



*sweet little
sinners*

HACKER

CASSIE MINT

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One

Frankie



Whenever I need to make a big decision, I have three different plans of attack. Option one: call my friend Tabitha to check what a normal person would do—and hopefully get her boyfriend Spencer to weigh in, since as a cat burglar, she’s not that normal either.

Option two: draw on the collective wisdom of the internet, and hope my exact predicament has come up before. This is good for laundry questions and houseplant care; not so much for illegal activities.

Or option three: roll my favorite dice and hope for the best.

I lean back in my desk chair and frown at the spread of computer screens, blue light washing over me in a sickly glow. It’s late, but that’s okay. That’s not why my brain’s stuck. I’m a night owl, and I think better after midnight.

The handful of dice dig into my palm as I squeeze them tight, and I rap twice on the desk with my stuffed hand. I can’t tear my eyes away from the screens; can’t even blink.

Luca Bianchi will die tonight.

Oh, he's got a few hours left in him. The literal backstabbing is set for 5am, after which point the mobster will be nothing but a pile of dead limbs and a red puddle on the floor. Is he having a good night, at least? Did he have a delicious last meal? What did he eat?

It took me a long time to unearth this plan, digging through private servers and coded communications, and honestly, I stumbled onto it by chance. Luca's cousin has been careful. I doubt even the kingpin will realize it was him—that the hit came from inside the house.

But *I'll* know. I found that weasel's breadcrumb trail and followed it all the way back to an assassin. He's taken out a hit on his own cousin, and for what? The chance to take over Luca's activities, probably. To become the new spymaster.

Dude. That's not how it works. If someone had me killed, they wouldn't magically become a great hacker, and he won't inherit Luca's web of secrets and intrigue. It'll just disappear. Evaporate in a puff of smoke. Such a waste.

Because Luca is *good*. A genius, really. That's why I like him so much—or part of it, anyway. As a rule, I don't lie to myself, so I'll also admit that the thick bronze hair, square jaw and moss green eyes don't hurt either.

We're all animals deep down, even me, and I exist more online than in the real world.

And my inner animal *really* likes Luca Bianchi.

“Shit.”

I grab my phone, then sigh and toss it on the desk. Pick it up, then put it down. What good would calling Tabitha do? She doesn't know Luca like I do. She hasn't watched him for months, *years*, like he's her favorite TV show. She's not properly invested. She doesn't have all the facts.

I think Tabitha would tell me to stay out of mob business. So I'm not gonna call her.

And there's no point checking online. Somehow I doubt there's a forum for this.

Okay, so that leaves my trusty dice. An odd number, and I'll warn him. Even, and I won't. I'll let Luca Bianchi die.

The dice clatter over my desk, the sound cutting over the soft music pulsing from the speakers I've got hooked on all the walls. Most of them land in a neat halo, but one bounces off the keyboard at a weird angle and drops onto the floorboards below. I scowl, but count up all the other dice first.

Nineteen so far. An odd number. That's good.

My legs are stiff as I climb out of my desk chair, my ass sore from hours on the plush leather. The chair almost cost more than my screens, but I still feel like an old woman every time I get up after too long in one position.

I can't help it. My focus snags on something, then I get absorbed. Like on Luca Bianchi for instance—I've got more than one dead leg after staring at his stuff for hours. Reading his emails; scrolling through his bank accounts, both

legitimate and hidden. Scanning his appointments and trying to decode his private notes.

He makes it hard for me, not like most of the power players in this city. I like that.

One time I hacked his laptop webcam and watched a live feed of his kitchen for four hours. He made tortellini from scratch and called to threaten an informant while stirring the sauce. And later on, he wandered past the doorway shirtless on his way to the shower.

That was such a good night.

It's dark under the desk, away from the screens. It takes a second for my eyes to adjust, then I spot the ghostly white cube beside the table leg. My mouth goes dry.

Three.

I stare at the three dots, plucking the die off the floorboards. It brings a tiny clump of dust.

So: twenty two. An even number, which means I won't warn him.

Decision made. I'll let Luca Bianchi die.

* * *

Okay, forget that. How do you even tell a person they're about to be betrayed? I don't like sending the simplest messages. I can't do small talk, and everyday interactions confound me. This is way above my pay grade.

And even if I figure out the wording, how do I do it? How do I get in touch? Ideally, I'd leave an anonymous note on his computer or something. Let him find it in his own time, and erase any trace of me so he can't figure out who sent it. But I'm on the clock here, and there's a chance Luca is asleep, so I need to get his attention fast.

My brain's whirring so much, I need a fan in my skull. I lunge to my feet, stumbling to my kitchen on wobbly legs. When did I last eat?

A bowl of curry instant noodles and a sickly sweet energy drink later, I collapse back into my chair, breathing hard. *Focus, Frankie.*

The stakes are high on this one. Stupid dice don't know what they're talking about. Luca Bianchi is *not* a man I can sit back and watch die... but he's not someone whose attention I want, either. He got pissed off last month when a neighbor signed for a package for him. He's a very private, territorial person. A dangerous man.

He won't take well to discovering he's been hacked.

A glance at the clock makes sweat break out on my palms. It's past 3am. Time's running out for Luca.

"Crap. Double crap. Oh shit. Oh shit."

I got into his phones months ago. He's got three of them: one for business, one for family-personal, and one for *actual*-personal. He barely uses that one, but I think he likes the idea of having private space.

That's the phone I go into now, my fingers flying over the keyboard. I set an appointment in the calendar: *Get murdered* at 5am, then set a loud reminder to chime out until he swipes it off.

Is that enough? How will I know if he's seen it? I stare at the potted ivy vines trailing down the wall beside my desk, my eyes dry and heart pounding.

I should be sure. This is Luca Bianchi. I should be extra certain.

So I set a dozen more appointments and alerts on every piece of Luca Bianchi's tech that I've ever hacked. All his phones and his laptop. His smart watch and tablet. If he lives long enough to get in his car again, his sat nav will warn him too.

Then I dial everything up to maximum volume, sit back in my chair, and let them chime.

Two

Luca



Someone is fucking with me, which means that someone is going to die. This was already a shitty, waste-of-breath day, with one of my best moles in the police department caught stealing documents, and my favorite cooking show getting axed. I'm not in the fucking mood.

The first alert comes from my personal phone. My *really* personal phone. I've barely snatched it up from my nightstand and silenced the alarm before the others start to ring out.

All of them.

My laptop pings rhythmically from the kitchen counter, loud enough for the sound to float through the wall. All of my phones are chiming now, the volume dialed up even louder, and even my smart watch flashes and vibrates on the bureau.

What. The. Fuck.

Do I seem like the kind of man it would be fun to prank? Have I let myself appear soft? It's true that I don't relish violence the way some in the mob do, but that's a matter of personal taste. Not fear.

Whoever is doing this will die. Painfully. I will make an example of them.

Because this is my *space*. My territory. These are my fucking things. Whoever is doing this has clearly hacked all my tech, and for what? A stupid wake up call? Making me lose a few hours of sleep?

I swipe off another alert, then my tired eyes snag on the text. I've been glancing at the reminders, seeing without really reading, but my sleep-fogged brain is finally catching up.

The alerts all say the same thing: *Get murdered, 5am.*

Huh.

Well, if it's a prank, I guess it's slightly better. More unsettling. And if it's not... who the fuck would warn me like this? Everyone I know would call, or meet in person. Not hack my smart watch and personal phone.

It's still an invasion. Even if they're right, they'll pay. I dig the heels of my palms into my eyes, mind whirring as I plot out scenarios.

Who would want me dead?

Lots of people.

But who would have the guts to try it?

Not so many.

5am is not far away. I need a plan now.

My jaw cracks as I yawn, shaking my head and striding toward the shower, my personal phone gripped in one hand

and a switchblade in the other. Will I die in the next ten minutes? Unlikely. But the water will wake me up, will get a solution out of me, and besides...

I'm not meeting my maker in fucking pajama pants.

* * *

I stand outside a warehouse on the city docks, arms folded and a salty breeze tugging at my hair. Dawn's breaking, the horizon a burning red line, and waves slosh against the stone dock walls.

"This is bullshit." My cousin Sal stands at my side, arms crossed, his posture matching mine. Sal's always copied me, even when we were boys, and right now we've even got matching dark shadows under our eyes. "He came to your apartment? That's personal, Luca."

No shit. Aren't all assassination attempts pretty personal when it comes down to it?

I frown at the oil drum perched on the dock's edge. Two lower-downs are stuffing bricks through the hole, weighing it down, because the last thing I want is my hit man floating out to sea, bobbing around in the shipping lane.

"How'd you know he was coming?" Sal prods, and the hairs prickle on my neck. I shoot a glance at my cousin, but he's not watching. He's gesturing at our helpers, making them stuff the barrel quicker. The light's coming up fast, and we've all got shit to do today.

I only called him because he's head of clean up. Figured it would make this all go faster.

Now I'm wondering if Sal and I should have a chat.

"I always know."

Not true, but he doesn't need to hear that. A big part of my role is the mystique—people spew out their secrets faster when they think it's inevitable either way. Sal's always been jealous of my job; has always resented playing clean up. It's a vital task, but he thinks it's degrading. Following around after the big boys.

"I'll know about the next one, too. And I'll figure out who's sending them, no problem."

Sal shifts his weight, sweat beading on his thinning hairline. He still won't look at me. My eyes narrow.

"What do you think I'll do to them, Sal? When I figure out who wants me dead?" My voice is soft, but I don't need to yell to get my message across. And sure enough, when my cousin shrugs, the movement's jerky.

"You'll wipe 'em out, Luca."

"Course I will."

A hunch isn't proof. I won't kill a cousin on a hunch, and not in broad daylight right next to the last body I made. It's sloppy, and besides, the boss wouldn't be happy.

But a hunch can become proof, and if I'm right about Sal, he won't be breathing for very much longer. I might pity him

—he’s always been so tragic, with his droopy jowls and the whine to his voice—but that fucking hit man knocked my espresso maker off the kitchen counter. I loved that thing. I imported it from Milan.

My cousin jolts when I clap a hand on his shoulder, giving him a friendly squeeze. “You should take the day off, Sal. You seem stressed.”

We watch as our helpers shove the barrel over the wall’s edge, the metal grating over the rough stone. There’s a loud splash, the rush of bubbles... then nothing. I’m still gripping Sal’s shoulder. He wants to shake me off, but he won’t.

“I’m fine,” he says. “I’m fine.”

The choppy waves glint like steel in the rising sunlight.

“I need a trace,” I tell Sal, because he won’t know how to piece this together anyway. The knowledge won’t do him any good, even if my hunch is right. “IP address, phone number, social security. The whole deal. Send Alessandro to my place for eight.”

He sighs. “Sure, Luca.” He looks older already, but hey, *I* didn’t age him. He chose this nonsense. “You need a clean up crew at your apartment too?”

“Just my regular lady.” I already bleached all the blood and dealt with the signs of foul play. My normal cleaner Ola can handle the rest.

She’s discreet. Trustworthy, unlike some pieces of shit. And I really need one of her perogies today.

It's barely dawn, and I'm already sinking bodies at the docks. Someone hacked my fucking sat nav, and my espresso machine broke. Sometimes I think this life is not worth it, and those thoughts are crowding in fast this morning.

I push them all away. No time to brood just yet.

There's still one problem gnawing at my brain. I've got a hacker to hunt.

Three

Frankie



I fling a backpack onto my unmade bed, tugging the zips open and standing back with a huff. What do people pack when they run for their lives? Would *that* question be on an internet forum? I gaze around my messy bedroom, dazed and lost.

Luca Bianchi lived past 5am. I watched the fight through his laptop webcam on the kitchen counter, my heart in my mouth and my nails digging into my palms. Luca's a tall man, packed with lean muscle, but the hit man was *big*. A heavy-boned bruiser. I stood there and wished Luca wasn't so freaking stubborn, that he'd just disappeared and left an empty apartment for the hit man to find.

There was no sound through the webcam, but I flinched when the espresso machine hit the floor, shards of metal flying across the tiles. Luca loved that thing. He's going to be extra pissy, and if he finds me, he'll take it out on me.

The sat nav was overkill. An extra insult. I know that now, but I can't turn back time, can I?

I don't regret warning him either, even if it means I'm screwed now. I've never felt relief like seeing that hit man go down. Luca didn't drag it out or make it messy, and I like that about him. He doesn't relish gore like some men in his position. He's efficient. He gets the job done, and then he moves on.

If he finds me, will he kill me quickly too?

Oh my god. I need to get out of here. *Focus, Frankie.*

This is a bad time to have an easily-distracted brain. More than ever, I need to focus on one task at a time and not fixate on Luca Bianchi and his plump lips. Those thick, sooty eyelashes that would be feminine on another man. He could be a model, sure, but that doesn't mean I should stand here and daydream about him until he turns up and shoots me dead.

Would he do that? A gun doesn't seem like his style.

Shit. Double shit.

My movements sluggish, I force myself to pack while my skittish thoughts circle round and round in my head. I shove my passport, wallet, keys, dice, and a stack of emergency cash into my backpack. Then a spare tank top and three pairs of plain white cotton underwear.

A hairbrush.

Deodorant.

Toothbrush, toothpaste and soap.

Oh my god, do I need a weapon? If Luca turned up here, could I even concentrate enough to use one? What else should I take?

Hell. I am not equipped for this. I got carried away with my fixation on Luca Bianchi, and now I'm in uncharted territory with no map. Stupid crush.

Digging through my bedroom drawers, I find my grimy old pocket knife, then add the half empty plastic lighter I use to light my apple scented candles. It's the saddest weaponry you've ever seen, but it's all I've got. I'm a hacker, not a fighter, and it's not like the kitchen's kitted out. I *never* cook. I don't even own a cheese grater.

Running to the cupboards, I toss three packets of instant noodles into my backpack and zip it shut. Gotta go, gotta go. Every second, the risk gets greater of Luca finding me. I'm clattering across my living room, yanking the backpack onto my shoulders, when my phone buzzes in my pocket.

I freeze, heart pounding. Then lie to myself, just for a second.

Maybe it's Tabitha, or one of the other girls. Maybe it's a spam call.

I draw my phone out, fingers shaking. Why do I answer? Maybe some tragic, needy part of me wants to hear his voice.

"Hello, Francine." It's deep and warm in my ear. Like we're old friends catching up, but an old friend wouldn't call me that.

I lick my dry lips. “Actually, it’s Frankie.”

“Frankie,” he repeats, his tone still warm. Like we’re meeting over breakfast. Like he wants to reach through the phone and shake my hand. “You did a hell of a job on my tech, Frankie. Apparently if you hadn’t announced yourself like that, I might never have known you were there.”

Ah, yeah. There’s the anger I expected. The bite to his words.

“Sorry about your espresso machine,” I whisper.

A beat of silence. Then: “You watched what happened.”

I don’t answer, because I don’t need to. Luca already knows.

“Do you watch me often, Frankie?” He sounds irritated, but curious too. The mobster wants to figure me out, wants to make sense of me before he swats me like a gnat.

“Sometimes.” The word comes out all gravelly, so I clear my throat. “I like watching you cook. All I eat is instant noodles.”

There’s a soft laugh, and all the tiny hairs on my body stand on end. It’s a menacing laugh, and I should *not* get so flushed and tingly over it.

“That’s an invasion of my privacy, Frankie.”

I wrinkle my nose. “I know.”

What am I supposed to say? I’m a hacker. All I do is invade people’s privacy, and I figured Luca Bianchi of all

people would understand that.

People like us, we deal in secrets. It's our main currency, but apparently it's only okay for him to do it, or for it to happen to other people. *Men*.

"I'm hanging up now," I tell him, because I need to end this call. If he knows my number, he probably knows my address too. This conversation is a distraction, a way for him to buy time. "If you don't cause me any trouble, I won't hurt you either."

It's not an empty threat. I've got months' worth of material on this guy, and he has zero regard for the law. I could give Luca Bianchi one hell of a headache... if I lived long enough, anyway.

There's a slow inhale, then a gust of breath. I inch toward my front door, rummaging in my newly stuffed bag for my key. Why did I throw it in there first, then pile a load of crap on top? I suck at this.

"It's a pity," Luca says quietly, like he's talking to himself. "I could have used your skills, Frankie. I would have paid well for them, too. But the insult can't stand."

Got it! I jab the key in the lock, twisting it as one of my instant noodles packets slips out of my bag onto the floor. I kick it behind me in a rustle of plastic.

I always lock myself in when I'm at home, because I live in a fancy building with a bunch of rich men. I don't trust a

single one of them, and I *know* they all hate me. I scruff up the elevator with my sweatpants and battered sneakers.

That's one of the reasons I chose this building. I like pissing them off. It's funny.

The door swings open, and I sigh with relief at the empty hallway with its cream walls and potted palms. He should have come here quicker. It's not like him to make mistakes.

“Bye, Luca.”

“Wait—”

“I'm glad you're not dead. Don't trust your cousin Salvatore.” I hang up, bring up the call record, dig a pen out of my bag, and scrawl Luca's phone number on the back of my hand in messy blue ink. I vaguely recognize it: he's calling from his actually-personal cell. Didn't even block the number. Is he being sloppy, or does he want me to have it?

Doesn't matter. I toss my phone back into the apartment, slam the door and spin the key in the lock. I can go to ground for a few days. Figure things out.

Before long, Luca Bianchi will forget all about me.

If I don't call him, anyway.

Four

Luca



My hacker lives in one of the most expensive buildings in the city, in a two-bedroom apartment with a large balcony. If I wanted proof that she's skilled, here it is, because places like this take a lot of money. And if I wanted proof that she's unhinged, here that is too.

Because her apartment is wild. *Literally* wild, like one of those photos of nature reclaiming abandoned buildings. Every surface is covered with clusters of potted plants; everywhere I look are waxy green leaves and trailing vines. There are so many plants in her apartment, the air feels different from the hallway. More humid. Every room smells faintly of damp soil.

Running and leaving these plants behind must have hurt her. She's clearly attached, in a strange way. So she'll be back. I'm counting on it.

I shouldn't have called Frankie like that. It gave her too much warning, it let her escape, and I don't even know why I rushed into it. I was so impatient to speak with her. But it was

a long morning, so I'll forgive myself for the lapse in judgment, because it's not like she can hide from me forever.

Within hours of her alarms, I knew every single thing about her. Now I know her name and date of birth—and the fact that at twenty two, she's too young for me. I know where her estranged parents live. I've felt the clothes in her closet and sniffed the food in her fridge.

Frankie didn't lie when she told me she lives off instant noodles. It's disgusting. If I let her live, I'm going to force feed her vegetables.

Fidgeting with my personal phone, I stand on her balcony with the breeze playing over my cheeks. She hasn't called yet. Will she call? Probably not, since I threatened to kill her. The lights of the city glow under the stars, and I lean my elbows on the railing with a sigh.

I've been here all day, except for a few meetings in the afternoon. Don't want to go back to my own place. What's there for me, anyway? A broken espresso machine and the violation of being hacked; empty rooms and the lingering tang of bleach.

Sal might try again tonight. Put out another hit. I would if I were him, because his situation is now truly desperate. But even if he does, I won't be there. No one knows where I am.

“Come on, Frankie.” I drum my fingers on the railing, jaw tight. I want to nip this situation in the bud, that's all. It's not about hearing her raspy voice again.

Though she called me Luca, not Mr Bianchi. Like she really knows me. And no one ever sees me cooking, so I guess in a way she does.

The buzzing phone takes a weight off my shoulders. I answer quickly, pressing the handset to my ear, and ignore the rioting sensation behind my rib cage.

“Good evening, Frankie.”

There’s a long pause. I wait, breath held.

Then, quiet as the breeze: “Hi, Luca.”

All at once, the tension bleeds from my limbs. I roll my stiff neck, gazing down at the city lights, wondering which glowing golden square is hiding my hacker. “I wasn’t sure you’d call.”

“It’s a burner,” she says quickly, like I’m tracing her location. I probably should, but I’m not. “By the time you get here, I’ll be long gone.”

I tug at my collar, flicking the top button open. Relaxing at last. “I won’t bother, then.”

“Oh,” Frankie says. “Um. Good.”

“Where are you staying?” I’m not expecting an address or anything. She’s a smart girl, and I clearly can’t be trusted, but I’d like some visual details. Something to help me picture her.

The color of the walls, maybe, or what she dresses in to sleep. The precise shade of her dark hair. The security footage from this building was too grainy, though even those fuzzy

images of her were enough to make my throat dry. “Do you have somewhere safe for the night?”

Frankie snorts. My lips twitch. Yes, it’s a ridiculous question.

“I’m staying with a friend.”

Teeth gritted, I tamp down the hot rush of jealousy. “I see.” The pause stretches between us, until I can’t help myself. I need to ask. “A platonic friend?”

Frankie’s laugh is real now. Brassy and delighted. “You’re jealous,” she crows, and I smirk out at the rooftops. Her amusement is contagious. “If you wanted me to spend the night alone, you shouldn’t have chased me from my apartment, Luca.”

The smile drops off my face. “I *do* want you to spend the night alone.”

“Well, like I said.” She’s more serious now too. “I’m staying with a friend.”

“Another hacker?” Do they travel in packs? Have underground professional conferences? Is it a man?

“No,” Frankie murmurs. “You’d like her, though. She deals in information too, but she tricks it out of people in person. Flirts with them until they blab all their secrets.”

She doesn’t offer any more details, and I don’t ask. Useful or not, I don’t care about Frankie’s honey trap friend. Only the raspy girl on the phone.

“It is platonic,” she blurts when I don’t say anything more. “It’s not—it’s nothing like that.”

Relief settles over me, cool and soothing like the first drops of rain. I peer up at the dark clouds gathering, blocking the stars.

“You should come back here. Water your plants.” How long will they survive with her gone? It would be a shame for her to return to a wasteland. “Maybe I won’t kill you after all.”

Her soft puff of laughter makes my chest squeeze. “Such a great offer, Luca. Thank you.” You can hear the smile in her voice.

“You’re welcome,” I tell her. “Think it over.”

When the line goes dead, I slide the phone back into my pocket. The rain’s coming down faster now, soaking through my shirt and suit jacket, clinging to my hair, but I don’t go back inside. I stand out on the balcony and breathe in the scent of wind and wet stone, and feel the cold moisture seep through to my skin.

This silence after talking to Frankie, this emptiness in my chest... it feels like loss.

I need my hacker to call me again.

* * *

I do get a call, but not the one I want. It comes through to my family-personal cell a little after ten, and I roll my eyes before answering. I’m stretched out on Frankie’s sofa, a bag of

microwave popcorn burning my hip. Trashy, but after a handful, I do see the appeal. “Yes?”

“Luca,” Sal greets me. “Cousin, where are you tonight? Want to get a drink?”

He sounds nervous. He should be. More than anything, he wants to keep his distance from me—all of his survival instincts are screaming at him to stay away. But he needs me gone before I get concrete proof of what he’s done, and that means luring me out.

Sal doesn’t know about Frankie’s warning. Paired with my earlier hunch, that’s confirmation enough for me.

I flip over the paperback I stole off Frankie’s nightstand to glance at the front again. It’s a fantasy novel, with a mob of orcs and elves and practically nude busty women on the cover. “I’m reading.”

Sal chuckles. “Uh. Where?”

“Does it matter?” I turn a yellowed page with my thumb. “It’s a one-man job.”

“Right.” Sal’s breaths are shaky. This much stress is bad at his age. “So you don’t want a drink? I’m buying.”

I grin, my expression savage though there’s no one around to see. “There’s a first time for everything, huh?”

Sal forces a laugh, and you know, I don’t think this is purely about the role. He doesn’t just hate being the cleaner. This guy really hates my guts. My own blood.

It's a kick in the teeth. He's a few years older, but I saved his ass from getting kicked all through growing up. Should've let them stamp my slimy cousin into the ground.

“So you'll meet me at Vinny's?”

I rummage in the popcorn bag. “Tomorrow, maybe.”

Sal wants me dead by tomorrow, but hey—life is cruel. We can't always get what we want. For instance, I want a certain hacker girl balanced on my thighs. I want her raspy voice in my ear, begging me to touch her. And I want more of Ola's perogies, and for everyone to stop fucking calling me. Everyone except Frankie.

“Sure, maybe,” Sal says, playing it cool because he knows he's pushing too hard. This guy wants to gather secrets? Please. He's as subtle as a brick. “I'll see you at the boss's in the morning.”

He hangs up quickly so he's first. Such a child. I toss the phone onto Frankie's striped Moroccan rug, then find my place in her book again.

My hacker reads some smutty stuff, that's for sure.

I turn another page, eyebrows raised.

Five

Frankie



Luca Bianchi has made himself at home in my apartment. I don't know what I expected when I borrowed a laptop to log into my home security system, but it definitely wasn't the world's best dressed squatter, striding from room to room in his tailored gray suit.

I figured Luca might smash up my things. The computers, at the very least.

Then I figured he'd leave me the rubble there as a warning to stay out of his business.

Instead, after spending the night on my sofa, Luca's in my kitchen digging through the cupboards. I don't have sound so I can't hear what he's muttering, but from his jerky movements and the way his lips keep moving, I'm pretty sure he's cursing me out.

It's true, my kitchen is tragic. I never bothered to buy more than a single saucepan and a wooden spoon. A few plates and bowls and forks and shit came with the place, but mostly I eat my noodles out of mugs.

“He’s still there?”

A soft voice cuts through the quiet. My friend June places a steaming peppermint tea at my elbow, then settles at the kitchen table beside me. She sips from her own drink, her delicate eyebrows pinched in a frown, staring at Luca on the screen.

I shrug, my neck stiff from a night on June’s sofa. Her apartment is smaller than mine, all strangely shaped rooms and bright walls and streaming sunlight. Her wrought iron balcony overlooks the arts district.

It’s a nice place. I’m lucky to stay here, even if there are hardly any plants.

But watching Luca rummage through my kitchen cupboards is giving me this weird rush of homesickness. And when I turn to June, I can’t help noticing that she and Luca share the same thick, bronze hair; the same smooth, tan skin.

I always knew June was pretty. But now I get why men fall over themselves to tell her their dirty secrets.

If Luca Bianchi flashed me his dimples, I’d probably write down all my passwords. And if he flirted with me? Forget it. I’d be putty in his hands.

“What’s he looking for?” June tilts her head, watching him over the rim of her mug. Out of nowhere, I get the impulse to clap my hand over her eyes and stop her looking, because Luca’s taken off his suit jacket and rolled his white shirt to the elbows. His gray pants hug his toned ass and thighs, and god,

he's perfect. I don't want anyone else to see the shift of muscles under his clothes.

"Cooking equipment, probably." I take a sip of peppermint tea to soothe my tight throat. "I don't have any."

June huffs a laugh, nudging me with her elbow. "I could teach you to cook, you know, Frankie."

"I know." So could the internet. So could the back of food packets. But it just doesn't interest me—not unless it's Luca Bianchi doing it. Honestly, he could sit there tying and untying his shoelaces and I'd probably be transfixed, watching his clever fingers and the flex of muscle in his broad shoulders.

Right now, he's glaring at my sparse cupboards, his hands propped on his narrow hips. Biting my lip, I pull another burner phone from my pocket. It's a new one, just in case he tracked last night's. Somehow, I don't think he did.

The number scrawled on the back of my hand nearly washed off in the shower. I went over it this morning in permanent marker.

The phone rings once before Luca answers, whipping his cell from his pocket and pressing it to his ear. He's still glaring at my cupboards. "Frankie?"

"Yeah." On the screen, his shoulders relax an inch. "Um, hi. Good morning. There are pop tarts on the second shelf if you're hungry."

Luca stiffens again, his body going rigid on the screen, then he wheels around, accusing mossy eyes searching for the

camera.

That's the thing about plants. They draw the eye. You can fill an apartment with vines and leaves and flowers, and that's all anyone will see. Never the tiny black lenses peeking between the foliage.

"You're watching me again, Frankie." Luca's voice is rougher in the morning, but he doesn't sound mad. He sounds pleased. "Invading my privacy."

Hardly. "You're in *my* apartment. I'm not even hacking anything, I just logged into my own system."

"Did you watch me all night?" Luca presses. He rubs a hand over his jaw absentmindedly as he talks, and I can almost hear the rasp of stubble. What would that feel like under my fingertips? Or chafing against my skin? Does he *want* me to have watched him?

"Not all night," I lie.

Luca raises an eyebrow, still scanning for the camera. Behind him, the kitchen is a riot of clean dishes left stacked haphazardly on the draining board; wild, rangy plants; and buttery sunshine filtering through the open window.

"You ate my popcorn. And you read my book."

I see the exact moment Luca spots the camera tucked on a shelf between two spider plants. The frown melts from his handsome face, and his smirk... it makes my toes curl.

"Oh, my," June murmurs, fanning herself. Shit, I forgot she was here. I spin the laptop screen away from her, shrugging

when she snorts and rises to leave.

I'm being petty and ungrateful. I know that, I do.

But I do *not* want my friend drooling over Luca Bianchi. He's mine.

"Is someone else there?" My mobster is frowning again.

"It's just my friend June. She's gone into another room."

Luca stays silent and thoughtful, and I miss that smirk so badly it hurts. And though I could happily stay on the line to this man for hours, I won't kid myself that he'd want that. I need to make this call worth his while.

"Did you check out your cousin Salvatore?"

Luca grunts, then turns to find the pop tarts, probing one-handed at the shelf. "Yes. He is suddenly very interested in my whereabouts."

I bet. Luca's cousin must feel like he's on a timer, the seconds ticking down as he gets more and more desperate. "Don't tell him where you are."

"Worried about your plants?" Luca asks lightly. He's found the pop tart box. He fishes out a chocolate one and drops it in the toaster.

"No." My stomach cramps, but it's not hunger. It's fear. "I'm worried about you, obviously. Why do you think I warned you the first time? I knew it would screw up my life."

Luca's quiet at that. The air shimmers above the toaster from the heat.

Finally, he says, “I am not an easy man to kill.”

No kidding.

If he was more normal, more *mortal*, maybe I would have more things to say right now. Or maybe I’d have gone home already, and we could be eating pop tarts together.

But Luca Bianchi is not a friendly house guest. He’s a mobster, and he promised to kill me. Even if he’s decided to let me live, that doesn’t mean he wants to hang out and eat breakfast. Why am I kidding myself about this?

“Frankie?” Luca sounds cautious. Like he can sense my drop in mood through the phone. “Are you still there?”

His chocolate pop tart jolts in the toaster. I squeeze my burner phone, palm clammy.

“Your breakfast is ready.”

“Well, I’d hardly call this food.”

“Have a good day, Luca. Don’t meet up with your cousin.”

“Wait, Frankie—”

I hang up on him, breathing fast. On the screen, Luca stares at his phone, jaw clenched, his chest rising and falling under his shirt. For a moment, I think he might smash his cell. Might toss it against the wall and shower my kitchen tiles with glass. That’s what mobsters do, right? They break things. They throw violent tantrums.

But Luca rolls his neck, eyes closed and face calm, then tucks his phone back in his pocket. He plucks a plate off the

draining board, lifts his chocolate pop tart from the toaster, and strides from the room without another glance at the camera.

So controlled. Always so controlled.

I mean, I could follow him. Watch him in the other rooms, too.

But I don't. I press June's laptop shut, half-giddy with homesickness.

Six

Luca



Once you've spotted one camera you start seeing them all, watching through the wild thicket of houseplants like panthers' eyes. It's unsettling, not knowing whether Frankie's watching at any given moment or not, but I suppose it's been like this for a while, even if I didn't realize it. She's been watching me. Viewing my life like a soap opera.

She probably knows about my doomed cooking show.

She probably knows *all* my habits, and yet she still watches me. It's liberating.

Has Frankie seen me naked? Has she watched me jerk my cock?

I'm glad, suddenly, that I don't fuck around like most men in my position, because there's no chance Frankie's ever seen me in bed with another girl. Sal's always teased me for it, calling me a monk, but it's a trust thing. I don't let my guard down. Not for anyone, and certainly not for some meaningless fling.

Turns out I never *had* a guard up with Frankie. She sidled right past it, all before I even knew her name.

At first, I hated the feeling of being watched. When all those alerts went off in my bedroom, I was almost angrier with her than with the hit man, because *I'm* the watcher, damn it. I'm the man who knows everyone's raw little soft spots. No one has shit on me.

But since talking to her a few times... it's different with Frankie.

I don't mind her watching. In fact, as the day wears on, I like it.

I test her, sometimes. It's clear she won't call me just to chat, no matter how much I might want her to. But she'll respond if I prompt her in some way, if it seems like I can't find something or want to ask her about the apartment.

It's funny. She's not even here, and she's the most responsive host you've ever seen.

"Reboot it," she says, calling me mid-morning when I 'accidentally' knock the router off a bookcase. "The password's taped to the bottom."

"Not very secure," I tease her, so glad to hear her husky voice. I set the router back in its place, watching the lights turn green one by one.

Frankie makes a noise like *meh*. The audible version of a shrug. "You can't hack paper."

No, I guess you can't. Though if anyone could, it'd be her.

I last an hour before I need to hear her voice again, then I fill a watering can from the kitchen to the brim and start strolling between rooms, waving it aloft in a visual threat.

“Don’t,” Frankie blurts as soon as I answer her call. “I watered them two days ago. None of them need it. Seriously, you’ll give them root rot.”

“Maybe they deserve it. They’ve been hiding your cameras.”

Frankie groans. “Luca! Don’t hurt my plants. Please.”

I wouldn’t. I know by now, even if Frankie hasn’t realized yet, that I’d rather wrestle a hundred hit men than make her unhappy, even for a moment.

“Come home, sweetheart,” I try next. “I’m getting lonely.”

She laughs, and it sounds strangled. High-pitched and breathless. “No way. You’re trying to honey trap me. Batting your big, manly eyelashes at the camera. You’re acting all flirty and sexy and seductive right now, but when I get there, we both know that’s it. It’s curtains for Frankie.”

Curtains? Who says that?

“I won’t hurt you,” I promise, then my voice drops. “No more than a nibble.”

Frankie’s inhale is shaky. “This isn’t real,” she declares, clearly for her own benefit as much as mine, “and I’m not an idiot, Luca.”

I need to leave for a few hours after that. Partly to get some work done, to pick up fresh clothes and check on my apartment, and partly to burn off some of the mounting frustration weighing on my chest. Why won't she come home? Why the fuck did I ever threaten to kill her? Have I ever been more short-sighted in my life?

Talk about a mess.

Frankie won't trust me—and yet every phone call leaves me more addicted.

* * *

One night on Frankie's sofa was bad enough. By the time I'm standing over it at midnight, arms crossed and jaw tight, I'm still not ready for a second.

I don't sleep well. I never have. And stretching out on these hard, lumpy cushions, with my legs bent and my neck craned at a weird angle? It's a lost cause. Maybe I won't even bother.

My phone buzzes in my pocket.

"I do have a bed, you know," Frankie murmurs.

I pinch the bridge of my nose, my whole body crackling to life the way it does when I know she's watching. Suddenly, I feel everything: the warm air on my cheeks; the brush of my cotton shirt against my chest; the coiling tension at the base of my spine. "I was waiting for an invitation."

"Kind of ironic."

I exhale. “Yeah.”

When I say I wanted an invitation, I mean I wanted Frankie here, too. Pulling me into her bedroom by the hand, then kicking the door shut behind us and pushing me down onto the messy tangle of her sheets.

Fuck. I’m still not one hundred percent sure what she looks like. I only have that grainy security footage to work with.

“What color are your eyes, sweetheart?” I stroll to her bedroom, my free hand tucked in my pocket.

“Brown,” Frankie says slowly. Like she’s waiting for the punchline. “Why?”

“I want to picture you. Do you have freckles?”

“Some.” There’s a pause, and I can practically hear her chewing her lip. “Not many. Do you want me to have freckles?”

It sounds like a line, but I don’t care what she looks like. However Frankie is, *that’s* how I want her. But how do you say shit like that without sounding like a liar?

“It would give me a game to play,” I say instead. “I could join the dots with my tongue.” Frankie says nothing, but there’s a muted swallow. A distant rustle of fabric. “Where’s your friend June tonight?”

“Out on a job.”

I frown, coming to a stop at the closed door. “Are you safe while she’s gone?”

Frankie's laugh is throaty. "The only person hunting me is you."

"That you know of," I point out, because I'm clearly not the only person she's hacked. Fuck, why does that make me so jealous? Does she watch other men the way she watches me?

"I've never made my presence known before."

I grunt. I'm still pissed off at the thought of her staring at other men through their webcams. It makes my skin hot and itchy under my clothes.

"And I've never... fixated on anyone else." Shit, it's like she can hear my grumpy thoughts. "I grab their info, in and out. So there's way less risk."

I nudge Frankie's bedroom door open, feeling lighter already. "That's good. I don't want you watching others like this."

She makes a loud huff. "Why would I do that?" Wherever the camera is in her bedroom, Frankie must see my sudden grin, because her voice warms like she's in on the joke. "I'm very picky, Luca. Like you and your cooking shows."

"Only the best," I agree, nudging her bedroom door shut then crossing to flick on a bedside lamp. Soft, golden light fills the room, thousands of green leaves casting shadows on the walls. "Can you see me right now?" I flick my top shirt button open. Frankie pauses.

"... Yes."

“And do you like what you see?” I undo another button. Another one. The sides of my shirt sag open as I go, baring my chest to the golden light.

“You know I do,” Frankie grits out. “That’s why you’re doing it. You’re playing me.”

“No, this isn’t a game.” I flick open the last button, then shrug one arm out of my shirt. Switch my phone to the other hand, then drop it to the rug in a flutter of white fabric. “Not a bad one, anyway. I mean it. I want you here, sweetheart. I want to taste every inch of you. I want you sighing in my ear.”

“But I’m not there,” Frankie says, and fuck, I love when she states the obvious. I can picture her adorable little frown; can imagine smoothing it out with my thumb. “And if I were, you’d strangle me sooner than kiss me.”

“Not true,” I tut, my hand drifting to my belt. “Not true at all. Ah, Frankie, I thought you really knew me by now.”

Her silence is heavy. My hacker doesn’t like being wrong.

“Have you watched this before, Frankie?” I palm the hard length of my cock through my suit pants. “Have I put on a private show?”

“No.” My hacker sounds equal parts irritated and engrossed. “I saw you walk past the kitchen shirtless once, but that’s it. I wouldn’t have watched you do *that*. Not without you knowing. It would have been creepy, Luca.”

True. But surprisingly I don’t hate the idea, so long as it was Frankie. I’m strangely disappointed to hear she’s kept me

so pure.

“Will you watch me now?” My voice is pure gravel. Fuck, I want her. I’m still gripping myself, squeezing and rubbing, but it’s not enough like this, muted by the fabric. “I’m going to do it and think of you. Do you want to see that?”

Her silence weighs on me until I think I might suffocate. “*Frankie.*”

“Yes,” she whispers. “I’ll watch.”

Fuck.

“Touch yourself,” I tell her, wrenching at my belt. I want these clothes off right this second. Every part of me is suddenly overheated, too sensitive to every brush of fabric.

“That’s not *watching*,” Frankie says, but after a moment I hear the catch in her breath. I know she’s doing it.

Where is she? In a guest bedroom? Crammed in a corner on an airbed? Sitting at a kitchen table, legs gathered up on her chair?

“Where are you?” I need to know. “Describe the room. Set the scene.” My belt slithers free, and then I’m shoving my pants down as she tells me in stilted tones about a sofa, a dark living room, the stars shining through glass balcony doors, and her oversized t-shirt and white cotton panties. Her dark hair gathered in a messy bun.

My boxers go too. I kick everything off then crawl onto Frankie’s unmade bed, flopping down onto my back and staring up at the ceiling with the phone pressed to my ear.

The bed covers smell like her. Like soap and black pepper and green leaves, and the very faint scent of sweat. I groan, snatching up a pillow and crushing it to my face. I breathe her in deeply, my hips rocking up against the air.

“You smell so fucking good, sweetheart. I want to rub you all over me.”

Frankie chokes out a laugh. “You look insane, Luca.”

“I don’t care.” I toss away the pillow then take my cock in hand, spreading a bead of precum over the head with my thumb. “I know how you smell before I know how you look. *That’s* insane.”

She hums in agreement, but she can’t hide the way her breaths are coming faster. There’s more rustling fabric down the phone.

“Are you doing it?” I bark. I sound harsh, but I can’t help it. I need fucking details. I’ve never needed to *know* something so badly in my life. “What are you doing? Are you petting your little clit? Are you fucking yourself on your fingers?”

Frankie moans, the sound ragged. “Yes. *Shit*. Yes, both those things.”

“Good.” I’m lightheaded, and it must be all the blood in my cock. I’ve never been so hard. I’m fucking into my own grip, mattress creaking and hips flexing, and I’m rigid in my hand. A steel pipe. “Good girl.”

Frankie whimpers, and I grind my teeth. She likes that, huh? Well, there’s more where that came from, just as soon as

she shows her goddamn face.

I work my cock in a brutal rhythm. Not trying to put on a show like I said, but seeking relief, my nerves sparking under my skin with every little feminine breath in my ear. I fuck my fist like I'm truly alone, like I have no idea she's watching me, like I've thought of so many times since discovering her, and it feels wrong and so fucking right.

The mattress creaks. Sweat beads on my back, then drips onto the sheets. They'll smell like me, now, too. Like the both of us.

"Come home, Frankie." I squeeze myself harder, gripping so tightly it hurts. Jerking myself roughly, like I want to chafe myself raw, punishing myself for scaring her away in the first place. "Say you'll do it. Say you'll come home. Look at this: this cock is yours now. It's waiting for you. Come home and ride it."

Come and drench me in your scent.

Come and claim me like I'm going to claim you.

Frankie lets out a strangled groan. "But you'll hurt me."

"No." I don't want her to even fucking say it. "I will never do that. Because you are *mine*."

Through the phone, I hear her breath seize. I hear her telltale whimpers, and clench my jaw at her helpless squeak. And when Frankie gasps out my name, that's what tips me over the edge; that's what sends hot, white streaks of come lashing over my fist. My body coils up tight, my muscles

tensing rock hard, and a tendon stands out in my neck as I groan between my teeth, coming so hard it edges into pain.

Afterward, I stare up at the ceiling, ears ringing. My stomach rises and falls, and I'm burning hot. Covered in a sheen of sweat.

"Frankie," I plead when I can speak again, and I sound broken, even to my own ears. An addict begging for a bigger fix. Maybe that's what softens her in the end.

Because there's a slow exhale. A rustle as she shifts the phone against her ear.

Then: "I'll do it," she says. "I'll come home."

Seven

Frankie



I've made a lot of crazy decisions lately, especially where Luca Bianchi is concerned. I consult my dice before I leave June's apartment, scattering them across the scrubbed wood of her kitchen table, but they give me the wrong answer again. They tell me to stay away.

"They're just dice, hon." June wraps an arm around my shoulders, squeezing me into her warmth even though she's smaller than me. I don't know if it's her soft voice or her sunny apartment or her fresh daisy scent, but June always makes me feel like a little kid again, crawling into my mom's lap. "You don't need to listen to them if you don't want to."

Well. I don't regret warning Luca about his hit man, and the dice would have let him die, so... maybe June's right. Maybe I need a new way of making big choices.

I guess I could ask Luca's opinion. That thought nudges at me as I walk the twelve blocks home, my backpack straps cutting into my shoulders. He's smart as hell. And he'd

probably give me even better answers than Tabitha, because Luca knows me more than anyone.

And I know him.

He's not going to hurt me. He's going to keep me, and covet me, and I've known it for a while now. Maybe that's what scared me into staying away.

Because I'm no prize. Some days I can barely look people in the eye, and my houseplants get more vitamins than I do. I have carpal tunnel in my right wrist from spending too many hours on the computer, and I wear baggy clothes so the seams won't bother me.

Luca's going to be so disappointed when he sees me for the first time. Who has he been picturing? Some cute, girly girl like June? An athletic beauty like Tabitha? Instead, he's getting a gremlin in baggy sweatpants.

By the time I reach my building, I'm scowling so hard that the doorman jerks back, palms raised.

"Excuse me," I growl, stomping past to the elevator.

I chose this building because I'm out of place. Because of the faintly horrified expressions of my fancy neighbors whenever I cross the lobby with another grocery bag filled with instant noodles. I *wanted* to be weird, to set people on edge, to shake up their perfect worlds, but as I jab the elevator button, for the first time in my life, I wish I could fit in.

If I wore crisp designer clothes and skillful makeup, I wouldn't look out of place next to the model-handsome Luca

Bianchi.

If I could make small talk and tell pleasant jokes with strangers, maybe he could take me on dates. Introduce me to people as his girlfriend.

But I don't do those things. I'm not that girl, and as the elevator swoops upward, my black mood gathers around me like storm clouds. I bet he's not even there. I bet he got what he wanted—my agreement to come home—then promptly lost interest. I bet he over-watered my plants, too.

I bet, I bet.

Grump, grump, grump.

I stomp so hard down the hallway to my apartment that the door swings open before I reach it.

“Hello.” Luca leans in the doorway, arms crossed over his toned chest, his mossy eyes sparkling with amusement. “What put you in such a snit? I heard you coming from three blocks away.”

“No, you didn't,” I say pointlessly. Obviously he didn't. Luca knows how to make jokes, because he is a normal human being. The jerk.

Sighing, Luca pushes my door wider, then steps back to let me inside. Immediately, I'm hit with the muggy, green scent of my apartment, and some of my anger settles. Checking the first few pots, I find dry soil. Not parched, but not soggy.

“I didn't water them.” Luca stands at my back, arms still crossed, and his voice is harder now. He's defensive. “You can

check every single pot, or you can take my word for it.”

Somehow I think there’s a right answer here.

“I know you didn’t.” My elevator tantrum aside, it wouldn’t have been elegant. Luca doesn’t make sloppy plays. “But houseplants are tricky. Sometimes they get thirsty and sometimes they don’t.”

“I see.” Luca waits while I kick off my sneakers and drop my backpack to the floor, then make my way down the hall. I check every pot, even the ones where I need to climb onto a chair or table top. Luca sighs when I do that, moving close enough to catch me if I fall.

Should I have greeted him before the plants? How can I do that when he’s so handsome I can barely look straight at him?

“Which one is your favorite?” I ask part way round the living room, spinning a peace lily to give the rear leaves more light.

Luca thinks for a moment, then mutters, “The one on the bookcase with the vines.”

“English Ivy.”

He exhales again. “Yeah. I guess so.” Luca really sighs a lot around me. He’s lucky he’s in a room with so many plants, or he might become oxygen deprived.

He’s mad at me. This first meeting isn’t what he wanted. Because *I’m* not what he wanted? Sometimes I hate being right. Should have listened to those dice.

“Well?” The mobster waits until I’ve checked every last plant in my apartment. We’re standing in my bedroom, staring at each other across the expanse of my bed. The covers are straightened, the pillows fluffed and piled up. It’s the first time the bed’s been made since I bought it.

“Well what?” I’m not good with open questions, and last night Luca lay there naked and touched himself. A very distracting memory. I saw it all on June’s laptop screen, and my abdomen feels heavier just thinking about it, aching and warm.

Luca huffs and spreads his arms. He’s wearing a dove gray shirt and black pants today, and the fabric shifts against his toned chest when he moves, tension pulling on the buttons.

I frown at them, mentally urging one to pop open.

“Do you want me to leave, Frankie?”

I dart a glance at Luca’s face. His jaw is hard, his eyes narrowed. He was so happy to see me only a few minutes ago.

“If you want,” I mumble. I’m sure not going to beg him to stay. A girl’s gotta have some dignity, and I’ve been running short lately.

“So that’s it.” Luca props one hand on his hip, rubbing the other over his jaw. Watching me with those cold, assessing eyes. “You hack me, you phone-fuck me, and now you’re done. Am I not what you wanted? You’ve watched me enough. You knew what you were signing up for.”

I shrug, so miserable. I knew he'd have second thoughts, but I didn't think I'd screw it up *this* quickly. This conversation barreled off the rails the second I stepped through the door, and I have no idea how to force it back on track.

“You're either very brave or very stupid, Frankie.” I choke out a laugh. I'm neither of those things, but there's a real warning in Luca's eyes. They're dark and glittering. “But once I walk out that door, you can't watch me anymore. Do you understand? I can't allow it. Next time I won't be so forgiving.”

Threats, always threats. I wet my lips. “I won't watch you.”

Luca's expression hardens even more. “Well, then,” he says, and then he's striding around the bed. Yanking me close by the elbow, and kissing me hard enough to bruise. I make the world's most embarrassing squawking noise, and it's my first kiss, so there's no way I'm any good. But Luca lets me wind my arms around his neck, burying my fingers in his bronze hair, and he growls with approval when I crush myself against his chest.

“I liked you better on the phone,” he snarls, and yeah. That's it. That's the moment when I crack open down the middle. Luca Bianchi might as well have buried an ax in my rib cage.

“I'm not good with people.” I press the words against his neck, voice shaking.

A harsh laugh. “No shit.”

It's my first kiss, and that's supposed to be happy, I think. Romantic, even. But though Luca makes my nerves spark to life, though he overwhelms my senses in the best way, I'm too raw and hollow to really enjoy it.

He nips my bottom lip. I pull away.

Luca Bianchi steps back, face carefully blank. A stranger to me again.

He reaches out, ruffling my dark bangs with a fingertip. "Be seeing you, Frankie. Stay out of my fucking tech."

Then he turns around... and he's gone.

* * *

With time to replay our meeting over and over in my head, I can see all the points where I went wrong. Luca was excited to see me; I was so nervous I ignored him for the houseplants. He wanted smiles; I scowled at him. He asked if I didn't want him, and all I did was shrug and say he could leave.

This is why I'm better online. In written form. I can have time to think, to read the situation, to figure out what I really want to say.

When I crawl into bed after a long, scalding shower, my sheets smell like him. It's still morning, but I don't care. I'm gonna sleep all day. I recognize Luca's scent from our kiss, but I like to think I'd know it either way. It's so him. Storm clouds and smoky cologne. Sharp and electric and unforgiving.

I bury my face in the pillows and sigh. I don't cry—much. What is there to cry over? I was always going to screw it up.

But as I bury my face in soft cotton that smells like him, I sure wish Luca Bianchi would let me watch him for a while longer.

Eight

Luca



This is a very bad time for my cousin Sal to try to kill me. Hours after leaving my hacker, I need to *think*, damn it, to go over where I went wrong with Frankie. My instincts are screaming at me, squirming in my brain, letting me know that I missed something big.

I hate missing things. It feels like fucking amateur hour, and I didn't live to my thirties in *this* family by stepping wrong. I know people. I play them like fiddles.

All except Frankie.

I've never felt out of control like that. Exposed and raw, like a nerve. Hurt and embarrassed and so pissed off. I was cruel with her, harsher than I needed to be, and though she rejected me first, it's not sitting right in my stomach.

I liked you better on the phone.

Why the hell did I say that? When I close my eyes, I can feel the exact way she stiffened against me. The way she went wooden in my arms, practically vibrating with hurt.

I meant that she seemed to like *me* better on the phone, and I preferred that dynamic. I liked her breathy and eager and sweet in my ear, not stomping around and ignoring me, huffing like she couldn't wait for me to leave.

Maybe I read it all wrong. Maybe I made a fool of myself.

Thinking about the way I touched myself for her... I screw my eyes shut, my face hot.

"Luca," the boss clips out. "Are we keeping you awake?"

We're gathered in his study, surrounded by polished dark wood and bookcases groaning with leather hardbacks that have never been cracked. All his inner circle are here, getting an update on business. Movements in our territory. Plans for the politicians. I should be listening, because this is my area. I'm the one who pulls all the strings.

"No, sir." I force myself to listen, ignoring the excited way Sal's preening across the room. Yeah, he definitely thinks he's in line for my job. Bullshit. I meet his eyes, expression hard, and the asshole nearly wets his pants.

I need to deal with my cousin. Sal's a loose end, and I've got bigger problems.

But bigger problems or no, another hit man broke into my apartment when I was gone. Ola told me about the damage he left, the broken door and boot prints, whispering in my ear when I came home to change. Her hands were white-knuckled on her mop handle.

I sent her home and told her to stay away until it's safe. I'll pay her either way, but I don't need Ola's death on my conscience. Plus I love those perogies.

"Luca," the boss says, "go round the members' clubs today. I want dirt on the new candidates. And take one of these assholes with you."

"Sal," I say, eyes fixed on my cousin as my smile spreads wide. He goes chalk white, wriggling in his chair. "I'll take Sal."

"Good." A meaty hand waves in the air, dismissing us. We all stand, wood chairs creaking in relief. "Get it done."

Oh, I will.

* * *

I call Frankie in the early evening from a pig farm twenty miles outside the city, watching hundreds of muddy swine chew up the body of my cousin. It gives me no pleasure except the satisfaction of a task ticked off my list, and the knowledge that the hit men should stop coming for me—for a while, at least.

The boss won't be happy about this. But he's never happy, so what's new?

And he won't care once he hears about the hit men. At the risk of sounding like a child on the schoolyard, Sal started it.

Pigs are good for this. See, who needs a cleaner anyway? These pigs are doing a better job of body disposal than Sal

ever did, eating him bones, boots and all, and standing out in the countryside is almost restful if you can get past the crunching.

Frankie takes a long time to pick up. For a minute, I worry she's tossed her latest burner away already—or worse, that I fucked up so badly that she'll never speak to me again.

“Hello?” Her voice is wobbly and thin.

“Frankie.” Surely no one else would call this number, but she still sucks in a shocked breath when she hears my voice.

“Oh. Luca.”

Yeah.

Oh, Luca is about all I deserve after some of the stuff I said to her. The more distance I get from this morning, the more our meeting changes in my mind. It's like I'm viewing it from new angles. From her cameras, maybe, tucked away between the leaves.

I don't look good in these reruns.

Because Frankie was tense. Terrified. So nervous it infected me too, set me on edge, and what did I do? Did I set her at ease? No. I escalated.

I threatened to kill her all those days ago, and then when I finally lured her home, I lost my temper with her. Fuck, *I* ought to be in there with those pigs.

“Um,” she says, because I haven't spoken yet. Too busy kicking my own ass. “What's up?”

“Nothing much.” I squint into the sunset, at the dying rays of bloody light. “Getting rid of a body. You remember Salvatore?”

There’s a long pause. Then, so hollow: “Are you threatening me again? I said I won’t watch you anymore.”

Thud. That’s the feeling of my heart slamming to the base of my rib cage, dropping a sickening way down my body. I’ve really fucked up if Frankie’s still scared of me. And I dig the heel of my palm into my eye, grinding hard enough to hurt as I stare out over the rolling grassy hills.

“I’m not threatening you, sweetheart.”

Another soft noise. “Sweetheart, huh? You really do like me better on the phone.”

Ah, shit. “I shouldn’t have said that to you. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Yes, you did.”

“I *didn’t*. I loved you in person too. Are you kidding me? With those cute little bangs? Those retro sneakers? I just didn’t love you pushing me away like that.” I swallow hard, pulse thudding in my ears, but she’s still not saying anything. I keep going. “You were so beautiful and clever and you wouldn’t even look at me, Frankie. After everything we did. Do you know how badly I wanted you to look at me?”

“I was nervous,” she whispers. I squeeze the phone until it creaks. “I didn’t mean to be rude. I just—I panicked.”

Fuck. My heart. “I know. I know that now. Please let me come back. We’ll try again, okay? And you’ll look at me, and I won’t be an asshole.”

“What if I don’t?” Frankie wails, so loud I hold the phone away from my ear. “What if I can’t?” And she sounds so melodramatic that I have to laugh. It bursts out of me, echoing over the hillside. The closest pigs pause their chewing, snorting at me before they duck back down for another bite.

It’s no way to go, chewed up on a pig farm. But then, Sal doesn’t care anymore, does he?

“Stop laughing!” She’s telling me off, but I can hear the reluctant smile in her voice. We’re getting somewhere, thank god. The ice is thawing. “That was my first kiss, and look how it ended! I don’t know if I can do *any* of this, Luca.”

That sobers me up. “I didn’t know it was your first.”

“Would you have been sweeter?”

My mouth twists. “Probably not.” I am who I am. “I was so fucking hungry for you, I could barely see straight. But I wouldn’t have left like that. And there would have been second and third kisses, Frankie. Other things, too.”

She blows out a slow breath. “...Yeah? What other things?”

She’s giving me an opening. I gaze up at the heavens. Thank god.

“What else would I have done to you?” I wait for the last scrap of Sal disappear, then turn on my heel and stride away in

my rubber boots. The farmer knows better than to come out and talk to me while I'm here, so it's a clear walk back to the mud-splattered car. I put her on speaker as I fold into the driver's seat. "I can tell you, Frankie, but I'd rather show you in person. I'll need a shower first, though. I smell like pig farm."

She giggles, and it's the sweetest sound filling the car. I flex my grip on the steering wheel, pulling over the bumpy track toward the highway. The evening light is soft, tinted the exact same shade of pink as her lips.

"You can shower here," Frankie offers, so shy.

I tilt the rear view mirror, watching Sal's final resting place slide into the distance. "I'm on my way."

Nine

Frankie



He's coming back. Oh my god, Luca's coming back. I stand at the foot of my bed, body frozen and mind racing at a hundred miles per hour. Should I bathe? No, I already did that. Should I clean? Well, he's already seen my mess.

Oh, god. What if I can't look at him again? What if I screw it up for good this time?

Because Luca Bianchi should come with a warning. I knew he was beautiful, obviously, but seeing him through a webcam or in photos online versus seeing him in person were very different experiences. It was like spotting a mountain lion a few feet away instead of in a grainy photo on a news website, staring at you from the roadside and looking hungry.

My heart rate spiked. Adrenaline coursed through my body.

And I turned into a complete idiot.

If I had more warning this time, a few days to prepare, I'd make extra sure that Luca feels welcome when he gets here.

Maybe I'd buy him some kitchen equipment, or fresh ingredients for the fridge. Maybe I'd set out a towel for him, like this is a hotel, and put a foil-wrapped chocolate on his pillow.

Hey, I've got towels. I can do that right now.

I pick out my favorite one for him, a fluffy midnight blue one, and brush off any tiny specks of lint before balancing it on the bathroom counter top.

“Um.” My voice bounces off the tiles. I've never invited a man here before. I never *really* invited Luca the first time—he just showed up. Will he expect something? A freshly made drink pushed into his hand? A peck on the cheek like a 1950s housewife?

Sinking slowly into my panic, I stare at the white bathroom tiles and forget to blink. My brain's buzzing and rattling around in my skull, and I should *do* something. Change out of my sweatpants and baggy black t-shirt, maybe. Wash up the bowl and mug from my lunch.

God knows how long I stand there staring. However long it takes to drive here from a pig farm, I guess, because a brisk knock on my door makes me jump.

“Shit.” I slip out of the bathroom and tiptoe down the hall. Like if he doesn't hear me coming, that evens things up somehow. “Double shit.”

Luca stares at me when I pull the door open. Too late, I remember I went to bed with wet hair and now my head looks

like a bird's nest.

My gaze skates away from his mossy green eyes. Travels down his toned chest and gray button-down shirt; his black suit pants and leather shoes. He must have worn those farmer boots out in the country, because there are splatters of mud on his pants, but they start just below the knee.

I wrinkle my nose and address his stomach. "You really do smell bad."

Luca huffs a laugh. He tips my chin up, waiting until I meet his eyes again, and the smile that spreads over his face...

It's warm. So delicious, like sinking into a hot bath. It's impossible not to smile back.

"Hello, Frankie."

I force my lungs to work again. Wrap my hand around his wrist. "Hi, Luca." With a tug, I pull him inside before he can change his mind.

* * *

"This is your towel." I point needlessly at the blue heap on the bathroom counter.

Luca nods at it solemnly. "Nice to meet you." He's very silly for a mobster. I didn't realize that from watching through his webcam.

I brush past him to get the water going, but keep one eye fixed on the large mirror above the sink. Luca's undressing.

He knows I'm watching, too, because he winks at me, flicking his shirt buttons open one by one.

I get this swooping sense of déjà vu, and then I'm gone again. My brain has fritzed out, and all I can do is stand there like an idiot and watch him out of the corner of my eye.

"You're welcome to join me." Luca tugs his belt through the loops, the tendons in his forearms flexing. "Do you have another towel?"

Wordlessly, I leave the room to fetch one. By the time I come back, I'm breathing normally again.

I wouldn't say it's going well, not exactly. I'm clearly acting like a crazy person, but Luca doesn't seem mad this time. He seems accepting. Even fond. And when I step back into the bathroom, nudging palm fronds aside so I can close the door behind me, Luca smiles at me in warm, shirtless welcome.

"I wasn't sure you'd come back." He takes my pink towel, still damp from this morning, and places it beside his on the counter.

I frown at the shower spray. Steam curls toward the ceiling. "Where else would I go?"

Luca hums. "Nowhere, I hope." Then his hands are on me, warm and dry and so much bigger than mine.

He squeezes my shoulders. Kneads the small muscles until my tension drains away, gazing at me softly the whole time.

And once my shoulders slump and I sway in his hold, he starts touching me in other places, too.

He runs his hands down my arms, the tiny hairs standing on end like I've been electrified. He rubs circles onto my palms with his thumbs, and then he reaches up again. Cups my neck; strokes my jaw; ruffles my bangs.

“You like doing that.”

His teeth flash as he grins. “So I do.”

I don't mind. My mom used to say that if there was anything in my favor, it's that I'm not vain. Luca can do anything he likes to my hair.

Since he's touching me so much, I figure I'm allowed to touch him back. I start simple, resting my palms on the hard swells of muscle of his chest. Brown hair dusts his bare skin, and lower down, his stomach is ridged. I can feel his heartbeat thumping beneath my hand.

“Will you kiss me again?”

Luca leans down, his nose brushing mine before our lips meet. It's gentler than earlier. Hazier, too. Like we're sinking into each other, tongues moving in a slow, lazy dance.

Heat coils around us. The air gets thick and muggy. When we break away, my chest feels like it's bursting with tiny bubbles.

“You really do stink, Luca.”

His laugh echoes over the drumming spray.

He gets in first, kicking the rest of his clothes off and stepping behind the glass pane. I watch him hungrily, pleased that it's *my* bar of soap he's running over his body. My shampoo he's working into his hair. After this, Luca won't smell like pig farm. He'll smell like me. His hair looks darker when it's wet, fully brown instead of bronze, and rivulets of hot water streak his bare skin.

I tug my baggy t-shirt off, letting it drop to the tiles beside his things. I make sure the fabric is touching.

"You're not wearing a bra." Luca's words rasp through the steamy air. Green eyes watch me, narrowed and intent.

"I don't like seams and straps. Don't like stuff close to my skin."

"Good." Is it? "Pinch your nipples."

Ha. He's so bossy, even when he's in there and I'm out here. I do what he says, though, plucking and pinching my nipples and watching him stare at me through the foggy glass, and it feels even better doing this with his eyes on me. Everything's more sensitive. Amplified. Like there's a direct line between my nipples and my pussy, and every pinch makes me ache harder down there. Makes me swollen, slick and needy.

I already know what Luca's cock looks like. I saw it through the camera last night and I can see it now, stiff and ruddy, jutting out into the air. It bobs when he moves, and when he soaps it up, he gives it an extra squeeze, letting out a hiss.

“I want to come in now.”

Luca booms another laugh, taking his hands away. “Were you waiting for an invitation? Yes, Frankie. Please come and join me.”

* * *

My sweatpants and underwear drop in a rustle of fabric, then I step under the hot spray. The steam’s thicker in here, and it smells like soap. No more pig farm, only clean, wet Luca Bianchi. He makes space for me, backing up respectfully against the shower wall, though his eyes are still hungry. A mountain lion watching a jogger.

“You’re not in the water anymore.”

A muscled shoulder lifts. “I’m letting you wash.”

“But you’ll get cold.”

Luca grins, then joins me under the spray. He was right—I get a lot less water now, and this isn’t very efficient, but I bathed this morning. I’m not here to get clean, I’m here to touch Luca’s skin when it’s slippery and flushed.

And he feels *good*. Hard and wet and wonderful, his big hands roaming over my bare body as his pulse beats under his skin.

The broad head of his cock brushes at my stomach. Too curious to think twice, I reach down and tuck it between my legs, squeezing his hard shaft between my thighs. I like how it

feels down there. Like sitting on a sexy broomstick, slotting thick and perfect between my lips and grazing against my clit.

“Oh, *fuck*.” Luca grips my hips, sawing his cock back and forth between my legs. His forehead presses against mine, and our stomachs brush together with every thrust. “Shit, Frankie. I didn’t expect that.”

I tell him my broomstick comparison. He shakes his head, expression strained as he stares at the wall. “There’s no way I’m coming out of this with any dignity.”

I can’t imagine Luca Bianchi ever *not* being dignified, no matter what ridiculous thing I say to him. He’s so sharp and clever and elegant. So primal and deadly. But he clearly needs some reassurance, so I trail open-mouthed kisses up his throat, tugging on a handful of his wet hair.

When I look up at him again, Luca must feel better already, because he crowds me against the shower wall, caging me in with his hands pressed on the tiles either side of my head.

“Do I still stink, Frankie?”

I shake my head dumbly. “No.”

“And do you want me right now? Do you want my cock?”

A nod this time. “Yes.” Hell, if the questions are all this easy, I’ll nail this quiz. I trail my palms over Luca’s stomach to celebrate. “You have a nice body, Luca. The best.”

His throat bobs. “So do you.”

And it's not enough. I've told him I like his body, and that's true, but it's so low on the list of my favorite things about him. I like his deep voice and his three phones and his friendship with his cleaner Ola. I like that he makes pasta from scratch, and I like that his green eyes are the color of houseplant foliage. I liked watching him eat my popcorn, and I like that he called me from the pig farm. I like that he came back for me again, even when I pushed him away so badly the first time.

“I love everything about you, Luca.”

My words are so hoarse, I'm surprised he hears them, but he must because he groans and flattens me against the tiles. He's rocking against me again, sliding his cock against my stomach, but I don't feel used. I feel so, so wanted.

“So do I, sweet girl.” He latches onto my neck, sucking hard, and I scrabble at his shoulders for purchase. “I didn't understand before, but I do now. Okay? You're perfect, Frankie. My perfect girl.”

He leans back long enough to spin me around, then pushes me against the tiles.

“Brace yourself.” His right hand strokes along my arm, then tangles our fingers together. “It's going to feel strange at first, but we'll go slow. If it hurts, you say so and we'll stop. Alright?”

I nod, water from my wet hair trickling into my eyes. I blink it away, then I'm screwing my eyes shut for a different

reason, because Luca's *there*. Pushing inside me, his free hand steadying my hip.

"Okay?" His lips brush against my shoulder. "Sweetheart. Answer me."

"I'm okay," I wheeze. "It's... it's a lot."

"Yeah." Luca stops pushing for a second, reaching around to play with my nipples. Every brush and pinch of his fingers makes me soften up down there. Makes me warm and slick and pliant, sucking his cock deeper into my body.

"Keep going," I say when I can't stand it anymore. "Go further in."

Another kiss against my neck, and then he's sliding deeper. The stretch burns a little, but it's not painful exactly. It's just so *much*.

"Stop," I gasp after a few more inches. Luca stops at once, his heart thumping against my back. "Just for a second," I add, and I can feel him relax. "You're really big."

"Ah, yes." Luca tweaks my nipple again. "There's my ego. Hello, old friend."

"Shut up."

His chuckle vibrates through my whole body, and *god*, that feels good. I reach back and slap at his hip. "Okay, more. More. And laugh again."

"I can't laugh on command, Frankie," Luca says, though he's chuckling as he says it. Chuckling and thrusting harder

against me, his hips snapping against my ass. He fucks deeper and deeper, forcing his way inside me, and it feels so good that I stumble against the tiles.

“Careful.” Luca hitches me upright then flattens me against the wall. Pins me there with his bulk, his cock plunging between my legs.

The air is thick with steam. It’s hot in here, the shower spray pounding against the floor.

“Do you like this?” He licks my throat. Scrapes my pulse point with my teeth. And green eyes watch me closely over my shoulder, even as his length stretches and fills my pussy. “Frankie. Do you like this?”

“Yes.” It comes out as a groan. Do I *like* this? I want to do this every day, every hour, every *minute* for the rest of our lives, and I tell him so, my confession muted by the drumming spray.

“Every minute could be a challenge.” Luca’s squeezing me so tight, like he doesn’t want to let go of me either. “We’ll work on the rest.” And then, like he hasn’t been holding back a devious secret weapon, Luca reaches down my body and starts rubbing my clit.

“Jesus!” I buck back against him, then thrust forward against his hand. I don’t know what to chase more, his cock or his fingers. Whichever one I go after, I miss the other, and they’re working in concert. Heightening every brush of contact until I’m tense and shuddering, sparks coursing under my skin. I’m burning up, smoldering, gasping for breath, and for once

my thoughts aren't swirling around my head. I'm nothing but a body. A pulsing, needy body.

Luca's teeth scrape my shoulder, and he rubs my clit faster. "I didn't get to see you come last night, Frankie. Show me now."

I whimper. Try to surrender to tension building in my belly, the heat and ache and crackle of delicious friction, and once I let it drag me under, there's no going back. I screw my eyes shut as it washes over me, sweeps me up like a violent storm, then I collapse against the shower wall as I shudder and quake.

My fingers dig into the shower tiles, their tips turning white, and I clamp down so hard on Luca's cock that he feels *huge*, impossibly bigger.

"Fuck." His thrusts are jerkier now, rough and uneven. He presses me hard against the tiles, grips the back of my neck, and empties inside me with a groan.

Hot water speckles my cheeks and drips in my eyes. A different wet heat spreads between my legs.

We come back into our bodies slowly, breathing hard. Luca pulls out gingerly, and sticky fluid trickles down my thighs. We rinse off under the shower spray with gentle touches.

"Beautiful girl." He can't stop stroking me, kissing me, playing with my hair. "Perfect girl."

If he says so.

I get out first, passing Luca the blue towel. He watches me the whole time he dries off, then kicks his stinky pig farm clothes into the corner with a wrinkled nose. “Guess I’ll stay naked.”

I can’t hide my grin. Because Luca Bianchi is *here*. He’s really here.

He’s staying. He’s naked.

And he’s mine.

Ten

Luca



Four years later

I feel her eyes on me the minute I step through the door. Dark camera lenses watch me from between thousands of waxy green leaves, but I don't react as I shrug off my jacket. I hang it on the coat hook, then kick my shoes off and roll my neck with a sigh.

I'm a little messier since moving in with Frankie. More laid back.

It's not a bad thing.

You know what else is great for learning to relax? Faking your own death. Fuck, I've never felt so free. Frankie helped me do it, and she still keeps tabs on my old family, even years later. She watches for anyone who might come sniffing around, wondering about me, but in all this time, no one's even questioned what happened.

As far as they're concerned, I disappeared with Sal. Someone must have picked us off when we were outside the

territory. A shame, but it's the cost of business.

We had to leave the city, obviously. Couldn't risk being recognized. So we moved hundreds of miles away and started over, hiring a massive van for all her damn houseplants. But it felt good, it felt *right*, and I left enough money behind for Ola to retire. And one good thing about the plants is that we felt right at home here straight away.

Our home is an indoor jungle of giant leaves and trailing vines. It smells like damp soil and green matter, and as I stroll down the hallway, I half expect to hear the shriek of monkeys or the cawing of birds. Instead, all I hear is the distant rattle of a keyboard.

My wife is home, then. Watching me—and everyone else in this city. That's good. The two of us, we work together these days, dealing in peoples' dirty secrets. Business is booming. There are so many. An inexhaustible supply.

I reach the baby's room, poking my head inside. The crib's opposite the window, the late afternoon sun drifting hazily through the glass. There are plants in here too, though Frankie picked out special ones with bright yellow flowers.

I check on our daughter. Smooth her blanket and stroke her cheek. She stirs, so I back off, tugging my collar open.

Every time I look at my daughter or my wife, my heart swells so much that my chest could explode. I won't wake her, though. Not while I've got a shot at some time with Frankie, and I pull the door closed as I leave.

There are cameras in there too, obviously. We'll know if she needs us.

“What’s for dinner?” Frankie asks the second I step into her office. I grin, brushing a trailing spider plant off my shoulder as I cross to her side. Her monitors loom all around her, one showing the baby’s room, another showing the hallway I just walked down. The rest are bank statements; someone’s email inbox; lines of code.

“Didn’t you miss me?”

She’s curled up on her desk chair, feet tucked under her ass. She gets pins and needles sitting like that, but she still does it. Frankie hums as I brush her hair away from her neck, nibbling at her earlobe.

“Of course. I always miss you.” She swats at me, and I straighten with a laugh. Her fingers fly over the keyboard, so fast they nearly blur. “And I miss your cooking, too.”

“Then I’ll make you a deal.” Her stiff shoulders relax as I knead them, and she melts back against her chair, still typing. “Stop working for a second and let me eat what *I* want, and I’ll cook whatever you ask for tonight.”

Frankie’s silent for a long time. She’s weighing the pros and cons. On the one hand, she doesn’t like stopping her work in the middle. Frankie is a focus machine. On the other hand... well, it’s a no-brainer, isn’t it? She gets her pussy eaten and the food of her choice. After a while I get bored of deliberations, spinning her around in her chair.

“Hey!” She sounds outraged, but she’s smiling. Already wriggling her legs out from under her, pulling her baggy t-shirt over her head. She throws it at me and I catch it, the fabric warm from her skin. “You’re so bossy, Luca.”

I grin, bending to work her waistband over her hips. “Yes, this must be terrible for you.” Her mischievous smile lights up my insides.

“I want pizza tonight.”

“Alright.”

“And I want to watch you spin it in the air.”

She drives a hard bargain. I kneel between her bare legs. “Agreed.”

Frankie cards her fingers through my hair, and I push her thighs wide. I’ve only been gone for a few hours, but that’s far too long to be away from her.

“Did you learn any good secrets today, sweetheart?”

Frankie smirks. “Always.”

I duck down to breathe against her pussy. “Tell me everything.”

* * *

Thanks for reading Hacker! I really hope you enjoyed it. :)

For more soulmates in the city’s underworld, check out June’s story in [Honey Trap](#). *He’s the one man who knows better than*

to trust me... and I want him so badly it hurts.

And for a bonus instalove story, grab your copy of [Beauty & The Kingpin](#).

Happy reading!

Cassie xxx

Teaser: Honey Trap

It's always unsettling watching June work. It's almost supernatural, the way she draws people closer; the way she tricks information out of men. God knows if I'd met her like this, stumbling past in a bar, I might've sat down beside her too, though it's not my usual style.

I might have bought her a drink. Tried to ask her on a date, and asked all about her life, and told her anything she wanted to know. Fool that I am, after an hour of her smiles, I'd probably have been ready to get down on one knee.

But that's June. So beautiful it hurts your heart, with a husky laugh and a wicked glint in her eyes. Looking at her reminds me of those nights at sea with the navy, gazing up at a starry night and feeling tiny and expansive, all at once.

She doesn't mean it, though. The smiles; the laughter. The fact that I know this and I *still* want her makes me the biggest idiot of all.

Harry has a ginger ale ready for June when she comes out of the backroom, the irate politician long gone. She picks it up with a murmured thanks and weaves her way through the crowd, and though I expect her to find another bar stool, she heads for my booth instead.

She must've got something good if she's calling it a night already. I know better than to ask, but curiosity burns in my

gut, and I mull it over as she picks her way across the floor. Is the politician having an affair? Does he have some scandalous fetish, or secret dodgy donors?

A dusky pink sheath dress brushes against June's curves as she walks, the hem grazing her mid-thigh, and she's twisted her brassy hair up in a high ponytail since hiding away. The delicate slope of her neck draws eyes as she passes, and I'm already sliding back to make room when she arrives.

"That was quick."

June shrugs, dropping into the booth, pointedly ignoring all the eyes still tracking her every move. Does it get tiring for her, being watched like this all the time? It must do. But there's no strain on her brow as she slaps an old newspaper on the table, folded open to a half-completed crossword.

"He's an idiot. Didn't exactly make it difficult for me."

This is another pattern with June. Once she's done making fools of arrogant men, she likes to unwind with a ginger ale and an old crossword. I'd think it another carefully crafted behavior to charm her watchers, except apparently I'm the only one who finds this so cute I could howl. The first time I saw it, I practically had to bite my knuckles to keep from yelling how perfect she is.

"Eleven down." June spins the paper to face me, a pen balanced against her slender knuckles. "Since you're not working tonight, you can help me with this."

“Who says I’m not working?” I pluck the pen from her fingers, the brief brush of contact sending my heart slamming into my ribs. Fuck, she makes me so tragic. “This place is my office as much as it’s yours.”

June levels me a flat look. “You’ve been scowling at me all night.”

Shit. “Maybe you’re my mark.”

Or maybe she’s right and I can’t focus when June is in the room. Knowing that she’s close and stringing some creep along for information—that sets my teeth on edge. I can never look away until I’m completely sure he’s gone and she’s safe, and even then, I make sure to walk her home.

On nights like this, June *is* my job.

Unpaid. Unacknowledged. Probably unwanted too, but her safety is more important than her liking me.

And it can’t piss her off too badly because she’s sitting beside me in this booth, so close the fabric of our clothes keeps brushing together. No body contact yet. I can maybe kid myself that I can feel her heat against my side, but this room’s too muggy for that to be true.

“You gonna tell me what you learned?” I fill in the letters as we talk, my handwriting so much messier than hers. My letters score deeper into the paper, the ink thicker and more vivid. Hers are pretty and delicate, just like her.

June laughs softly. “Sure. For a price.”

Yeah, that's what I figured. I wasn't really asking anyway, but one thing I've learned with June is it's better to be the one asking the questions. She deals in secrets, after all, and I'm full to the brim with my clients' confessions. Running my mouth would be a disaster.

To be fair, June never seems to pry with me. But maybe it feels that way for all her other marks, too. Asking the questions keeps me sharp. Keeps this safe.

“What did he want from you?”

June wrinkles her nose. “What they always want.” She plucks the pen from my hand, finishing the answer I'm writing then moving to six across. Her ponytail swings over her shoulder, hanging against her front like a shiny rope. Her ginger ale sits untouched, moisture beading the glass and a wedge of lime half sunken at the surface.

And this is another reason I should keep my distance from June. I know for a fact that the things I think about her, the things I want—they're about as welcome as the mumps. I'm no better than that sleazy politician, panting after her and wanting to touch, to taste, to fuck. Wanting to claim all her beauty and keep her all for myself.

“Don't you get tired of it?” I should stop pushing. I know I should. Because her shoulders are tensing, and if I keep going like this, I'll drive her away.

It would be a relief and a kick in the chest, all at once.

“Of course I do.” June shoots me a glare, and it fills me with perverse pleasure. Those men she tricks for information, they only get her giggles and smiles. Me? I get the whole range of her expressions. More of the pissed off ones than any others, if I’m honest. “But I’m using the tools at my disposal. You told me you respect that, Marcus.”

“I do,” I tell her quickly, because it’s true. I’m not shaming her, I just... I worry. “But I’m trying to picture doing it, and I can’t see it. I don’t know how you can stand those assholes for even a minute.”

June huffs out a breath, but she’s softened again. She fills in another clue, and she must have shifted closer because now her shoulder’s brushing mine. So warm and smooth through the fabric of my shirt.

“It’s just talking. But you couldn’t do it, Marcus. You don’t even smile for me, and we’re almost friends.”

“Yes, I do.” Surely I smile for June. She’s the only person I’m always happy to see. And what the hell does she mean by ‘almost’ friends?

She snorts. “No, you don’t. I think I’d remember that.”

...She would?

I lean back in the booth, the hubbub of the bar making my ears ring. I need this distance. This moment to collect myself. To remember that I can’t trust June, and I can’t let myself think this is real. That’s how she does it—how she gets under a man’s skin.

Some days, when my control's wearing thin and I want her so badly I can *taste* it, I think maybe I don't care. That it would be worth letting her play me for an hour or two of her sweetness. To bask in the warm glow of her smiles.

But my clients trust me with their secrets, and they're at risk here, not me. I clear my throat, shuffling along the booth, putting some much-needed space between our sides. June gives me a strained smile, and every part of me aches.

If this was real, I'd do anything for her. I'd offer up everything I am.

But it's not real, and this is the only part of June I can allow myself: a shared crossword, then a rainy walk home.

* * *

Check out Honey Trap [here!](#)

xxx



Cassie Mint

About the Author

Cassie writes outrageous, OTT instalove with tons of sugar and spice. She loves cookie dough, summer barbecues, and her gorgeous cat Missy.

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