go.”

“No, fuck that. It’s bitches like this who make everything so much harder for guys like us,” Prick one, I mean Chad,

growled out.

“Wow, okay, I’m not going to ask what that even means because I’m sure it’s all a bunch of bullshit, but you guys have a nice night... if you get in, that is,” I offered as I turned away.

It seems Chad wasn’t pleased with that answer, so he came after me, but Wreck-it Ralph intercepted him. With his arm twisted up behind him, he just stood there swearing, trying to get loose.

“What would you like me to do, Mistress?” the bodyguard asked.

This is when I realized this was the same guy who was standing outside Daddy’s office all day. “Toss him to the back of the line. I feel like he needs to cool down a bit before getting into the club. Who knows, he might learn that treating people with respect will get him farther in life.”

Ralph hauled Chad away and headed for one of the other bodyguards to hand him off. Once he was done with that, he returned to me. “So did you get stuck with me after a long day because you did something wrong?”

“No, Mistress, I requested to be on your security team,” he answered.

“Really? You asked to be here tonight?” I questioned. “By the way, what’s your name? I can’t keep calling you Wreck-It Ralph in my head.”

“Boykov is my name, Mistress,” he shared with a hint of a smile. “But if you wanted to call me Ralph, I’d be fine with

that. As for your question, it wasn't just tonight. I went to Master Ryker and asked him to assign me as lead of your personal security."

"Now, why would you go and do a thing like that? Do you have any idea how big of a pain in the ass I am to deal with?" I blurted, shocked at his choice.

Boykov shrugged and gave me a real smile. "I've been working for your family for ten years, and it's been rather boring. The boss doesn't go out much anymore and has many other men on his team so I get stuck with door duty fairly often. Figured I could use a little entertainment in my life."

I burst out laughing at that and slapped him on the arm. "Be careful what you wish for, Ralph. I'll give you a week before you're begging to be back watching who enters and leaves a room."

"Challenge accepted," Boykov answered. "Now I believe your male friend you pulled out of line is getting nervous. Might want to go catch him before he bolts."

"I think you and I might actually become good friends," I commented, then headed back to Nick. "You ready, or have I freaked you out?"

"Why do you have bodyguards?" Nick asked, looking back over my shoulder.

I let out a heavy sigh and wrapped my arm around his. "That would be because I have a father who's far too overprotective, and I tend to get myself in trouble. Nothing I can't get out of

myself, but Daddy likes to make sure his only daughter is looked after.”

Nick didn't say anything, just nodded and let me lead him toward the entrance. “Hey, guys, we have an add-on. This is my friend, Nick, and he made me the best martini I'd ever had. I might have also caused a small scene at the bar, so I'm getting him in as an apology.”

The three men took in Nick but didn't really seem all that pleased about the intrusion. Then again, the mafia was always a suspicious bunch, so I shouldn't be surprised.

“What bar did this happen at?” Braxton asked.

“Oh, The Bandit,” I answered. “I had this jackass who made a move, and he was going to throw his drink at me, so I helped him decide that wasn't his best life choice.”

The flash of concern that appeared on Braxton's face gave me pause, but he quickly shook it off and smiled. “Think we better get you inside before you start a riot out here.”

“Better to be safe than sorry,” Jace muttered, leading the way.

When we approached the head of the line, the bouncers took one look at our group and flew into action. The rope was lifted, and all of them stood at attention, bowing their heads slightly as we passed. Braxton paused to speak to one of them as the rest of us continued into the club. When we entered the actual club, there was a long hallway with neon lights twisting and turning to make it seem like you were walking through a

portal of some sort. You could hear the music from the DJ, and the lights moved in time with the beat.

It was becoming clear why this place was called Club Illusion. Everything you saw made you look twice to see if it really looked like that or if your mind was playing tricks. The end of the hall had strings of glittering beads you had to enter through that landed you in the bar area. Two enormous horseshoe bars were on either side of the space, helping to ease the load of the massive number of people lined up three deep trying to get drinks. The bartenders worked fast, but I'm not sure it would matter with how busy the place was, people were going to have to wait.

Nick started to direct me to a spot that opened up when Luca held out a hand and stopped him. He shook his head and motioned for us to follow him. Off to one side, there was another set of stairs going up with two guards posted. They recognized Jace and Luca then their gaze landed on me. One of them actually gawked at me, mouth hanging open and everything.

As we passed, I used a finger to close it for him. "Careful, wouldn't want people to think you've never seen a woman before." His jaw snapped shut so hard I could hear his teeth clink. I gave his cheek a soft pat. "That's much better."

At the top of the stairs, I could see the main dance floor which was breathtaking. The floor was made out of something like shattered glass, letting the laser lights reflect off it, shattering the beam into a million pieces. The stage was at the back of

the room with a massive projector screen with whatever graphic or movie the DJ wanted to pair with his music. The place was amazing all the way around, and I was beyond impressed with Braxton's skills.

The upper floor was clearly for VIPs and had its own bar which was where we were headed. There was another staircase that went right down to the dance floor, meaning when I was ready, I didn't need to fight through the other room to get my groove on.

"What can I getcha?" the bartender asked, looking at me first.

"This place have a signature drink?" I inquired.

"Sure does, and it's pretty awesome. Some clubs try too hard to make something overly complicated or flashy but not this place. They picked good liquor to work with and solid mixers we can use," he gushed.

"Then make me the best drink this place has to offer," I announced. He nodded and checked in with the others who gave their order.

"Astin," Nick called, drawing my attention. "You've got to be honest with me, who are you?"

I reached out and fixed his shirt collar, leaning in so he could hear me better. "I'm not going to tell you that tonight. We're going to have fun, live it up, and if you still want to know or feel it matters, then before we leave, I'll give you the answer you're looking for."

Nick looked confused but nodded as the bartender passed out drinks. I picked up mine and took a sip, grinning at how good it was. I felt a hand rest on my lower back, making me tense until I heard him speak. “So what do you think?” Braxton asked.

Glancing over my shoulder, I grinned. “It’s amazing. I’m totally impressed.”

“Thank fuck for that. It was my first solo job without having to check things over with the boss. To hear you say that means I did all right for myself,” Braxton shared. “Come on, we’ve got an area reserved for when we come to visit the club. We can enjoy our drink then head down to the dance floor. I didn’t really get to see the other night, but you can dance, right?”

Laughing, I shoved him back. “Dick, yes, I can dance. I might have been raised differently, but I made sure I learned what really matters in the world.”

“Yeah, I think I’ll be the judge of that,” he challenged and grabbed my hips, stepping up behind me. “Like the song says, *hips don’t lie*.” Nipping the shell of my ear, he stepped away, grabbed my hand, and pulled me over to a space with a velvet circle couch made semi-private with more beads hanging around it.

Braxton settled me in the middle and took one side while Jace plopped down next to me. Luca took the tufted chair directly across from my seat, and Nick chose to sit on the other side of Braxton.

“So you’re a bartender at The Bandit,” Braxton commented. “What drink did you make that has Lady Astin here in your debt?”

“It was just a martini... it’s what The Bandit is known for,” Nick answered. “While I think I make a solid drink, I believe Astin’s being nice.”

Luca snorted. “She doesn’t do that, or did you miss the altercation outside the club?”

“Hey,” I snapped indignantly. “I can absolutely be nice. If you’re nice to me, then I’m nice back, you give me shit attitude, then you get shit right back.” The three guys looked at me with matching expressions of disbelief. “Oh fuck the lot of you. We’ve known each other barely for a full day, and you think you know that much about me?”

“Was I wrong about how you give out compliments?” Luca asked.

Crossing my arms, I glared at him. “No, you’re right. I don’t give them out unless I truly mean it. Why blow smoke up someone’s ass? It doesn’t help them get better in the long run.”

“There you have it, Nick. It seems you made a damn good martini. Maybe I need to hire you here, poach you from your other place,” Braxton mused aloud, tapping his chin. “Maybe later I’ll sneak you behind the bar to make some for us.”

Nick seemed uncertain about that idea. “I’m not sure they would allow that.”

“Trust me when I say the owner would be more than okay with you making drinks,” Jace interjected.

This didn't really set him at ease, but I had to chuckle to myself that as heir to the Caprioni Family estate and all that came with it, I wouldn't mind one bit if he made drinks.

“I want to dance. Who's coming with me?” I announced.

Braxton popped to his feet. “M'lady, I'd be honored to have this first dance.”

“Oh good God,” I muttered, rolling my eyes. “Let's go, prince charming.”

FIFTEEN



Jace

Watching Astin and Braxton head off to the dance floor, I stood and stopped Nick from joining them like the puppy wanted to. “Hold up a sec.”

Nick was a good-looking guy and, from what I could tell, normal in the general sense of the word. I could see why Astin would find someone like him, who had no idea who or what she was, so enticing. Sadly, normal wasn’t ever going to be in store for her now she’d been named underboss.

“What’s up?” Nick asked.

“How long have you been at The Bandit?” I asked as Luca came to stand behind him in case he decided to make a run for it.

Nick frowned and stepped back to look at both of us. “What the fuck’s going on right now? If you guys have some arrangement with her, and I crashed it, I’m sorry. How was I supposed to tell her no when she dragged me along?”

“You don’t,” Luca stated. “Now answer his question, how long have you been at The Bandit?”

“Five years. My uncle owns the place, and he got me a job there so I could work my way through college,” Nick admitted.

“Fuck,” I swore under my breath. “Nick, is your uncle, Harvey O’Hagan?”

“You know him?” Nick asked, sounding surprised.

I rubbed my forehead with a hand feeling a headache coming on. “When she was at the bar, she said an altercation happened. Do you know who the guy was?”

“Guys, it’s not a big deal. My cousin deserved it for sure,” Nick shared with a shrug. “Maybe the broken nose will teach him not to be a dick to women who turn him down.”

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.

“I’m going to ask you a question, and you better not lie to me, or this night will become so much worse for you,” I threatened, watching his eyes go wide. “Do you know what your uncle really does for a living?”

“I-I can’t talk about that,” he stuttered.

“You just answered my question.” I sighed, running my hand over my buzzed head. “What’s going to happen now is you’re gonna leave. If Astin ever pops up in your life, you walk the other way.”

Nick's expression changed from confusion to anger. "Who the fuck are you to decide something like that for her? She even said you haven't known her any longer than I have."

Luca moved in on him, grabbed the front of his shirt, and pulled him forward until they were nose to nose. "Listen, you little shit stain, you know nothing about that woman. If you want what's best for her, then you forget you even met her. Walk away now while you can, or else you leave me no choice but to ensure her safety with your body six feet under. You feel me?"

Shoving Luca off, Nick fixed his shirt, not daunted but cluing in on the fact he'd stepped into something way over his pay grade. "Who the hell is she?" Nick demanded.

"You learn that information and a whole shit storm is going to rain down on us far sooner than we'd like," I explained. "Now, get the fuck out of this club and don't ever come looking for Astin. You ignore our warning, and I'm not sure you'll keep living."

Even though we were being as crystal clear as possible, Nick wasn't backing down. "Fuck you guys. I bet this is all about getting me to back off so you can have one less dick to compete with."

I looked at Luca over this idiot's head and gave him a signal I knew he'd understand. Turning, I motioned to one of Boykov's guys who came right over. "I need you to escort our friend, Nick, out of the club and get him in a cab home. He's not to enter this club again tonight."

The grunt nodded and took Nick by the scruff, dragging him away. “You bastards can’t do this to me. I have every right to be here if I want to,” Nick hollered, thrashing in the grunt’s hands. “Just wait until I tell Astin what you did. You’ll never get a shot with her.”

Luca charged up to Nick and slammed his fist into the dude’s face, knocking him out in a single blow. “Nothing is more important than keeping Astin safe. She doesn’t have to like me or like what we do as long as she’s alive to rule the empire.” With the proclamation, he waved the grunt off and headed for the bar.

I stood there a moment, shocked at hearing Luca make that kind of declaration. We had great respect for the boss, but we knew he didn’t want us to be his people—we were marked for another. It seems she’d already made quite the impression on a few of her lieutenants, and it’s only been a fucking day. Things were going to be far more interesting than I think any of us expected. Right now wasn’t the time to worry about the future. Down below was a woman I wanted to dance with and a man I couldn’t get enough of.

Braxton might think we’re only fuck buddies, but I knew better. Many nights he crawled into my bed for no other purpose than because he didn’t want to sleep alone. It was more like we were in a non-monogamous relationship he refused to put a title on. He never kept his dates a secret from me and was honest if he slept with them. On occasion, I had a fling with a woman or man who caught my attention here and there, but Braxton is who I wanted at the end of the day.

Heading down the steps, I paused to search the sea of people for the pair. It was hard to miss them the way they moved so in sync, his hands on her hips, her arm up around his neck as he whispered something in her ear. Watching them, you'd have no idea they'd just met each other. Some connections were just that instant, and those two shared a kindred spirit for mischief, making me thankful there was more than just myself looking after them.

Wading through the masses of people, I brushed off advances from men and women alike until I reached them. Braxton met my gaze first, giving me a questioning look, and I nodded, letting him know we got rid of the dead weight. In an expert move, he unhooked one of Astin's hands and twirled her away from him right into my arms.

"Oomph," Astin grunted as I caught her against my body.

She started to push away then looked up and saw it was me. Knowing I needed to act, or she would second-guess herself, leaving me to dance with someone else. "Wait," I said, leaning in so I didn't need to shout. "I know I have a lot to make up for since our first meeting wasn't great. What do you say to a do-over?"

She leaned back against my arms, searching my face, then she held up a hand for me to shake. "Hi, I'm Astin Caprioni, the underboss of the Caprioni Family."

Smiling, I took her hand. "Nice to meet you, Astin. I'm Jace Cohen, lieutenant in charge of gambling and assistant to Ryker who leads security."

“Would you care to dance, Jace?” Astin asked.

“Fuck yeah, I wanna dance with you,” I answered, pulling her tight against me and slipping my leg between hers.

The song morphed into one that was a perfect beat to grind up against this sexy-as-sin woman. I had no doubt this woman could chew me up and spit me out if I let her, and fuck was it tempting to give into her pull. She had this confidence about her that told you she was someone important, but yet I’d seen the compassion she had for Atticus. This woman was as complex as a Rubix cube, and I wanted nothing more than to figure her out. What more did she have in that wicked brilliant mind of hers?

As time passed, Braxton came up behind her and boxed her between us, rolling his hips so she rubbed against my jeans. We all knew she didn’t have anything on under that dress, and it made me so fucking hard I was worried people could see it clearly outlined against my jeans. Thank fuck black hides a multitude of sins. As she ground on my leg, her dress started to rise until it was barely covering her pussy. The urge to slip my hand between her legs and finger fuck her right here on the dance floor was all I could think about.

Fuck it. I’m just gonna ask her.

“Does that feel good to have your naked pussy rub on my jeans?” I said into her ear, lifting my gaze to meet Braxton’s. “Do you like having Braxton thrust against you, forcing you to grind on my thigh?”

Astin's eyes started to glaze over with pleasure at my words. *Damn, I love a woman who enjoys some good dirty talk. Too many women get in their heads or take it personally, missing the theater of it all.*

“Do you know how simple it would be right now to slip my hand between your legs? Your dress isn't even covering your pussy at this point, almost like you're begging me to touch you,” I purred into her ear. “Is that what you want? Do you want me to make you come right here on this dance floor with all these people around us?” Her whole body shivered as Braxton ground her into me again, making her clutch at my arms to keep herself upright.

“What do you say, *Mistress*? Do you want your lieutenant to finger fuck you right here?” Braxton questioned, letting his hand skate up her sides until they reached her breasts. “I think you know exactly what you want right now, but you can't bear to admit it.”

Astin let out a moan that had the people next to us smirking as they tried not to watch. “Careful, you wouldn't want to draw attention to us now, would you? Unless that's something you enjoy... being watched as you get fucked.”

Her breath came in quick pants as she shifted to try and finish herself on my leg, but I caught her chin and made her look up at me. “Sorry, babe, but if you want to come, you're going to have to ask me for that.”

Biting her lower lip, she looked at me with heat in her eyes telling me she wanted this so badly. What I couldn't tell was if

she was hesitant to ask because we didn't know each other all that well or the fact I was making her submit to get what she wanted.

"I want to come," she announced.

Ah, she didn't want to submit.

"Yes, I'm sure you would, but I didn't hear a request in that statement. If you want to come on this dance floor, Astin, you have to *ask*," I reiterated, letting my lips brush her ear and my fingers glide up her thigh.

There was a hitch in her breath and another small moan as Braxton found her nipples through her dress, telling me how turned-on she was. "Can I come, please," she finally whispered just loud enough for me to hear, being so close to her.

"Yes, you can come all over my fingers as I fuck you with them right here in front of everyone," I acknowledged and moved my leg so there was more space for my hand to slip between her legs.

When I ran a finger through her center, I found her dripping wet with anticipation. *Fuck*, that had to be the hottest thing in the world to know she wanted this so badly. Seeking her entrance, I slid one finger up inside her, testing to see how far or rough I could be. My finger glided in without resistance, thanks to how wet she was. Removing my finger, I swirled two of them in her wetness and then shoved them deep inside her as my thumb stroked over her clit.

“Fuck yes,” Astin shouted as she clung to me. “Keep doing it just like that.”

This time I was going to let it slide that she was ordering me about while doing this. I’d already won the battle of will here tonight. I was the dominant in this situation, and she’d learn soon enough that when I took charge, she couldn’t take it back while in my bed. Outside the bedroom, she could be my boss and rule over me as she saw fit, but during private time if it ever came to that, she’d have to listen like a good little girl.

I kept my tempo quick, but I didn’t want to draw too much notice. When I landed on her G-spot, she let out another cry, but this time I slammed my mouth over hers, needing to keep her quiet. Under different circumstances, I’d love to hear her screaming my name. Right now, I didn’t want to chance anyone causing trouble for us and ruining my moment. This interaction would seal the deal on whether or not it would happen again, and fuck did I want more to happen.

When I felt her walls starting to constrict around my fingers, I sped up, slipped my other hand into her hair and yanked on it so her head fell back as I devoured her. When I pulled away, I turned her face to Braxton who took up where I left off, kneading her breasts while I focused on making this woman come so hard her legs gave out. Doing the best I could to keep this subtle, I fucked the shit out of her until I felt her clamp around me and scream into Braxton’s mouth. Yanking my fingers out of her, I slapped her clit, causing her to almost collapse, but Braxton had been ready for it.

Tugging down her dress, I scooped her up into a bridal hold and carried her out of the crowd back to the private floor. When we reached the top of the stairs, Luca was there with a concerned expression. “What the fuck happened? Is she all right?”

“Oh, I’m fabulous. I just can’t use my legs at the moment. Give me a few minutes and another drink, and I’ll be good to go,” Astin answered, giving Luca a thumbs-up.

He gave me a confused look but didn’t comment further as I headed for our private space, and Braxton went to get her a drink. Once settled on the couch, I gave her space, not wanting her to think this meant anything more than good fun between consenting adults.

“Where did Nick go?” Astin asked, looking around.

Luca sat across from her again, resting his foot on his other leg, looking completely relaxed. “Something came up, and he had to leave.”

Astin watched him carefully for a moment, and part of me wondered if she realized we’d gotten rid of him.

“Is he still alive?” she questioned with a cocked brow.

Damn, this woman was far too smart for her own good.

“Last I saw,” Luca answered.

Astin rolled her eyes. “Is this the game we’re going to play now? If so, I’m opting out. It’s going to ruin my post-orgasm bliss, and I’m quite enjoying it right now.”

Luca's gaze snapped to mine, a mixture of jealousy and irritation reflected in them. I wiggled my two fingers at him and popped them into my mouth, then slowly pulled them out again.

"That's gross," Astin muttered. "Seriously, you don't know where that pussy's been before you. What if you just gave yourself mouth herpes or something?"

Luca snorted at my shocked expression. "Do you have herpes?"

"No, but you didn't know that, and you just put them straight in your mouth," she pointed out. "You really should ask more questions, or is it because you and Braxton are partners you forgot how the dating world works?"

"For you," Braxton interrupted, handing over a drink. "First of all, Jace and I are friends with benefits, not an official couple or anything. We are best friends who fuck but also fuck other people when we want to. Second, we all get tested regularly. I make sure since I don't need that shit spreading around my girls and then I have to get them treatment or replace them. Too much money is at risk for the top of the food chain to cause the problem."

"Well, that's all dandy, but I was talking about me having something," Astin countered.

Braxton let out a bark of laughter then took a sip of his drink. "There's not a chance in hell you would let someone near you if they had an STD. Not to mention any kind of unprotected sex because not only would your father be out of his mind, so

would Ryker. All your records get funneled to them for every doctor visit you've ever had."

I flinched a little at the fact he brought up either of those people right now. While the house staff keeps their mouths shut about what happened in the house to an outsider, it doesn't mean they don't talk to each other. Word spread like wildfire about the fight that happened at dinner and how Astin had dinner alone in her room. It's another reason she needed this night to blow off some steam.

"Yes, they're intrusive motherfuckers, aren't they," Astin commented. "Just for the record so you can hear it from me instead of through the grapevine, I'm clean. I got tested regularly as well once I heard a guy I had a romp with gave another girl the clap."

"Now that we've cleared that up," I muttered. "I do have a question for you."

She glanced at me, taking a sip from her drink. "Shoot, I suppose you've earned it."

"Why The Bandit?" I inquired. "Out of every place you could possibly go, why there?"

"Two reasons," she said, holding up two fingers. "They had been awarded the best martini bar for the past five years, and second..." she put down her pointer finger, leaving her middle finger up in the air. "It wasn't owned by Daddy Dearest. I was trying to stay under the radar, and going to a place we owned risked someone might know who I was."

“Damn, you put some thought into that, didn’t you,” Braxton interjected. “Makes me want to know what they’re doing that we aren’t to get that award.”

“Hmm... you know who you could have asked about that before you got all alpha male and chased him away?” Astin sassed. “So are you going to tell me the real reason it was so terrible of me to have gone to The Bandit?”

The three of us looked at each other, unsure how much we should tell her if she didn’t know about Harvey. It wasn’t like she was going to ask the boss right now, and she needed to know the danger.

“Does the name Harvey O’Hagan mean anything to you?” Luca asked.

The second that name came out of his mouth, Astin’s whole demeanor changed. “Yes, I know who that is.”

“Yeah, well, he owns that place, and the idiot you decked was his son. Not to mention that Nick is his nephew,” Luca informed her. “You, little lady, walked into the lion’s den, stared into its gaping jaws, and walked away alive. That won’t happen a second time.”

“Daddy’s gonna be so pissed.” Astin groaned and slumped in her seat.

SIXTEEN



The bliss I'd been having all night seemed to come crashing to a halt when I learned I'd stepped into a bar owned by Harvey O'Hagan. That bastard was the number one thorn in Daddy's side, and I even considered becoming chummy with his nephew. *Ugh, this is what I get for trying to go someplace under the radar.* If we didn't own the building or business, then our competition did. Thank fuck, I know the Italian place I like was in a building we maintained. It wasn't a major earner, so not many people paid attention to what went on there.

"No, no," Braxton said, poking me in the ribs with each word. "I'm not going to let this crash the party. The night is young, and there's a fuck more fun to be had. Look, you didn't know, and now you do, so that's the end of it. Chin up like the queen you are and finish your drink so we can get back down there."

"Yeah, you have fun with that," Luca commented dismissively.

I cocked a brow at him and leaned forward. “Oh, so you came out tonight to sit up here and lord over all the small people down below?”

“No, you sassy minx, that’s not at all what I was going to do,” Luca shot back.

“Do tell?” I challenged.

“Tell you what?”

I sighed dramatically. “Tell me what it is that you plan on doing while we dance?”

“There’s a poker game going on in one of the side rooms,” Luca shared.

Shooting to my feet, I grabbed his arm and yanked him out of his chair. “Why didn’t you say so earlier? I fucking love poker. God, I haven’t had anyone new to play with in years since my uncles left. It got boring to play with the rich boys in the area... there was no challenge. Well, that and they got mad I kept taking all their money.”

Luca gave me a surprised look. “You’re sure? Seems like you were having a good time with the other two.”

Coming to a sudden halt, Luca had to catch himself before he almost pulled me over. I twisted around to face Braxton and Jace who weren’t following us. “You’re not coming?”

“Do I look like I have a face for poker?” Braxton asked. “Nah, babe, you go have fun, and when you’ve made enough money off those idiots, you’ll know where to find us.”

Jace stepped up and caught my chin, forcing me to give him my full attention. “There’s no pressure to this, but do you want there to be a possibility to continue things later? Just want to make sure we don’t end up in someone else’s bed if you want us in yours.”

Oh fuck, what the hell is a woman supposed to say to that? What happened on the dance floor was hot as sin, just what the doctor ordered, but did I dare ask for more? They clearly didn’t have any issues with this being good old-fashioned adult fun, but fucking around in a club was one thing, bringing them home to *my* bedroom was another.

“Why don’t we see where the cards fall, no need to set expectations. Takes the fun and spontaneity out of it when you start putting rules in play, don’t you think?” I asked, hoping they wouldn’t feel slighted by my choice.

“If that’s what you want, then we’re both fine with it. No expectations, rules, or plans, just let the moment happen,” Jace agreed. “So far, that’s worked out well for all involved,” he added with a wink.

My pussy clenched at his words, remembering exactly what it felt like to have his attention on me. “Yeah, it’s been pretty great.”

Jace leaned in and kissed me on the cheek, letting his lips linger as he whispered, “No risk, no reward, Astin. Don’t worry, I’ll get you right where I want you, earning the reward a good girl gets.” With that parting remark, he sauntered off with Braxton.

I'm so screwed.

“You still coming, or did Mr. Alpha whisper some dirty magic words to get you back on the dance floor?” Luca asked.

Shaking my head to clear it of all the lust-filled thoughts Jace had instigated, I smiled at Luca. “Not a chance. I want to make some grown men cry.”

He gave me a look that told me he wasn't convinced but headed to the opposite end from where the bar was. “This is a thousand-dollar buy-in. I realize that's not a problem for you, but just so you know, this isn't amateur hour. Jace and I put this game together with a few high rollers who like to invest in our clubs and what they have to offer. They don't like to play with Jace because he's too good, so I babysit them at these openings. You're not gonna be put off with working girls being in there, right?”

“Are they going to be fucking on the table?” I asked with as serious of an expression as I could make.

“No.”

“Great, then why would I give a flying fuck what they're doing? Girls got to make money somehow, and if they want to do it this way, then more power to them,” I stated.

“Not really sure why I even asked. We run the biggest strip clubs and escort services in the city,” Luca muttered.

I grabbed his arm and clung to it as I kissed his cheek. “It was still sweet of you to ask, though. Oh, one thing, if they don't know who I am, let's not tell them. I want to be given a real

shot at this, not worrying about men sucking up or letting me win.”

Luca looked a little flustered at my closeness but nodded sharply in agreement. “I don’t think there would be any reason they would know about you yet, so your chances are good. Did you want to go by Astin?”

“Oh, good call. If you didn’t know what my name was, what would be your first guess?” I asked, still holding onto his arm as he opened the door.

“What? Why are you asking me that?” Luca spluttered, completely caught off guard.

I pushed out my lower lip in a pout. “Come on, Luca, just play along.”

“Angelica, because you’re such a brat,” he muttered.

Laughing, I let him drag me into the first room where he greeted the guards who were the ones to open the second door, allowing us to enter a swanky room that still fit the vibe of the club but more toned down. A small bar was tucked in the corner, and the large octagon poker table was set up with ten chairs around it. Eight of them were filled, and it made me wonder if they’d needed an extra player or if I was going to get someone kicked out.

“Ah, Luca, no Ryker tonight?” One of the men greeted, rising to his feet to shake hands.

So I did kick someone out of their game. Thankfully, it wasn’t someone important.

“I hope you don’t mind if I take Ryker’s place. I’m Angelica,” I shared, nodding my greeting at the other men.

The older gentleman at the table chuckled.

“Do you even know how to play poker?” Another of them asked.

I shrugged. “It can’t be that hard, can it?” Shifting, I looked at Luca. “You can loan me the money I need to play, right?” I asked with a pleading look.

“Don’t worry about the money, I’ll get you squared away,” Luca assured me.

“Lovely,” I cheered and took a seat in one of the open chairs. “What are we playing, boys?”

Two women walked over and passed out drinks to the other men wearing stunning lingerie. These must be the working girls Luca mentioned. One of them came over to me, batting her artfully done false eyelashes. “Hi, I’m Libby. Can I get you anything, angel?”

“Yes, I’d love a gin and tonic with three limes, please,” I requested. “Also, I have to ask, did the club provide your outfits? They’re amazing.”

“Oh, that’s Braxton. He’s the man who runs the club,” she answered. “Us girls trust whatever he picks out. It’s always something yummy and looks good on us all. He says the packaging needs to be as pretty as the goods.”

“Wow, smooth-talker, that one, hmm?” I teased with a small smile.

She grinned and nodded. “Don’t get attached, though, if you ever meet him. That man breaks hearts left and right.”

“Ladies, I hate to interrupt your girl talk, but we have a game to play,” a grumpy old voice cut in.

I rolled my eyes conspiratorially at Libby, making her giggle as she went to grab my drink. Luca sat with a tray full of chips and sorted them between us. It would seem the man believed I was good at this since he only gave me ten thousand to play with while he had twenty. The rest of the table had roughly around thirty, give or take a few thousand.

“Might I ask your names? I feel like if we’re going to play a game together, we should at least cover that formality,” I suggested.

Luca cleared his throat and pointed to the man on his right. “We have Archie, Raymond, León, Edgar, Harrison, Alejandro, Quincy, and Vance. All of them are integral in keeping our businesses well-funded with patrons and supporting us in events such as this. They were all personally invited by the Caprioni Family to this select game on opening night. Something we do for all our new club openings.”

Clearly, what he was trying to tell me was that while I might be better at this game, I shouldn’t make them cry too badly. They were important to our business relations. We might not need their money, but the support they gave was worth more. Many of the names I knew from business deals I’d read about. Interestingly enough, two of them, Raymond and Harrison,

were the ones trying to buy the plot of land for the amusement park.

“It’s really lovely to meet you all,” I greeted again. “Now, how do we feel about five-card draw? You gentlemen strike me as risk takers.” They all smiled at that and nodded their heads.

Edgar grunted and waved at the dealer. “Set it up, Scott. If the lady wants to lose her client’s money, that’s his loss.”

Okay, for real now, why the fuck does everyone assume I’m a working girl? It was because I commented on their clothes. That had to be it, or maybe the name Angelica was a step too far to pull off. Fuck it, they’ll learn soon enough.

Scott, our dealer for the night, opened the deck and set to shuffling it. Libby handed me my drink with a note written on the napkin.

Watch out for Alejandro, he always cheats.

Smirking, I wrapped the napkin around the rock glass so the ink would bleed as the condensation seeped into the paper. One thing every man should learn is that just because a woman wasn’t officially playing the game, we were always playing the long game. Libby had my back, and none of them had a fucking clue to even be concerned.

The blinds were put in the pot, cards were passed out, and the game was underway. Taking a sip of my drink, I grabbed my cards looking at what I was dealt. It wasn’t a great hand, but it wasn’t the worst. I could do something with it. Not that it

mattered, I didn't plan on winning the first round. I had to get a feel for these men and how they played.

"I'll take three cards, please, Scott," I requested, tossing away what I knew wouldn't help me, leaving the best of my hand.

Glenda never wanted me to learn how to play poker or any other gambling activity, knowing that with my personality, I'd become addicted, but not in the way most people think. No, see, for me, it was about getting in people's heads. I wanted to know their tells, what it meant when they cleared their throat before a turn, or if they tapped their cards twice as they thought. This wasn't just about being good at keeping your thoughts to yourself and off your face, it was all about the little things, and that's what I got high on.

While I waited for my cards, I watched every detail of these nine men. Luca might be my lieutenant, but I still didn't know him for shit. Playing this game would teach me about him just as it would the others. Many of the men were pleased I had to hand in that number of cards, believing it was proof I would be shit at this and an easy target. The rest turned in one or two, except for Alejandro. He also handed in three cards. Keeping Libby's note in mind, I made sure to see if he gave three and got three. Scott was a good dealer, and he did everything as he should. Guess we were going to wait for us all to have a few more drinks before making his move.

The first round I lost, folding before I got in too deep, making Luca glance at me questioningly. He didn't need to know my plans. All I needed from him right now was to have a little

faith and trust. Not having to play meant I got to lean back in my chair and watch. I gulped down my drink and wandered over to the bar pretending to be bored.

“Could I get another gin and tonic,” I asked the bartender, then leaned forward and lowered my voice. “Lighter on the G if you please.” The man looked at me with surprise at the request. “No one wants a sloppy date,” I added.

Hell, if everyone was going to think of me as a hooker, then I might as well use it to my advantage. He nodded and only put in half a shot but made the rest like normal. I plucked out a few limes and added them before taking my seat.

“Looks like Quincy takes the first round, you bastard. Can’t believe you won with two pairs,” Harrison muttered. “You all fell for the bluff. We should know better. When he bets big, he’s got shit.”

“You’re just a sore loser, Harrison,” Quincy snarked. “Let’s take a five-minute break then go for the next round.”

Everyone got up from the table and went to the bar where Libby and the other girl were consoling the loser ever so wonderfully.

“So, Angie, you wanna tell me what your strategy is, or did you just realize you’re not as good at this game as you thought?” Luca murmured as he rearranged his chips.

I rested my arm on the table and rested my head on my hand, grinning at him. “What would the fun be in telling you that? If

you're worried about the money, I promise to pay you back with interest when we get back to the house."

"That's the last thing I'm worried about," Luca said with a snort. "On the other hand, when they find out who you are, they're going to think you're a joke. This is a risky move."

"Why don't you let me worry about that for now... call it a trust exercise," I suggested, reaching out and booping him on the nose. "This round try not to rub your nose when you don't have a good hand. Or keep doing it but only when you have a good one so everyone thinks it's a bad one. That will throw them for a loop, and they'll never know if it's good or bad."

Shock shone in his eyes at my comment, but the others returned, ending our conversation.

"Well, little lady, let's see if you do better this time around," Raymond said encouragingly.

Libby appeared at my side, offering me another drink, having spotted mine was empty. "Don't worry, angel, it's got just the right amount of gin for yah."

I grabbed a hundred-dollar chip and handed it to her. "You're a gem, Libby, don't ever change."

She blushed and stuck the chip in her bra, giving me a wink as she meandered over to Vance who grabbed a handful of her ass. "Libby-lou, you know you're my favorite, right? I always ask for you at these events."

"Aw, Vance, you flatter me," Libby gushed and planted a kiss on his cheek, making the man glow. "Did you want me to

blow on your cards?”

“That trick doesn’t work the same as dice, but maybe I’ll take you with me to the casino night Jace is hosting in two weeks,” Vance offered.

Libby clapped her hands. “Sounds fun.”

That woman right there was a professional on every level. She knew just how to be the right amount of stupid to keep them interested and stoke their egos. Damn, maybe I needed to make more friends with strippers and working girls. I might learn a thing or two about how to get information out of a man who didn’t require pain.

This time when I got my hand, I knew I was gonna play to win. It was too good to pass up just to study men I could read easily enough. “Only one card for me this time,” I told Scott, handing in the one I didn’t want.

He slid me over a new card, and I picked it up and pouted. *These assholes were going down, and none of them would see it coming.*

“It’s risky to hand in only one card,” Archie mused aloud. “Three shows you have a bad hand, two say you’re not confident, but one means you’ve got something or you hope to God the new card gives you something.”

“Aren’t we philosophical tonight,” Edgar muttered. “Give me three.”

“Oh, did I touch a nerve there, Ed?” Archie teased.

“Fuck off and put in your bet,” Edgar snapped.

Everyone put in a fairly conservative bet but me. I dropped half my chips in the pot. “I think that’s somewhere around five grand.”

“Now are you sure you want to do that, dear,” Vance warned. “If you wanted to take some of that back, we might let you on account of not really knowing the game.”

I gave him a warm smile. “I so appreciate that, I do, but that’s the right number for this hand.”

León tossed in his hand. “Fuck, I fold.”

“Damn tightwad, why do we even invite you to these things? You never take a risk. Live a little, would you?” Edgar grumbled and flipped the man’s hand over. “For fuck’s sake, you have a decent hand. There was a chance you could have come out on top.”

You never showed hands before the game was over. If someone could count cards, you’d be handing them information you didn’t want them to know. My gaze shifted to Alejandro who was studying those cards a little too intently. Was this how he cheated? No, he seemed like a smart man, but I wasn’t sold on the idea of card counting.

We continued, and Harrison was the one to challenge me. “I see that bet and raise you two grand more.”

The men all turned to look at me, waiting expectantly for me to give my response. Not wanting to go crazy, I nodded and threw in the two grand. “I see you and call. Let’s see what you have that’s so impressive.”

Harrison laid out a flush with a giant grin on his face as the other men swore and tossed down their cards. I held my cards, glanced down at them, frowned, and looked back at his as if I wasn't sure if he did better than me or not.

“Now, correct me if I'm wrong, but I think this beats your flush. What do they call it, ah... yes, a straight flush,” I announced, fanning out the cards. “Look at that, all hearts... must be a good sign, right?”

Harrison looked like he might be ready to climb across the table and clobber me as the dealer slid over all the chips. “You little witch, you knew how to play all along.”

“Now, now... I told you all I could play. You're the ones who didn't believe me,” I chided, wagging a finger at them. “Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to use the ladies' room. Tonic just runs right through me.”

Standing, I looked down at Luca, who had a smug look on his face until he noticed me watching him. “Oh, it's past the bar, take a left. You know what, never mind. I'll show you.”

“What a gentleman.” I simpered, taking his arm.

SEVENTEEN



Not truly needing to use the bathroom, I took my time washing my hands and patted my makeup. Dancing had gotten me all sweaty, and no girl ever looked good with creases or raccoon eyes. Feeling enough time went by where the old farts would be talking among themselves, I exited the bathroom.

Luca waited like I asked, albeit begrudgingly. “You know, they’ll think we’re fucking in the bathroom if I don’t go back.”

“Does that bother you?” I questioned. “I mean, if you don’t want to be a liar, I could give you a blow job really quick.”

“Astin, didn’t I tell you nothing about me and my dick are quick?” he reminded me.

I tossed up my hands. “Just trying to help a guy out.”

He had me super curious, though, about this whole going-the-distance thing he keeps bringing up. If he’s not quick, then are

we talking a half hour? Hour? I mean, how long could a woman take getting rammed before it started to get raw? Have I been missing out on something by thinking twenty to thirty minutes is a long time? Fuck, if I was going to ask him, better to wait and find out for myself.

Exiting the bathroom, I smiled at his pout. “Did you miss me?”

He just rolled his eyes, shoved his hands in his pockets, and headed back.

“Whoa there, Energizer Bunny, there’s a reason I did all this,” I pointed out. “No, it wasn’t just to torture you, I promise. Without you there, it leaves them free to talk about anything and everything. I want to know what that would be, so we are going to be really quiet and not enter right away.”

Luca blinked at me a moment then nodded. *Ah, a man of few words... fucking hate that.* We arrived at the curve of the hall that would land us back in the room with everyone else. I pulled Luca to a halt and listened.

“Did you hear Boss Caprioni is giving the zoning issue over to his daughter, just like we thought he would? The man’s losing his touch, first thinking we’d actually want to invest in a crap piece of land like that. Second, putting a fucking broad in charge of matters that should be dealt with by men,” Harrison said, the disdain clear in his voice.

Alejandro scoffed. “You’re just butt hurt because a woman took you for a ride, and you got nothing out of it but the bill.”

“No,” Harrison snapped. “It’s to show that the big man isn’t the king he thinks he is. Colmazio is losing his grip on the city, first with the bikers and now this. If any of them fucking touch that land, it will become a nightmare that will never end.”

“What the fuck do you know?” Edgar asked. “That sounds like more than just a money pit of toxic land.”

“When they started to look into the damage of the toxic waste, they found a burial ground on the edge of the land. Once they did testing and found out it was one that belonged to the Kocabe, the government reached out to inform them. Now the whole area is off limits to everything until they survey the entire area to see if anything else has been missed,” Raymond explained.

“I still don’t get it,” Quincy muttered.

“It’s now protected land under the preservation of the Kocabe Native Histories Act. If Colmazio or his daughter send someone to do their own reading of the soil, they’ll have broken the treaty. It was the government’s way of making peace and trying to mend fences. By anyone taking even a speck of sand from the area, they have stolen from the Kocabe. Until they can determine there’s nothing else of their heritage on or in the land, it’s all theirs at this point,” Harrison continued with a chuckle. “They’ll be thrown in prison and pay a fine so large to the Kocabe people they’ll be ruined.”

Motherfucker, I’m going to kill them.

“Why doesn’t anyone else know about this?” León asked.

“Seems like if they did their research, they would know.”

“Harvey O’Hagan was more than happy to pay off the right people to keep this quiet and off the books. It’s not officially documented anywhere. Besides, Harvey is offering us a way better deal on property outside the city. It wasn’t what we were hoping for, but the money we save on the land means more money in our pockets at the end of the day,” Raymond answered.

Luca rested a hand over mine, making me realize that my nails had dug into his arm, leaving behind marks. Yanking it back, I shook it out, took a deep breath, then entered the room.

“Miss me, boys?” I asked, plopping down in my seat. “As much as I’d love to keep taking all your money, I feel like this is best left to the boys. Don’t worry, I won’t take Luca from you. He can stay and have all the fun.”

“That’s too bad. I was hoping to get a chance to redeem myself,” Harrison challenged.

“Oh, I think we’ll run into each other again. Maybe then we can play another game and see who the better player is,” I said with a wink. “Luca, you look like you’re running a little low. I’ll let you use my chips.”

Leaning in, I kissed him on the cheek. “Bleed them dry,” I whispered, then gave the men a girly finger wave and left the room.

“Everything all right, Lady Astin?” the guard at the door asked when I pulled out my phone.

I whirled to look at him. “You knew who I was?”

“Yes, Ryker sent out your photo to all of us so we wouldn’t be caught off guard,” he answered.

“Huh, guess news about that travels fast,” I commented. “Do me a favor and don’t let any of them know who I am. I was incognito for the night, and it would spoil my fun if I didn’t get to see the shocked look on their faces.”

“As you like, Lady Astin,” he said and resumed his stance by the door.

Scrolling through my phone, I found Gunner’s number and dialed. The damn thing went right to voicemail. Glancing at the screen, I found it was one in the morning, but that was no reason for him to have his phone off. *Fuck*. I hurried over to the railing and looked for the others, but I couldn’t find them.

“Ugh, I don’t have time for this,” I growled as I headed for the entrance.

When I got to the stairs that led up to the street, one of the bouncers spotted me. “Mistress, are you all right?”

“I need a cab or a ride back to the house,” I answered, trying to google a number for a cab.

“Not a problem.” The man grabbed a radio off his belt and spoke into it. “The mistress needs her ride.”

“Roger that, sending the limo around front,” another man responded.

My jaw fell open. “That was fucking impressive.”

The bouncer grinned. “Glad you think so. Are you sending it back for the others?”

“Fuck no. They can figure their own way back. Serves them right for not being around when I was looking for them.” I huffed.

He gave me a quick glance. “You, Mistress, shouldn’t be looking for anybody. They should be following you like good little ducklings.”

“Aww, that’s the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard,” I gushed, resting a hand on his arm. “Now I’m so going to call them my little ducklings, and they’ll hate it.”

“Your ride should be ready now,” he offered. “Get home safe.”

“Thank you once again. I’ll make sure to tell Boykov you were amazing,” I shared, waving him goodbye and heading up the stairs.

As if the man heard me, Boykov was standing by the limo door waiting for me to get in. I hurried over but paused before I slipped in. “That man down there needs a raise or whatever job he wants, Ralph.”

“I’ll make sure to mention it to Master Ryker,” he assured me with a smile. “Are the others coming?”

“Not with me,” I announced and slid into the car.

To my surprise, Boykov slid in beside me and closed the door. I cocked a brow at him, and he shrugged. “Protocol. If you’re not with any of the lieutenants, then one of us needs to be with

you. They're part of your security team as well, but when it's just you, that means we step up to the frontlines."

"Interesting... good to know," I said as I pulled out my phone to call Ryker.

Two rings, and he answered, "What's wrong."

"Goodness, you think just because it's one in the morning and I was out with the boys, something is wrong?"

"Ti... Astin, what do you need?" he asked with a groan.

"I need everything you know on Harrison and Raymond along with what moves Harvey O'Hagan is doing. Seems we've been behind on a few things," I shared.

"None of that makes sense," Ryker challenged. "What am I looking for?"

"You're not looking for anything. That's *my* job. I need the information, *all* of it, Ryker. Not just the things you think I should know. I mean, every speck of information we have on those two property tycoons."

"Fuck, okay. I should have a fair amount already, but the way you're talking, it makes me think I need to take a second look. We've gotten lax with them being some of our top people," Ryker said, and I could hear the typing on a keyboard.

"One more thing, which room is Gunner's?" I inquired.

"Ah... left side, third door down," he paused. "Why do you need to know that?"

"Fucker doesn't have his phone on," I bit out.

There was a moment of silence. “Yeah, I’ll let him figure that out on his own.”

“Wise choice. When you have what I need, meet me in my rooms,” I directed and hung up.

“Do I need to call the doc and tell him to be on standby?” Boykov asked.

I cocked my head. “Why would you need to do that?”

“For Gunner, after you wake him up,” he explained.

Laughter burst out of me, and I nearly fell over in my seat.

“Oh God, that’s amazing. Damn, I’m so glad you’re on my team. You’re my kind of people.”

“So... is that a yes?” he pressed.

“No. I’m just going to make him piss his pants. The golden boy is going to be horrified that he fucked up this bad without me needing to spank him too,” I assured Ralph.

We pulled up to the house, and Boykov wished me a good night as I entered the front door. The house was quiet, and the lights were dim, making it a little spooky. It was an old house, so it makes sense it would have a creepy side to it. I felt like that was a rule. Moving quickly up the stairs, I got to the landing and took a left, looking for the third door down. The doors alternated which side they were on, so I guess when he said third door, he meant literally the third door. Welp, if it wasn’t him, then I’d have some apologizing to do.

I kicked in the door, letting it slam into the wall as the dim light from the hall lit up the room. Unlike my suite, they only

had one actual room with the bed off to the right side of the room. Gunner flailed as I flipped on the lights, falling out of his bed.

“You motherfucking idiot,” I yelled, storming into the room. “Who turns their phone off at night? Do you think this is some nine-to-five gig? I’m sorry, you’re not a manager who checks out at the end of the day and turns off their goddamn phone.”

Gunner’s head appeared on the opposite side of the bed from where I was, eyes wide with terror. “Wh... what happened?” he stuttered. Then he grabbed a pair of glasses off his nightstand and looked at me with his hair sticking out all over the place.

“You would know already if you had answered your goddamn phone,” I snapped.

He lunged across the bed to where his phone was on the other nightstand and looked at it. “Fuck, I forgot to add you to my list of people who can call me in the middle of the night.”

“Excuse me?” I questioned. “Why the hell can’t anyone call you? What if I don’t have a phone handy and use a payphone or a business line? Do you have any idea how stupid that is?”

Gunner looked like a fish on dry land with the way his mouth kept opening and closing, trying to come up with some logical response.

“Turn that shit off right now,” I ordered. “Come on, I want to see you delete that setting with my own two eyes so I know that when I need your ass, I can get a hold of you.”

Gunner righted himself and flicked through the screens until he got to the one he wanted. Turning the screen to me, he showed me where the setting was and slid the toggle to off. “Done.”

“Good, now follow me,” I directed.

“Are you going to tell me what’s going on?” he asked, jogging after me as I left his room and headed up the stairs to my own space.

I glanced back at him for a second then shook my head. “No, you get to suffer for a while longer knowing you fucked up in so many ways. Just for the record, I’m not talking about just this moment. I mean, you almost ruined the entire Caprioni Family in one fell swoop.”

“How? How is that even possible?” Gunner spluttered.

Ryker was standing outside my door with a sleepy Atticus at his side. *Smart boy, knowing I was going to want him here too. Seems he was trying hard to make up for being a jackass.*

“Head into my office while I change into something more comfortable,” I commented as I unlocked my room and entered.

“Why did I get dragged out of bed, Astin?” Atticus asked, his voice rough with sleep. “My body requires a full eight hours if it is to properly function. Any less than that, and I fear I might make a mistake of some kind.”

“I promise this is important enough to warrant the interruption,” I offered as I entered my office that connected to

my bedroom. “Ryker, would you please see if they can make us coffee? We’re going to need it.”

“Sure thing,” he answered.

I slipped into my room and shut the door behind me leaving the guys in the office. I kicked off my shoes, yanked my dress over my head, and tossed it on the bed. In my closet, I grabbed a pair of sleep shorts and an oversized T-shirt with a Korn album cover on it. It was one of my favorites and not just because it was a concert Ryker and I managed to sneak out to go see. Grabbing a scrunchie, I tossed my hair up in a messy bun and washed off all my makeup. Now I was ready to get down to business.

When I stepped back into my office, the three men were standing there waiting at attention like I was some military commander. “At ease, boys,” I said, taking a seat at my desk.

My phone started ringing inside my purse I’d left on the desk. Grabbing it, I smirked as I saw it was Braxton so I turned it to Gunner. “See how you can call me, and now I’m going to answer it to see what they might need.” Swiping my finger across the screen, I picked up the call then hit the speaker button. “Hello?”

“What the hell, woman? Did you seriously just leave us here at the club?” Jace demanded.

There was the sound of a scuffle like one of them was trying to wrestle the phone away from the other. “Fuck off, man, don’t piss her off even more,” Braxton yelled. “Astin, you still there?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I’m home in my office with the others,” I commented. “You might want to do the same thing. We’ve got some shit going down.”

“Why didn’t you come find us?” Braxton questioned.

“This isn’t a matter that could wait, and I didn’t have time to track you down. So I suggest you two get your asses back here right now,” I ordered.

“What about Luca? We can’t find him either. Is he with you?”

“Leave him be. He’s doing exactly what I need him to right now. I’ll explain things when you get here. Don’t take too long,” I said, then hung up.

Soon enough, these men will realize there’s no such thing as a night off in this life. There was always someone younger, hungrier, or smarter trying to take what we had. Something was going on that I hadn’t been able to see through with just the information they sent me that *something was going on*. Why the hell would they think Daddy was losing his touch? From everything I’d seen, he was acting as he always had.

“Now, Ryker, do you have what I need?” I asked.

“I sent everything I could to your tablet, and I have a few guys working on the rest,” he shared.

Grabbing the tablet, I opened it and found a new folder full of the details I needed. “Atticus, do you already have the financials on all of our business partners or only what they think you’ll need for the transaction?” I asked.

“Mostly just what I need on a case-by-case basis, but I can request whatever I need,” he stated.

I glanced up at Ryker, and he nodded immediately, took a seat in one of the chairs across from me, and opened his laptop.

“Ryker is going to send you everything on Harrison and Raymond. What I need you to do is go through every single transaction and find every single person they’ve paid. If they pay a hooker every Thursday, I want to know who it is and if it’s one of ours or someone else’s. It seems they’re shopping for new business partners who are giving them a better deal, and I want to know exactly *who* that might be. Between the two of them, I know one of them will have fucked up and given us the golden ticket we need,” I explained.

Atticus nodded and started to leave the room, then paused. “I’m going to get my laptop unless you want me to work in my room. It will take me about two hours to get this done if I’m not bothered.”

“Go do what will give us the best results. Please make sure you have your phone on you and that you’re able to receive my calls,” I instructed.

Atticus frowned at me. “Why wouldn’t I be able to get your calls? My phone is always on and close to me. It’s been made incredibly clear to me that I’ll be at your disposal day or night as you are to us.”

I beamed at him. “You’re exactly right, Atty. Thank you for having a clear expectation of your job.”

He nodded, still looking unsure about the whole situation and not realizing I was saying this to make a jab at Gunner, who simply hung his head. The fact Atticus had been more prepared than him must burn, but such is life. After tonight, I'm fairly certain I'll never have to question whether or not his phone is on.

“Gunner,” I called, causing his head to snap up. “I need you to start from the beginning of this whole theme park situation with Harrison and Raymond. Did you approach them first, or did they come to us? Were you included from the beginning, or did you get brought in later?”

A knock on my door put a pause in the conversation as a cart was wheeled in with coffee and some snacks for us to munch on as we worked. As the staff left, Jace and Braxton joined us, looking none too pleased with me, but even more surprising was that Luca came with them.

“Did you take all their money already, Lukie-poo?” I asked as I ignored the others.

Even though we went out and things got a little steamy, it didn't mean they had any control over how I did things or where I went. I was safe and played by the rules, so they didn't need to be my shadows. There was no way I was letting them forget I was their boss.

“I wasn't trying before, and neither were you, by the way. That first hand you could've won, but you decided to fold early,” Luca commented.

I rested my chin on my hand as I looked at him. “You’re right, I could have won that round, but I wanted them to feel more comfortable with me there. If I’d stomped their asses like I wanted to, then they would have been so much more guarded.”

“Fair enough since what we learned is going to keep us from getting fucked right up the ass,” he muttered. “Did you tell golden boy how badly he fucked up?”

“No, we were just about to dive into that when you all showed up,” I said cheerfully. “This is lovely, though, so now I don’t have to repeat myself. Gunner, if you please, you were going to tell me how this deal came into being.”

EIGHTEEN



Gunner

How is it that every time I turn around, I keep fucking up with this woman? She still hadn't told me how I managed to screw up, but clearly, it had something to do with this deal. Harrison and Raymond had been working with us for years, and I thought they were personal friends to the boss. Now she had me second-guessing everything I was thinking.

“Twice a week I work out of the Caprioni Enterprises building downtown. It's when people can meet with me about projects and things like that. I personally believe it helps when dealing with new clients... it seems less like a dirty deal with the mafia and more of a true legal business interaction. Raymond came to see me on one of those days and pitched the idea. To be honest, I wasn't sure about taking on the work since the land part would be such a struggle. So I told Raymond I'd talk to the boss. Turns out Harrison was having dinner with the boss, and I didn't get a chance to talk to him. When he saw me the next day, he told me he'd given the green light on the deal.

While I'd never speak poorly about the boss, I did feel like he hadn't been given all the information."

I paused and decided to pour myself some coffee since I could tell this was going to be a long night. "When I sat with him to go over what I learned from Raymond, it seemed like they were playing us against each other, only telling each of us half the story. Boss had already given his answer and said he wouldn't go back on it when it came to a valuable friend."

Astin's face scrunched up at that. I'd thought it was odd myself, but there's no way I could argue with any of it. That wasn't my place. "Let me get this straight, Harrison is the close personal friend?"

"Yeah, he's Casimira's older brother," Ryker interjected. "That's how they got connected... through her."

"Why am I not surprised," Astin muttered. "Continue," she instructed, waving her hand at me.

I took a sip of the coffee, hissing at how hot the fucking shit was burning my tongue. When I got coffee while working late, it was never this hot. It also tasted a hell of a lot better than normal.

"The two handed it off to their lead assistant I've worked with on all other projects so that wasn't unusual," I started, taking a seat in the other open chair. "He gave me their plans, what information he had on the land, and the other typical things I like to know before I sign off on giving the money. Only this time, they said there was a problem with the zoning, and we

needed to fix it according to the agreement the boss made with Harrison.”

“Hold up,” Astin cut in. “At this point, you didn’t know about the zoning issue of the land being a toxic waste dump?”

Warning bells went off in my brain at the tone in her voice. “No, I assumed that if Boss gave his stamp of approval, things were fine. Normally, we never deal with that portion of things. I just double-check to make sure the business plan is sound, ensuring we’ll be able to make our money back. I know that’s not how we’ve done it in years past, but I’d rather make smart investments than worry about breaking kneecaps to get our money. Plus, the loan was going to be over a million dollars.”

“That’s great, so you double-checked the business plan. Did they have the plot of land listed?” Astin questioned.

“Yes...”

“Then why didn’t you question that a plot of land that large was still left in the city for someone to use? I mean, fuck, Gunner, if you’re going to double-check things, why not double-check everything? It’s clear you had questions but didn’t bother to go back to the boss and ask?” Astin challenged.

I slammed my mug down on her desk and glared at her. “We *don’t* question the boss. He tells us to do something, and we do it. That’s our role as a lieutenant.”

“Get out,” she snapped. “Pack your shit and get the fuck out of this house, Gunner.”

My jaw fell open at this demand. “What?”

“I said get the fuck out of this house, you’re no longer welcome here,” she ordered, her eyes hard, telling me she wasn’t fucking around.

“No, not until you tell me what the hell I did that was so wrong I could have taken down the whole empire,” I shot back.

“Oh, I’m sorry, are you challenging me?” she taunted. “Did you just say you don’t challenge your boss, that it’s your place to just follow orders?”

“This order doesn’t make sense. I’m the only one who knows everything that happened with this idea. I had conversations with senators, government aides, contractors, and everyone who was involved in this project. None of it is written down, the only place you’ll find that is in my brain,” I roared, feeling like I’d been under attack ever since she got here. “There’s no logical reason for you to push me out.”

Astin leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms, looking at me with an expression I couldn’t figure out. *Fuck, why were women so goddamn complicated?*

“So you do speak your mind,” she mused aloud. “I might say you even challenged me, your boss, in that little tantrum you just had. Now, why was I different in your mind than the boss?”

“Because you haven’t earned my respect and trust,” I blurted, still angry from the bashing I’d taken from everyone.

The tension in the room rose to new heights as I realized what I'd said. While what I said wasn't wrong, I shouldn't have said it to her like that or yelled it. There are better ways to handle your emotions than to simply let them fly off the handle. I'd always been taught to respect those in a position of power, but at that moment, I hadn't done that.

"I'm sorry, what I meant to say is—"

"Exactly what you said," Astin cut in. "What did I tell you before? I have zero problem with you questioning me or second-guessing a choice I made. Clearly, you didn't like the decision for me to kick you out, and you felt it would be better for everyone for me to keep you around. Why didn't you do that when you had questions about the choice my father made?"

"I told you, when the boss makes a choice, you follow it," I countered. "I've seen him when people talk back to him or challenge his authority."

"But that's not what you'd be doing," Astin shot back. "If you went to him and expressed how you felt like this deal was a bust or more trouble than it would be worth now that you found out more information, he wouldn't shut you down. The one thing my father loves more than me is his business. It's why I was hidden away from the world so his legacy could continue on through me."

As she said this, shame washed through me. Why hadn't I tried harder to talk to the boss about this entire project? Even though I still didn't know what really had gone wrong, I knew

the deal should never have been struck. Instead, I saw it as a challenge to prove how good I was at my job to Boss.

“Will you please tell me what I missed?” I requested, my voice low with dejection.

Astin got up and walked over to pour herself some coffee and doctored it up with far too much sugar than was right. Instead of sitting in her chair again, she sat on the corner of her desk near me, forcing me to look up at her.

“Look, Gunny, I have zero problem with the fact that you don’t trust me right now. I don’t trust any of you,” she stated matter-of-factly. “That’s something we’ll all have to work on. However, if you speak to me in that tone or volume ever again, I’ll slap the shit out of you. I welcome your opinion and thoughts, but I will not be disrespected while you do it. You might not respect me as a person, but out of respect for the fact that I’m your boss, you’ll treat me as such.”

“I understand, and I apologize for my outburst. Truly that’s not the way I was ever taught to speak to a woman or someone who’s in charge,” I answered, holding her gaze so she knew I meant it.

With a nod, she sipped her coffee before answering my request, “It would seem Harvey O’Hagan is making his move, and it’s one that could kill us if he got away with it.”

She paused, letting that information sink in as panic dropped like a lead weight in my stomach. “Don’t tell me he’s the one they’re working with.”

“Oh, how I wish I could, but it seems I fucked up along the way as well. It didn’t dawn on me that if a business wasn’t owned by us, who would have snatched it up for themselves? When I first got here, I decided to stop in The Bandit and get a drink. Even made friends with the bartender who happens to be his nephew,” Astin shared.

“What?” Ryker snapped.

“Oh, it gets better,” Astin commented. “In true Astin fashion, I had to show a man who was hitting on me that he was an idiot. This upset him, and when he tried to retaliate, I broke his nose. Come to find out that it was Harvey’s son... well, one of the four. Now I learn that Harvey is making moves to destroy the Caprioni Family and in a really smart way. Seems there was a burial ground discovered on the property, and it’s now labeled native land. If we were to send out inspectors and they took samples, then we’d be breaking the treaty the government put in place. This would result in jail time along with a fine. I was led to believe it would be one motherfucker of a fine that could cripple us.”

Hearing her explain all this only made my anxiety worse. This was exactly what I was supposed to be protecting the boss from. Yet I’d been too much of a people-pleasing asshole to stand up against him.

“Holy fuck,” I blurted.

“This isn’t Harvey’s first move in the past few months either,” Braxton spoke up. “He tried to poach a bunch of our girls when I had to close down the Monarch. All the girls had been

placed at other clubs so they could work, but Harvey seemed to think we weren't doing so well if we closed down a club. Thing was, I'm gutting the place and having it remodeled. It's a shithole that needed it a long time ago, but no one ever took the time. The old lieutenants clearly weren't looking to the future, seeing how it could make a shit-ton more money if the place looked better."

"Word on the street is he's the one who's been stirring things up with the MCs too," Luca added. "The Red Tigers never had an issue until Harvey commented they might be able to strong-arm us into something better."

"This makes me ask, what the fuck does Harvey know that we don't?" Astin demanded. "There has to be a reason why the bastard is making moves now. No one had any idea I was going to be brought back now, so he couldn't be preparing for that. You've all been around my father the most. Is there something off about him that's giving people the impression that now is the time to strike?"

All of us looked to Ryker. He was the one person besides Liu who knew the boss the best.

"There hasn't been anything official, but if you have questions, you're going to need to ask him," Ryker answered vaguely.

Astin grabbed her phone and punched the button that would connect her to Liu, according to the label on it. She waited a moment then I heard someone greet her on the other end. "Sorry to bother you so late, but is he here, or did he leave for

his weekend house?” Astin asked, bitterness dripping from her tone.

None of us really asked questions or presumed to stick our noses in places where it didn't belong, and the boss's love life was one of those areas. Of course, we knew he spent the weekends at his second home with his mistress and their son, but no one would have dared to comment on it.

“I see, how gracious of him,” Astin bit out. “No, no need to bother him. Do you know if he'll be back for breakfast? Lovely, I'll speak to him then. Thank you, Liu. You can go back to sleep now.”

After she hung up, no one asked what he said, but it was clear he wasn't in this home currently. I sipped on my coffee and tried to figure out just how I fucked up this badly. Astin had been right to call me out. I should have spoken up, and now we were dealing with a shitstorm.

“Okay, everyone, go to bed. There isn't much we can do at the moment. Now we know the play, I plan on making this bite them in the ass in the most delicious way possible. When those two assholes see my face and understand who I really am, I'm not going to be happy until they're pissing in their pants,” Astin announced. “Ryker, can you let Atty know once he's done with those finances, he can work on his eight hours of sleep? He'll be excused from breakfast since I need him as sharp as he can be.”

Ryker nodded and collected his computer. “I'll have him send it over to you since I'm sure he's nearly done with it.”

“Yes, do that. It will put me right to sleep,” she agreed, leaning her head back and closing her eyes. “All this information running around in my head, I’m gonna need something to knock me out.”

Jace cleared his throat, drawing her gaze. “I believe I did offer my services.”

“Get out of my rooms now before I decide to tie you to a chair and show you my favorite techniques to make someone squeal like a pig,” she said with a deadpan tone.

Ryker snorted and headed for the door. “Trust me, as someone she’s practiced on before, that’s not a place you want to be in right now.”

Jace gave Astin a lingering look, making me think something might have happened between them, but I was horrible at reading people’s emotions. I could corner someone into a deal or to sign a contract, but when it came to manipulating people, I was awful.

“No need to get nasty. A simple no would have done just fine,” Jace countered as he smirked at her scowl. “Like I said, I’ll get you where I want you someday.”

My jaw almost hit the floor at that comment. How could he even think to speak to her like that? He was her subordinate.

Braxton popped up from his seat and blew her a kiss before waving goodbye. “Sweet dreams, Mistress.”

Luca left right after them, not saying or doing anything, simply getting up and walking out, a man of complete mystery

to me.

“Did you need something?” Astin questioned.

My head snapped to face her as I realized I was standing here like an idiot. “I wanted to know if you were serious.”

Leaning forward, she pitched her head on the back of her hand as she studied me. “You’re gonna need to narrow it down. The you-almost-ruined-us part or the get-the-fuck-out-of-my-house part? Those were my best guesses.”

“Both, either, I don’t know,” I muttered, running my hand through my hair. “I fucked up. I see that now. It was wrong of me to let the deal happen when I thought something shifty was going on.”

“Tell me this... do you give blind faith to everyone who has your loyalty?” she asked. “If that’s the case, then I don’t want it. I’ll do whatever it takes that you’re never blindly loyal to me because I can’t have that. To be loyal is one thing but to allow me to ruin us without saying a word is another. It’s clear you’re gifted in this area, and I’d hate to have to replace you, but if you can’t tell me no to something down the line because we’ve learned to trust, I’d be stupid.”

“Would you believe me if I told you I don’t know the answer to that?” I offered. “In my brain, it makes sense that if we foster that type of relationship, then it could absolutely work. With Boss, he made it clear that we were new, up and coming, and, therefore, we weren’t allowed to question things. None of us had earned that right. Of course, that was three years ago,

and now it's completely different, but that was the foundation of our relationship. For me, it's hard to break."

Astin stood and walked over to me. "That actually makes a lot of sense. So in the spirit of setting our working relationship down the right path, I say it plain and simple. I'm not perfect, neither are you. If we don't see eye to eye on something, we're going to have a discussion and hash it out. What we won't do is yell at each other, myself included. That does jack shit when you're trying to figure something out. You and I need to be a team, even though the final choice will be mine which you'll respect and follow through on. Sound fair?"

I reached out a hand to her. "That's an agreement I can shake on as long as I get to still live in the house."

"I'll shake on it as long as you never put your phone on do not disturb, *ever* again," Astin countered.

Raising the offered hand, I gave her a salute. "Yes, Mistress."

"Cheeky fucker," she grumbled. "Shake my goddamn hand so I can go to bed."

With that demand, I shook her hand firmly as all good handshakes should be and left the room feeling like I might still be able to redeem myself from this cluster fuck.

NINETEEN



When my alarm went off what seemed like moments later, I groaned, grabbed my pillow, and pulled it over my head. Thank God I hadn't had much to drink last night, or this really would be hell. There was a dip of the mattress like someone sat on it, which had me sliding the knife out of the spot I'd hidden it between the mattress and headboard. Chucking the pillow in the direction of the person, I yanked off the blankets and tossed my leg over them until I straddled them with the blade at their throat.

"Braxton, what the fuck?" I demanded, seeing his shocked eyes looking up at me.

He opened his mouth to speak, but only a squeak came out. I sat back, pulling the knife away and brushed my hair out of my face. "Holy fuck, I'm not sure if I should be turned on or pissing in my pants right now," Braxton finally blurted.

“Why the hell are you here in my room right now?” I asked, my adrenaline still roaring through my body. “Do you realize I could have killed you by accident?”

“No, no, I didn’t know that. Now I do, and next time I promise to ensure I make more noise when I come to wake you up,” he answered. When I started to move off him, he grabbed my hips holding me still. When I gave him a questioning look, he shrugged. “What can I say... I’m a man who likes to be topped.”

Snorting, I settled my weight on his thighs as he laid there. “Care to share with me why you came to wake me?”

“Right, sorry, I got a little distracted as my life flashed before my eyes,” Braxton said with a grin.

“Yo,” Jace’s voice called from the office. “Where the fuck did you go?”

A moment later, he walked into my bedroom and froze, seeing our positions, and leaned against the door. “Huh, that wasn’t quite what I pictured would happen, but I can roll with it. Do you want him for yourself, or is this a more-the-merrier situation?”

“Your boy toy almost got himself dead by waking me up the way he did,” I commented as I flipped my knife casually. “When I said anyone can wake me up when necessary, I might want to share the best way to do that so everyone stays alive.”

Jace’s eyes grew wide at my words. “Fucking hell, Astin.”

“No, no,” I said, waving my knife at him. “You don’t get to judge me for this. I’m the one who’s been trained my whole life in preparation for someone trying to kill me. This is child’s play compared to what else I know how to do. Now, before someone else decides to join the party, would one of you like to explain why you’re in my bedroom?”

Jace shook his head as if he were trying to concentrate and slipped his hands into his pants pockets. “The boss is back and wants to speak with you in his private study. Breakfast will be served, but it won’t be at the normal time. He pushed it back an hour.”

Groaning, I twisted and threw the knife until it hit my bathroom, and I slid off Braxton to stand. He quickly followed, grabbing my wrist and pulling me back toward him. He met me in the middle and planted a kiss on my lips, surprising me. When I didn’t brush him off, he deepened the kiss, making me moan as his other hand reached around and grabbed my ass firmly. This man could kiss like nothing else I’d ever experienced, reminding me he’d had a lot of practice.

I placed a hand on his chest and pushed him back. “Slow your roll there, Braxy-poo. It’s way too early, and I almost stabbed you once this morning. Let’s not make it twice.”

“Can’t say I’ve ever been into knife play, but then again, I’ve never tried it,” Braxton shared. “Good thing I’m always willing to try everything once.”

Was he being serious right now?

“Thanks for sharing, but I don’t think I’ll be your tour guide on that adventure,” I pointed out. “Was there something more you two needed, or can I get ready for the shitty day I can already tell this is going to be.”

Braxton frowned at me then looked at Jace. “Why is she acting like we didn’t have a moment last night?”

“Because she’s scared and choosing to keep us at an arm’s length,” Jace offered. “She liked what happened between us, and even though no one has asked for more than anything purely physical, she can’t risk it.”

“You two are crazy, you know that?” I said, pointing at both of them. “Now get out of my room while I take a shower. *Alone.*”

Braxton let out a dejected sigh and headed over to Jace. “Looks like we’re gonna need to up our game.”

“Oh, after the taste I’ve had, I’m gonna be begging for seconds until she relents,” Jace agreed.

“You do realize I can hear you, right?” I snapped. “What makes you think the two of you are so irresistible when I can have anyone I want at the snap of my fingers.”

“Not true,” Jace countered, shaking his head. “Luca, yeah, probably, but Gunner or Atticus will be much harder to convince.”

I settled my hands on my hips. “You, Mr. Gambling Man, are not as slick as you think you are. I’m not going to fall for whatever plan you’ve concocted in your brain just because you taunt me.” While I might not be looking for attachment and

prefer to keep things with no strings attached, not everyone else could do that. Both men would see sleeping with me as being in a relationship with me.

“That might be true for Gunner, but I’m not so sure about Atticus. He has indulged a time or two with the girls I can provide, and I don’t see him saying he has a girlfriend. The man is all about rules. You set them, and he’ll follow to the letter of the law,” Braxton shared. “Besides, after seeing what happens when you’re left to your own devices, it might be best to monitor who you sleep with.”

“Damn, just when you were so close to talking me into it, you had to go and point out my shortcomings,” I said with a sigh. “Now I’m going to fuck anyone who isn’t any of you to prove that I can pick worthy men.”

Braxton started to laugh as he headed out but called over his shoulder, “Yeah, like Ryker’s ever going to allow that to fucking happen.”

Snatching up one of my pillows, I chucked it at the door, but they managed to close it before I hit either of them. “Bastards.”

Still in a sour mood from dinner last night, I took my time getting ready and even decided to dress more casually with skinny jeans and a flowy royal blue shirt that had ruffled sleeves. Unable to go completely casual, knowing I’d have meetings today, I slipped on a pair of strappy wedges that elevated the whole outfit. Hair down and light makeup, I was ready to face the criminal world once again.

Stepping out of my room, I found a thermal travel mug on my desk with a note from Ryker. *Figured you might need this before meeting with the boss.*

“Goddamn you, Ryker,” I muttered, grabbing the thing and noticed what was written on it, *Wake Up, Kick Ass.*

When I took a sip, it was doctored just how I like it, making me wonder if he remembered or simply watched how I made my coffee last night. Then again, he did keep harping on the fact he thinks he *knows* me, so it’s possible he remembered. I walked down the hall to my father’s room and knocked on the door.

“Come in.”

Pausing a moment, I took a deep breath and shoved open the door to find Daddy sitting in one of the armchairs sipping on his own cup of coffee. He looked up at me with a smile, setting aside the paper, and motioned for me to sit across from him. “Did you have a good time last night?”

“I suppose that’s a loaded question seeing as I had to yank everyone from their beds,” I commented as I took a seat, crossing one leg over the other.

If Daddy wanted to pretend like nothing happened last night, he most certainly could, but that wasn’t the game I was playing.

He blinked at me for a moment. “Why didn’t I hear about this?”

“There was no need to disturb you from time with your family. This is why I’m here, after all, to lighten the load off your shoulders,” I reasoned, knowing he wasn’t going to like that answer one bit.

Daddy sighed and rubbed a hand over his face, setting down his coffee and leaning forward so his elbows rested on his knees. “Astin.”

“If it’s all the same to you, I’d really love not to rehash the events of last night. The whole house knows about my humiliation and how your other child feels about the situation. Oh no, that’s right, children. I forgot you adopted one without telling me,” I corrected myself. “Was this the reason you called me here, or is there another matter you wanted to discuss?”

“Just tell me this... am I in for another year of silence, or is that punishment no longer being used?” he asked.

“No, I’m not twelve anymore. Besides, you’ve made sure to teach me other ways I can torture people to get the maximum impact while still keeping them alive,” I reminded him. “What you did was bullshit, Daddy, and you know it. Why lie to me for so long when you could have just had it all out in the open? That would have given me years to get over the fact that I was the one left out of it all.”

“You’re not left out, Astin, quite the opposite,” Daddy argued. “How was I supposed to tell you? Just come right out and say it in a letter when we couldn’t talk about it face to face or even over the phone?”

I uncrossed my leg, slamming my heel to the floor. “Yes, that’s exactly what you should have done when you’ve had the house since you and Mother got married. Instead, what you did was to feed me bits and pieces. Just so you know, I have a mistress I actually love even though I’m married to Flora. Casimira is pregnant, you’re going to have a brother, and I’ve moved them into the second home I have so I can keep an eye on them. Oh, and because I feel like a terrible father for keeping my eldest child locked away in a house in another country, I’ve decided to give this whole Dad thing a second try and spend the weekends with them. See, none of that’s hard. It’s a natural progression of sharing what’s going on in your life. Instead, you decided to just slap me upside the head with it after I told you I wanted time to adjust.”

Daddy slumped in his chair, looking at me with sad eyes telling me I’d hit the mark with my words. “You’re right.”

“While I’d love to just own that, I’m gonna need a little more from you,” I commented.

“Casimira, can you please come out here,” Daddy called over his shoulder.

I shot to my feet, rage boiling inside me. “She’s been listening in this whole time? Just when I didn’t think you couldn’t stoop any lower, you drive the knife right into my back with both hands.”

“That’s enough, Astin,” Casimira snapped, stepping out of the bedroom. “Don’t you dare speak to your father in such a

manner. I know you're upset with him, but he was doing what was best. He always has when it comes to you."

I burst out laughing. "I'm sorry, but who the fuck are you to speak to me like that?"

That had my father on his feet, grabbing me by the throat. "No, Astin, I'll take your anger because I deserve it. What I won't let you do is speak to Casimira like she's some two-bit whore when she's my wife."

Unflinching, I held my father's gaze, refusing to back down as he tried to make me cower. It wasn't going to work. He'd done everything in his power to make me strong, tough, and more ruthless than him. He was now going to learn firsthand how it had worked, and this wasn't a tactic that could be used.

"Seems I'm not Daddy's only secret," I spat. "Go on, treat me like everyone else who's beneath you. Clearly, you couldn't just get rid of me since your son is a spoiled brat who would be eaten alive in under a second, and the other, no matter what last name he has, is under his mother's thumb. Looks like you're left with me to take over the legacy."

His eyes grew wide as he jerked his hand back, releasing me, shaking it as if he hadn't realized what he'd done. Casimira came up to him and rested her hand on his back. "Darling, why don't you sit? It's not good for your heart to be this stressed."

That comment had me snapping out of my anger to take a more assessing look at my father. A light sheen of sweat beaded on his brow while his breath was slightly more

labored. When he sat, Casimira handed him a glass of water, but when he grasped it, I noticed his hand had a slight tremor to it.

“What’s wrong with you?” I demanded.

“I have cardiac heart disease. I was diagnosed a few years ago,” Daddy explained. “I’ve been managing it with medication, but it’s become much worse in the past year. One of the many reasons you needed to be brought back now. I’d have done it sooner, but I didn’t have things ready on my end, and I wasn’t going to set you up to fail.”

“Who knows?” I questioned.

“Just family,” he said, reaching up and squeezing Casimira’s hand. “No one else can know, or I’ll be finished. Like you said yesterday, if there’s blood in the water, sharks will come looking for their next meal.”

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner? I get not wanting to let people know, but I’m family, or at least I thought I was, but now I’m not so sure,” I muttered. “What I can’t wrap my head around is why you’ve been keeping so much from me only to keep stumbling into things left and right.”

“Because I’m a selfish old man who wanted to protect his little girl from everything,” he said and reached out for my hand, but I pulled it back. “I couldn’t tell you who Casimira really is to me because I didn’t want you to be burdened with keeping that secret. Not telling you about Liu was a mistake and absolutely something I should have made you aware of. The only reason I went so far as to adopt him is so he’d be free of

his mother. Cutting all ties to her and allowing the boy to be free was worth going through the full adoption even though it was only a year before he was eighteen,” Father shared.

“Who told you,” Casimira asked. “My bet’s on Mathis. He’s never liked us keeping it a secret from you.”

I glanced at her but shook my head. “No, I won’t tell you that, but you’re correct. I’d already been made aware of the real nature of your relationship.”

Daddy pulled her down to sit on his lap before returning his attention to me. “I didn’t build a new family, Astin. We’ve been a family since the day I married your mother. There are two women who I love with all my heart, and it killed us both to lose Natalina. Being the leader of the mafia, I knew I couldn’t be open about my actual relationship with both of them, so we agreed on wife and mistress. In hindsight, I realize I should have told you from the start because if your mother had still been living, we would’ve all done life as a family unit, together, the five of us.”

“Not much we can do about that now. What I want from now on is your word on Mother’s grave you’re not keeping anything else from me,” I said, holding his gaze as I waited for his answer. “Just know that if you lie to me again, and I find out about it, I’ll spill every one of your secrets, kick you out of your position, and take over by force if I need to. That’s how serious I am about all this.”

Daddy then reached out with a hand. “Let’s shake on it then. I vow on Natalina’s grave that I’ll be honest and truthful to you

about all things pertaining to my life and the business. In return, I ask that you also do the same. There have been fifteen years where I haven't been part of your life, and I want to know about every detail of it. So as long as we are honest and truthful to each other, then everything will be well."

I clasped his hand, and we shook on it. This was more than an agreement between father and daughter—this was an underboss and boss drawing a line in the sand. The first one to cross it lost everything, and we both knew it. The stakes were high, but I needed that reassurance to know I wouldn't be getting slapped in the face with any more siblings or mystery wives hiding in the shadows.

"So the deal is struck," I announced. "To show my willingness to hold up the deal, I'll tell you my biggest secret. With what I know, I can topple this whole empire you have built, and it's only fair you have something that can put me away in jail for years."

Daddy looked at me, surprised. "How on earth did you find time to do something that would get you sent to jail?"

"Every girl has to have a hobby, and well... mine is stealing shit," I paused and took a deep breath, preparing to put myself out there. "Ever hear of the thief, Luna Selene?"

TWENTY



Both my father and Casimira looked at me, stunned.

“Yeah, so I’m sure you can see why you having that information is equal to me knowing about the two of you,” I explained.

Daddy spluttered, moving Casimira off his lap to stand and pace, only to stop and stare at me. “How?”

“Would you believe me if I told you it was Ryker’s fault?” I asked.

His brows creased then he nodded. “Actually, yes, I could absolutely see that being the case. Obviously, that wasn’t the only reason, or you would have stopped when he left. Instead, if the papers are right, you became more active and increasingly more random.”

“What do you expect would happen when a girl’s best friend up and leaves her with no word? That was a dick move, Dad,

and you know it. Why the hell did he have to lie to me and cut off all communication?" I demanded.

Never did I think I'd see my father look embarrassed about anything, but there he was staring down at his feet like he knew he'd done something wrong. "What can I say? I'm a jealous old man, and I didn't like him having so much time with you. If I couldn't interact with you, then neither could he. Again, I didn't think before I acted where you're involved. I should have just told you he was with me and would need to follow the same rules. Maybe then you two wouldn't be so at odds."

"Wait, did you order him not to speak to me or make any contact?" I asked.

Daddy contemplated that question a moment before he answered, "Yes. I told him once I found out the two of you were writing letters that he had to cut off all communication. It was too risky and one reason we only corresponded quarterly."

I leaned back in the armchair, staring into the fire burning cheerfully in the fireplace. *No wonder he's been so thrown off by my attitude. He was following orders, and I was acting like a spoiled bitch. Does he know Daddy never told me he was working for him?*

"Did you tell him he was going to college and then change your mind?" I inquired, trying to figure out where our wires got crossed.

"It was always his father's wish for him to go to college. I agreed it would be wise for him to do so and held up my end

of the deal to ensure he did and graduated with high honors,” he informed.

“But...”

Father let out a heavy sigh. “He did college online while I trained him. He got a degree in cyber security and a minor in criminal justice, along with some pre-law classes to help in the areas we needed. That boy got the finest education and then was mentored personally by me to ensure he had the best outcome being your top security advisor.”

“Wow, Daddy, so you know how that sounds?” I asked. “You took away the one person I had in the world, leaving me with nothing but Glenda. Of course, Luna Selene became more active. What the fuck else was I supposed to do with myself? Honestly, though, it was the best way to use all the training you forced upon me. Lots of real-world applications mixing the two, if I do say so myself.”

“I’m sorry... are you advocating that all our people should become thieves as well?” Casimira asked, her tone shocked.

I held up a finger, gesturing to her to wait a moment as I turned back to Daddy. “Okay, I know this is going to be rude with her right here and all, but I’m gonna need you to be real with me here. How much influence, power, or knowledge does she know about the business? I don’t want to assume one thing only to end up getting you or her in trouble when I spill the beans about something.”

“Casimira knows most, but there are some things I keep strictly between those who *need* to know. More so for her

safety if she were ever to get taken,” Daddy answered. “When it comes to things about you, that’s your call on what you’d like her to know or not. I understand telling us about your nightly activities to even the score, but if you wish her to leave or not to answer a question, both of us will respect that.” He glanced over at her as he returned to his seat. “Won’t we?”

“Of course, darling. Astin and I need time to build a relationship. If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to head down for breakfast,” she answered, kissed Father on the cheek, and left.

“She’s going to need some time to adjust as well. None of us expected this to get so out of hand the way it did last night. All of this was handled poorly from start to finish,” Daddy said and picked up his coffee cup once more.

“Are you sure you should be drinking that with whatever’s going on with your heart?” I inquired. “I’m not a doctor or anything, but to me, caffeine sounds like a bad idea.”

“Yes, so thankfully, this is decaf. And I drink it... one, to appear normal, and secondly, because I truly love the taste of coffee,” he answered with a chuckle. “I’m not sure if it really sank in with everything else I said, but, Astin, this isn’t something I’m going to get better from. I could go on the donor list and ask for a new heart, but that would be like signing my own death warrant. Yes, there’s the black market, but still, everyone talks for the right amount of money. I have an amazing doctor who’s been looking after me, and I trust him not to kill me in my sleep. We reached the end of the road with what we could do. It’s time for me to start setting affairs

in order, meaning bringing you home and getting things underway.

“Now, I’m not going to die tomorrow, but I’m also not the man I used to be. Having you know is going to make this easier. I need you in meetings to hear what people are saying, to take the bull by the horns, and make people listen. I’ve been surviving the past year with Liu, but he isn’t going to be in charge. You are. The Caprioni business needs to be respected and feared by someone, and right now, it’s not me. Once it was, but my health has made me weak in more areas than I realized. My mind isn’t as sharp to catch the double play like it once could,” Daddy explained, laying it all out on the table between us.

“You, my beautiful ruthless daughter, are exactly what this world needs, and I’ve known that all my life. Can you trust me when I say having you become the underboss wasn’t decided because you’re my blood? I picked you over everyone time and time again when I saw your test scores. You, my girl, have a brilliant mind that reminds me of me when I was your age. I don’t expect you to forgive me or for us to just brush this under the carpet. I hurt you, and it will take time before things can mend, just don’t shut me out,” he pleaded, reaching over to take my hand.

This time I let him. I wasn’t sure if it was because of how many times he’s said he was wrong to me or if it’s because I knew he was dying. Whichever one it was softened my heart enough to know I didn’t want to lose him just yet. As he said, we’d need to work on trust, and I wasn’t letting this go by any

means, but I also didn't want him to die tomorrow and think I hated him.

"I'll try, Daddy," I answered. "It's going to be hard to move past all this, but I'm willing to try. As for business, that's business. I'm adult enough to be able to separate those two because I love this company as much as you do. I've wanted this position since I figured out that's what you were training me for. There are so many ideas and plans I want to try, but if I step in and tell you something isn't right, then you have to trust I'm doing what's best for the business as a whole."

He nodded but seemed a little unsure about that stipulation. "You've found something already, haven't you? There's something I've missed."

"Yeah, a fucking massive miss, but it wasn't just on you," I shared. "I've already chewed Gunner's ass out twice last night, but he's being held responsible for this too. He knew something was wrong, and he didn't challenge you about it. Gunner's so worried about upsetting or offending the people he respects that he's doing more harm than good."

"Did I choose wrong in picking him for the position? I felt those qualities would make him ensure he didn't fuck up the job," Daddy questioned as he leaned back in his seat, pouring more coffee into his mug. "Tell me everything that happened, but don't tell me where I fucked up. I want to see if I can spot it."

"If I do that, then we won't be able to make breakfast. Can I call to have it sent up? Once you figure it out, we're gonna

need to get to work because this is only the tip of the iceberg,” I commented.

Daddy picked up the phone by his elbow and called for food to be delivered to his room. Once the promise of food was guaranteed, I started on the details I learned last night. Since he wanted to find what he missed, I skipped over the parts he already knew and simply went over everything else but stopped before I told him what I’d heard at the poker game.

I had to wait for his answer as breakfast was wheeled in, already portioned out for us after being tasted. This was something I wasn’t sure I would ever get used to, and I absolutely didn’t want to know who the person was who had the horrible honor of doing the job. We sat in silence for a bit as we ate, but I had the sneaking suspicion he was using it as time to figure out what he missed because he still wasn’t sure.

“You said this was a massive mistake, didn’t you? That the combination of me doing something and Gunner not calling me on it is why things failed,” Daddy asked as he set down his fork. “I’m only asking because I’m not sure I can see where the two circumstances meet.”

“When you had your meeting with Harrison, didn’t you feel like it was odd Raymond wasn’t there as well? I was under the impression the two of them did all business together?” I questioned.

“That’s true, but Harrison and I are old friends, and he wanted to ask me for a favor. He knew if Raymond were there, it would be harder for me to save face if I said no. Harrison, on

the other hand, is someone I trust to be honest with if I felt the venture was a bad idea,” Daddy explained.

I stood and brought my empty plate back to the cart and refilled my coffee mug. “What did he tell you was wrong with the land? Did he once mention the toxic ground issue?”

“Yes, that’s what his favor was to get me to change the zoning on it. As you know, we have quite the pull in that area,” he said, looking confused.

Could it be that he was so blinded by trusting this man he wouldn’t even consider they would turn on him? Fuck, this was going to be a bigger blow to him than I expected.

“Daddy, I don’t know the extent of your illness or how stress impacts you, your heart, or your health in general. So before I tell you what’s going on, I need to ask if there’s something you should take, or do I need to have Casimira back in here?”

“Just tell me, goddammit,” he snapped.

Taking my seat once more, I set my mug aside in case I needed to act. “They set you up. Well, more so, they set me up to fail and take everything down in one fell swoop. The previous owners of the land discovered bones, and it was marked as a burial ground.”

His eyes grew wide as he knew exactly what that meant. “Astin, please tell me we didn’t send out a team to get our own samples? For the love of God, tell me I didn’t just lose everything because of my own stupidity.”

“When I tell you we were a day away from destruction, I’m not kidding. Thankfully, your plan of keeping me away from the public eye worked, and no one knows who I am. Why weren’t Harrison and Raymond invited to the party the other night?” I asked, curious how they didn’t know who I was.

“I was told they were out of the country and would be back today,” Daddy answered.

I let out a huff of laughter. “Well, I think you can cross them off the list of being our top clients and personal friends because they wanted to fuck you over without the courtesy of even using lube.”

“Stop beating around the subject and just tell me the fuck is going on,” he demanded.

“They kept all the information about the burial site off the record, ensuring we wouldn’t be able to find out anything about it. Gunner did his homework, but your *friends* teamed up with Harvey, and he did everything he could to make sure we were fucked.” I paused, giving him time to absorb all that information. “Harvey also promised them a better deal on all their loans, stealing them away and helping them find a better property for less money.”

“*What,*” Father raged as he shot to his feet. “Those bastards are turning their backs on me over something so trivial? Did they ever ask me for a better rate? Hell, I’d have been happy to negotiate after having them be such good clients. Now they’re going to see how big of a mistake this was when I ruin them instead.”

I slowly stood and gripped his arms, drawing his attention. “Look, Daddy, I know this is a slap in the face to you, but they did it because they somehow knew you were bringing me back. Did you tell Harrison anything to tip him off a few months ago? That seems to be when all this started, and Harvey felt it was the best time to strike.”

He sagged in my hold, letting out a heavy sigh. “I thought I was talking to an old friend, Astin. He’s been a dependable friend, so I thought I could trust him.”

“What did you say?” I pressed. “I need to know what damage has been done so I can fix this.”

His gaze met mine, and I could see the pain and betrayal in them. “He asked me how I was doing, and I made an off-handed comment that I’d felt better, but it was going to be fine because you were coming home soon. He must have known that’s what the party was for and lied so he wouldn’t have to be there.”

“The two of them were at the poker game last night that Jace and Luca put on. None of them knew who I was, so I used it to get to know them since they were big clients. I stepped away for a moment and overheard them talking about the situation. Most of the others were appalled at what they were doing but didn’t question it, either,” I explained. “Daddy, I think we have the beginning of a takeover starting to happen. Harvey is making moves not only on our clients but our own people. Braxton told me about how he tried to snatch up some working girls from one of our clubs.”

“How that fucking lowlife thinks he can steal from me and still live is going to be his own undoing. I’ll bring down the hammer of the Caprioni Family on him so hard they won’t know what hit them.” Father seethed, pulling away from me. “If they think Colmazio Caprioni is losing his touch, then I’ll have to show them how wrong they are.”

“Daddy, wait,” I snapped as he charged over to his desk. He paused then looked at me questioningly. “Yes, they’re coming after the Caprioni business, but it’s not *you* they are after. It’s me. I need to be the one to bring down the hammer on them. All this is happening because they think you’re sick and on the way out while I’m coming in wet behind the ears and have no clue what I’m doing. This has to come from me.”

“You want to handle this?” he challenged, crossing his arms. “For this to be your first act as underboss, it would certainly set the stage. If I let you do this, I want to be kept informed of what your plans are because I want these bastards destroyed to the point they will never be able to recover. Then I want it to be made clear that if we find others are working behind our backs with Harvey, they will meet the same fate.”

“Yes, Boss, I can do that and so much more. I want to play with them a little before breaking their necks, just so they squeal ever so nicely. You want to make an example out of them, then fine, I’ll do so and ensure no one will fucking question who did it to them,” I announced.

Daddy studied me for a moment, then nodded. “Seems I might have trained you too well. I was never one who enjoyed the

violence I enacted on others. Maybe that's why I lost my touch the second I got too sick to keep up an act."

"That's why you have me, Daddy," I said with a slow smile. "I'll gladly be the monster you set free to hunt down those who have wronged our family. Every leader needs a threat that goes bump in the night. I'll just happen to be the best-dressed nightmare they've ever met."

Daddy reached out and cupped my face, kissing me on the forehead. "Go. Do what must be done with my blessing, Astin."

TWENTY-ONE



Knowing the chains holding me back were removed, I left Daddy's room and headed down to find the others. It was almost ten, but I still felt it might be best to check the dining room first. When I entered, I found Jace, Braxton, Gunner, and Ryker. Atticus and Luca were the only two missing, but I knew I could find them easily.

“What’s the word?” Ryker asked.

I glanced at him but didn't answer right away. Instead, my gaze was trained on Gunner slumped over, nursing a cup of coffee. “Well, golden boy, did I spank you too hard last night, or are you going to shake this off and help me get back at these fuckers?”

Gunner's head snapped up almost as if he hadn't realized I was in the room. “What?”

“Really? You're going to make me repeat myself?” I questioned. “Or are you stalling for time? Don't make me kick

you out of the house again because this time, it won't be to prove a point. Shit's about to get real, and I need everyone on board."

Gunner sat up straight and met my gaze. "I'm good, tell me what you need, and I'll make it happen."

Nodding, I looked at the other three. "What about you fellas? Ready to shake some shit up and possibly start a war?"

"Fuck yeah." Braxton cheered, tossing a fist into the air. "Please tell me we are gonna stick it to Harvey and the other two jackasses!"

"To start with, we'll ruin Continental Properties that Raymond and Harrison run together, then we'll set our sights on Harvey and all those who think the Caprioni Family is just going to take this lying down. No one steals from us, and those who think we're not the best deal in town will learn we're the *only* deal in town," I announced. "Meet me in the conference room in ten minutes with the others. Tell Atticus if he hasn't gotten his eight hours, I'm sorry, but this isn't optional."

Knowing they would be along shortly, I headed to the conference room and let myself in. There was something cool about putting your palm on a scanner and having the power to unlock what was behind the door. Taking in the room, I headed for the records going back to when I'd read Continental Properties did their first deal with us in the information Ryker gave me last night. These files were written and read by those of the Caprioni Family only since we were the only ones to be taught the code.

I wanted to know where this friendship started and if they had really been family friends or just using my father. If I found that they'd been leading him on, I was going to make things even worse for them. It wouldn't just be business, it would be personal. It was hard enough for anyone in our line of work to find people we could consider friends, but to have them stab you in the back like these men were was unforgivable.

"Lady Astin," a voice called.

Turning, I found Liu standing near the conference table, looking up at me. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised he had access to this room being my father's righthand man. "Did you need something?" I asked, turning my attention back to the binder I was looking through.

"I was hoping you and I might be able to talk," he explained. "What happened last night was truly awful, and I don't want that one moment to ruin everything."

Letting out a sigh, I closed the binder and headed down the steps to the main floor. "What exactly would it ruin? My father and I have had a complex relationship for as long as I remember. Whatever is going on with Casimira isn't my concern, no matter if she's his secret wife or not. Jamison is a spoiled idiot who has no idea what it means to live in the real world where mommy doesn't come save you," I paused and met his gaze. "Then there's you, the overly skilled aide who has been adopted into the family and is privileged to all our dirty secrets. Tell me what was there to ruin in the first place?"

“He told me you know everything now,” Liu commented. “While he puts on a good face, I can tell you we won’t have him around much longer, Astin. He’s getting weaker and weaker no matter how much he tries to hide it. Don’t let his mistakes take away from the time you have left with him. Fuck the rest of us, be mad at me for not making sure he told you about me or making an effort to reach out to you myself. Yes, Jamison is an idiot but a lovable one if you gave him a chance. He’s been looking forward to the day he gets to meet his big sister.”

I cut him off, laughing at that last part. “Yes, I got the warm fuzzies from him on that front. He must have wanted to meet me so badly that he acted like a complete and utter dick. I tried last night, even after I got blindsided with *family* dinner. Didn’t you see me asking questions to get to know the little prick before he got all bent out of shape because we were having fish? They’re your family, not mine. As for my father, don’t you concern yourself with our relationship, we’ve managed to deal with things harder than this. So just back the fuck off and stop acting like you have any right to speak to me on this matter. You and I might share a last name, but that doesn’t make you my family.”

Liu rubbed his hand over his forehead like I was giving him a headache and nodded. “I’m sorry, you’re right. I don’t have any right to talk to you about this. You might not believe anything that’s coming out of my mouth but know this... your father loves you more than anything else, and Jamison grew up in your shadow. Fuck, I’ve been in it too since he made sure I

knew never to ask to take your spot because the answer would always be no. To be clear, I didn't want it... just thought you should know."

He turned to leave then stopped and faced me again. "I love him like a father. He's been the only parent who loved me my whole life. It's an honor to work alongside him, and I'll do anything to make sure his last years, months, days are ones that have happy memories. He's been waiting for you to come home like a child waits for Santa. Don't be the coal in his sock instead of the gift he sees you as." With that parting fortune-cookie wisdom, he left the room.

Liu had called me out in a way only Ryker had before in my life. It stung because I knew in some ways, he was right. I didn't know how much time I had left with my father, and if it wasn't much, then I needed to move quickly. He deserved to see these men who claimed to be friends ruined. This was my mission and a way to connect us when I didn't know how to forgive or trust again once feeling betrayed. Everything I'd been taught my whole life was to cut off those who hurt you or never to trust anyone lest they do what Harrison was doing to my father now.

Being the leader of the mafia made you a target. Everyone always wanted something from you, and if they couldn't get it, then they'd destroy you. The problem was you better be able to do it the first time, or we'd come back ten times harder until your bones were ground into dust.

“Mistress, what’s put that look of pure murder on your face?”
Braxton asked as he walked up to where I was standing.

I’d been so lost in my thoughts I hadn’t heard them enter.
“Huh?”

Braxton gestured to his own face. “Ah, your expression. You look like someone is going to die slowly by your own hands.”

“Oh, I’m sure someone will by the time this is all over,” I answered as I turned on my heel and took a seat at the head of the table.

The others entered and took their seats, even remembering the order I’d newly placed them in. Atticus seemed to have gotten enough sleep since he looked far perkier than the others. Luca seemed agitated about something, but I’d get there in a minute. First, I needed to share the order the boss had given me.

“All right, boys, listen up. The training wheels are coming off, and we are in this shit for real,” I announced. “The warm-up Boss thought we’d have to get to know each other isn’t gonna happen, so we’re gonna figure this out on the fly. Our main focus, above all others, is the destruction of Continental Properties. They’ve made a fool out of us and betrayed the boss’s trust. For that, the time of them benefiting from our friendship has come to an end. I’m tasked with the job of bringing them to their knees, and you, my lieutenants, are going to help me make it happen.”

“I know I said this earlier, but I’m hella ready to start some shit,” Braxton shared, a grin on his face. “Just tell me what you need, and I’ll make it happen.”

Atticus raised his hand, making me smile. “Yes, Atty?”

“Are we all required to perform physical violence on these people?” he questioned.

“No,” I answered simply. “What I need from you is to make a list of all the money they still owe us. I mean, going back to the first transaction and any penny they haven’t made good on, I want to know about it. They’ve been getting a better deal than they realized, and I want to show them that.”

“Thank you. I’m not very skilled in harming others, even though I’m quite a good shot with a gun. I apologize. I should clarify I’m a good shot when the target isn’t moving. I haven’t practiced on live targets or targets that move,” Atticus informed me.

“Good to know. I’ll keep that in mind if there’s an occasion where shooting is required,” I assured him. “Now, this is the list of things I’d like to do. Let me know if we have the ability to do them. Freeze their bank accounts, find every speck of dirt we can use against them, fuck up the deal they want to make with Harvey, buy the property out from under them, and pin the trick they were going to pull on us on them.”

There wasn’t an immediate reaction, but once they absorbed what I was saying, they burst into action. Laptops flew open, tablets were grabbed, and each of them was talking over one another trying to figure out who was going to do what.

“Jace, can you pull the information from your records to see how much he’s been loaned out during games and lost?” Atticus asked. “I keep saying I need to be given those records

as well, but Boss hasn't given the go-ahead. I'm the money man, and if it has to do with our money, then it should go through me."

Jace nodded and started to type on his laptop. "Trust me. If this gives you what you need, then I doubt there will be any pushback. Do you want just the past few years? The records before me are shit, and I've been trying to work through them, but men like these made deals on a handshake."

"Wait, what?" I demanded. "There are deals that have gone down without any paperwork?"

All of them paused and looked over at me. "What?" I demanded.

"Before your father, no one wanted a paper trail," Luca answered. "There are ledgers and other books that keep records, but we can't decode them. Even Boss was having trouble since it's a variation on the family code. It hasn't been, but for the past decade, the Caprioni Empire has been trying to ensure things appear legit on the surface since the government has gotten so much better at fucking us over with the details."

I ran my hand through my hair as I thought this over. "Okay, that makes sense. Get whatever you can, and I'll go over everything with the boss and double-check to make sure we didn't miss anything major. In the long run, this won't matter, but it's good for me to know going forward if we need leverage. Sadly, we can only prove so much from back in the day, not having written records."

We worked for hours going over all the years these men had worked with us. Father had given them loans and backing when they first started the company they have yet to pay back. There wasn't an agreed-upon timeframe, but that simply meant we got to call their note when we felt like it. The grand total ended up being about five million, and while they could afford to pay that back, it wouldn't be easy if we asked for it all at once. What I was most excited about, though, was being able to deliver it to them in person at their office. I imagined the looks on their faces when they realized who I was, and it was priceless.

Then an idea started to unravel in my mind about what could be done to pin the whole breaking the treaty on them. It might even give me a chance to use my burglary skills to my advantage. There's no way they could deny the accusation when the evidence was right there in their own offices. Delivering the bill would give me a chance to look around the place, then I could decide if it was worth it. On second thought, looking up their blueprints might not be a bad idea either.

"Ryker, can your people get me blueprints of properties that aren't ours?" I asked.

Gunner cut in before Ryker had a chance to answer. "If he can't, I know my people can. We keep copies of all the buildings we've helped to develop."

Ryker just smirked and gestured to Gunner. "I was gonna say, ask him."

“Did we work on the main offices for the Continental Properties?” I inquired.

“Well, seeing as they’re in one of our buildings renting out space, the answer to that would be yes,” Gunner affirmed.

“Did you want the whole building or just their floors?”

“All of it. I want to be able to know every nook and cranny of that place,” I answered.

Ryker gave me a questioning look. He knew the first thing I did for a job was memorize the layout and learn security. The bonus was if we were in charge of the security, it would be even easier to make this happen. I was going to hit these men with everything I could think of to set the tone here and now about what it would be like to deal with me.

Working in the conference room with no natural light access, I had zero idea of what the hell time it was. The only reason I looked at the clock was my stomach rumbled so loud the ground should have vibrated. “Holy shit, it’s already dinnertime,” I blurted.

Looking up from the tablet I’d been reading reports on, I found the guys all had various snacks and drinks scattered around the table.

“I told you she’d come out of her tunnel vision when she got hungry. Now you three owe me ten bucks,” Ryker said, gesturing for those who owed him to hand it over.

Braxton slapped the money on the table. “I knew I shouldn’t have bet against you,” he muttered. “How was I supposed to

guess she'd be so one-track-minded that she didn't even notice when we all got up and raided the kitchen?"

"I'm telling you, when she's on the hunt, there's nothing that's going to stop her from getting her mark," Ryker pointed out then turned to me. "I hope you don't mind, but I asked the kitchen to make you a burger with a side salad. It should be arriving any minute."

Okay, maybe the asshole did know me, after all.

"Thank you. I appreciate that. Really," I said, getting up and stretching.

Feeling the need to move about, I took a few laps around the table swinging my arms and shaking out my muscles that had clearly been far too tense and stuck in one position. "Tell me where we're at."

"How far have you gotten through what we've sent you?" Atticus asked. "I just don't want to waste time going over what you already know."

"Good point," I agreed, shooting him a thumbs up. "I've read through all the financials you sent me thus far, plus the records Jace has for Raymond's transactions with the gambling. That seems to be more his vice than it is Harrison's."

"So I'm guessing you didn't get to my reports then because Harrison has expensive taste when it comes to his bed companions. He has two he calls on all the time, Cherry Pie and Alfie. Sometimes he even has them together, but lately,

that's been happening less now that Alfie is a personal favorite to Mayor Wilson," Braxton informed me.

I paused in my walking to face Braxton. "I'm sorry, did you say they share the same dalliance?"

"Well, Harrison had him first, but then Wilson started to steal him away booking out time and even offered to make him his private paramour if you will. Alfie isn't one to be a kept man, so he negotiated specific days that would be exclusive to the mayor," Braxton explained.

"I'd like to meet with both of them discreetly in the next day or two. If I have to go to them to keep this quiet, then that's fine," I instructed. "How close of an eye do you keep on your people?" I asked Braxton.

He leaned back in his chair, crossing a leg over the other with a smug look on his face. "Are you asking if I ensure all my people who have high-power clients know they should keep their eyes and ears open for things we need to know? Then the answer is yes."

"Do you trust them to do so?" I challenged.

Braxton shrugged. "Most of them have vices I used to keep them in line. If they want the best and purest crack on the market, then all they have to do is tell me something I want to know. Since we control who those drugs go to, I know it's hard for them to get. Others want money sent to family or children kept hidden. It's part of my job to care for those I employ, and to me, this is part of that. They displease me or fuck up, then they'll suffer the consequences."

“As long as you can tell me that when I speak to Alfie, I won’t find that he’s been trading secret notes or plans between his clients, then we shouldn’t have a problem,” I reasoned. “Set up the meeting, but I want to talk to them separately. If something goes down, I don’t want the other to know they’ve been caught.”

“Astin, is it your plan to always assume that the person is lying or betraying you?” Atticus asked, his face betraying his confusion. “Wouldn’t it be better to apply the law of innocent until proven guilty?”

Walking over to him, I sat on the table and looked him in the eye. “Do you believe that in the world we work in, people are innocent?”

He didn’t answer me right away but took the time to contemplate what I asked him. “While I see your point with all of us being criminals of varying degrees, I don’t agree with the thought we’re all guilty.”

“All right then, following that logic, would you say you’re innocent?” I inquired. “I’m not trying to pass judgment, I’m more so wanting to understand your train of thought.”

“On that matter, I can only speak from my personal viewpoint since I’m not an ethics major or know the parameters of good or bad, guilty and innocent. However, I know exactly how many laws I’ve personally broken and what that would mean for me if I were to serve time in jail. According to our law and government... no, I would not be innocent. While I’ve never done anything to maliciously harm anyone or do more than my

superiors instructed, I've also not said no. This makes me an accomplice in all that has occurred.”

“Okay, I'm following you,” I said, tapping a finger on my chin. “So then, by your own logic, if a man or woman participates in criminal activities without trying to put a stop to it, they're guilty, correct?”

His brows creased as he followed my rabbit trail leading him right to the point I was trying to make. He looked at me with wide eyes as he understood. “I see that I've not been placing my own rules on others, I've been assuming they're following those that the governing parties have set for us. This would be incorrect of me to do since almost everyone in the world isn't bound by a black and white view of the world.”

“I don't know, Atty, you sounded pretty gray there to me. You know what the rules are and yet you choose to break them,” I reasoned, giving him a smile and a wink. “That's all right, we need someone who knows what the rules are so I'm warned when I cross over them too far.”

“Is that something a friend would tell you?” Atticus asked. “I've mentioned before I haven't really had friends, so I'm not sure what's socially acceptable or not.”

Reaching out, I gently placed a hand on his shoulder. “Trust yourself, Atty, you're doing just fine, and I'm not merely saying that to make you feel better. I like you simply the way you are, and if you feel it's important for me to know something, then you tell me... damn the etiquette.”

“Thank you, I appreciate your honest words, but I’m sure I’ll have more questions,” Atticus stated before he turned back to what he was working on, clearly done with this conversation.

Hopping off the table, there was a knock at the door, so I headed over to open it, praying it was my cheeseburger.

TWENTY-TWO



Atticus

Nothing about Astin fit in any of the boxes I put people in. There was a place for those in charge, co-workers, bullies, people I couldn't stand, and those who I found mildly interesting and didn't mind being around. There was an incredibly small percentage of people who landed in the last box—really there was only one—Luca. Like me, he didn't fit with the others on our team yet, but unlike me, they still tried to include him.

Luca was one of the first people to stand up for me against the bullies in the Caprioni business. When I'd been given the position of lieutenant, no one understood it, not even myself. Yes, I was superior to all others when it came to numbers, and there was no one I'd met who could do it better than me. It wasn't bragging as others accused me of—it was a simple fact. How can people dispute what's right in front of them? Did they want the boss to have someone of inferior ability doing this important job? This is why people generally confused me.

Astin rejoined us at the table with a tray of food that she smiled down at as if she was delighted with the meal. I enjoyed a well-made meal, but I don't know that I've ever looked that excited for food before. What was the point when I was just going to ingest it? The enjoyment would be over as soon as the food was gone. That's why I like math, science, and equations I could work on or manipulate into other forms. There were endless possibilities with the same nine symbols that equated to a measurement.

That's why I think Astin was so hard for me to put into a box. She wanted to be my friend, yet she was also my boss. Then when the others would try to bully me or brush me off, she came to my defense. Nothing about her made any sense—she was an equation with a variable I couldn't seem to find.

Looking at my screen, taking in the flood of numbers, my mind easily put them in the proper place and calculated their value. Seeing the full picture of Continental Properties, their business wasn't doing as well as their reports led us to believe. Once the note was called and they no longer had that float money giving them the cushion they'd grown accustomed to, it would hurt them severely. Of course, the whole plan was to cripple them to the point they would never be able to go back into business if they were allowed to live. It was clear by Astin's comments she wasn't planning on that happening.

As I looked at the numbers, they seemed to blur on the page as my mind wandered uninterested in their predictable nature. All I seemed to want to do was figure out the puzzle of a woman enthusiastically eating her meal at the head of the table. What

about me did she find so appealing that she singled me out to be her friend? None of the others got that offer. Nor was she offended when I asked questions or challenged her view on something. Was this what my mother had been talking about when she said I'd know when I met the right person?

It has been six years since she passed, and I wish every day she was still around. Like Astin, she could talk to me and explain things I didn't understand in a way that didn't make me feel stupid. My brain worked differently than others—it saw things in black and white, right and wrong, rules and laws. When situations didn't follow any of these paths, I didn't know how to handle the expectation that came with it. Mother used to tell me my father was just like me, and she loved that I reminded her of him. I'd never had the chance to meet him since he died overseas as a military operative who worked with our intelligence agency. He was sent on a mission and never came back.

Needing the money to pay for Mother's medical bills once her cancer became so aggressive she needed around-the-clock care, I stumbled my way into working for one of the boss's bookies. He was willing to pay me a large sum of money to keep the books, and he liked, even more, the fact I didn't need to write most of it down. I caught the boss's eye when I discovered the man I was working for was skimming money off the top. He didn't think I'd notice since he never wrote it down, but he also gave me the sheets for the earnings of the bets. Numbers never lie, even when people do.

The bookie was replaced, and I was given an even better job working in the main headquarters as Boss learned what I could really do for his company. I'd never had the chance to go to college, but Boss didn't care if I had a degree or not as long as I could do the job, which I could easily. Soon after that, I was brought to work under the previous lieutenant, shadowing him and then taking his place when he was removed. Knowing the man well enough, I could safely say he'd have been a terrible fit to work with Astin. James hated the idea of women being anywhere outside of the home. *It's where they belonged*, he used to tell me constantly.

Now here I was the lieutenant to the first female underboss of the Caprioni Family. It was important I do my job well so as not to fail her or the boss who'd given me the chance. Astin needed me to find out what these men were up to and how to hit them where it hurt. The bill against them of five million would be a large stumbling block, but I was still working through some of their other ventures they didn't use us for. If we weren't the ones giving them the money, who else was?

"I found the property," Gunner announced. "It's about an hour outside the city, and if I'm reading this right, nowhere near the right size for the plans they showed me."

Astin paused in her eating to ponder Gunner's findings. "Could it be that Harvey is fucking with them? Or do you think they gave us all fake information?"

Gunner frowned at his computer as if he was frustrated it wasn't telling him what he wanted to know. "That's the thing,

the plot of land isn't anything they would want. It makes me wonder if they've even seen what Harvey is trying to sell them or if he's pulling a bait and switch."

"You said it's an hour outside the city?" Astin inquired, getting to her feet and walking over to look at the screen. "Who do we have that can get out there fast, take pictures, and give us feedback? Something about this doesn't seem right to me. Harrison and Raymond don't seem the mastermind type to come up with a plan like this. My gut says Harvey is using those two greedy idiots, and they don't even realize it. If we snatch up a piece of land that's been sitting there forever, Harvey's going to know we figured it out."

Everyone looked at her with surprise. How had she come to that conclusion with only the small bit of information Gunner had just provided? Now that she explained it, I had to agree with her. If Continental Properties was going to buy it, then they should have done it already. A project this large, even with our help to grease the wheels with permits, would take a full year, if not more.

"Are you saying you think this is all a trap?" Ryker asked what we were all thinking.

She stood and started to pace around the table again like a caged animal frustrated with its confined space. "No, I don't think all of it's a trap. What I think is... this is a test to see how well we are paying attention. When I first learned about this, I wanted to buy the property right away to prevent them from having it. I'm thinking that's what most people would do

in my place, and that's what they're looking for. If we have someone go out there, take in the site, and tell me it's a dump and not at all what you would need to build a theme park on, then I guess we'll have our answer."

Gunner grabbed his phone and made a call, excusing himself from the table to tell whoever what we needed done.

"Atty," she called, drawing my attention. "Has anything you've done so far been traceable if someone went looking, or has it been based on all our own records?"

"I was just about to investigate who's been giving them smaller loans for projects they've never brought to us. While I'm an expert in numbers, Ryker is the one who would be able to answer that question since he's a hacker," I explained. "Although everything I've done up to this point has been from our data."

"Good, hold off on that other stuff for now. Ryker, I want you to run whatever scan or code you need to ensure whatever we look up on them won't be traced back to us. From now on, I want us all to act like every step, every keystroke, every phone call is being monitored," Astin ordered. "If Harvey is using these idiots as a patsy, then I don't want to give him the information he's looking for. He needs to think we don't have a clue what he's up to."

"Luca, can you tell me if they send or receive anything through you? I mean, drugs and supplies of any kind, even if it's a special kind of toilet paper you can only get from Tabor," Astin requested, walking over to his seat.

“That’s the odd part... they used to use us to get all the specialty building supplies that would cost a small fortune here. They order so sporadically I didn’t notice it’s been six months since they’ve needed something,” Luca informed her. “Normally, it’s two or three but never this long, and cross-checking the buildings they’ve finished recently, they should have ordered something. They have an obsession with this certain kind of gold-veined granite that’s hard to get and costs about ten thousand a slab. Usually, they call me to get it imported from where it’s mined in Apria, so they don’t pay the taxes on imported goods.”

The look of anger that clouded Astin’s face had me alert. Never before could I read someone as easily as I could her, but it made me wonder if it’s because she doesn’t hide her emotions like the rest of us have been taught to, or if she just feels them so strongly others can’t help but feel it coming off her.

“Who’s our biggest competition in the harbor?” Astin demanded. “Seems we’ve been slipping if someone is stepping on our biggest money-maker.”

“The Vona,” Luca answered. “There was a large increase of immigrants over the past few years, and they took over the South Wharf. I didn’t pay attention to them until about a year ago because they use smaller boats to take their goods up and down the major rivers instead of the ocean. They can’t handle big loads or deal with people overseas, but they are running ships down to the gulf of Apria and getting their international load off and bringing it back up.”

“I can see why you didn’t watch them that closely. It’s a foolish mission. We used to do the same thing back in the day, but the Apria border patrol kept stopping the ships. How are they getting around that?” Astin pondered aloud, tapping her chin as she moved. “Unless they have someone who’s paid off the right people. That wouldn’t work either, though, since the Apria keep changing their people in charge every two years to different locations so that doesn’t happen.”

“That’s simple,” I commented.

Astin paused and looked at me. “What’s simple?”

“If you want to know and prepare for the changes, you buy off the person who makes that call. It could even be to the point where that specific person in charge changes every place but along the rivers and gulf,” I explained. “You just have to look for the constant instead of always dealing with the variable.”

“Simple,” Astin murmured.

She glanced down at her watch and sighed. “Okay, I need a workout and sleep. We’ve been at this all day and only coming up with more problems to deal with. Finish up what you’re working on then call it a night. Breakfast at seven thirty, and we’ll be right back here. We need to get to the bottom of this quicksand before we sink further into it.”

Grabbing her plate, she started to head out, then paused to look at Braxton. “When am I meeting with your people?”

“If you don’t mind taking a tour of a newly renovated club tomorrow afternoon, that’s when I have it set up,” Braxton

answered.

“Good, and remember, if any of you are going to wake me up later or in the morning, do it loudly and from far away. Ask Braxton if you have any further questions,” she commented and left us to our work.

Ryker pushed back his chair and slouched now that he didn't need to posture for Astin's attention. “Let me guess... you almost got gutted?”

“Fuck off,” Braxton shot back. “It was terrifying and hot as all sin. Jace just decided to stand there and watch like the asshole he is.”

“Nah, if I thought you were in any danger, I'd have done something,” Jace argued. “Besides, you looked like you were enjoying it, and I didn't want to spoil your fun.”

This had me intrigued for a whole other reason. “Does she always sleep with a weapon?”

“Yeah, that's how they trained her since she was thirteen, I think. They would surprise attack her at night just to make sure she reacted the way she was supposed to,” Ryker explained. “Back then, she'd be awake and ready in about a minute or two. Something tells me she's probably faster now.”

“Why would they need to train her to do that?” I questioned. “It seems to reason if the security was good enough, she wouldn't need to be so hypervigilant.”

Ryker turned to look at me, his expression closed off. “No matter how good we are at our job, if someone wants to take

someone out, they'll find a way eventually. It's smart to make sure that whoever the target might be can defend themselves. Astin is probably the best-trained person in this whole house. The training they put her through would have broken even the strongest of men, but that's what they wanted so they could rebuild her into the woman she is now."

I frowned, trying to wrap my head around how that made any sense at all.

Ryker clapped me on the shoulder, making me flinch at the contact. Most of the time, I could handle people touching me if I was ready for it, but the casual nature some of these men had with touch caught me off guard.

"Don't stress about it too much. Just know that if we ever get into a fight, she's the one you want on your side," Ryker said before he rose from his seat and headed out.

Looking at the others, they didn't seem bothered by this information either, it was just me. "Am I that wrong for thinking no one should have to be trained like that to survive?"

Luca rose and pulled on his suit jacket, fixing his cuffs as he answered, "She isn't just anyone, Atticus. She's the first woman to rule over the Caprioni Family, and that paints a big-ass target right on the back of her head. If they can't control her, which we're all finding out isn't gonna happen, then they'll try to take her out."

"Now it's our job to make sure we know what the fuck is going on around us so we can be prepared for the worst. What this whole situation has just shown me is that we've been far

too trusting. No one but those of us in this room or related to our boss are who we can trust. Everyone else can be bought or manipulated,” Jace pointed out. “I need to make the rounds but reach out if you guys need anything.”

Luca and Jace left, leaving me with Braxton and Gunner, who had just finished his call.

“I’ve got someone who’s going to go by the property first thing in the morning since it’s getting too dark right now to do any good,” Gunner informed us. “We calling it a night?”

“Yeah, I have to check in on some of the clubs,” Braxton answered, getting up. “We have some new girls being brought in, so I need to do the final approval and placement.”

“Are these new girls voluntary or those you’ve taken as payment?” Gunner challenged.

Braxton whirled on the man grabbing him by the shirt. “What the fuck difference does it make to you? I don’t hear you busting Luca’s balls for bringing the drugs we sell or the guns we distribute. What about Jace who gives people credit he knows they’ll struggle to pay and then sends his people to beat it out of them? This isn’t the world for the weak and faint of heart. Most of those girls, regardless of how they ended up in my clubs or service, have a better life than they would have on the streets. I make sure they’re fed, clothed, and looked after, so I don’t want to hear a fucking self-righteous word out of your mouth.” Braxton shoved Gunner, stumbling away from him and stalked out of the room.

Standing, I let out a heavy sigh. “You know I’m not skilled in interacting with people, but even I know that was a stupid thing to say. None of us are good people, and it’s wrong to point out the sins of others when we have our own to deal with.” Grabbing my laptop, I headed to my room to work on my daily tasks for the Caprioni business in peace.

TWENTY-THREE



Getting to sleep a full eight hours was a magical experience I'd try to never take for granted. I was practically skipping my way into the dining room the following morning. Daddy was there reading the paper and sipping on his coffee like we were out of some old-fashioned mob movie.

"Good morning, Daddy," I greeted and took my seat.

"Good morning, Astin. Finally get some sleep?" he asked, looking me over. "I heard from the staff that you kept the boys behind locked doors for almost the whole day."

"There's far more going on than any of us realize, but that's all I'll say for now. If you'd like me to catch you up to speed, I'll do so in your office," I said, giving him a side glance, telling him we couldn't talk here.

"Good, it so happens I need you in a meeting right after breakfast," Daddy commented, going back to his paper. "Oh,

and I got a call from one of my people who wanted to let me know my daughter was seen having drinks with Harvey's nephew."

I gasped, clutching a hand to my chest dramatically. "Good heavens, what's the world coming to? How dare she even think about breathing the same air as a man like that."

"Hmm... it seems she caused a scene outside a club as well," he added from behind his paper. "One would think she's the new underboss and making sure people know their place in the world around her."

"Good for her, she needs to stand her ground. The moment you let one cockroach get past you, then suddenly there's an infestation," I agreed. "Besides, this happened like a whole day ago. Your people need to get on it if they want to get the drop on me."

Daddy folded his paper back to look at me. "I'm guessing you had no idea who he was but that you're now going to keep your distance?"

"Yes, Daddy, the boys made sure to corner him, steal his lunch money, and send him on his way, I imagine," I said, smiling at the woman who was pouring coffee for me. "Thank you."

"Of course, Lady Astin, is there anything I can get for you?" she asked.

"No, I'm fine to wait for the others to get here to start eating," I answered. She bobbed a curtsy and went back into the kitchen. "Am I allowed to ask what the meeting is for?"

“Mayor Wilson has requested a meeting with us,” he answered. “We’ll be meeting him at the Caprioni offices at ten.”

“Interesting, and did the mayor request this meeting himself?” I questioned.

Father folded the paper and handed it to me so I could read the front page. *Mayor Wilson is making moves to be harder on crime. The police budget is increasing for the first time in ten years.*

“Now, how do you suppose he’s doing that?” I asked to no one in particular. “Did you have something to do with this?”

Daddy just cocked a brow at me. “Why in the world would you think that?”

“This was the major thing he used in his campaign but hasn’t been able to make good on it in the first year. He’s now halfway through the second, and I assume trying to build up for re-election,” I said, relaxing into my seat as I crossed one leg over the other. “If you wanted to keep a young and moldable mayor in your pocket, helping him achieve his dreams would certainly do the trick.”

“Dearest daughter, I am just a man who wants what’s best for his city,” he countered with a grin, telling me I was right. “My assumption is he wants to go over the rules before he takes the money. It’s too bad that someone already let the cat out of the bag, making it incredibly challenging for him to back out of the deal.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “Whoever’s been spreading lies that you’ve lost your touch is an idiot. They just don’t know how to play with the big boys.”

“Who’s playing with the big boys?” Braxton asked as he plopped into the seat next to me.

Glancing over at him, I batted my lashes. “Wouldn’t you just love to know, but maybe I want to keep them for myself.”

“Sharing is caring, Astin,” Braxton said, then pushed out his bottom lip in a pout. “I promise I’m awfully good at taking orders. I wouldn’t get in your way at all.”

Father cleared his throat, drawing our attention. “While I have no say in what you do in your private life, I’d prefer not to have to listen to it before I’ve had breakfast. Some things are best left for private conversations.”

I flashed Daddy a bright smile. “So what you’re saying is wait for lunch to have awkward conversations with other men about my sex life at the table?”

He gave me a withering look and set his coffee cup down harder than necessary. “Astin, enough.”

Knowing I’d pushed the line as far as I could, I shrugged and watched as the others joined us. Some looked more rested than others, making me curious about what they got up to.

“You’re in my seat,” Atticus said to Braxton.

“It’s breakfast,” Braxton countered.

“Yes, I’m aware of what meal I’m trying to sit down to eat. You are preventing me from doing that because you’re sitting where Astin instructed me to be,” Atticus responded.

Braxton opened his mouth to argue then moved down one which was the spot he was supposed to sit according to their self-imposed rules. Atticus smiled at me then took his seat.

“Good morning, Astin.”

“Good morning, Atty. Did you get your required amount of sleep?” I asked, feeling he seemed a little grumpy.

“No, I was only able to get six hours of sleep,” Atticus grumbled. “I finished all the work I needed to do for the business, but something kept bothering me about what I was working on yesterday, so I went back over everything. I couldn’t find what the problem was or why it’s not allowing me to sleep, but it’s utterly frustrating. This has never happened to me before, and I don’t think I enjoy this feeling at all.”

I reached out and cupped his chin, turning him to look at me. “We’ll go over everything together and figure it out, I promise. I won’t let you go another night without getting the sleep you need.” When I first touched him, he tensed, then when he met my gaze, he relaxed completely and nodded in agreement. “I have a few meetings this morning and another this afternoon with Braxton. After that, I’ll make sure I’m available for as long as necessary.”

“Thank you,” Atticus said, reaching up to grasp my wrist and pull my hand from his face, but instead of letting it go, he held

onto it with both hands. “I’m glad you picked me to be your friend.”

Grinning, I gave him a wink. “Same to you, Atty.”

I pulled my hand back as the food was placed on the table for the others while a plate was set in front of me. We ate in relative silence, many of us having things preoccupying our thoughts. The meeting with the mayor was going to be important and possibly would help us with our current issue. Gunner texted me last night that he’d sent someone out to look at the land, so I would need to touch base on that. Then there was the meeting with the two prostitutes Harrison used. The day had just started, and it was already full of important issues to take care of.



The car pulled up to the Caprioni building, and instantly, someone was there to open the door for us. “Welcome, Master Caprioni, Lady Astin,” the man greeted.

Daddy got out of the car first, and when I moved to get out, Boykov was there to give me a hand. “Good morning, Ralph. How are you today?” I asked.

He smiled and stood to his full height, making me feel small, which was an accomplishment with five-inch heels on. “I’m doing just fine, Lady Astin. You ventured out of the house today. Should I be expecting some excitement?”

“The day is young, and I’m well rested, so who knows what could happen?” I announced as we entered the building. “We have a few meetings to go to, so there’s ample opportunity for chaos to ensue.”

“Mistress, that wasn’t a challenge,” Boykov interjected.

We stepped into the elevator, and I faced him with a grin. “Oh, silly Ralph, everything in life is a challenge. If it’s not, then what’s the fun in living it?”

Father chuckled at my words but didn’t comment. We were now all business, and he might show a small amount of humanity in a closed setting like this, but once we stepped out of this elevator, he was the king of the Caprioni Family. I followed him down the hall as people stood from their desks in respect for who he was. Many tried not to gawk at me, but I understood it would be hard. I was the first woman of power to ever be allowed into this part of the business.

It might also have something to do with the burnt orange pantsuit I was wearing with cream heels. Nothing about it was subtle, but that’s just how I liked it. People were going to stare at me wherever I went with my father, so I tried to give them something pretty to look at. That and it lulled men into thinking I was nothing but a silly little mafia princess who spent all her daddy’s money on clothes.

Daddy’s office was at the end of the hall with glass walls from floor-to-ceiling, showing an impressive sight of the city below us. Everything about this office gave off the impression of power, from the massive dark wood desk to the regal-looking

leather chair placed behind it. Bookshelves were placed on one of the only walls that wasn't glass, filled with awards and pictures of my father with important people. All of it was a tactic to remind them who he was and the people he had behind him.

The mayor was young and new, but Daddy had felt he was the best to help us, so he lent his muscle to his campaign. Once Wilson got in office, he tried to be independent but clearly, that wasn't going so well for him. Now he'd walked himself into a corner where he took our help or we let him fail, turning everyone against him. Then we'd pick the new prized pony who would do tricks for us.

"Master Caprioni, the mayor has just arrived," a mature woman in professional attire notified us. "Is there anything you might require before your meeting starts? Tea perhaps?"

"Yes, tea would be good, thank you, Mrs. Laningham," Father answered as he handed off his coat to her. "Astin, is there something else you'd like instead?"

"No, tea will be just fine," I said, offering a smile to my father's longtime secretary. He'd mentioned her a time or two in his letters, saying how he'd be ruined without her.

When she left and Daddy took his seat behind the L-shaped desk, I joined him, resting my hip on the long side so I was slightly behind him. "Liu doesn't come here with you?"

"Mrs. Laningham has been working for me for about twenty years now. What happens in this building is her domain, and I'd never take that from her," Father explained. "Liu runs

matters at the house and deals with minimal issues while I'm away. It's like running two different lives, Astin. One is in view of the public, following the rules, giving us protection from the real work we do. The business we run from the estate is the true meat of the Caprioni Family legacy, but we can't work as freely if we didn't have this to cover us."

"So by keeping two different people in charge of each area, it keeps them from overlapping and making connections," I commented, understanding what he was saying.

"Indeed," Daddy commented as the door opened.

"Mayor Wilson and his aides," Mrs. Laningham introduced, followed by an attractive man accompanied by another man and a woman who entered the office.

Mayor Wilson approached the desk and extended his hand, and Father stood. It was subtle but yet another power-play move proving Daddy didn't feel the need to get up sooner. "Timothy, good to see you. I'm glad you reconsidered my offer and called back to set up this meeting."

"Yes, well, it seems I might have misjudged the backing I had in a few other areas," Mayor Wilson commented as his gaze drifted to me.

Mayor Timothy Wilson was an attractive, mature man of the spry age of forty-five. With hazel eyes, salt-and-pepper hair, and a sharp modern suit that hugged his fit body in all the right ways, this man was *daddy* material all the way. He was also the youngest mayor we'd seen in a long time since most of his predecessors had been fifty and above. The people had wanted

a change, and that was his whole campaign strategy—project youth, big changes, and bringing the city into the twenty-first century.

“Who might this lovely lady be?” Wilson asked, giving me a grin I’m sure has made women’s panties melt many times over. Sadly for him, I just wasn’t as impressed knowing far too much about him and getting the chance to meet his hooker of preference later today.

Standing, I walked behind Father and came around the desk to come face to face with this man we were going to leash into being the faithful pet I needed him to be. Extending my hand, I introduced myself. “Astin Caprioni, it’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Caprioni, is it?” Wilson repeated as he took my hand and lifted it to his lips. “Where have you been hiding such a gem, Colmazio?”

“Astin is my eldest and has been pursuing her education abroad. She’s recently graduated and came to take her place working in the family business,” Daddy answered.

In a sense, everything he said was true, and as a casual cover story, it worked brilliantly.

“Then allow me to welcome you back to our fair city, Astin,” Wilson said, beaming at me.

There was another knock at the door, and a moment later, a man entered wheeling in a cart with a tea setting. He placed it

on the coffee table in the seating area then filled the teapot with steaming hot water and left.

“Please, let’s sit, have some tea, and discuss this new plan you have to bolster the police budget,” I instructed sweetly, letting my hand run down the mayor’s arm.

Wilson followed me like a good little puppy and sat next to me on the couch, making me want to roll my eyes. I glanced at the woman he’d brought with him, and she was staring daggers into my head. Clearly, Mayor Wilson wasn’t someone who was good at keeping his dick in his pants if he was boinking his aide on top of his paid dalliances.

Daddy came to join us, sitting in an armchair that had its back to the desk and allowed him to see everyone seated easily. Using the opportunity to see just how badly this philanderer was interested in me, I rose. “Can I make you a cup of tea, Father?” I asked.

“Yes, thank you, Astin, no cream but a touch of sugar, please,” he answered, playing along with my actions.

Bending over, it just so happened to put me in the position where my ass was right in our good mayor’s view. I heard two men groan and a woman snarl, telling me I have more fans than haters at the moment. Working quickly, I rose and handed the cup and saucer to Daddy. He gave me a questioning look, but I simply winked and turned back to make myself a cup. This time as I worked the button down the blouse I was wearing, it was gaped just enough for them to see my black lacy bra.

“For the love of God,” the woman muttered just loud enough I could hear her.

I righted myself with my tea in hand and sat in the chair across from her. Once seated, I held her gaze and stared her down until she dropped her eyes, telling me she wouldn't be someone I needed to worry about. She might be convenient for the mayor, always being around, but she understood her place.

“Aren't you going to offer us some tea, Astin?” Wilson asked.

I opened my eyes wide and batted my lashes. “I'm sorry, I figured such an able-bodied man like you would want to do that yourself. If you can't, I'd be more than happy to accommodate your needs.”

“No, no, I was teasing you, which was unkind of me. We don't know each other that well yet.” He backtracked, pulling the tea service closer to himself.

Men, they love to be served, but the moment you question their virility, they're suddenly able to do just about anything for themselves. Go figure.

“Mr. Caprioni, the last time we met, you commented about being willing to support the mayor and his mission to build up the police force. Then after we set up this meeting, we discovered the plans have been leaked to the press,” the woman stated.

“I'm sorry,” I cut in before anyone else could respond. “I know I haven't been here for the other meeting, but I think it might be helpful if I knew your aides' names, Mr. Mayor.”

Wilson puffed up his chest at me using his title and gestured to the man first. “This is Grant, he’s my chief of staff, and this is Melony, the assistant chief of staff. Both of them are also lawyers, so I felt like it was wise to bring them along, so I didn’t land myself in more trouble.”

“Oh, and what’s your background?” I questioned even though I knew the answer.

“I’m an economics professor who specialized in policy analysis,” he answered, making it sound far more impressive than it was.

Sitting back, I crossed my legs and sipped my tea. “Fascinating,” I murmured. “Forgive me, Melony, I didn’t mean to cut you off earlier. Please, you were commenting on the fact that the press is already talking about Mayor Wilson’s accomplishments.”

“Yes, I was curious as to how they came about knowing that would occur?” Melony asked, glaring at me.

“Are you insinuating the leak came from my people?” Father demanded. “This is a multi-billion dollar company. If I were to allow a leak like this, it would be terrible for business. What would have happened if the mayor backed out of the deal or decided to use the money for something else? Bad press would affect us both, Ms. Campbell.”

“No, sir, that isn’t what she meant,” Grant argued. “She’s just pointing out that it might be wise to be aware that someone is privy to this information and is leaking it. It’s better to be safe than sorry, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Then I’d advise you to do the same and check your staff,” Father challenged. “It was your office that called me a week ago asking if the offer I made when giving my generous support to the campaign is still open for conversation.”

Gary started to sweat and fidget with his tie as he tried to come up with a way to fix this situation. Tired of watching these idiots fumble the ball, I stepped in.

“I think we are getting off-topic here, don’t you?” I asked, setting my tea aside. “We are here to discuss what you need to make what you promised the people of Eastrose happen. So I’m sure you have a number for us.”

“A number,” Wilson said slowly as if he wasn’t understanding.

“Yes, Mr. Mayor, the amount of money you need to reach the goal of beefing up the budget for the police force,” I coaxed.

Why the hell did Father think this idiot was the right person for this job? He could be turned into a good puppy, but it doesn’t help us if all he does is piss on the rug.

“Of course, my goodness, you must think me daft. Forgive me, Astin, I wasn’t aware you were so well informed on these matters,” Wilson rambled, trying to save himself.

I smiled and tucked some hair behind my ear before meeting his gaze. “This is an important meeting, and I didn’t want to be here unprepared.”

The gulp he swallowed could be heard through the room, telling me I had him right where I wanted him. “How kind of you to put so much effort into this.”

“So, Timothy, what’s the number,” Father asked, snapping the man back to attention.

“Fifteen million, that’s what I’d need to bring everyone back to full-time. It wouldn’t allow for overtime, but I wouldn’t have to force the precincts to cut back and allow for a stronger presence in the city,” Wilson answered.

Father hummed as he scratched his chin as if considering the proposal. For us and our company to hand over fifteen million would be simple, not to mention the tax write-off we’d get for doing it.

“What’s your plan for the police once you bring them back to work? There must be an agenda you have for needing that much force to be available,” Father inquired.

Wilson gestured to Grant who dove down to grab his briefcase, pulled out a few sheets of paper, and handed them over. “I apologize, I only have one copy. In the future, I’ll make sure to have more with me.”

“Port enforcement and drug crackdown,” Father commented as he read the reports. “I didn’t realize there was an issue with the ports.”

“That’s where all the drugs are coming in from, and if we can get more support there, we can stop the drugs before they hit the streets. There also needs to be an increase in undercover cops as well to make fake buys in areas we know are a problem,” Melony interjected.

I could tell by the tone in her voice that this was her idea. The passion and drive she had in her eyes made me question if the mayor truly intended to do this or if she'd been pushing since the beginning. Of course, we'd never allow this to happen. If we did, it would be shooting ourselves in the foot. No, something would need to be done to redirect his choice.

“If you'll excuse me, I need to step out a moment to make a phone call,” I murmured, rising from my seat and heading out into the main office area. I spotted a sign for the bathrooms, so I headed in that direction. In the women's restroom, there was a little seating area before entering another door to get to the bathroom itself.

Pulling out my phone, I called Ryker. Before I could put the phone to my ear, I was slammed up against the wall.

TWENTY-FOUR



Lips crashed against mine, and a leg was put between mine so I was flush with my attacker's body as he rubbed his hard cock against me. "I was hoping you would step away for a moment, Astin," Mayor Wilson whispered in my ear as he groped my breasts. "Can you feel it? The energy between us is amazing."

I glanced down at my phone and saw the call had gone through, and Ryker was listening in. This was my chance to get some information out of him and fix this fucking deal his goody-two-shoes aide came up with.

Using the position against him, I flipped us so he was the one with his back to a wall. "Now, Mr. Mayor, you shouldn't sneak up on a girl like that. It's rather rude."

"You make me want to do crazy things, Astin," he said, trying to sound as sexy as possible. "Tell me you feel this between

us, the sexual tension. It's so strong, I thought I was going to burst sitting there watching you make fucking tea."

Good to know that worked, but maybe it worked too well.

"If you want me, Mr. Mayor, it has to be just me," I countered, leaning in so my lips whispered over his. "I know your fucking your aide. She's pretty, but that bitch can only take you so far. You drop her and let me help you instead, and no one will be able to stand in your way." I let my hand trail down his chest until I was rubbing his dick.

I wasn't sure I'd found it at first, then the way he groaned told me this handful of a bulge was what he was working with. "You could be so much more than just a mayor if you had the right person behind you. The next office you hold could be governor or even senator."

His breathing was becoming more labored the harder I gripped him. "If power is what you want, that's what I can get you, but you can't do it with dead weight. You don't need to protect the port. No one gives a shit about that. Your citizens want to know their children are safe and that neighborhoods, parks, and schools are monitored. Protect the weakest, and instantly, you're a hero, choosing to use all the influence you have to make our city safe to grow up in. Drugs will find another way to get in, then you're seen as a failure. Do something that makes a splash and drives the voters to your side. Win them over, and they could carry you all the way to the top."

Apparently, political talk was like a drug to our dear mayor as he grabbed my shirt and ripped it open, sending buttons flying

across the space. “I want you so fucking bad.” He growled as he latched onto one of my nipples through the lace of my bra.

I grabbed the back of his neck, and he thought I was giving him the go-ahead as he slipped a finger to pull the lace down. Instead, I gripped tightly on a pressure point, making him grunt in pain as I twisted him around, facing away from me. Keeping him there, I dropped my phone as I wrapped my arms around his waist and undid his pants. “I told you I won’t be another one of your fuck buddies, Timothy. If you want me, then you better prove you deserve me, show me what kind of man you are. Don’t let your aides run the show. They aren’t the ones people elected.” I nipped his ear as I freed his cock.

“Oh God, yes, just like that.” He moaned.

It wasn’t long until I felt him ready to come, and I paused to grip his balls and squeeze.

“Ah, fuck!” He gasped, his head falling back.

“So, Mr. Mayor, what will it be? Do you want me or not?” I crooned. “The things I could do to you would blow your mind, but only those who are worthy get to experience them.”

“Yes, I want that, I want it all,” he pleaded as I rolled his jewels in my hand. “Tell me what I have to do to prove I’m worthy.”

“Tell Melony to fuck off and drop the plan she created for you. It’s amateur, and you’re better than that,” I instructed as I started to work his cock again. “Do that, and I’ll know you’re serious about me.”

His hips jutted as he tried to speed up what I was doing, but I squeezed hard, making him grunt and behave. “You’re right, Melony was needed to show I support women in power, but she’s holding me back now. I’ll deal with her and prove just how worthy I am.”

“Good boy,” I purred. “Now I have one question for you, just to see if you’re really being honest with me. I already know the answer to this, so if you lie to me, it will all be over, and you don’t get to come. So choose your answer wisely.”

“I’ll answer anything.”

“Did Harvey O’Hagan pay off everyone involved in the burial ground issue with the toxic land we’ve been trying to get rezoned?” I inquired as I let my other hand slip between his ass cheeks to prod at his asshole.

I didn’t know if he was a pitcher or a catcher by the way he was acting, but I’d bet money he took it hard and fast in the ass. Wilson started to moan louder as my finger slipped in deeper, and I started stroking that special spot.

“Tell me, and I’ll make you come so hard you’ll be dreaming about me for weeks,” I urged as I slowed my hand and finger.

“Yes,” Wilson gasped, bending forward to rest his hands on the wall. “Harvey thought it was best if we didn’t let people know we allowed native land to become a toxic waste dump. He’s been the biggest help with keeping matters amicable between the Kocabe and us. I didn’t know how to stop it from coming out, and he told me he’d deal with it. Now please, please let me come,” Wilson begged.

I kissed his cheek and shoved in a second finger, thrusting them hard against his happy place as I wrung his cock, making him come so hard his cum splattered on the wall in front of us. Just as the mayor sagged in my arms, the bathroom door burst open, and Boykov was standing there looking ready to murder someone. Apparently, the mayor had been smart enough to lock the door when he entered.

“Oh good, perfect timing, we just finished,” I committed as I pulled my fingers out of his ass. “I just need to wash up a little, and you make sure no one disturbs us while the mayor pulls himself together?”

Boykov looked at me with a raised brow but nodded. “Yes, Lady Astin. Seems today is going to be an interesting one, after all.”

“That it certainly is,” I agreed and headed off to wash my hands with bleach, lots of bleach.

After scrubbing my hands five times over, I looked at my shirt, trying to decide what to do with it. All the buttons on the top half had been busted off. Sighing, I slipped off my jacket, removed the shirt altogether, and put the jacket back on, buttoning it up. It showed off way more than I wanted it to and also gave me no chance to hide what happened in the bathroom. Fuck it, I’d just call Braxton and tell him to bring me a shirt when we met up at the club.

Chuckling the shirt in the garbage, I exited the bathroom and went back into the sitting room to find Boykov waiting for me. “He returned to the meeting,” he informed me.

“Lovely,” I muttered.

“It’s none of my business, but I might suggest you call Ryker back. He’s the one who reached out to me saying you might need my assistance,” Boykov urged, handing me my phone he must have picked up from the floor.

Groaning, I took it and called the one man back who would lose his mind over what I just did to get what I wanted. When Ryker was around me growing up, he was always overprotective even though he knew I didn’t need any protection with all my training. That, and Ryker loved to make it clear he was mine, and anyone who wanted to make advances on me had to deal with him. That got so much worse after we slept together, but then he left two weeks later.

“Are you really calling me this time, or will you continue the torture of making me listen to some man having his way with you?” Ryker asked bitterly.

“I’ll have you know that wasn’t my intention when I made the call,” I pointed out. “The reason I was calling you is that the mayor wanted to use the money we gave him to beef up security on the ports and crack down on drugs. Forgive me for thinking you might have an idea on how to resolve that problem.”

“Sounds to me like you figured it out all on your own,” he snapped back.

“Goddammit, Ryker, you need to get a handle on this whole caveman routine. It’s getting old. I’ll have you know that man got nothing from me other than two fingers up his ass. While I

have zero issue using what my daddy gave me, I'm not going to make myself cheap either," I countered, feeling my blood pressure rise in the way only Ryker could cause. "Look, I have no idea if what I did worked or not. What I did get out of him was confirmation that Harvey is indeed behind keeping the burial ground a secret from everyone. Tell me that wasn't important?"

"You know it was, Astin, and you'll use it as proof that what you did was just fine. I thought you wanted to be respected in this world, not play into stereotypes of women in the mafia," Ryker snarled.

My jaw dropped at his words. "The fuck did you say to me?"

There was silence on the other end of the line telling me he just realized how badly he fucked up. "Astin."

"Oh no, sorry, buddy, but you don't get to just say shit like that and apologize right after. I have an incredibly important meeting to go back to now. I'll deal with *you* later," I warned, hanging up on him before he could say another asinine word.

Balling my hands, I let out a frustrated scream, making Boykov flinch before I brushed my hair out of my face and shook it all off. With a few more deep breaths, I was back in control and sent a text to Braxton to grab me a shirt that would go with burnt orange knowing he, of all my lieutenants, would be able to manage that task perfectly fine.

I looked over at Boykov. "Do you have a woman in your life?" I asked.

“No, Lady Astin, for a man in my job, the most important person for me has to be who I’m protecting. It’s hard to take a bullet for someone when you know you have someone waiting at home,” he answered.

Nodding, I patted him on the arm. “You’re a good man, Ralph, don’t ever change. It’s nice to know I have someone like you to watch my back who doesn’t see me as a conquest or something to control.”

“It’s day four, give yourself a break. All of this is as new for them as it is for you,” Boykov reminded me. “Just keep being you, and they will see how fully committed and capable you are to running the Caprioni Family. If that doesn’t do it, then I’ll hold them down while you have a nice chat with them.”

I laughed at that, knowing he was being completely serious, making it all the more wonderful. “Come on, I’ve got a mayor to train and a disapproving father to manage before this meeting is over.”

When I re-entered Daddy’s office, I noticed that Melony was gone, and Grant seemed a little worried as the mayor spoke excitedly.

“It’s brilliant, isn’t it? Just think with the money you help invest, you’ll be assisting in the future of others as well,” Wilson explained, clearly telling Father all about the plan I came up with for him. “Allow me a week to get you new numbers and an action plan to put in place for this.”

“You thought of all of this in just the matter of minutes you were out of the room?” Father questioned, an amused smile on

his face until his gaze landed on me. Then his brow slammed together as he took in my appearance, and just as quickly, he cleared his expression so no one else noticed. “Did you hear, dearest daughter, the mayor seems to have been inspired to make the most out of his time in office?”

Walking over to him, I perched on the armrest of his chair and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Goodness, I step out for a moment, and so much has happened. Maybe I’m not needed at these meetings. It seems you handled them without me.”

“No,” Mayor Wilson snapped, then cleared his throat, placing a smile back on his face. “I believe we’ll need a woman’s view on this project. You understand issues I never could, and it would be invaluable to me if I could have your assistance in this endeavor.”

“If you truly feel like I’ll be an asset, then I’d be happy to help. Just let us know how the Caprioni Family can support you,” I answered, giving him a professional smile.

The bastard better not pull some shit in front of my father, or I would have to take him down far sooner than I’d like.

“Thank you, Astin. I value all you and your father have done for me. Speaking of it would be wrong of me to waste time when I have much to do. We’ll meet again next Tuesday, and I’ll have everything you could possibly need to feel confident in what I’ll be doing with the money you’re willing to invest in this city,” Mayor Wilson said, shoving to his feet and walking up to my father offering his hand. “I won’t disappoint you, sir.”

“See that you don’t, or you’ll find out how it’s far better to have me as a friend than an enemy,” Father commented, shaking his hand.

Wilson grasped my hand in both of his, looking deeply into my eyes as he kissed the back of it. “Until we meet again, Astin. I pray it won’t be too long.”

“A week will be over in the blink of an eye,” I offered, looking up at him through my lashes. “Until then, I wish you the best on this new plan. It could make you a hero to the people, including me.”

Part of me wanted to gag on the words I was saying, but this was how you got them hooked on the line to the point they didn’t want to be free of it. Knowing I had the mayor wrapped around my finger would come in handy in more ways than I needed right now, but that was how you stay on top. Always plan for the future and the unforeseen problems you might run into.

The two men left, and I rose from my seat to give Father some room, knowing he was going to have some choice words to say to me.

“Daughter,” he growled out the word. “What in the world has happened to the shirt you were wearing earlier.”

Running a hand through my hair, I let out a frustrated breath. “Daddy, please don’t make a big deal out of this. Something needed to be done, so I went to make a call to Ryker when he cornered me.”

“That tells me *nothing*, Astin,” Father snapped. “You could have had that man crying on the ground in a second. You *let* him make advances he never should have felt free to make.”

I whipped around to face my father. “You’re goddamn right. I let him cop a feel. Is that what you want to know? That I used my womanly wiles to get what I wanted? That’s what we do in this business. If I want something, I’ll do whatever it takes to get it. We needed him to change his mind and get the fuck away from our ports. The person behind that idea was the bitch, and she’d have been trouble for us, so I got what I wanted and cut off the dead weight.”

Father shot to his feet, his face turning red with his rage as he glared at me. “I didn’t raise you to be a whore.”

“No, you raised me to be a queen, to stand above all others,” I shot back.

“Do you think I just bent over and let him take what he wanted from me? That I’m just a woman in the mafia, so what does it matter? Why the fuck does everyone assume that I’d just fuck anyone I needed to control? Yes, I use my body as a tool, just like I was taught by the men you sent, daddy dearest. You know what I won’t do?” I pressed, stepping up to be toe to toe with my father. “I won’t give away my self-respect. Why? Because at the end of the day, I have to look myself in the mirror. If I can’t justify everything I do to myself, then this will be over before it starts. If I can’t stand behind my choices, no one else will.”

Father seemed to deflate at my words and sank back into his chair, looking pale. Instantly, I was at the door, yanking it open. “Mrs. Laningham,” I called.

The woman appeared, her face looking concerned and stepped into the office the second I waved her in. Seeing my father, she hurried to his desk and grabbed a bottle of pills and a water bottle from the refrigerator.

“Here, sir,” she said, handing him two pills. “Drink the water slowly so you don’t choke on it. Astin, would you grab the blood pressure cuff out of my desk? It’s in the bottom drawer on the left hand side.”

Doing as she asked, I cussed myself out knowing better than to upset him like that. I’d done my own research on his condition, knowing he’d never be truly honest with me about how he was feeling or how severe this condition was. Snatching up the cuff, I returned to find him with his suit jacket off and tie loosened. Mrs. Laningham took the cuff and placed it on him, hitting the button to start the machine as she also took his pulse the old-fashioned way.

“Pulse looks good,” she commented as the machine beeped. “Ah... it seems your blood pressure is a tad high. The meds should kick in soon and help to stabilize, but you need to rest a moment. I’m pushing back your next meeting by half an hour.”

“No, Astin can take it. Would you please show her to her office?” Daddy instructed.

Mrs. Laningham looked at him, then me, and let out a sigh. “I suppose that’s better. You never get out of that meeting without getting worked up, and you can’t afford to do that right now. Follow me, young lady. I’ll get you the information you need.”

TWENTY-FIVE



Mrs. Laningham showed me to an office located right next to my father's. It had a secretary's desk at the entrance, but no one was working at the station.

"Your father wanted you to hire your own person," Mrs. Laningham explained. "A person's secretary is a deeply personal choice, and it's important to pick the right one who will have your best interest at heart. I do have a list of qualified people within the company I can offer you if you'd like to start there."

"Yes, that would be helpful," I answered, then paused before entering the office. "Who am I meeting with?"

"That would be a Mr. Alejandro Molina. He runs a group of nightclubs we supply security to," Mrs. Laningham informed me. "I'll grab you the file with all the information you should need. The man comes in once a month to complain about how

our security isn't up to his standards. It gets under your father's skin, and he can't keep his cool."

Fuck. Of course, this meeting had to be with one of the men at the poker game the other night. This means my plan to surprise Raymond and Harrison wasn't going to wait. If I was meeting with Alejandro today, I feel like I might have until tomorrow. Most likely, I'd have to settle the situation tonight. Opening the office door, I flicked on the light as I was looking for Jace's phone number. I really needed to put them all on speed dial.

Looking up, I stopped in my tracks, stunned at the office. This wasn't at all what I expected, but it seemed Father had taken the time to have it set up with me in mind. There hadn't been a name on the door, so I assumed it was merely a space they had open. However, no one but a woman would feel comfortable with this décor.

It was all soft creams and warm wood colors that popped with the bright sunlight that shone in from the wall of floor-to-ceiling windows. The desk was modern and sturdy to match the theme of the building as a whole, but the wall behind it was a beautiful mosaic of white, gold, and copper with floating shelves that held trinkets nestled on them. The office chair was cream-colored leather, while the two seats before the desk were a light gray and seemed to look comfortable.

Off to the side was a seating area with a couch and chairs that appeared incredibly inviting. Where Father's office was all about power, mine was pure sophistication and class. Both

held power in their own way, but this was more my style, and I was truly impressed. Sitting behind the desk, I called Jace and set it on speaker phone as I took in my surroundings.

“Lady Astin, how might I be of service?” Jace answered with absolute professionalism.

“Did I catch you at a bad time?” I asked, curious about the change from the man who was constantly offering his *personal* services.

“Not at all, I’m always available when you need something,” he said, making me raise a brow.

“I see. Well, I was reaching out because Boss asked me to take a meeting with Alejandro. Can I assume you know who that is since you invited him to the game on opening night?” I questioned.

“Yes, I’m quite familiar with him. What information did you need?”

There was definitely something going on that caused him to give me this cold shoulder, even over the phone. “It was mentioned to me that he comes to complain about the security we provide him. Would you happen to know what in particular he takes issue with?”

“I’m not as in the know on that as Ryker is, but since you two are fighting, I can see why you’re asking me,” he commented, making me stiffen in my chair. “Alejandro doesn’t like that our men won’t take direction from him or go where he tells them. These are our men, and they’re on loan to the man following

orders we've given them. He's also mentioned a time or two he doesn't appreciate they won't let in some of his high-roller guests if they're underage."

"Interesting, so he wants us to give him men he can be in charge of and boss around. Why doesn't he get his own people?" I asked and tried to ignore his dig, telling me that Ryker had been flapping his gums about what had happened.

"It was part of the lease he made with the boss. He rents space in our buildings for his clubs, and as a perk, he gets security as part of it. Nothing had been negotiated that they would be under his control, so he comes back every so often trying to wear the boss down into giving him control over them," Jace explained.

"Hmm... now I can see why this is a frustrating experience for Father and why he handed it off to me," I said aloud as I processed the information. "Seems I'm going to need to read over the lease unless you think it would be faster to ask Gunner?"

"Knowing the brown-noser, I'm sure he'd be more than happy to have the chance to redeem himself," Jace muttered.

"Good point. Pretty sure he'll answer my phone call this time too," I said with a chuckle.

"Was there anything more you needed from me, Lady Astin?" Jace asked, making it clear he was done talking to me.

"For now no, but just to be clear, I don't appreciate this attitude, and you better lose it by the next time we speak," I

ordered.

There wasn't an answer to that, but I'm not really sure what he could say.

“At the risk of getting my balls stepped on later, I have to ask why?” Jace blurted, clearly unable to keep his thoughts to himself. “If you needed to get your rocks off, I've made it clear that I'm more than happy to help you out with no strings attached. Allowing yourself to be so vulnerable with someone like the mayor is a huge risk. Any one of your lieutenants would jump at the chance while offering discretion.”

“Yes, this discretion you speak of is being demonstrated as we speak. What, did Ryker send you all a group text to let you know what happened with the mayor?” I demanded.

“Astin, Ryker's not the one who's been spreading it around,” Jace corrected. “The mayor's former aide, Melony, had been blasting you all over social media that she got fired because of you. She goes on to mention how disgusting it was that you fucked him in the women's bathroom, screaming so loud that everyone could hear you. As for the other part, I just assumed you and Ryker fought about it because it's Ryker, and he loses his shit when it comes to anything concerning you.”

Motherfucker, how did I not consider that? Of course, Melony wouldn't take this lying down. She'd be pissed her meal ticket to fame just booted her for me. Son of a bitch.

“Look, I don't have time to hash shit out with Ryker, but could you please reach out to him and make sure he's doing whatever needs to be done to bury this?” I asked, dropping my

head into my hands. “Also, just so we’re clear, I didn’t sleep with him. The one who was moaning like a dying cow was the mayor as I wanked him off. He’s the only one who got fucked, and that’s the last time I’m going to explain myself to any of you. Let’s not forget that I’m the fucking underboss here.”

The office door opened, and Mrs. Laningham entered with a file and put it on my desk. “He’ll be here in about ten minutes. I’ll show him in when he arrives, if you’re okay with that?”

“Yes, thank you,” I answered gratefully.

“I got you covered, Astin. Deal with Alejandro, and I’ll deal with Ryker. Do you want me to join you for the meeting at the High Heel?” Jace questioned, sounding more like his normal self. “Normally, I’d say have Ryker there, but I’m not sure that’s the best idea right now.”

“Do I need more backup than Boykov and his men?” I asked. “I was under the impression this was before club hours, and we were meeting two professionals.”

“While Braxton believes he has a handle on all of his people he places with high-profile clients, I’m not so blinded. If either of these two is fucking us over behind our backs, it needs to be dealt with right away,” Jace warned.

I thought about it for a moment, then came to a decision. “Tell Ryker he better be there as my head of security for the Caprioni Family, or he’s useless to me, and I’ll put you in charge.”

“Ah...” Jace started, his voice full of panic. “Can I add that last bit if he doesn’t pull his head out of his ass? I’d really like to live through this day.”

“You understand the stakes. Do what’s needed so he does his goddamn job and stops acting like a jealous boyfriend. I need to call Gunner before he shows, so text me Ryker’s answer when you have it,” I stated, disconnected the call, and immediately called Gunner.

“Lady Astin,” he answered after the first ring.

I tried not to giggle at how excited he sounded that I was calling him. “Hey, Gunny, I need your help with something.”

“Anything, just name it. I’m always available to help however I can,” he cut in.

Waiting just to be sure he didn’t need to say anything else, I then started in on my request. “I’m meeting with Alejandro Molina, and I need to know the specifics of his lease agreement. More importantly, everything that has to do with security.”

“Certainly. Do you want me to send the entire contract and highlight the parts you need? Or just send those sections pertaining to security?” Gunner asked.

“No, send it all to me. I probably won’t be able to go over it in the next five minutes, but I’ll have it in case he challenges something. Oh, I’m at the corporate office and don’t have my tablet,” I murmured as I realized this fact.

“That’s no problem. It’s all a secure network you can log into on any of the coded tablets. I helped to make sure that the office was equipped with everything the other day, so there should be a device in the top drawer to your left. If not, let me know, and I’ll get one of my people to bring mine over,” Gunner shared.

I tugged open the drawer, and sure enough, there was a tablet. “Got it. So I just put in the code like I do for my tablet at home?”

“Yup.”

“Awesome, send that over as soon as you have it, and I’ll just wing it until then,” I responded.

“It’s pretty straightforward. He didn’t want to add security to his budget so we offered to include it in the rent,” Gunner explained.

“Okay, what if he wanted to hire his own people, could he do that?” I inquired.

“Certainly, we’d just need to input their information into the security database so they can be given a user ID and login code like our people do.”

Is that what Alejandro was fussed about? He wanted access to our systems, but our people were too loyal to allow him to use it to his advantage. Why?

“Astin?” Gunner called in a louder voice. “You still there?”

“Sorry, I missed that last part. Run it by me one more time,” I said, rubbing a hand over my face.

“If Mr. Molina wanted his own security free of using our system, he’d need to be moved to a different building. All the ones he picked have the more advanced security at his request, something about holding large amounts of cash in the building for poker games for some of his clients. I’m not sure what deal they made regarding that, but it was one of the items Jace commented on changing for future leases with Alejandro if he continued to expand,” Gunner relayed.

Great, just great. Now it’s not only Harvey we have to deal with, it’s Alejandro too, trying to make a move on our turf.

“Thanks for all the info. I’ll text you if I have any more questions,” I said, knowing I needed to get off the phone and at least glance over the file that was handed to me.

“Don’t hesitate to ask,” Gunner assured me before he hung up.

Grabbing the file, I flipped it open and found notes from all the previous meetings. Daddy hadn’t done much except make some changes to the rules security needed to follow. He ensured there was a list of all people who were to be let in no matter what and people who were to be kept out. It seems the man in charge of these men was an underling to Ryker, and it might be smart of me to have a chat with him to get his view. Alejandro was only going to give us part of the story—the one that made it sound important to change things.

A knock sounded. I looked up to see the office door open, and Mrs. Laningham escorted Alejandro in. “Let me know if there’s anything you need, Ms. Astin,” she said before leaving.

“What’s the meaning of this? I was supposed to talk to Colmazio Caprioni, not a whore who’s pretending to be someone important. If he doesn’t want to speak to me, then I want to hear it from his own lips,” Alejandro blustered.

“I suppose I deserve that after our first introduction but allow me to reintroduce myself.” Rising from my desk, I walked up to the man and held out my hand. “Hello, I’m Astin Caprioni, Colmazio’s daughter and heir to his entire estate. He had something come up and didn’t want to waste your valuable time, so he asked if I could take the meeting instead.”

Alejandro looked at me dubiously but reached out to shake my hand. “You’re not Angelica?”

“No, I’m not. Forgive my deception, but I really wanted to play a few rounds of poker and didn’t think you would give me a fair game if you knew who I really was,” I offered as an explanation. “Please sit.”

He hesitated a moment then took a seat in one of the chairs in my seating area, and I took the one across from him. “Do you even know who I am?”

“Of course, Mr. Molina, you own a series of nightclubs and rent space in our buildings. I had to refresh myself on which ones and what agreements were made in your lease, but I’m up to speed,” I shared with a smile, gesturing to the file and tablet on my lap. “Now, how can I assist you today?”

“It’s about the security you’ve provided,” Alejandro started.

Cutting him off before he could get any further, I flipped open the file and looked over the notes again. “Are they not following the rules and guidelines you’ve set up? I see we have a list of people who are to be let in or kept out. The supervisor informs you on all altercations that happen as well as keeping our people in the loop. You’re in control of setting hours, approve all staffing choices, and can even request overtime if there’s a special event. To be honest, I’d say you’re given a much better deal than all our other tenants who have security included in their lease, not to mention you are in one of the most secure buildings.”

The man in front of me fidgeted as if he hadn’t expected me to be *so* well informed. “Yes, well, my biggest problem is they aren’t my people. They’re Caprioni people who babysit my interests at the behest of your father.”

Turning to the tablet, I opened it to our secure network and found the lease agreement with links for me to click on that would take me to the places Gunner highlighted. I could kiss that man right now for making this so easy. “I just want to double-check something for you. Ah, yes. So according to the agreement, you’re allowed to discontinue our services and hire your own people. They would need to be approved by our people since we’ll add them to the security system in each building, but there’s nothing stopping you from having your own people.”

“If I do that, is my rent going to be less?” he questioned.

“No, because you’re one of our most valued tenants and friends to my father, he has given you a fair deal. Those who have this service are charged an additional five thousand a month since we have to pay the men. You are only being charged for the space and the surcharge for the top-of-the-line security system. If you wanted to step down to one of our other buildings that doesn’t have that level of security, it would drop your rent considerably,” I explained. “I might add that we don’t even have that kind of security for our gambling facilities. Is there something special about yours that requires it?”

Alejandro grunted. “I doubt it’s wise for you to say something like that so casually. It might give the impression you’re easily robbed.”

“Oh, I didn’t say we were vulnerable because of it. They’re quite well protected. It’s just not done with a flashy system,” I corrected. “Plus, I know better than to let anything slip which could endanger my family’s business.”

He frowned at my answer, not at all understanding what I was saying, but that was fine because he didn’t need to. “Now, getting back to the matter at hand with your security. Other than them not being people you hired personally, is there something that needs to be addressed?”

“If I decide to bring in my own people, you still need to do the background check and fingerprinting, correct?” he inquired.

“Yes, because of the security system in place, they must have their fingerprints registered for the scanners,” I answered

simply, not wanting to give more away than I needed to.

“Hmph, I still don’t like that you have to monitor my people,” he grumbled.

“That’s a simple fix in switching buildings,” I countered. “You only have three clubs, and it’s been going around that they haven’t been doing as well as you’d like. It might benefit you to change your venue and do a relaunch while cutting your cost considerably. I’d even be willing to let Braxton and his team assist you if you’d like.”

I was playing a dangerous game pushing him so hard, but I needed to know if taking a look at his clubs might need to be happening in the near future.

Alejandro’s brow creased as he glared at me. “My clubs are doing just fine. They’re my main source of business, more of a hobby, and I won’t downscale them just so you can get someone bigger and better into the space.”

“Goodness, in no way did I mean to make you think all that,” I said with wide, surprised eyes. “I’m simply looking out for one of our best clients and tenants. Those spaces are hard for us to fill because of their cost. I was simply offering an alternative that might help you in more ways, but if you wish to continue on there, so be it. As for the security, you can hire your own, put them in the system, or continue with what you have and let me know if there’s something I can do to improve the situation.”

“It’s clear you’re his daughter with how stubborn and thick-headed you both are. It’s a wonder anyone does business with

your family seeing as you're utterly unreasonable in your terms. No one else would dare to conduct business like this," Alejandro announced, shaking a finger at me.

I leaned back in my chair and set aside the file and tablet before crossing my leg over the other and settled my hands in my lap, appearing completely relaxed. "Then feel free to take your business elsewhere."

Alejandro looked like he might have a stroke with the shock on his face. "What?"

"Look, if you're not happy with the deal you made with us, then I give you the freedom to find something better," I stated. "If you can find someone who's willing to take a monthly meeting to hear you complain about something we should be charging you for, then by all means do so. I have better things to do with my day than waste my time listening to you. Those are *my* people who are graciously on loan to you. I pay their salary, and you're damn right I'm in charge of them, so if you don't like it, then find better."

"I doubt your father will feel the same way when I leave with not only my nightclubs but canceling all the contracts I have with your family," he snapped back, shoving out of his chair angrily.

"You most certainly can do so if you wish, but make sure you have your lawyers on speed dial since we'll be suing you for breach of contract. I was going to be nice about it and let you move your clubs without any fuss, but you had to go and call my bluff. If you pull everything you have going with us, it will

cost you millions if not billions in contracts and legal fees,” I informed him. “The ball is in your court, Mr. Molina, but if you try to ruin my family, make no mistake, I *will* destroy you.”

The older man paused in his hasty exit and looked back at me. “You dare to threaten me, *girl*?”

I let out a sigh, stood, and walked over to him. “First, I’d like to make it abundantly clear that wasn’t a threat, it was a promise. You fuck with my family over something so insufferably insignificant, I’ll make it my sole mission to demolish everything you’ve built to the point you’ll never recover. Secondly, I’m a grown-ass woman, and I’ll be treated with respect befitting the underboss of the Caprioni Family. Have I made myself clear?”

Alejandro clenched his jaw and balled his hands, but he nodded.

“I’m sorry I didn’t hear that,” I commented, cupping my hand behind my ear.

“Understood, Ms. Caprioni,” he bit out.

“Wonderful. If you have any further questions regarding security, let our office know. We’d be happy to set up a phone call to address these concerns going forward,” I informed him with a bright smile. “I hope you have a wonderful rest of your day.”

He looked like he was going to argue with me but instead spun on his heel and left my office without another word.

TWENTY-SIX



A moment later, Mrs. Laningham entered, looking surprised. “That was fast. Did everything get worked out all right?”

“Yes, I believe for the first time, Mr. Molina is understanding matters more clearly,” I shared, giving her a wink.

She chuckled and shook her head. “You have much of your father in you, don’t you? The spitting image of your mother, but that mind of yours is all Colmazio, that’s for damn sure.” Her smile turned all business as she handed me a stack of files and a list of names clipped to the top. “I wanted to give you these to look over when you have a chance. They all work with the company so they’re already vetted, but if you don’t see anyone who catches your eye, then feel free to conduct a search of your own.”

“Thank you truly, this will be such a help.” As I followed her out of the office, I glanced at my watch. “I need to run to

another meeting with Braxton. Would you let Daddy know if he needs me just to call?”

“Certainly, dear, now go on. It’s good for that stubborn man to have you to lighten the load around here,” she answered, patting my arm reassuringly.

I headed down the hall with my stack of employee records then paused and looked back for Boykov. The man was already on my heels, having appeared out of thin air which was impressive for someone his size. “How do you do that?”

“Lots of practice and good shoes,” he answered instantly.

A bark of laughter caught me off guard as I continued toward the elevator. “Why can’t the others be more like you? Seriously, I feel like every other man who works for me is wound so tight they can’t take a fucking joke,” I commented as the doors to the elevator closed, and Boykov used his pass to unlock the controls and take us to the parking garage.

“Please don’t take offense when I say this because I do think you’re a lovely lady.” He started making me incredibly curious as to what was going to follow. “The difference is that I don’t want anything more from you than friendship. On the other hand, those lieutenants of yours are a mixed bag of in love with you, in lust with you, and then there’s the one whose soul you hold in the palm of your hand.”

Stunned, I blinked at him for a few moments, trying to wrap my head around what he’d just said. “You’re pulling my leg, right? I know what you mean about the whole lust thing. If Jace and Braxton tried any harder, they would be laying in my

bed buck-ass naked. I'm assuming you're talking about Ryker when you mentioned holding his soul, but damn the man has an odd way of showing he fucking cares. Everything that comes out of his mouth is a disaster."

"There was only one woman I ever loved, and when I thought I was losing her, I acted like an idiot. Said all the wrong things and eventually pushed her away just like I feared I would. Thing was, she didn't feel the same about me, and you can't force someone to love you. I'd have fought for us, but if she wasn't going to join in the fight, there was absolutely no point," Boykov shared.

"So is that when you swore off relationships?" I asked. "Feel free to tell me to fuck off if it's too personal."

"No, I've always had that rule, but she made me break it. Then I find out it was purely lust on her side, and she was already promised to someone as the old families do. It was her last chance at living life before she was forced to settle down, becoming a dutiful housewife," Boykov answered with a shrug. "Life lessons we learn the hard way."

"Yeah, that I understand," I muttered as we exited the elevator to find a car waiting for us.

Boykov opened the door for me, and I slipped in and was surprised to find Braxton already in there, grinning at me. Boykov took the front seat, and we were off to the High Heel.

"Um... hi," I greeted once I got over my shock.

“I figured it would be easier to just pick you up, giving you a chance to pull yourself together before we arrive,” he explained, offering up the clothing.

He'd grabbed a black silky tank top for me. I flicked my gaze forward to the front of the car but a screen was already going up to separate us, giving me some privacy. Waiting a moment for it to go up all the way, I undid my jacket and placed it over my lap. I quickly put my hair up, getting tired of it being down, but I froze as a finger caressed the swell of my breast.

“So it's true,” Braxton whispered.

I grabbed his hand and looked him in the eye. “Don't.”

He shook his head. “Out of all of us, I have zero ground to stand on. I'm the fuck boy, remember? It's odd, though. I'm not sure why seeing another man's mark on your body makes me feel like stabbing the mayor in the dick. Fuck, even when Jace comes back with scratches or other signs that he's been with someone, it's no big deal.” He paused, searching my face as if he looked hard enough he'd find the answer he was looking for. “Why? Why is it different? We've never even been together? You don't owe me anything, and we aren't beholden to each other in any way. In fact, you're my boss. You, by right, should be able to do whatever the fuck you want.”

As he talked, my grip on him loosened, and he pulled his hand out of my grasp to let them ghost along my jaw. Then they trailed down my neck, over my collarbone, to once more dance over the swell of my breast where the faint mark of a

hickey showed. My breath started to quicken at his touch, my mind sending me flashes of what we did on the dance floor—the feel of his lips on mine, his hands caressing my nipples as he pressed me against Jace.

Before I knew what I was doing, I shoved until he was flat on his back with me on top of him, devouring his mouth. He opened for me, allowing me to explore him with a hum of pleasure. His hands stroked up my back until he came to my bra, where he paused almost as if asking permission. When I didn't stop him, he flicked open the hooks and brought his hands to cup my breasts. Nimble fingers massaged them, swirling around my nipples, encouraging them into hard peaks.

Breaking our kiss, he latched onto the one with the mark, his tongue flicking over my sensitive flesh, making me moan. The sound cut off as I remembered where we were, and there were two people in front. I'd already had my sexuality used against me once today, I wasn't going to allow it again. Biting my lip, I felt my nails dig into the leather as Braxton undid my pants and slipped his hand between my legs.

“Let me please you, Mistress,” Braxton requested as he left his hand lingering there without making contact. “Allow me to wash the memory of that moment from your body and mind. You did what you had to, but I refuse to let this beautiful body be marked by a man who isn't worthy of you.”

Looking down at him, I saw the need for my permission staring back at me. If I said no, he'd stop, but did I want him

to?

“Do you think you’re worthy of me?” I asked.

“No one is worthy of a queen. There are only those she permits the privilege of her body to,” Braxton answered. “Tell me what you need, and I’ll serve you, my queen. Give me the honor of you being my ruler. This humble servant only wants to serve however his queen desires.”

Holy shit, Braxton was a sub. Not just any sub, but from what he was saying, a service submissive who wanted nothing but to make my life easier.

“What does Jace call you?” I whispered, rubbing my nose along his in a gentle caress.

“I’m his pup... playful, full of energy, and sometimes in need of discipline,” he answered. “That’s not what I want between us, though.”

“Tell your Mistress what you want, and I’ll see if you’re worthy of that role,” I ordered.

“To be yours to use as you wish. I want to serve, obey, and be owned by you, Mistress,” Braxton pleaded. “Never have I wanted to be someone’s, but the moment I saw this mark on you, I hated it. No one but those the queen allows should ever take such liberties.”

“What if I told you I allowed this to get what I wanted?” I countered.

“That’s not the same as wanting it. I imagine you didn’t feel good about what happened even if it got you what you

wanted,” Braxton pointed out.

I frowned. “Are you questioning my methods?”

Braxton shook his head. “Never, Mistress, what you choose to do with your body is your choice. What I want is to be the person you use to remove the stain they leave behind, to erase the experience from your body with something you own and can trust will never betray you. Whatever happens between us or whoever you bring into our moments will *never* be spoken of out of my mouth. I’ll serve and protect you, my queen. That’s what I want.”

I pulled his hand from my pants and sat back to consider what he was asking. “Do you want this to be a full-time dynamic?”

Braxton grinned at me. “I think that ship has sailed the moment you held a knife to my throat. I’d serve you no matter what you offer me in return as long as you allow me to still have Jace to meet my needs.”

Fixing my bra, I slipped the tank top on and tucked it into my pants as Braxton righted himself, clearly understanding things were not progressing. “I think this is a conversation we need to have with Jace. He’s been your partner longer, and I’m not going to create problems within the small circle of people I need to rely on.”

“As my Mistress says, I’ll follow,” Braxton agreed.

Reaching over, I grabbed his chin, forcing him to look at me. “No matter what, I still need you to be you. What caught my interest in the first place is the sassy, honest, and playful part

of you. I don't want a slave, that's never something that will win me over."

Braxton grinned. "I knew choosing you would be the right move."

"So just like that, you could give up being a manwhore, letting the wind take you wherever your cock fancies?" I asked, dropping my hand. "You have Jace, why look for more?"

He shrugged and looked out the window. "He never asked, but I'm not sure I'd have listened either. Jace feeds part of what I need, but there was always something else I kept looking for. Listen to me sounding like a fucking idiot and probably scaring the shit out of you with this emotional crap," he muttered, looking back at me. "You're just like me. We don't do anything permanent or attached, that's when it becomes too serious. I really can't explain it, Astin. I fucking wish I could because it would make me feel better, but I can't. The second I saw that mark on you, I knew I didn't like it one bit and had to shoot my shot."

He let out a sigh and rubbed his face with both hands. "Just so we're clear, if you say no, I won't hold it against you. Fuck, I'm not sure what I was thinking coming at you like that out of the blue. Just forget I even said any of that, and I won't bring it up again."

Everything in me wanted to comfort Braxton and tell him it was fine, but I think I was reeling from it as much as he was. We had no business starting a dynamic like that, we hardly knew each other. Not to mention there was the whole Jace

matter, and it was clear to me those two didn't understand the relationship they were already in. My brain was buzzing with all the thoughts racing through it about what had happened and how I wanted to say yes to him. Why the hell had things gotten so complicated? Fuck, maybe I did just need to get laid. Then I might be able to stop whatever was happening to draw all this crazy amount of attraction going on between most of the guys and me.

"We're here," Braxton said, pulling me out of my thoughts.

TWENTY-SEVEN



The building was older, historic-looking, not at all what you think of when you say strip club. It wasn't on the side of the highway in a dumpy old building with no windows, making you question if you really wanted to go inside. No, this palace was classy with a beautifully hand-carved and painted sign with the name written on it. Braxton led the way through the double doors into a lobby area with a ticket counter, coat check, and restrooms. There was another set of double doors that brought you into the interior of the strip club.

Everything was luscious red or deep glossy black, making the whole place feel rather decadent. Booths were along either wall with chairs and small cocktail tables closer to the long stage that went down the middle of the space. Nothing in here felt cheap or dirty—this was a place you went with business guests or if you were famous. This wasn't the spot for a rowdy bachelor party or college students blowing off some steam.

“Damn, Braxton, this is incredible,” I shared as I took it all in.
“Seriously, this is fucking impressive.”

“Why, thank you, m’lady,” Braxton said with a bow. “If you’ll follow me, I’ll show you the back office and the locker room for the girls. I have Ms. Cherry coming in to meet with you first, then Alfie will come in an hour later.”

“What did you tell them this meeting was for?” I asked.

“Told them the new underboss wanted to interview some of our top earners to check up on my work,” he informed me.
“They love being able to give their opinion on just about everything, so I know they’ll show up.”

“You were worried they wouldn’t?”

“Nah, I just try to make it their choice as much as possible. Some didn’t come into this of their own free will, so even if it is an order, I like to make it sound like they have a choice in the matter,” Braxton explained.

He brought me back to the front entrance and through a door in the coat check room that led to a shadowed hall. Flipping on the switch, the hall lit up, and we made our way into the back of the club with a store room, two offices, and the entrance to the locker room, where an older woman was bustling about folding towels and getting items ready.

“Hey, Desire, how are you?” Braxton greeted.

“Oh, hello, darling, doing just lovely. Did you bring a new recruit with you? She seems a little fancy to be doing a job like this,” she murmured under her breath as Braxton hugged her.

He laughed and gestured to me. “Allow me to introduce Astin Caprioni, the new underboss to the Caprioni Family.”

Desire dropped to her knees and held her hands up like she was praying. “Please forgive me, ma’am. I had no idea nor did I mean any disrespect.”

I looked wide-eyed at Braxton, but he just shrugged, so I kneeled by the woman. “It’s quite all right. You had no idea, and to be honest with you, in your shoes, I’d also assume any woman coming here was looking to work. Please get off the floor... there’s no need for this.” Helping the woman to her feet, I gave her a soft smile. “There, that’s better. Now, do you mind sharing with me what brought about that reaction to meeting me?”

“I’m not sure I should say,” she commented, chewing on her bottom lip. “See, I really love this job looking after these girls, and they’re like my own children since I couldn’t have any.”

“Would it help if I promise I won’t fire you as long as you answer my question?” I offered.

She looked between me and Braxton who nodded in encouragement. “My brother is Big Time, the leader of the Red Tigers.”

“Ah...” I said, now understanding the full picture. “Let me just state that your brother put himself in the position to be scolded by me because of his big mouth. I warned him to watch how he spoke to me, but he chose not to listen. The actions of your brother have nothing to do with you.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I truly appreciate that. Most wouldn’t act so kindly,” she pointed out.

“Yes, well, don’t let that get spread around too much,” I joked with a wink. “Now I assume you’re the den mom for the club?”

“Yes, ma’am, I’ve been working with this club for about ten years now. Seen girls come and go, but I make sure they’re looked after and have what they need. I’m also in charge of keeping an eye out for any rough play with the customers the girls won’t speak up about,” Desire explained with pride in her voice.

I reached out and gave her a reassuring squeeze on her shoulder. “Thank you for being there for them. We ladies need to look out for each other. It was a pleasure to meet you, but I do have a meeting I have to attend.”

“Of course, just holler if there’s anything you need,” she assured me.

Stepping out of the locker room, Braxton unlocked one of the offices and flipped on the lights. The office itself was pretty straightforward, which made sense since he moved between all of them, and we had a manager running the day-to-day.

“Where’s the rest of the staff?” I asked.

“The club doesn’t open until five, so they come in around two or three. I figured having one set for noon and one at one o’clock would give us the space to ask what questions we needed to. You wanted to keep this low profile, so this will

ensure that. Cherry Pie dances out of this club, but Alfie works at the Tropical Martini, an all-male club,” Braxton informed me as he gathered a few items from the office. “I had Alfie’s employee file sent over for you to look at as well as Cherry’s.”

I could tell that Brax was trying hard to act like nothing had happened between us, so when I grabbed his arm, he flinched. “Look at me,” I said softly. When he didn’t, I let my hand trail down until I gripped his in mine. “Please.”

That seemed to do the trick, and I could see so many emotions swirling in them that I couldn’t even begin to decipher. I leaned in and kissed him, letting my lips melt against his, needing to reassure him. He felt so lost, and I hated that for him. It took a moment, but he returned my kiss, letting his other hand wrap gently around the back of my neck, his thumb caressing my cheek. I pulled back and rested my forehead against his just letting us be for a moment.

“Give me a little time, Brax,” I murmured. “This isn’t a choice either of us should make lightly. I’ve had my heart broken, and I won’t do that to someone else if I can avoid it. So please, will you allow me time?”

“My queen, I’ll wait for as long as you need me to if that is your request. If you tell me there’s a chance, then that’s all I need right now,” he answered, pressing a chaste kiss to my lips before stepping back and running his knuckles along my jaw. “No matter what you choose, we’ll be fine. I’ll make sure of it.”

I nodded and jumped as a knock sounded on the door before Ryker stepped into the office. Braxton was still very much in my personal space, and it was clear that something had happened between us, making Ryker pause. “Sorry, I should have waited for an answer before entering.”

Braxton started to step away, but I didn’t let go of his hand, bringing him to a halt. “You’re fine. Thank you for making the time to join us.”

“While Jace phrased it as a request, I knew it wasn’t,” Ryker said as he slipped his hand into his pockets. “Although I’m not sure why exactly I am needed here, Jace was more than happy to take my place.”

“Jace isn’t the head of security,” I stated. “If there’s a problem and one of these employees has been trading secrets for money or whatever else it might be, I need repercussions to be swift. I, of course, can do them myself, but I feel for the business as a whole if they know that when I have you with me, sentencing will be swift.”

“I see. So you play judge and jury while I’m the executioner,” Ryker concluded.

I gave him a bright smile. “Exactly.”

Releasing Braxton’s hand, I moved behind him to sit at the desk and look over the two files he provided me. “Oh, I also need to set up a meeting with Harrison and Raymond tonight. Somewhere public, dinner, drink, something to that effect since I’m sure with how the meeting with Alejandro ended, he won’t keep my identity a secret for long.”

“I can make that happen,” Braxton offered. “What time do you want the meeting?”

Looking up from the files, I ran through the rest of my day and what needed to happen before I dropped a bomb in their laps. “Let’s say eight.”

“All right, I’ll step out and make a few calls if that’s okay?” he asked, looking right at me for confirmation. I smiled and nodded then went back to the files.

Cherry Pie, whose real name was Amanda Smith, was one of the people who chose this life. She started working for us five years ago right after she turned eighteen. Once she got her feet under her, she became a fan favorite to many but quickly sought out those who would make her the real money. Cherry didn’t start taking private clients until two years ago, but the woman charges two hundred and fifty dollars an hour.

Alfie’s story wasn’t quite so simple. He’d been forced into working to pay off his father’s gambling debt at the age of sixteen, working in the clubs as a busboy and barback. Once he hit the legal age, he started his dancing and immediately began taking clients. He paid off what was owed by the time he turned nineteen with what he was pulling in. Now twenty-three, he was charging three hundred and would only take on three clients at a time while still dancing at the Tropical Martini.

Out of the two of them, my thought on who was spilling secrets was Cherry. She was power hungry, and there were many complaints from other girls how she ruined outfits or

broke heels so they couldn't dance. She'd even stolen a client or two from others. Cherry was a lioness out hunting for herself, and she wasn't going to let anyone steal her limelight.

"Astin," Ryker interrupted after I'd had the chance to read over everything.

"Yes?" I asked, not looking up as I made a few notes on a scratch pad.

"Tin-Tin, am I ever going to do this right?" he asked, sadness coating his words. "Every time I think there's a chance for us to at least be friends again, I fuck it up."

Setting the pen down, I met his gaze. "Is that what you're trying to do, be friends?"

"Are you telling me that there's a chance for more than that?" he questioned, his brows raised in surprise.

Not answering right away, I studied my once best friend's face. He was the first man I'd loved, my first of everything if I were being honest. I'd loved to tease him, leading other guys on just to ruffle his feathers and make him stake his claim by my side. Then, in a blink, everything changed. Now knowing what Daddy told me about giving him an order not to talk to me made sense why he didn't. Yet it also bothered me he wouldn't ensure I knew what was going on instead of trusting Daddy to tell me.

"He never told me," I said. "Daddy let me believe you abandoned me because he was jealous you got so much more time with me."

“What?” Ryker blurted.

“I assume you were expecting my father to tell me he recruited you and told you not to speak to me anymore. He never did,” I explained further.

Ryker let out a growl and dropped into one of the chairs opposite me. “He was jealous?”

“You got to spend every day with me until I was eighteen. That’s far more than he ever got, and he apparently decided your punishment was cutting off communication and me being pissed at you,” I continued.

“None of this makes sense,” Ryker muttered. “He knows how I feel about you, and it was the one reason he picked me to be the head of security. The boss was counting on my love for you to push me to do whatever it takes to keep you safe.”

“Did you just say you love me?” I blurted.

As if the universe was against us, Braxton entered the office with a stunning woman behind him. Cherry was luscious—I’m not sure there’s another way to describe her. She wasn’t stick skinny with blonde hair, but instead, she was curvy, bronze-skinned, with thick curly brunette hair and chocolate-brown eyes. Her lips had the perfect pout, her makeup was done tastefully, and she wore simple skinny jeans and a crop top.

Ryker stood and moved to stand behind me, the picture of the faithful sentry watching over me. I was so tempted to look up at him to see if he was drooling over this woman like so many men have before.

“Lady Astin, this is Cherry Pie,” Braxton introduced. “Cherry, this is Astin Caprioni, the underboss to the Caprioni Family.”

I rose from my seat and reached out to shake her hand. “Thank you so much for coming in early to meet with me. I appreciate it.”

“No, it’s my pleasure. I’m happy to help since the Family has always taken good care of me,” she responded, grasping my hand firmly, a little too firmly. “Braxy said you were looking to interview some of the top earners?”

“Yes, see, the thing is, we are having some trouble with our high-roller clients abusing their privileges, and I wanted to check in with each of you to get your feedback. It’s our job to make sure you’re safe to do your work and that we vet the men before they earn the privilege of time with someone of your caliber,” I explained, laying on her importance thick, knowing that if I played to her ego, she’d sing like a canary.

“Oh my, it’s awful that some people are having trouble. I’m pretty fortunate my clients are some of the best,” she shared. “Who were you having trouble with?”

“Actually, one of them is Harrison,” I said, leaving it at that to see what she’d volunteer.

She gasped, and a hand shot up to cover her mouth as her eyes went wide with shock. “No.”

Shifting, she looked over at Braxton. “She can’t be talking about my Harry, can she?”

“Yes, that’s the reason you’re here, Cherry,” Brax responded, his tone sounding bored. “If there’s something we need to know about him, now is the time to speak up. We have two others he spends time with coming in to talk with us as well.”

Her face clouded over in a mask of rage. “What others?” she demanded. “I’m the only one he sees. He promised me he wasn’t seeing anyone else. I told him that was the rule if he wanted to fuck me without a condom.”

Well, that was fucking stupid of her to believe, but this might just make her tell us what we want to know.

“You’re not the only one he’s done that to, and it was brought to our attention. One of the others also mentioned they were asked to share information with another client of theirs. Has he asked this of you?” I questioned, resting my chin on my hand.

She licked her lips as her eyes shifted over to Ryker then back to me. “No, ma’am, he has not.”

Liar.

“Okay, let’s try that one again,” I said as I gestured for her to rewind. “Before you answer, do you know who he is?” I asked, pointing to Ryker.

“No,” she murmured.

“Okay, Amanda, you need to stop lying to me. You’re not skilled at it in any way, and each time you do, the hole you’re digging is just getting deeper. So let’s stop making this worse for yourself and tell me the truth. If you choose to continue on this path, Ryker is going to get involved, and neither of us

really want that. On the off chance you don't think that's a good enough threat, I'll tell you right now he's the lesser of two evils in this room," I informed her.

Her hands started to shake as she clasped them together on her lap. "Wh... who's the other evil?"

Sitting up, I felt the coldness take over me as I answered, "Me. The evil you don't want to face is me, Amanda. So tell me what I want to know, and we might be able to figure something out where you get to walk out of this room alive. Keep fucking around, and you'll find out just how evil I can be."

Behind her, Braxton had a full body shiver and purposely adjusted himself so it was made clear he wasn't scared of me. The darkness turned him on, and he wasn't afraid to tell me so. I smirked at him, then returned my attention to the quivering victim in front of me.

Would she make the darkness come out to play, or was she smart enough to know that would be her end?

"When I first started out, I'd moonlight at some of Harvey O'Hagan's bars that had amateur nights. Then things here started to take off for me, but Harvey always kept tabs on me. He's tried more than once to bring me over to work at one of his clubs, but he doesn't have the pull the Caprioni do in the city. There has been a time or two that I've been asked to deliver a sealed envelope to Harvey or from Harvey to Harrison," Cherry divulged.

I stood and came to lean against the front of the desk. “Did you ever look at the messages?”

She nodded. “All of them. I wasn’t going to risk everything without knowing what it was about. It was a bunch of random sentences. None of it made sense when you read it altogether.”

“You don’t happen to have one of those letters now, do you?” Ryker asked.

Reaching down for her purse, she pulled out a small manilla envelope. “Harvey gave it to me two days ago. I’m supposed to meet Harry tonight after my shift ends at midnight.”

Plucking the envelope out of her hand, I offered it to Ryker, who opened it. “You won’t be meeting Harry tonight or any night from here on out. I’ll allow you to do your shift tonight, but if you want to continue working here with us, I’d expect a few things to change,” I informed her.

Her bottom lip started to quiver as tears filled her eyes. “I knew it was wrong of me, but Harvey had been so good to help me when I had nothing.”

My hand shot out and grabbed her jaw and squeezed tightly. “If you’d spoken up and asked for our help, we’d have been there for you, Amanda. Instead, you went to our enemy, the one man who’s actively trying to destroy the Caprioni Family and take it for himself. Look in my eyes and tell me, are you loyal to Harvey O’Hagan?”

“N... N... No,” Cherry stammered, but her eyes told me everything I needed to know.

We provided the income for the life she wanted to live, but the man who had her loyalty was Harvey. “I told you not to lie to me,” I whispered. “Now the last words you’ll ever utter will have been a lie. Let’s see how that loyalty works for you when you can no longer speak and your pretty face is scarred.” I leaned closer to whisper in her ear, “You picked the wrong side, Amanda. You made your choice, and now you have to live with it.”

With a gentle kiss on her cheek, I lifted one of my feet and pulled a thin blade I’d installed in all my heels. Leaning back, I lashed out with the blade slicing her face from chin to temple. Then another from her hairline down her nose and across the other cheek. She jerked back, screaming at the pain, knocking over the chair and landing on her back.

“Ryker,” I barked. “I want her tongue removed so she can never spill another secret and drop her off at Harvey’s club. He wanted her so badly, he can have her.”

With a nod, Ryker grabbed the sobbing and bleeding Cherry Pie and dragged her out of the room. Grabbing a few tissues, I wiped off my blade and put it back in my heel. As I stood, Braxton was there, eyes wild with excitement and lust, pressing his pelvis to mine. He took my hand, and I noticed there was blood on it I hadn’t cleaned up yet. Lifting it to his mouth, he flicked out his tongue, licking the blood off my skin.

“Are you a fucking idiot?” I snapped, jerking my hand back. “You have no idea what that bitch could be infested with. She

openly admitted she was having unprotected sex.”

“She had her testing done yesterday,” Braxton countered.

I gave a frustrated growl. “That doesn’t test for bloodborne pathogens.”

“I know she doesn’t have HIV. We run full panels, Mistress. I’d never put you at risk like that,” he rebutted.

Pushing him back, I looked over myself and saw a few splatters on my sleeve, so I removed the jacket, hung it on the back of the office chair, and sat. We had another half an hour until our next meeting, and this hadn’t gone as planned. My phone pinged, so I grabbed it out of my jacket pocket.

Jace: *I’ll be there in five minutes to back you up while Ryker handles things.*

Me: *Sounds good. Braxton and I are in the office.*

“Seems Jace is going to be joining us while Ryker handles Amanda’s punishment personally,” I shared.

“Ah... Ryker wants to do it himself,” Braxton mused out loud as he came to lean against the desk, looking down at me. “You should have made me do it.”

Frowning, I cocked my head. “Why? That’s not your job, it’s his.”

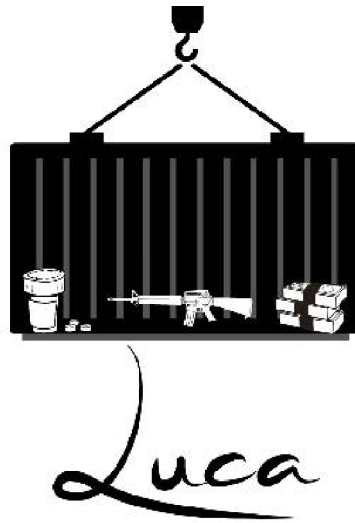
“I’m the one who fucked up and didn’t have a clue she was working with Harvey. Making me do it would be a kind

punishment if I'm being honest," Braxton muttered.

Interestingly enough, I didn't hold him responsible for this fuck up. Cherry was a smart girl and knew exactly what she was doing, never expecting to get caught. I wasn't sure how Braxton would have been able to stumble upon this unless he had a guard on her at all times, and that was unrealistic.

"There's always someone smarter than us out there somewhere. You're in charge of all the girls across all our clubs. There's no way you would have been able to catch her in the act. None of the girls here like her so she wouldn't have told anyone else, leaving no leak. Cherry was a free agent who didn't live in our dorms... her free time was her own. What we need to do is learn from this and figure out how to stop it from happening again," I reasoned. "Let's just hope Alfie doesn't befall the same fate."

TWENTY-EIGHT



The harbor was busy today which was odd for it being so late in the week. I knew we had a bunch of shipments coming in that had been held up by the Coast Guard, making me wonder if that's what happened to all these people too. The Aprian government has been on a power trip trying to control our only access through their waters from overseas. Each year our government had to negotiate new terms, and that time was coming soon, which meant the bastards always tried to find a way to fuck us.

My cell started to vibrate in my pocket, pulling me out of my musings. I glanced at the screen to see it was Ryker. He was supposed to be with Astin, so this couldn't be good.

"Yeah," I answered.

"We've got a major problem. Astin's on top of it, but I need your help. One of Braxton's girls was passing notes in class between Harrison and Harvey. They're coded, so I have no

fucking clue what it says, and you're the best at figuring this stuff out. I'm gonna send you a picture of the note I have, but we need to know what it says before we meet with Harrison and Raymond tonight," Ryker explained as I could hear screaming in the background.

"Send it over, and I'll see what I can do. All our shipments finally cleared customs, so I need to make sure we get it the fuck out of here then to our warehouse and storehouses. It's too much product to trust it to linger here," I warned.

The screaming intensified, making me need to pull the phone away from my ear. "Dude, what's with the squealing pig?"

"Sorry, let me step outside," Ryker commented as the sound diminished. "That would be our leak. Astin charged me with her punishment, and when that's done, we drop her off on Harvey's doorstep."

"I assume she's aware that if she does, it will tell him we know about Harrison," I pointed out.

"Thing is, I don't think she cares," Ryker said with a sigh. "When we meet them tonight, she's pulling out the rug from under them. This is no longer the long game we're going for. It's more of hitting hard and fast to make a lasting impression on all. Personally, I think she wants Harvey to know she's figured out his game."

"Damn, who pissed her the fuck off?" I asked, chuckling.

It seems our mafia princess is finally shaking off the disguise and showing her true colors. If she's reached the point that

starting a war wasn't a concern, Harvey must have really gotten under her skin. The glimpse I got of her darkness that day I asked if she'd really kill us told me everything I needed to know. Everything we are seeing now was her mask, and we all needed to pray to whatever god might be out there she'd never turn that evil on us. If Harvey was her target, this would be a bloodbath of epic proportions that our country hadn't seen since the dark days before the Caprioni Family took leadership.

"To be honest, I think it might be a few people, and this is the straw that broke her," Ryker muttered.

"Meaning you need to be real fucking careful she doesn't turn on you," I said, reading between the lines. "That woman isn't the girl you knew and grew up with. She's a mafia queen born and bred who's going to rule over her kingdom, crushing the bones of her enemy."

"She ordered the woman's tongue be removed after she sliced up her face from a shiv she keeps in her heel. I think that was a clear enough message for me to realize that all on my own, but thanks for lookin' out," Ryker drawled sarcastically. "Braxton sent a message with a time and place for tonight. Apparently, she wants all of us to be there, so they know the full backing of the Caprioni Family is behind this decision."

"Is Boss going to be there?" I asked. "Seems this would be a good chance for him to show the world he stands behind her choice. Harrison has been a long-time friend to Boss, and this is a slap in the fucking face."

“All I know is what Braxton sent in his message. She had another meeting with Harrison’s other hooker that he shares with the mayor,” Ryker answered.

“Speaking of the mayor.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Ryker snapped, which told me he fucked up with her again.

“So that’s why she’s making you do the punishment,” I said with a smirk.

He grunted in response. “I’m not so sure. I think if she didn’t have another meeting, she’d have done it herself. Problem is taking a tongue is messy, bloody work, and it would have ruined her clothes. I bet you money now she’ll make sure to have a change of clothes with her at all times.”

“Send me what you need me to look over, and as soon as I find out anything, I’ll let you know,” I said, seeing one of my men heading for me. “Looks like the first ship is unloaded, and I need to tell them where they’re taking things.”

“Will do, and don’t be late tonight. This is important,” Ryker warned.

Rolling my eyes, I hung up. “I’m not the one who’s always late... that would be Braxton,” I muttered.

“Master Luca, we have the containers we need off the first freighter. They’re halfway done with the second, but I know you wanted the shipment moved, but the trucks aren’t here,” Ted informed me.

I glanced at my watch, knowing the first group of trucks should be here by now. “What do you mean the trucks aren’t here? You know what, never mind, I’ll handle it. Just get everything staged and ready so when they get here, we can get this show on the road.”

Turning on my heel, I headed back to my office here at the docks. Caprioni Inc. had many subsidiaries, one of them was a shipping company we used as our cover for smuggling goods. This gave us a legitimate presence here on the docks, where we brought in authentic orders for our builders and other supplies we needed. Mixed in those products were the drugs, guns, and skins we smuggled. Thankfully, I always put a hold on the skins this time of year because these boats were kept out there drifting for upward of a month. Once the agreement was settled, everything would be back to business as usual.

Shoving open the door to my office, I used the burner phone to call my transport people.

“Master Luca, I was just about to call you,” the man on the other line answered in a panic. “We have a problem.”

“What the hell kind of problem are we talking about?” I demanded.

“The Red Tigers are here demanding their product, but we don’t have it since we haven’t picked it up yet,” he answered.

“They keep threatening to tear the place apart until they find it saying we’re trying to cut them out.”

“Fuck,” I swore. “Hand the phone over to Big Time.”

“Really?” The man all but squeaked.

“Tell him it’s me, and if he wants his fucking drugs, he’ll take the phone call,” I ordered.

“Y... yes, sir,” the man said with a tremble in his voice.

There was the sound of a man walking and people shouting in the background. As I waited for him to gather the courage, I shot a text to Ryker, Jace, and Braxton, guessing Astin wouldn’t look at her phone if she was meeting with someone. Then I sent another message to the boss so he was in the loop.

“So, did you find my product?” Big Time demanded of my guy.

“N... no, this is Luca. He says you’ll want to talk to him if you want to get your product.”

“Hand me that.”

There were lots of muffled sounds, and then a shot was fired, making me shoot out of my seat.

“Luca, if I don’t have my drugs in five minutes, I’ll kill another one of your men. That bitch thinks she can cut me out, I’ll show her who she’s dealing with. That cunt needs to learn her place, and it’s not in this motherfucking business,” Big snarled into the phone. “Ticktock now, tell your *mistress* she fucked with the wrong man.”

“I would say your goodbyes now, Big, because you just signed your death sentence,” I bit out between clenched teeth.

“Ha, you think I’m afraid of you? Boy, you’re nothing but a mutt on a leash,” Big said, laughing.

I snorted and shook my head as I grabbed my leather jacket and headed out. “No, you shit stain, it’s not me you need to worry about. Our queen has had a rough day, and if you think for one second she isn’t going to feed you your own dick for this insult, you’re a bigger idiot than I thought you were.”

“I ain’t scared of no whore. She just needs the right man to put her in her place, and I’ll happily do that,” Big threatened before hanging up.

Dropping the burner, I smashed it under my booted heel, knowing we’d have to scrap the warehouse after this. Dead bodies tend to blow your cover and draw far too much attention from unwanted sources. We might have the local police and government under our control, but if the next level got involved, we’d be in some hot water.

“Master Luca, where are you going?” one of my foremen called, looking utterly confused.

Tossing a leg over my motorcycle, I pulled the keys out of my pocket. “To witness history in the making.”

“What?”

“I’m getting our trucks,” I hollered back over the roar of the throaty engine then peeled out of the parking lot.

The warehouse the Red Tigers were holding up was twenty minutes away if you followed the speed limit. I was betting I could cut that in half, not to mention on a bike I could take

some of the alleys shaving off even more time. This needed to be wrapped up in a timely manner while I still had our people working the docks. Tomorrow was a mixed bag which would make it harder if we were delayed, but we've dealt with worse.

When I got close, I stopped a few buildings over and cut the engine coasting into another one of our warehouses where we stored building supplies. I've learned if we keep legitimate business mixed with the illegal, it's harder to spot who's coming and going for what. The cops either had to stop and search everyone or none of them if they wanted to catch us that way. It clogged things up and made it easier to get out the back so they stopped doing it.

Hopping off my bike, I grabbed my phone and looked over the messages. Boss had told me to call him, so I returned that call first. "Boss," I greeted when he answered.

"What the fuck is that bastard trying to pull?" Boss demanded. "How dare the fucker think this is acceptable. This will be the end of him and his precious gang."

"I have a feeling your daughter will have the same feelings," I commented. "Do you have orders for me?"

"No, Astin will take care of this. She made it clear to him in our meeting that if he fucked up, she'd be the one to deal with his ass. Watch her back, Luca, I know just how skilled you are. It's one of the reasons I picked you to be one of her people. You'll understand what I've made her into even when the others won't," Boss explained. "Luca, I need you to listen carefully to what I'm about to say and never repeat it to

anyone. Not even the other lieutenants, do I make myself clear?”

This had me tensing and looking around to make sure I was alone in the warehouse. “Yes, Boss, I hear you loud and clear.”

“Has she mentioned anything about her training to you?” he asked.

“Only bits and pieces but nothing specific. I’ve seen a glimpse under the mask, but she has learned to wear it well, sir,” I answered.

“Know that I’m not proud of the choices I made, but if I was forced to do them again, I would. Everything was to prepare Astin for taking over the Caprioni Family and everything that comes with it. What happened to her mother was a tragedy, and I refuse to have it happen ever again,” Boss stated.

“Sir, it’s clear to anyone who knows you or sees the two of you interact that you love your daughter more than anything in the world. Whatever you tell me won’t change that,” I assured him.

“It’s pretty to think so,” Boss muttered. “To protect my daughter from herself, I had to put her under hypnosis. While she still has vague memories about what happened to her during training, I’ve buried them. The problem is that everything has its limits, and when her anger gets the better of her, she snaps the hold on her mind. When this happens, the ruthless killer I turned her into appears, and she loses everything that makes her Astin.”

Out of all the things the boss could have told me, this wasn't at all what I was expecting. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Luca, you're one of the only people who will be able to handle her if she snaps. Your brilliant mind to work around barriers as an assassin is what makes you good at your job, but that wasn't the only reason I promoted you. If the killer comes out in Astin, no one is safe. She doesn't know how to distinguish between friend and foe. The only way to bring her back is to use the trigger phrase, but for it to work, you have to be certain she hears it," Boss explained.

I rubbed my forehead as I tried to keep up with everything that he was telling me. "So I need to get close enough, not die, and say the magic phrase in her ear?"

"Basically," he answered. "The phrase is *hug me like the night holds the moon.*"

"Pretty words to calm the madness, I see," I commented.

"It's something her mother used to tell her every night when she tucked her in," Boss shared. "It was the only thing that seemed to cut through the rage and anger. The truth in my quest to keep her safe was that I broke her, Luca. Initially, we tried therapy to see if we could fix the damage, but she eventually killed most of her therapists. She's a predator of the highest level and will do what it takes to get her kill. The only reason I'm telling you this now is she's already had a rough day, and I fear this altercation with the Red Tigers might push her over the edge."

“I understand your concern, and I’m honored you chose me with this purpose in mind. Your daughter is exactly what this world needs right now to make changes happen, knowing there’s a monster that lurks underneath makes her all the more suited for this,” I said, hoping he’d understand what I was saying. “Are we going to see you at the meeting tonight?”

“No, she asked me to hand this to her, and I intend to do that. Once this is done, I think we all need to go out, show the world we aren’t hiding from this fight,” Boss remarked.

“Sounds like a plan to me. I’ve got to go. I need to call Astin back and figure out what her plan is,” I said, hearing another call beeping on my phone.

“Go, and none of you better fucking get hurt,” Boss ordered then hung up.

As I suspected, it was Astin on the other line. “I’m already here. What do you need?”

“We are pulling into the complex now. Where are you?” she asked.

“Tell the driver I’m in building ten, and the warehouse is open for him to pull right in,” I relayed.

I could hear her instruct the driver before she returned her attention to me. “What do you know?”

“Big Time seems to think you’re making good on your threat to cut him out, but the reality of the matter is that our shipments are late. No one has gotten any product lately,” I

explained. “He shot one of our men and said he’d be doing it every five minutes until we got him his drugs.”

“Fucking cock nugget for brains,” Astin swore under her breath. “We’re pulling in. Speak to you in a second.”

The sleek black car I assume Astin was in pulled up with Ryker in his Jeep right behind them. In seconds, Astin was out of the car and opening the trunk. All vehicles had weapons stashed in hidden compartments for situations like this. I headed over, checking my gun, making sure I had a full mag before putting it back in the holster. An SUV pulled up, and Boykov with five men poured out armed to the teeth. Astin, in heels, dress pants, and a black tank top approached with a holster slung over her shoulders, a gun on each side.

“Where’s the building they’re holding up?” she demanded. Everything about her was a clash of lethal energy and an appearance that didn’t match at all. Her hair was up in a messy bun with wisps of hair floating around her face.

I cleared my throat, trying not to get distracted by how fucking hot she was right now. It’s been three years since I’ve been the Family’s assassin, but something about deadly beauty just did it for me. “We are two buildings away, but each of the warehouses is roughly half a city block long, so we’re still far enough away they won’t know we’re here yet.”

“Well, I think it’s about time we changed that,” Astin said with a smirk.

TWENTY-NINE



As I jumped into Ryker's Jeep with Jace, Braxton, and Luca, the rest of our men followed behind in the SUV. Boykov didn't like this plan at all, but I didn't think Big was going to shoot me the second he saw me. He was a man who wanted to teach me the errors of my way, so I'm betting on some monologuing happening first.

Reaching to my left, I made sure that the gun had the safety off so the second I pulled it, I could fire off a shot. When we pulled up to the warehouse, ten bikers stood outside, but the number of bikes told me there were five more. I assumed they were inside the warehouse looking for the mythical drugs we were withholding from them.

Ryker parked, but before I could get out, he grabbed my arm. "Astin, please don't get hurt," he begged.

"Wasn't planning on it. Trust me, I want this over as fast as possible. There's still a lot that needs to be done before drinks

tonight, and I'm not going to allow a man named *Big Time* to fuck up my revenge," I said, giving him a wink and hopping out.

The clack of my heels on the concrete caught their attention as I approached. One broke off and headed inside presumably to tell Big Time I was here. I walked through the maze of bikes that littered the area until I came to one that had obnoxious lime green flames with *Big Time Fun* written on the fuel tank. Pretending to look it over, I bent over, taking in all the custom details that the president had invested in his prized possession. Taking a step back, I kicked out and knocked the bike over so it slammed onto the concrete.

"What the fuck, woman," a man bellowed.

I looked up, scanning the men to figure out who it was that said the words, but all of them looked equally mad. So I continued my approach to the warehouse entrance just in time for Big Time to emerge.

"What the hell happened to my bike?" he demanded.

"Oops," I said with a shrug. "Looks like I might have knocked it over."

The man's now clean-shaven face and still bruised nose charged at me. Before he could get more than three steps, I pulled my gun and shot him right between the eyes. Crow was next, his gun at the ready, but I'd already fired another shot, knowing he'd be coming. He hit the ground face first next to his boss, stunning the rest of the crew. All my men had their

guns raised at the ready while Big's crew was still absorbing that their leaders were dead.

"How many did you kill?" I asked.

No one answered, so I shot the foot of the one closest to me. He screamed and dropped to the ground clutching his leg. "Motherfucking son of a bitch."

"Do I have your attention now?" I questioned, and they all nodded. "How many of my people did you kill?" All of them looked at each other, but no one answered. "Silence isn't an option, fellas. Tell me how many, or I'm just going to kill you all right here right now."

"Four," a man blurted. "We killed four of your men."

"Ralph, can you send one of your men to check?" I asked.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted someone in all black jogging into the building. While we waited for confirmation, I paced back and forth in front of the Red Tigers.

"So who's in charge now with these two gone?" I inquired. "I know there are like what, five of you who are leaders or whatever."

A man got shoved forward with a leather vest that said Guppy and Road Captain under it. "That would be me, ma'am."

"Guppy, that's an unfortunate choice now, isn't it," I commented as I poked his name patch with my gun. "So here's the thing, I'm going to take out the same number of people you took from me, and I'll call it even. Big and Crow needed to go, they would never be able to handle me being in charge,

so that's an unfortunate loss for you guys. What I need to know from you, Gup, is are you going to be a problem?"

He gulped loudly, making me wonder if that's how he got his name or not. "No, we don't want any more trouble with you or the Caprioni Family. Just tell us what you need from us, and I'll make sure it happens."

"Right, the problem is I don't think you're going to be who they make the next president. You're far too weak to pull the job off. I'm not really sure how you got this job," I remarked. "This is what I'm thinking... you tell whoever your new president is that he needs to come see me once he's elected. Then we'll negotiate terms, but you won't be the main group distributing our goods anymore. That will be handed off to another MC who will learn from you not to fuck me over. That work for you?"

Guppy nodded, his shoulders relaxed, believing that I'd let him off the hook. If only that were all it took for him to survive the next few days. His crew wasn't going to like any of this, and I was still undecided if I was going to let them live or not. If I ended this now, I would have less to deal with later, but did I want to wipe out a whole MC that had been around for thirty years?

"Mistress," Boykov called, drawing my attention as he walked over. He leaned down and whispered in my ear, "They killed them all and tore up the office. A total of seven of our people... it was brutal. They tortured them trying to get information."

“I see,” I murmured. “None of them leave here alive, and I want the rest of the Red Tigers to be put on notice... if they don’t get *the fuck* out of my city, then I’ll hunt down every last one of them. Burn down the building with the bodies in it and send the bikes to the chop shops to get rid of them.”

“Yes, Mistress,” Boykov answered as he gave a signal, and in a matter of minutes, all the Red Tigers were dead as I climbed into Ryker’s Jeep.

“I think it’s time we get back to the estate,” I said when the others joined me. “We still have a lot to cover before tonight.”

“As the queen commands,” Ryker said in all seriousness, gunning it out of the warehouse complex.



After a shower, fresh clothes, and a meal, I felt much more settled than I had in the past few hours. I headed to the second floor and down the hall to Atticus’s room, where he’d asked me to meet him so we could look over a few things. Luca was holed up in his room working on the letter having a guess at what the code might be. Even if we didn’t crack it before tonight, I knew we had more than enough to bury them. Any extra was just the icing on the cake to my revenge.

Daddy checked in on me, and I caught him up to speed about my meetings with Cherry and Alfie. It seems that Alfie had been asked to relay information, but the thing of it was, Alfie already knew the dark side of the Caprioni Family. He was a

smart man and knew better than to fuck us over now that he'd been freed from his contract with us. Alfie even went as far as to share with Braxton and me some other people we should talk to who are doing favors for outside clients. I made sure he got a bonus for being so helpful before we left to deal with the Red Tigers.

I rapped on Atticus's door and waited for him to answer. If it had been any of the others, I probably would have walked in, but I understood my Atty wasn't like the others. This was his space tailored to his exact needs, and I was a guest. He only kept me waiting a moment before the door was opened, and I stepped in.

The space wasn't what I'd been expecting at all. Everything was a modern style in black and white with glass accents. One side of the room was his sleeping area with a simple streamlined bed and a nightstand on either side. The other half held a large glass-topped desk with a metal frame. It ran along one whole wall with multiple monitors and stations he could roll between. Then there was a small seating area with two armchairs and a glass coffee table. There were no personal touches on the walls or decorations on any surface. This space was designed to create no distractions whatsoever.

"I hear your day has been rather busy," Atticus commented. "I feel that as your friend, it's my duty to inquire how you're feeling."

"That's a hard question to answer," I said with a sigh.

Atticus nodded in understanding. “Then I do not obligate you to answer unless you choose to. Do you still have the time to go over some items with me? It’s quite understandable if other things of a higher priority need your attention.”

“Atty, you’re a higher priority, and I told you I would help you. I’m a woman of my word, so please, show me where you feel anything isn’t making sense,” I assured him, gesturing for him to lead the way.

“As I mentioned at breakfast, I’ve gone over this numerous times, and while the numbers come out correctly to what I had, the outcome doesn’t feel like it should be what it is,” he shared as he pulled another rolling chair out of a closet for me to use.

Taking a seat, I turned to face him. “All right, tell me this, do you feel the number is too big or too small.”

“Too large. The records I’ve seen of other jobs done by other similar companies are far less expensive. I understand the boss might give some a deal as well as getting goods through Luca, but it wouldn’t convert to this large of a discrepancy,” Atticus explained.

“Do we have copies of the original agreements, the invoices, or other paperwork we can cross-check with?” I inquired.

Atticus frowned. “Most everything is done electronically. I get emailed copies from all the companies sent to me every night.”

“Are these sent to the corporate office first? Or are they just delayed in sending to you all at once?” I pressed.

“No, they get sent to the main accountants for each respective company. They do the day-to-day work, and I check over them to ensure they’re done correctly. My job is to oversee the money as a whole for the Caprioni Family,” Atticus said, breaking it down for me.

I nodded as something was nagging at me. “Does everything Continental Properties do go to the same person?”

“Yes, because they have so many jobs going all at once, they have a person who compiles everything for them based on each job. Then those files get sent to me to ensure all everything’s accounted for and invoices are getting paid.”

Grabbing my cell, I called Gunner. “Hey, are you at the house?” I asked when he picked up.

“Ah... yes, I am,” he answered, sounding confused. “Should I not be?”

“Calm down, come to Atty’s room. I have a project I need you to help us on,” I informed him.

“I’ll be there in a moment,” he said then the call was disconnected.

Atticus turned to face me. “Did you figure out the problem already? We haven’t even looked at the numbers yet.”

I reached out and placed a hand lightly on his knee. “That’s because numbers never lie, but people do.”

“I don’t understand. How can they lie when I have the paperwork to show what they were charged?”

Leaning back, I let out a sigh rubbing my forehead. “I’ve heard other companies doing this when they’re cutting corners on projects or running a scam but never to this magnitude. Is this the first time you’ve thought this about their reports?”

“It’s the first time I’ve looked at their whole portfolio all at once. I’m always looking at bits and pieces, not the whole situation. When you look at it case by case, there isn’t anything that would raise concern, but looking at it as a whole, their cost is extraordinarily higher than others,” Atticus reasoned. “The increase started about a year ago. Before then, all was fairly standard, but the occasional project being more than expected.”

There was a knock at the door then Gunner stepped in a moment later. “You need me?”

“How can we get original copies of invoices sent to us from the companies we purchase from?” I asked.

He wandered over to us with his hands in his pockets. “I’m not sure what you mean?”

“I want to see a copy of the bill that the supply company has, not the one we do,” I rephrased.

“Are you implying what I think you are?” Gunner asked.

“You tell me,” I countered.

Gunner didn’t answer me right away, instead made a phone call. “Ryker, I need you to deep dive into Nancy Mercer’s computer and tell me if she’s manipulating invoices for Harrison and Raymond.” He paused, listening to his answer

then frowned. “Son of a bitch, how long? A *year*?” Gunner roared. “No, I got this. Thank you for offering, though. Can you send me copies of all of that?”

Hanging up, he just looked at us and turned, leaving the room without a word.

“Huh, that was way easier to figure out than I thought it would be,” I mused aloud, tapping my chin.

“I believe I’m going to need some clarification on the events that just transpired,” Atticus murmured, frowning at the door Gunner just walked out of, then turned to me.

“One of the only ways someone would be able to fool you is if the data they send along matches what they noted in their logs. This woman took the invoice the supply company sent to her and manipulated the document to reflect an increase. Doing this meant when we paid out, we paid too much, instead of letting us know those two bastards pocketed the money,” I explained. “I’m sure if we could have gotten into their personal finances, we’d have been able to see the discrepancy, but we didn’t want to alert them that we were looking.”

Atticus sat there letting his fingers rhythmically tap on his armrest as he digested what I told him. “So, in this case, the numbers did lie.”

“Only because a person gave you fake ones,” I pointed out. “But if you think about it, they didn’t lie to you. They told you the truth of their story which, as you aptly noticed, was wrong.”

The tapping stopped, and he looked at me, his calculating eyes seeming to absorb more than any person ever noticed about me. “Why do you treat me so differently than everyone else?”

My brows shot up at this. “I don’t understand your question.”

“The way you interact with me, you don’t do that for the others,” he stated. “You waited for me to answer the door. You always take the time to explain things clearly to me, answer my numerous questions, and treat me as an equal. I have yet to see you treat another person the way you do me, and I don’t understand it. Everything about you confuses me, and I don’t know where you fit.”

“Where do you want me to fit?” I asked.

“See, you’re doing it now,” Atticus countered. “Please understand I don’t feel you’re treating me poorly or with contention, it’s quite the opposite. You say that we are friends, but I’ve seen others who claim to be friends, and they don’t have a mutual respect for each other the way you do with me.”

I smiled at possibly the smartest man I’d ever met who had a heart of pure gold. He had no idea, but he was my barometer, the person I used to ensure I wasn’t losing myself to this world that could easily swallow me whole and spit me back out. Atticus was my compass, he held true north because if he questioned something I did, then I knew I needed to take a closer look at the choice. Never had I expected to find someone like him in the world I existed in, but I couldn’t be more thankful for however that happened.

“I hope you’ll trust me when I tell you I’m not going to answer that for you. This is something I believe you need to figure out, and when you do, it will be all that more meaningful.” I rose and let my fingers caress his cheek. “What I will tell you is that you’re important to me, Atticus. Never doubt that.”

Having finished what we needed to do here, I started out of his room, needing to get a few more issues settled before meeting for drinks. I’d almost reached the door when Atticus caught my hand. It was the first time he’d initiated contact between us, so I paused and looked back at him. He stepped closer into my personal space, surprising me.

“Tell me now if this is inappropriate, but I have the strongest need to kiss you, Astin,” Atticus murmured, his voice so unsure.

Leaning in, I paused a breath away from him. “Kiss me, Atty,” I whispered.

His lips met mine in a gentle, timid caress that I welcomed. Not wanting to push him further than he was ready for, I started to pull back, but he caught me with a hand on the side of my neck, pulling me back in. This kiss was far more confident and the purest thing I’d ever experienced. Part of me felt like I was soiling him, knowing that I’d never be what he needed, what someone as good as him deserved. Yet I couldn’t resist getting a glimpse of what it would be like if he were to pick me.

He stepped closer, urging me to give him more, but I couldn’t. Atticus was far too special to waste himself on a woman like

me. He needed someone who wouldn't use her body to get a deal to turn her way. Or someone who wouldn't want to give in to a man who begged her to own him and use him as she wanted. No, I couldn't be happy with the quiet life he offered. I craved the thrill of getting finger fucked on the dance floor knowing anyone could see if they looked close enough.

I rested a hand on Atticus's chest and pressed gently to urge him to stop. "Thank you, Atticus," I said, then kissed his cheek. "I need to finish a few things before we head out to meet up with Harrison and Raymond," I explained as I gave him a warm smile that did nothing to dissuade his frown. "I'll see you later."

Leaving his room, I closed the door behind me and paused for a moment to pull myself together before straightening my shoulders and heading to my room.

THIRTY



It was far harder to find an outfit to wear than I planned, one that gave off power but nothing sexual. For this, I really wanted to make it through a conversation when someone didn't think I was a whore. Granted, they already assumed that from how we first met, but I wanted to give it a shot.

I settled on a pure white jumpsuit with loose trouser pant legs and a turtle neck top with long sleeves that puffed out a bit and tightened around the wrist. I paired it with simple white Louboutin heels and a gold clutch to add a pop of color. My hair was in a loose chignon with simple makeup to drive home the point. Looking in the mirror, I felt like the president's wife and as far from a hooker as you could get.

Ready as I'd ever been for dismantling two men who decided to fuck over my daddy, I headed out of my rooms. When I entered the hall, I found Daddy waiting for me with a warm

smile as soon as he saw me. “Astin, you look lovely. I’m not sure these men deserve it, though.”

“We need them to believe this is a normal meeting to discuss the progress on the land and the zoning issue. So I felt that I needed to play the part,” I reasoned. “I thought you were going to sit this one out?”

“I was, but Harrison called me personally to ensure I would be there. He said he had news for me, and it was something to celebrate,” he explained, offering me his arm. “I know his daughter has been trying to have kids, so I wonder if that’s the news. It would put him over the moon and something he’d love to tell me in person.”

“You two have been friends for a long time,” I commented. “I don’t know, Daddy. Something in my gut is telling me we should keep you out of this. If something happens tonight, you aren’t well. Look what a fight between us did to you.”

“Darling, there aren’t many people who can get under my skin like you can. It must be a gift because I’m not sure there’s another person in the world who would be able to rile me up the way you do,” Daddy teased and squeezed my hand. “Trust your father to know his limits.”

“All right, but I’m telling Boykov to bring extra people,” I countered.

“I do have my own security who will be there. This isn’t new to me, Astin,” Daddy pointed out. “Don’t worry, it will cause wrinkles, and you’re too young to start having those.”

Remember, I'm Colmazio Caprioni, king of Eastrose, and it would take one ballsy person to attack me out in public."

Letting the matter drop, we got into the limousine where the guys were already waiting for us. Each was dressed in their typical suits, projecting a normal state of events. While it was unusual for them to join us for a meeting we told them we were having, the plan was for them to be at another table to start. Luca hadn't gotten the note translated yet, but he thought he was close and continued to work on it as we drove. The bar that Braxton had a meeting at was neutral in the sense we owned the building, but the actual bar was owned by someone else. It was an upscale bar that specialized in various whiskey drinks. It was also themed in a manner of the twenties when alcohol was illegal and you had to have underground bars.

Wanting to keep this meeting more private, Braxton chose wisely as it was on the outer side of the city limits. It was still in the thick of things but not where most people would choose to go out for a drink, lessening the chance we'd run into people we knew. I had no idea how they would react to our showdown, but it wasn't going to be favorable. In fact, I almost had Braxton warn the owner things might get a little heated but I thought better of it. The more people who knew too much, the higher the chances of getting into trouble. Yet there could be a happy medium.

"Brax, do you think it might be a good idea to let the owner or manager know this could get messy?" I asked.

He contemplated that for a moment. “Part of me agrees, but I’ll have to make that call when I know who’s working. Miles is more levelheaded about things, but if it’s Carl, then I would say no, that will only make matters worse.”

“Fair. We chose to do this in public so they wouldn’t cause a scene, but I can’t help being overly cautious. It would be worse if innocents got hurt or involved in a situation we caused,” I reasoned.

“These are the risks we take, my dear,” Father reasoned. “There will always be innocents, but we also need to protect ourselves, and they’re our best chance. Besides, if something were to happen and they start it, their witness would help us.”

Leaning into him, I kissed him on the cheek. “This is why you’re the boss.”

“Astin, I didn’t get a chance to say this earlier, but I’m sorry for my outburst,” Daddy said in a low voice for only me to hear. “You did what was necessary, and I was clouded by seeing you as my little girl when you’re also the underboss. The choices we make are hard and only you know at that moment if it was the best choice. Sometimes, it’s not, and we learn how to do better next time. I went through the same process with my father, but no matter what, I want you to know I trust your judgment.”

“Thank you, Daddy. I’m sorry for what I said too. I was upset at someone else and took it out on you,” I shared.

He looked me in the eye with a knowing expression. “You have to let him out of the doghouse eventually. It’s my fault

he's there in the first place. I've seen the way he looks at you... it's the way I used to watch your mother before she passed. Our lives are hard, and there are few to trust and lean on, so don't lose someone without trying to fight for it first."

I looked at him in surprise. "You know Boykov said almost the same thing to me earlier."

"He's a good man. I was thrilled when he asked to be the head of your detail. It's hard for a father to let his little girl walk into danger, but that's the life that was chosen for you as it was for me," Father murmured as he relaxed into his seat, and I rested my head on his shoulder.

I feel things between us will always be volatile—we are too similar for our own good. Even though I hated how he handled the issues with Casimira, Jamison, and Liu, it didn't change the undying love I've always had for my father. Some days I might not like him or want to be around him, but I will always love him. When it was just the two of us, it was easy to forget the rest of it. Yet as I sat here in the silence of the car, I could hear his labored breathing and the unusually slow thump of his heart. We seemed to have less time together than I thought.

"We're all clear, Boss," the bodyguard said once he opened the door to the limo.

When had we gotten to the bar? How long had we been sitting here waiting for them to check the place? Sitting up, I shook off the concerned daughter and squared my shoulders, ready to defend our family against those who would dare to destroy us.

This time when I stepped out, Ryker was there to take my hand and help me out. I gave him a grateful smile and followed Father into the lobby of the old historic building. The bar was set on the fourth floor, giving us the chance to arrive and have the rest of the guys follow behind in a moment. Boykov and Daddy's personal bodyguard were with us since the rest of the team was already up there.

"You ready for this?" I ask.

"Are you referring to defending my empire or confronting a man who claimed to be my friend for the past thirty years?" he asked, cocking a brow.

"Either, I suppose," I said with a shrug. "You just seem so calm. I'm not sure I could do that when someone's done what he's doing to you."

"After years of betrayal, you get plenty of practice keeping the illusion of calm," Father answered before he stepped off the elevator.

That made me pause for a moment, wondering if he'd wanted to come to this meeting all along but didn't want to step on my toes. Either way, we were here now, and the show was going to happen one way or another.

A waiter led us over to our table where, to my surprise, Harrison and Raymond were already seated. The table was in the middle of the space with a group of four mismatched armchairs that looked like they could be out of Sherlock Holmes's study. The table was made from old whiskey barrels adding to the theme of the place.

“Colmazio,” Harrison greeted cheerfully, standing to clasp my father in a hug. “How are you, my old friend? I was delighted to get your invitation to drinks with your daughter since we were unable to make it to the party. Now, where is she?” he asked, glancing over me like it was perfectly normal for my father to bring along a random woman.

“Harrison, allow me to introduce you to Astin, my eldest child and heir to the Caprioni Family business,” Daddy said, gesturing to me as I smiled and held out a hand.

“It’s lovely to see you again,” I greeted.

The look of horror that crossed his face was priceless in its own way as Raymond quickly stood as well.

“Raymond, you’re here too. How nice that we all get to enjoy each other’s company once more,” I said, my tone so full of delight it made me want to gag.

“Forgive me, but I believe the last time we met, you said your name was Angelica,” Raymond challenged.

Father took his seat, and I did the same, holding my clutch in my lap as I looked contrite. “I’m sorry for the deception, but I was afraid if you knew who I was, you wouldn’t give me a fair game. I do love to play poker, but when people learn who I am, they won’t play to beat me.”

Both men nodded as they took their seats, still looking a little blindsided. They were saved when a waiter came over and took our drink order then left.

“Father mentioned something about you having exciting news, Harrison,” I commented, trying to get them to relax.

This seemed to shake him out of his shock, and a giant grin spread over his face. “Well, my daughter, Kathrine, has been trying for ages to have children. They already adopted a wonderful little boy who’s a joy, but they wanted to give it one more try. I got word yesterday that she’s having twins.”

Daddy clapped his hands in excitement. “Oh, I knew it would happen one of these days. With the way the medical world is now, anything is possible.”

“Yes, it’s truly a miracle,” Harrison agreed while taking a sip of his drink.

“That’s absolutely wonderful news to be blessed with. I was hoping it would be something like that so when I shared why we called you here, it wouldn’t be too big of a blow,” I said, moving my clutch to the side so I could rest my elbows on my knees.

Raymond was the one who clued into what I said first. “What are you talking about? What kind of a blow?”

“See, the thing is... I had a chat with Mayor Wilson today when he came to see us about another matter to determine if there was anything we could do to move things in the right direction. You’ll never believe what he shared with me,” I rambled, acting as if I was nervous to tell them.

Fuckers already knew all of this as it was, so I was just trying to have some fun with it.

Harrison's face sobered. "It's all right, you can tell us. We knew this project was a long shot but also knew if anyone had a chance, it was old Col."

"The problem has nothing to do with the toxic land or trying to get it cleaned up, which was a relief to hear until Mayor Wilson told me it was the Kocabe burial ground that was discovered. That, of course, was the first I'd heard of it, so he enlightened me on keeping it quiet so as not to create bad press with how tense things are with the Kocabe recently," I explained. "So for now, that land is dead in the water until they've examined every inch of it and negotiated with the tribes what land is theirs and what we can still use."

"I'm sorry, Harry, but I think it's best if you find another plot," Daddy added with a heavy sigh. "There are some areas where no amount of money or blackmail will get changed."

"We thought that might be the case, so we kept looking for property and found something that might be a decent alternative," Raymond said.

Flicking open my clutch, I grabbed the stack of pictures and tossed them on the table. "Oh, is this the place? Personally, I think a hundred acres is hardly anything to work with, but that would certainly cut down your cost. Thing is, it's out in the middle of fucking nowhere farm country. Do you really think people will travel that far for a place that can hold maybe three roller coasters?"

Raymond snatched up a photograph with the for sale sign that matched the online listing. He then grabbed the other pictures

and looked through a few before tossing them on the table. “This isn’t the place, this could be anywhere.”

“Hmm.” I nodded in agreement. “Yeah, I’m sure that’s not the plot Harvey would help you buy, but it was the trap set for us. As was the burial ground he paid to keep quiet. What I want to know is why neither of you said a fucking word about it?” I demanded, my tone turning cold. “One might think you were trying to screw us over, but why in the world would you want to do that? You’re making quite the profit off your invoice scheme, which I have to hand it to you was rather clever.”

“Col, what’s the meaning of this? Are you just going to let her speak to us that way?” Harrison demanded.

I raised my hand and snapped my fingers. Seconds later, Gunner was at our table handing over a large stack of invoices. “Thank you, Gunner,” I said, dismissing him for now. “I believe you’ll find the original copy of the invoice and the altered copy stapled together.”

“You can’t prove we took the money,” Raymond countered.

I leaned back and crossed a leg over the other, smirking. “You wanna bet?”

“Yes, prove it,” Harrison demanded.

Looking over my shoulder, I caught Atticus’s eye. “Could you be so gracious as to hand me the file you have on their finances?”

Atticus rose and walked over to me, but instead of handing it to me, the man tossed it on the table, remaining right at my

side. “You weren’t nearly intelligent enough to cover your tracks. It took me all of twenty minutes to figure out your system. If you were going to try and launder your money through our business after you stole it, don’t give it to our hookers. We track every cent that enters their bank account since we take a percentage.”

“Do you know how many laws you’ve violated doing this?” Raymond roared, slamming the file on the table. “This is an invasion of privacy.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” I countered. “We are allowed to track our employees’ transactions, and all we needed was to match the ones that entered your bank account. As my friend here said, not all that bright of you. Hookers take the money, they don’t give it.”

Harrison shot out of his chair, but Atticus was right there to shove him back into it. “Don’t make a scene. People here are trying to have a nice night.”

Seeing this side of my sweet man was surprising, but yet made him all the more endearing that he was protecting me. I grabbed the last thing out of my clutch and slid the envelope across the table. Harrison was still glaring at Atticus, who hadn’t moved, so Raymond picked up the envelope. He pulled the letter out and read over it, his eyes going wide with shock as he then looked at me. “You can’t be serious. If you do this, you’ll ruin us overnight.”

“I’m sorry. What about this meeting so far has given you the impression I give a flying fuck about that?” I demanded. “You

knew about the burial grounds. I heard it from your lips the night of the poker game. What was it you said? Something about my father losing his touch and putting a fucking broad in charge of things men should be doing. Did I remember that correctly?”

“Yes, Lady Astin, you sure did,” Luca commented from behind me. “In fact, I heard the whole conversation myself, so don’t try and pull any he-said-she-said bullshit. I’m sure we could ask the others at the table their thoughts once they see the ruin she’s about to cause.”

Luca rested a hand on my shoulder, and I could feel a piece of paper against my skin. Reaching up, I made it look as if I was giving him a reassuring squeeze as I took the paper.

“You’re calling our note?” Harrison barked, finally looking at the letter. “You can’t do that. There has to be a law against this.”

“See, funny thing about that is the moment we started going legit, you signed your lives away with every dotted line,” I explained. “So no, there isn’t a law to get you out of another law. I can take this to court and win in five minutes. I double-checked with the five we have in our pocket.”

“Do you have any idea what you’re letting her do, Col?” Harrison snapped. “Tossing away years of friendship over a disagreement?”

Father laughed. “Is that what you think this is? If I’d walked into that trap you set for me with the burial grounds, I’d be the one who’s ruined and in jail. You know all that already and

still you said fuck all to me, throwing your lot in with Harvey O'Hagan, of all people. The bastard's been gunning for me, and you were about to hand me over on a silver platter. Hell yes, I'm letting my daughter light your ass up and burn down all you've created. Get the fuck out of my sight, and you better have my money in a week, or I'll introduce you to my negotiation skills reserved for those who are late on their payments."

Both men stood to leave and were flanked by our security, giving me a chance to unfold the paper Luca handed me.

My people are in place. The signal is 'greedy tyrant.' Here's to a new king.

None of this made sense, but I didn't doubt it was the message. It clearly meant something important, and I was glad Harrison never got it. Who knows what those words would trigger? Feeling restless, I rose and walked over to the guys.

"You know what, Colmazio, you're not a king at all. You're just a motherfucking greedy tyrant," Harrison bellowed across the bar, struggling against Boykov and another one of his men.

Realization slammed into me, and I turned back to where Daddy was sitting alone. "No," I screamed, running toward him as fast as I could, but the shots were already fired.

THIRTY-ONE



Daddy's body jerked as two bullets found their mark in his chest, but I didn't slow down. I leaped, crashing into him, knocking the chair to the floor, and I used the momentum to roll us out of the way. Hooking my hands under his armpits, I dragged him backward to where a smaller second bar was located. The air echoed with gunfire, but I only had one thing to focus on, and it was the man in my hands.

Finally secure behind the bar, I laid him down and ripped open his vest then his shirt. The bullets missed his heart, but I knew they had pierced his lung as I heard the wetness in his breath. "Hold on, Daddy, I got you," I said, grabbing a rag off the counter and putting pressure over the wounds.

I smiled down at him. "It's gonna be okay, they'll send an ambulance, and we'll get you to the hospital. Maybe this is a chance to do something about your heart? You'll have a reason

to be in the hospital for a bit, and no one would know. Then you'll stay with me longer."

He reached up and grabbed my arm, pulling me closer.

"Shh, Daddy, don't try to talk. You need all the air you can get. Don't waste it on me."

That did nothing to lessen his intention, so I leaned close enough to hear him. "Journal thirty-four."

"What's about it?" I asked. "Is there something important there?"

"Everything, it's everything..." He wheezed, then coughed, sending blood spraying everywhere. "Astin."

"No," I snapped. "No, don't. I don't want to hear it, Daddy. You aren't going to die, I won't let you. I just got you back. This was our time, Daddy. We were going to rule side by side, show the world what it means to be the Caprioni Family."

Tears started to flow from his eyes as he looked up at me, and I could feel my own trailing down my cheeks.

"Astin, I love you more than anything in this world... never forget that," he managed to get out between gasps.

"Please, Daddy, you don't need to do this. Just hold on," I pleaded.

His bloody hand cupped my face, and I clutched it to me. "Let them love you. I picked them for my precious daughter. They're who you need to be the queen I raised you to be."

“None of this makes sense, Daddy,” I sobbed, moving his head to my lap. “I don’t understand, you can’t leave me. This isn’t fair. I just got you back, and all we did was fight. I was awful to you and everyone else who’s supposed to be my family. How can I face them without you?”

When he didn’t answer me, I reached a shaky hand to his neck, hoping there would still be a pulse and he was just tired.

There was nothing.

My father, the king of the Caprioni Family Empire, was dead. The one man I loved with all my heart was ripped from me in the blink of an eye. Tears fell from my face onto his, mixing with his own, but when I tried to wipe them away, I just smeared blood all over him. Taking my sleeve, I used that instead, letting his blood stain the white fabric, but I didn’t give a fuck. Nothing mattered now, there was nothing left for me. Everyone was gone, lost to this life that I’d been born into.

Well, they weren’t going to take me down that easily. They had no idea what my father’s men created back in Huntingford.

But they were about to.

Taking a deep, shuddering breath, I closed my eyes and reached down deep, letting loose the chains they’d put on my darkness. They thought I didn’t know, but I wasn’t ignorant of the evil that lurked within me. The problem was once I set it free, I didn’t know how to come back from it. Right now, there was nothing to come back to, so what was the harm?

A cold, detached feeling took over my body, slowing my heart rate, easing my breath, and settling my mind into a state of hyperfocus. Reaching out, I slipped the gun hidden under Father's jacket and the extra magazine he had in the inside pocket. A trick he told me saved his life more than once over the years. I grabbed a small knife and sliced off my sleeves allowing me more freedom from the billowing fabric. With one final glance at the body that once held my father's spirit, I stood and entered the fray.

Lifting my gun, I shot anyone who was in my way with practiced ease, counting down the bullets I had left in the gun.

Six.

Five.

Four.

Three.

Two.

I jerked when a searing pain bloomed in my thigh causing me to pause and look down. Blood started to ooze out of the wound, and I didn't see an exit. It wasn't enough blood to mean it hit an artery, so I continued, blocking out the pain.

One.

Empty.

Reload.

"Astin," someone screamed at me, but I wasn't going to be distracted.

There, desperately trying to claw open the elevator, was one of the men I was looking for.

Two hulking men charged at me.

Eight.

Seven.

“Why isn’t she hearing us?”

“Where’s the boss?”

“I saw her drag him back this way. Did we call an ambulance?”

“Guys, look at her. The boss is gone.”

Something in my chest rioted against that proclamation, but I couldn’t stop. *He* did this. It was his mouth that uttered the words that made this happen. Finally, the rat knew I was coming for him, the scent of piss in the air told me he knew. Father was dead, and this man was responsible. He was going to pay.

“Please, I didn’t know,” the Rat sobbed. “It was never my intention to have him assassinated. I might have been upset with him and lashed out, but he was my friend.”

The Rat scrambled away from me only trapping himself in a corner. I raised the gun, knowing with a simple squeeze of my finger he’d die. No. That would be far too good a death for him. Rats don’t deserve a good death, they must suffer, screaming their agony all the way to hell. Kneeling, I grunted

as I put the weight on my bleeding leg, but I dismissed it. Reaching back, I pulled my blade from my heel.

“You say you didn’t want him dead, so what was the purpose of all of this then?” I asked, my voice sounding hollow to my own ears.

The Rat didn’t answer. He just cried and begged.

“If you won’t answer me, then there’s no reason for you to ever speak again. You shall have the same fate as your traitorous whore. She’ll learn as will you that betraying the Caprioni Family only leads to nothing but suffering and death,” I shared, grabbing his jaw.

I tried to get the Rat to open his mouth, but he fought against me. Fine, there’s more than one way to skin a rat. I flipped the gun so I was holding the muzzle and slammed it into his jaw hearing the bones crack. The Rat screamed, thrashing under me, but it was no use. This time, when I wrenched his mouth open, he couldn’t resist with a broken jaw. I reached in and grabbed his tongue, pinching it hard enough that he whimpered in pain.

“You will drown in your own blood the way my father did,” I whispered in the Rat’s ear. “Slowly, you’ll choke on the thing that gave you life, but no one will cry for you. No, Rat, you will be alone, cold, and filled with the knowledge this is the result of your choices.”

Sitting up, I wiped my one hand dry on his shirt as I grasped my thin yet wickedly sharp blade. I worked quickly, wanting to make sure he lived long enough to be as terrified as my

father was. Blood flooded his mouth, making him choke, but I kept working, ignoring the blood he coughed on me. Once I freed his tongue, I tossed it aside and ripped open his shirt, letting my blade pierce into his flesh deep and into his lungs. I made sure to hit the upper and lower parts, ensuring his death.

Finished with the Rat, I stood and found the release for the elevator doors revealing the empty shaft. I dragged him to the edge and spat on him as he gagged and gurgled up at me. “May my face be the last thing you see before you greet the king of hell.” With a shove, I tossed him down the shaft.

When I stood, this time my leg gave out, sending me crashing to the floor.

“Astin,” a man cried behind me.

Someone was kneeling in front of me, grabbing my face, begging for me to look at them. I raised my gun to his temple.

Si—

“Hug me like the night sky holds the moon,” a voice rasped in my ear. “Come back to us, Astin.”

My whole body shuddered, and whatever had been pushing me to keep going vanished. A hand brushed my hair out of my face, and I looked up to find Ryker and Luca looking down at me with worried expressions.

“Tin-Tin,” Ryker pleaded.

“Ry,” I sobbed. “Daddy’s dead.”

“I know. I’m so sorry, my love,” he said, tears shimmering in his eyes. “We need to get you out of here and to a doctor. You’ve been shot.”

“No, I won’t leave him, Ry,” I argued.

“He’s coming too. Boykov has him and will make sure he comes home with us. We’d never leave your father behind,” Luca explained as he peeled my hand off a gun I didn’t remember holding.

I nodded, grief clogging my throat so I couldn’t speak. Ryker lifted me in his arms and headed to the back of the bar. The others were there, all of them looking worse for wear but alive and unharmed from what I could tell. *Good, I didn’t lose anyone else.*

My eyes drifted closed as I clung to Ryker. When we got to the car, I was handed off to Jace while Braxton wrapped a tight bandage around my leg, making me hiss.

“I’m sorry, but we need to stop the bleeding. Just hang in there, and we’ll get you fixed up in no time,” Braxton soothed, reaching out to take my hand.

Tears I couldn’t stop ran down my cheeks as I looked into his worried eyes. “Please tell me I didn’t hurt anyone but those who deserved it.”

“We all survived, thanks to you. No one knew who was friend or foe. Somehow, Harvey got his people into our security,” Braxton explained.

The darkness reared up at the mention of his name. “Harvey is next. He’ll learn to live in fear for the day I choose his death, and I’ll tear his very soul from his body. There will be no afterlife for him, no second-chance reincarnation. He’ll cease to exist when I’m done with him.”

“As the queen wishes, so it shall be.”

To be continued in Blood & Heartache

Elizabeth is an International Best Seller, originally from Illinois but now living in sunny Phoenix, AZ. Elizabeth has been writing for nine years and started out in YA Fiction but recently found herself loving the Reverse Harem genre. Like her favorite books, Elizabeth loves to write about strong women of all varieties. Not all strength is flashy or apparent at first glance—some lies just under the surface.

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