



KIDNAPPED

by my

DAD'S BEST FRIEND

AMAZON BESTSELLING AUTHOR

FLORA FERRARI

CONTENTS

Kidnapped By My Dad's Best Friend

NEWSLETTER

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Epilogue

Epilogue

Epilogue

Epilogue

Falling for My Mom's Boss

[Inking the Soldier](#)

[Top Reads](#)

[NEWSLETTER](#)

[A MAN WHO KNOWS WHAT HE WANTS](#)

[BRATVA BEAR SHIFTERS](#)

[LAIRDS & LADIES](#)

[RUSSIAN UNDERWORLD](#)

[IRISH WOLF SHIFTERS](#)

[INKED BY LOVE](#)

[TEXT ME YOU LOVE ME](#)

[Collaborations](#)

[About the Author](#)

KIDNAPPED BY MY DAD'S BEST FRIEND

AN AGE GAP, CURVY GIRL ROMANCE

A MAN WHO KNOWS WHAT HE WANTS, 322

FLORA FERRARI

Copyright © 2023 by Flora Ferrari

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

The following story contains mature themes, strong language and sexual situations. It is intended for mature readers.

KIDNAPPED BY MY DAD'S BEST FRIEND

There's no escape. "You're not leaving. You belong to me. Get used to it."

Blake Baird is a man who takes what he wants. And now he's taken me. I came for the job as a maid but now...

His dark eyes hint at all the things he's done as leader of the Scottish mob.

He won't hurt me, I tell myself. He and Dad were best friends once. Surely that will keep me safe, but he wants steaminess, not violence.

My self-esteem isn't low, but hey, I'm a realist. I'm nineteen, on the curvy side, and determined to find the man who killed my mother.

I'm not built to satisfy this mob-boss god. But amazingly, *he* wants *me*. How is that possible?

This could end very badly... or I could get everything I ever wanted.

**Kidnapped By My Dad's Ex-Best Friend is an insta-everything standalone insta-love romance with a HEA, no cheating, and no cliffhanger.*

NEWSLETTER

Get a free, new, original story NOW by joining my mailing list
and staying subscribed.

CLICK HERE >> [Get a FREE book now](#)

CHAPTER ONE

B onnie

“What do you mean we’re going to miss rent?”

Dad sits on the armchair, looking deflated.

He’s in his forties, but he seems older, his hair thin, and his expression so sad it sometimes makes me want to cry. He rests his head in his hands, sighing. “I lost the money.”

“The rent money?”

“I was walking from the bank to the apartment, and someone mugged me.”

He doesn’t look at me, his words muffled as he pushes his hands against his face. He’s shaking, shoulders moving up and down, and I have to fight away unfair anger.

Dad’s been suffering with his mental health for years now. He’s gone through gambling addiction and alcoholism. When he’s broken down in the past, I get to the real reason for all this heartache. Mom.

She died when I was nine—a hit and run. The driver got away. Dad’s never been able to get over it. Neither have I, honestly.

I think of Isla, the woman who called me Bonnie because she was Scottish, and I was, in her words, a *bonnie lass*. Thinking of my mother, my soul longs for her, to hold her, to *be* held by her, but life must go on. One day, hopefully, I’ll be a private detective, free to solve mysteries like who killed my mother.

“Mugged?” I say after a pause, hoping he can’t hear the doubt in my voice.

Dad’s last bout with gambling addiction was two years ago. He’s lied to me about money before. He lowers his hands. “You don’t believe me.”

“Why were you paying the rent in cash, anyway?”

“Our landlord is changing his bank provider. We’ll be back to the regular payments next month.”

I wish it were possible to trust my dad without having to question every little thing. I wish I could *know* he’s telling the truth, always wanting the best for me. He’s a good man. He loves me. Deep down, he cares. I’ve never had to wonder about that, but I’m not sure I believe this story.

“I’ve negotiated two weeks longer,” Dad says, “but we need money. Fast.”

“How’s the job search going?” I ask, sitting on the armchair.

It smells a little musty, but so does the entire apartment. I’ve long since accepted we’re not going to have nice things. There are specks of dampness on the walls and a few mold stains that won’t budge, no matter what products I use. The carpet is grimy around the edges. The place is *grim*.

“Not great,” Dad mutters. “What about you?”

“I’ve got a few hours at the restaurant, but it’s a zero-hour contract, and they’re winding me down. Too many employees, I guess.”

“Maybe there’s something in the paper.”

Dad gestures at the coffee table. We got it secondhand, or maybe third, fourth, or fifth.

I pick up the newspaper and flip to the back. A flyer falls out, brightly colored, with the words *Maid Wanted* written across the top.

This unique ad is searching for a discreet individual to act as a maid for Blake Baird, a businessman and entrepreneur. The pay is...

My mouth falls open when I read the number.

“That much for a *maid*?” I say, showing Dad the advertisement.

“That’s an impressive amount of money. It would solve all our problems.”

“Yeah,” I mutter. “It would. Do you think it’s worth a shot? I’ve never seen an ad like this before, a flyer, I mean, put into the paper.”

“He must be keen for a maid who fits his needs.”

“I’ve never heard of Blake Baird, have you? It’s a Scottish name.”

Dad smiles gently. Sometimes, when his lips make that shape, and his eyes shine with the old love, my mind drags me back to the days before Mom died, when Dad was whole, bounced me on his knee, and played catch with me and wasn’t shrouded in this veil of darkness.

“We don’t know every Scot in the States, Bonnie,” he says. “I think you should give it a try. In the meantime, I’ll keep looking for work.”

I look at the number on the flyer. Nerves make my heart beat faster, but I take a slow breath, reminding myself that one day, hopefully, I’ll have to deal with far more stressful situations than making a phone call.

I need to find a private detective to shadow, get some experience, and take steps toward my dream, but it’s difficult when we spend most of our time simply trying to stay housed and fed.

I’m nineteen. I’m not a kid. I can make a phone call.

“Hello?” a gruff man answers, his accent East Coast but sophisticated.

Is there a hint of Scottish? I think so. Just a sprinkle, and I find I like it.

“Yes, hello,” I say, using my waitress voice, all airy and approachable. “I saw your special advertisement in the

newspaper. I'm interested in the maid position."

"Do you have any experience?" the man asks.

"Uh... no. Yes, I mean. I work at a restaurant and often stay behind late to clean. I've been told I'm very good at it."

This may be a *slight* exaggeration, but I can't afford to be some paragon of morality when we could lose the roof over our heads.

"And you think that's enough to take care of my estate?"

"Your estate? I'm sorry. Am I speaking to Mr. Baird?"

He laughs like I've said something funny, with a hint of mockery. There's also something else in his savage tone, deep and somehow attractive. "Don't sound so surprised."

"I guess I thought I'd talk to a secretary or something."

"I like to handle my own business when it's this important. You'll be in my home. How soon can you interview?"

"Whenever. Today, even."

"What about right now? I'll send a car."

"Can you give me a moment?"

"Just one," he says gruffly.

Jerk, I almost say, but I'm almost smiling, too. It's a strange combination of feelings that don't make sense.

Putting my hand over my phone, I whisper to Dad, "He wants to send a car for an interview."

Dad nods. "Good. Excellent."

"You think I should go?"

"You don't want to?"

"He sounds... I don't know, really intense. Super serious. I don't know anything about him."

"He won't hurt you," Dad says. "I've heard Blake Baird is a decent man."

"I thought you didn't know him?" I say.

Dad swallows and shrugs. “I don’t *know* him, but I’ve heard his reputation.”

“Anyway, we need the money, right?”

Before waiting for a response, I remove my hand from the phone.

“Sorry, I’m back.”

“That was far more than a moment.”

When I say nothing, he laughs again. There’s so much hidden in that laughter, mockery, and something else, tempting me in a bizarre way.

“This is the part where you give me your name,” he says.

“Oh, it’s Bonnie.”

“Bonnie,” he repeats. “Are you Scottish, lass?”

When he says *lass*, a weird tingle shivers over my skin. I press my legs together, ignoring the thoughts, the lust-filled whispers about this man I know nothing about. I don’t even know what he looks like. He could be married.

“My mom was fully Scottish. My dad is half Scottish, but I’ve never even been.”

“Hmm,” he says, leaving me to wonder what he means by that.

“So, can you interview?”

“Yes,” I reply since I don’t have much choice.

There’s something else—a pull toward this man. I know nothing will happen, but I want to see him in person.

“I’ll send a car, Bonnie,” he says. “See you soon.”

“Wait, don’t you need my address?”

Dad is staring at the table, his hands resting on his knees, squeezing tightly. My mind flips over as I struggle to piece this all together. I’m sure something’s going on, something to do with Dad and Blake.

“Of course,” he replies. “What is it?”

The *of course*... There's something in there. What's going on here?

Maybe it's natural for a budding private detective to see mysteries everywhere, but I don't think it's as simple as that. I think Dad has lied to me. Again.

When I give the address, Blake says, "I'll send the car. Be ready." He hangs up.

I stand. "He's going to send the car now. I need to get changed."

I'm still wearing my waitress uniform. I went into work this lunchtime ready for a six-hour shift, only for my jerk-off boss to tell me he'd double-booked the shift, and I had to go home without pay.

If I can land the maid job, it'll make saving for training much easier.

"Good luck," Dad says once I'm changed and ready to go.

CHAPTER TWO

Blake

Archie, my Scottish terrier, barks at Malcolm as he walks into my office. The small black dog yaps and runs over to him, snagging his pant leg.

“Come on, little guy,” Malcolm says, shaking him off lightly. “I thought we were friends?”

Archie spins in a circle and runs to the corner, curling into a ball. That’s all he needs to do—show he’s up for a fight and won’t take any crap. Then he can let us have our meeting.

Malcolm sits opposite me, across from my large desk. He’s almost as tall as I am, with broad shoulders and a mop of dark red hair. He’s thirty, twelve years younger than me. His relative youth and my experience make an excellent combination.

“Another drive-by,” Malcolm says. “They shot up one of our bars this time. Didn’t hit anyone but tore the place up pretty bad.”

“The Italians?”

“We’ve owned this city ever since the old days,” Malcolm says. “I don’t know why they’d think they can make a bid now.”

“There’s new blood. A pup finally comes of age,” I say. “Enzo, leading up a wild clique of the mob. He’s trying to

finish what his father started.”

Malcolm’s eyes shoot up. “His father, as in the man who—”

“Yeah, who split me from my best friend. I had to kill Enzo’s father. Couldn’t let what he did go, but Cameron could never understand.”

Malcolm nods. “I know that must’ve hurt.”

I bare my teeth at him. “You think the leader of the Kilts is capable of emotion?”

He averts his gaze. People get awkward when I let out a flicker of the darkness in me, a tinge of the rage buried deep in my gut. It whirls and pounds and howls.

“Reach out to Enzo. Tell him I want a meeting. He hasn’t killed anybody yet in his petty attacks. Maybe we can reach a settlement. We’ve been making good money for too long, helping our men and their families. We don’t need another war.”

Malcolm nods, standing. “Will do, boss. Is she going to arrive soon?”

I sigh, toying with the letter opener on my desk. It’s silver and sharp. The surface of my desk is scarred from the previous times I’ve fiddled with it, hacking at the wood.

“Yeah. It’s time for me to do my bit for charity.”

“At least Cameron should be grateful.”

“He wants nothing to do with me. I’m fine with that.”

That’s what I tell myself—and others—when I think about my old connection to Cameron. I can’t linger too long on what happened. Otherwise, my body floods with tension and rage. I’ll never understand why he disagrees with what I did, what I *had* to do. Soon, it’ll be time to interview his daughter for the maid position.

Malcolm turns and leaves. I go to my large window, looking out over my well-tended estate, the fountain flickering in the afternoon sunlight. Archie sits at my feet as he looks up at me, head tilted, dark eyes mirroring my anger. People say dogs

look like their owners. If that's the case, I must be dark, broody, and ready to bite.

"I last saw Bonnie when she was six years old," I tell my loyal dog. "She was the shyest kid I'd ever laid eyes on. I don't think she looked at me once. Just hid in Isla's arms, face pushed against her chest, and now we're playing this stupid game."

Kneeling, I stroke Archie behind the ears. "The last thing Cameron needs is his daughter learning the truth, eh?"

One of my men, Grahame, pushes my office door open and gestures inside.

"Here you are, miss."

Bonnie walks through the door. I take a step back when I see her as if I'm going to throw myself out the window.

My balls flood with seed. My mind floods with need. My world floods with blazing intent unlike anything I've ever felt, wave upon wave of certainty surging into me as I gaze at her and take in every detail of her curvy, young body.

She's wearing a white shirt, buttoned up all the way, giving her a good girl look that appeals to me. That makes me want to bring out the bad in her. Her breasts are large and voluptuous, her hips wide and sculpted for my hands, her legs deliciously thick in her tights, her skirt hugging close to her sensual form.

Best of all is her wavy brown hair with a hint of red. Her eyes are wide, and her mouth opens in a shaky half-smile. There's a flush in her pale cheeks.

Her lips tempt me to kiss them. Images rise in my thoughts of Bonnie on her knees, staring up at me, mouth open as I guide my manhood to her mouth, stroking it across her tongue. Or me, between those tastily thick legs, licking her sopping innocent slit.

She's nineteen, less than half my age. She's Isla's and Cameron's daughter. That should be enough for me to remember my manners.

"Uh, hello," she says, standing behind the opposite chair. "Oh, and *hello*."

Her voice brightens when Archie walks around the desk and sits at her feet. I stare dumbfounded as my dog smiles up at her. Usually, he barks and causes mayhem at *anybody* who walks through the door, even my most trusted advisors, but there's something else here. It's as if he already likes her. I know the feeling.

"You're just the cutest, aren't you?" she says, kneeling and stroking him.

This gives me a preview of what I want, my woman on her knees, her breasts jiggling temptingly with the movement. My beastly mind imagines how her body would shift in sex, every naked inch of her rippling with the reverberations of my possessive thrusts.

Kiss her, hold her. Once she's sweaty and soaked with her release, maybe I'll bring out some light in myself. Maybe. Or perhaps I'd fuck her ruthlessly again.

I imagine what Isla would say if she knew what I thought of her daughter.

Standing, Bonnie stares at me.

"So," she says, "how do you know Dad?"

I can't help but smirk. I don't think about denying it.

"Did he mention something?"

"No, but you didn't ask my address, and Dad's acting suspicious. That flyer for the job, was that arranged?"

I laugh.

"Is something funny?" she snaps.

She's got some *fire* in her, too. This just gets better and better.

“I’m impressed,” I tell her. “Yeah, your dad made that flyer at the local library. Whatever happened during this interview, you were going to get the job. I *do* need a maid, but I wanted to help your dad out.”

Even if he rarely talks to me. We talk on the phone sometimes, but that’s it. He refuses to see me in person, as though behaving in that way keeps him honorable.

“Why?” she whispers.

“We were best friends once,” I say, “but not anymore.”

“What happened?”

“That’s enough questions,” I snap. “I wasn’t supposed to tell you any of this. You need this job. Since you already know the truth, it saves me from having to put on the show. Yes or no, do you want it?”

She folds her arms. Her juicy breasts push together. Her eyes flare with sassiness, and she pouts her perfect lips. My seed swells in my balls, trying to get me to grab her, throw her down, tear off her clothes, and drive up inside her. Push deep so that her walls wrap tightly around my hard dick. Then I’ll pump harder and harder until the heat and wetness become too much to handle. I’ll explode inside of her. Make a child with her. Have the family I never knew I wanted before she walked into my office.

She belongs to me. She always will.

“That depends,” she says. “Are you going to give me any answers?”

“None of that matters. It’s ancient history. I was best friends with your dad. Now I’m not. I’m offering you a job. That’s all you need to know.”

She unfolds her arms and gestures wildly. Her curvy body shivers for me.

“No, it’s not. I need to know more than that.”

“You’ll be waiting for a long time.”

“Then you can go to hell with your job,” she yells, spinning and walking away.

I smirk as she sways her hips, her plump ass moving from side to side, tempting me with her fullness, with the perfect shape of her rear end. Her footsteps echo from my office. I can't let her go. I need to kiss her, taste her, *own* her.

Picking up my phone, I call my security team. “Lock down the estate. Nobody leaves.”

She's staying with me, and I'm going to do any damn thing I want with her.

CHAPTER THREE

B onnie

My head rushes with thoughts as I march down the intimidating hallways. There are paintings on the walls, scenes from battles, and even suits of armor. There's a poem that looks like it's written in Gaelic.

Blake and Dad were best friends. They're not anymore. Apparently, that's all I need to know, but that's not fair.

It's not fair, either, how my body still tingles from the standoff with Blake. He stood tall and massive in his casual T-shirt and pants, his muscles bulging and swelling, all six and a half feet of him looking ready to turn full beast.

His eyes were dark and intense, staring with a mocking glint. His lips shaped easily into a smirk. His hair was silver tinted, mature, and experienced.

Even as I told myself I wasn't attracted to him, my body yelled, my sex rubbing against my panties, my clit feeling suddenly sensitive.

How am I going to get home? We're thirty minutes outside the city, but that's by *car*. Will his driver take me home?

I push open the large door and walk down the gravel path, heading for the wrought-iron gate with a small booth at the side. A security guy steps from the booth as I approach, a sinewy man wearing all black with an earpiece.

“Sorry, miss,” he says. “The estate’s locked down. You’ll have to go back inside.”

My breath comes quickly as I look up and down the tall walls, at least ten feet, surrounding the entire estate. The walls are sheer with no handholds, and it’s not like I’ve ever been much of a climber, anyway.

“Locked down... why?”

“Because Mr. Baird ordered it,” the man says, tone impassive. “Please return to the house. Mr. Baird has informed me you’ve got a room waiting for you.”

“A room.”

Does he think I’m staying here?

“I have to get home,” I say. “I need to talk to my dad.”

I have to ask what Blake’s talking about with this best friend stuff.

I *knew* Dad was lying.

Taking a step back—I’ve got no clue if this guy will grab me—I take out my cellphone. I’ve got no signal.

“We use a cellphone jammer when the estate is locked down, miss,” the security guard tells me. “It’s in your best interest to return indoors to the room prepared for you.”

I spin, marching back toward the house. It’s three floors tall and rustic, looking like a cross between a castle and a laird’s estate in the Scottish Highlands. Creepers move up the wall.

Shoving the large door open, I find Blake standing in the hallway. He’s got his hands behind his back, forcing his chest even further out, showing his muscles’ hard, swollen shape. I have to fight away the urge to march over to him and drag my hand down his body. I have to fight down any instincts telling me I want him. I need him.

“What are you doing?” I hiss. “You can’t *keep* me here.”

He approaches slowly, his shoes making imposing noises on the floor the nearer he gets. His scent comes with him, musky and manly.

My body is playing the jester here, my underwear rubbing sorely against my sex, my tights clinging to my thighs as though attempting to impersonate his hands to give me a preview of what it would feel like with him holding me tightly.

“I can,” he says passionately. “I *am*. You’re staying here with me.”

“Why?”

“Let me show you to your room.”

“I won’t be your prisoner.”

He laughs darkly. “You already are.”

There’s a connection, an invisible rope looping around us both. Reaching down, he takes my hand. I should snatch it away the second we touch, but I can’t deny the instant surge of heat that comes the moment his hand wraps around mine. I feel the heat, electricity, and the *spark* people sometimes talk about, shivering up my arm and through my body.

No, no, *no*. I can’t let myself get romantic and dreamy about my... my what... my *kidnapper*?

He tugs me toward the staircase I passed on my way out. To the left, there’s the long hallway with the armor and the paintings leading to his office. Now, he leads me up the stairs. He doesn’t pull me aggressively, but there’s a firmness in his touch, enough to tell me he won’t let me go. He’s not going to let me run.

“Why are you doing this?” I ask as we reach the landing.

Two battle axes rest on the wall, crossed, their blades looking real and sharp, silver like the maturity in Blake’s hair.

“You’ll be comfortable,” he says, “and your dad will get his money. You’ll be helping him by staying here with me.”

“But why—”

“Look at your room before you get whiney and pouty,” he says sternly. “You might like it.”

He leads me down the hallway. I try to force myself to snatch my hand away and at least *attempt* to run, but there’s

something strangely captivating about his touch. It's like I've split in two. One half of me is all pounding heartbeat and wondering what the hell I'm going to do. The other wants to stay here and keep holding his hand.

This must have something to do with Blake and Dad's secret history. Whatever happened between them led to this, to him keeping me prisoner.

"What did Dad do to you?" I snap. "To make you want revenge? To make you want to kidnap his daughter?"

These are searching questions. Whatever the answers, I should be able to learn something, but Blake looks at me with a smirk, as if he knows exactly what I'm doing, and refuses to play my game.

Finally, we stop at a tall wooden door. He pushes it open to reveal a plush, luxurious bedroom. There's a four-poster bed and thick rugs laid over the wooden floor. A fire in the corner and three large, connected windows look over the estate. Sunlight bathes the room.

"You want me to stay here?" I whisper, telling myself I don't want it. I don't want *him*.

"You're *going* to stay here," he says. "There's no *want* about it. You're going to do what you're told."

I pull my hand free, staring up at him. His expression is so difficult to read. He's smirking, but his eyes have the intensity of dying suns. It's like he's holding himself back.

"You can't make me do *anything*," I snap. "I deserve answers. I came here for a job."

"And I've got a job for you." He steps close, his hard body brushing against mine. "Doing whatever I tell you. That's your new job."

I laugh as harshly as I can as my mind skips to the possibilities. My thoughts are being real traitors right now, filling with a bunch of inappropriate stuff, like standing on my tiptoes and guiding my lips to this man and kissing him, feeling his hands roaming up and down my body. The future

and children's laughter and happiness somehow rise from this madness. What's wrong with me?

"You can't keep me here."

I march away from him, looking out the window. The construction of the building means this window doesn't have a wall beneath it. It's an overhang, meaning I'd have to jump. It's only one floor, but I'm not very athletic.

"I can. I am." His voice is husky. "You have access to the estate, but you can't leave. If you get hungry, the kitchen is downstairs and to the right."

I spin on him. He's moved to the door, his hand on it.

That's it? He's just going to leave me here?

"I don't get what you want me to do," I say.

He bites down. He clenches his fists, causing his forearms to swell, every inch of him barely contained rage and throbbing, powerful muscles.

"Anything. I. Want."

With that, he leaves, shutting the door firmly behind him.

I sit on the bed, taking out my cellphone again. Still no signal. They said they use a jammer. Could I find a landline and use that instead?

I don't let myself think about how soft the bed is, how appealing the silk sheets look, how everything here is clean and expensive and much better than home.

I don't let myself think about the tingling in my hand from where Blake touched me or the tingling from anywhere else, either. None of that can enter my mind. Just escape. It's all I can afford to think about. Get a phone. Call Dad. Find out what happened between him and Blake. Find out *who* Blake is.

He's clearly not just a businessman if he's willing to kidnap me so casually.

CHAPTER FOUR

Blake

My woman—my property—doesn't know I've got cameras throughout the house discreetly hidden in case of an attack. I usually don't bother logging into the feed since the exterior defenses are tight, but I do this afternoon.

Sitting in my office, I watch Bonnie walk down the hallways, looking up and down, clearly searching for something. Sometimes, she'll run her hands up and down her hips, a nervous gesture that makes my cock even harder. I've been solid ever since the bedroom when I told her she would do anything I wanted.

Everything I want... She's going to take it all.

When she gets to the second kitchen and spots the phone in the corner, I realize her plan. Standing, I move swiftly toward the door. The jammer blocks cellphone signals, so she's going to use a landline instead. I hurry through the house and stride into the second kitchen to find Bonnie with the phone pressed to her ear.

She's got her back to me, her big plump ass sticking out, round and begging, *screaming* for me to spank her.

"That's not very polite," I growl, grabbing the phone and slamming it into the receiver.

She leaps back, gazing at me with wide, innocent, fuck-me-now eyes. A softer part of me warns me to be careful and be

nice because she will be my children's mother one day, but she'll take my seed, anyway. Her body will swell with my future.

I can't think about Cameron or Isla and what they'd say.

"Using my phone without permission? Bad, bad girl, Bonnie."

She tosses her head, causing her hair to shift, a hint of fire in the brown. "Go to hell, Blake."

"I tried to be courteous, but clearly, I can't trust you. You'll have to stay in your room until you prove yourself."

When I take her hand, already addicted to the feeling—imagining her shy touch wrapped around my throbbing dick—she snatches it away.

I laugh savagely and then grab her body, hauling her off her feet. She gasps as I cradle her against me. I feel a tug in my heart when I think about carrying her over the threshold on our wedding night.

"Stop squirming," I growl. "Now."

Truthfully, I like it when she shifts about, grinding her ass cheeks against my hands, rubbing her hot, young body against me. She settles down as I carry her from the room, probably realizing she won't be able to squirm her way to freedom.

"What do you want from me?" she whispers.

"To be a good, obedient girl when I punish you," I growl.

"P-punish me?"

"You can't use my phone without asking."

I kick open her bedroom door, then kick it shut behind me. When I put her down, she backs away, her hands raised. There's something in the glinting of her eyes and how she parts her lips. She's trying to fight this, but she wants it too.

"I'm going to spank your big, *perfect* ass."

I snarl the word *perfect*, unable to say it without letting out the force inside of me. My cock is so hard it almost hurts, shaft solid as my seed rushes to my tip.

“What?” she whispers. “Why?”

“Because you’ve been a bad, horny young thing. And you’re mine. I can do any damn thing I want with you.”

She squeals as I rush forward, grabbing her wrists.

Isla’s face tries to glare at me from my mind, judging me for doing this with her daughter, and I hear Cameron in my thoughts, asking me where his daughter is.

I can’t think about that when I feel the lack of fight in her hands. She bites her lip as I slowly guide her hand to my manhood.

“What are you doing?” she whispers.

“Anything I want,” I growl, then let out a long groan as I push her hand against my pants, her soft warmth grinding through the fabric and setting my cock ablaze. “Good girl. That’s it. You can feel how savage you make me.”

She shakes her head as if she’s going to tell me *no*, but she can’t stop herself from making a sweet moaning noise.

I can feel it in her hand, too. I let go of her wrist, and I’m right. She *keeps* rubbing up and down as if some spell has taken hold of her.

“Why are you... so... hard?”

Her blush deepens, her words coming slowly, chained by nerves.

It’s difficult for me to answer as her shy hand strokes my length. She hasn’t done this often, her hand trembling. She doesn’t squeeze my cock, but palms it slowly, nervously, and *perfectly*. It’s so much better this way.

“Because you’re so damn sexy,” I growl.

If I could sense my young woman had done this many times before, I’d be obligated to hunt down any bastard who’s ever been intimate with her. Hunt him down and force him to pay a blood price for daring to touch my woman. Only I’m allowed to touch her.

“Keep rubbing,” I tell her, “and stick your ass out.”

“You can’t make me do this.”

But she doesn’t stop, her hand stroking up and down.

She stares up at me as though with fascination. Maybe she’s amazed by how completely captivated I am with her, fully and instantly obsessed as my tip swells.

“Stick. Your. Ass. Out.”

I grab her hips and push her a little, guiding her.

Looking down, I groan as her skirt stretches across her thick, juicy ass. It’s like I can taste her flesh, the sweat, the tanginess of her pleasure, and feel the texture of her soft creamy skin against my teeth.

“Good girl,” I growl, then spank her lightly.

She moans. “I’ve never been spanked before.”

“You like it. I can tell.”

“Nah-uh,” she whimpers, shaking her head, but her hand keeps moving.

She can deny it all she wants, but she’s doing it, and her thick body is writhing with pleasure each time I spank her. Again, again, again.

She pushes her ass out, giving me the best view. My cock is on fire, my tip flowing with endless precome, my underwear sticky as she continues.

“You better not have a boyfriend,” I snap.

“I don’t,” she whispers. “I’ve never had much luck there.”

“*Good.*”

I roar the word as I grab her hips and lift her off her feet. She giggles and squeals like she’s not sure how to feel, and then I carry her to the bed and flip her over.

“Stick. Your. Fucking. Ass. Out. *Now.*”

She’s on all fours, arching her back, her whole body shaking as she does what she’s told.

Cameron’s daughter. Isla’s daughter.

I can't think in those terms. All I can think about is the roundness of her ass and her thickness. My hands fly to her skirt and hike it up. Then I grab her tights and panties, pulling them down around her knees, revealing her bare ass.

"What are you *doing*?" she breathes.

"Tell me to stop," I snarl, smoothing my hand over her naked rear, her creamy flesh, so much to indulge in and obsess over. "Go on, Bonnie. No, you like it. I can tell."

"I don't," she whispers.

"Tell me to stop, and I will."

She says nothing as I trail my fingers up her inner thighs, getting closer to her sex. It shines in the sunlight shafting through the window. Nobody can see into this bedroom. The angle of the window ensures that. If one of my men saw her bent over with that soaked slit on display, it'd be the last thing they ever saw.

"No?" I say savagely. "I told you. You want this. You can lie, but your soaked slit can't."

She whimpers intoxicatingly when my fingers reach her pussy. Wetness smears over her folds and drenches her hole.

"Are you going to be a good, obedient girl?" I snarl, spanking her with my free hand while my other finger circles her entrance.

"No," she hisses, staring at me over her shoulders.

Her wide eyes tell me, *Keep going, don't stop.*

But my woman needs to keep her honor.

"Horny thing. You *want* me to spank you again?"

I spank her. Reverberations capture her roundness, causing her to shimmer.

"You're sick," she hisses.

"Why are you so wet if I'm so sick?" I growl.

She gasps when I slide my finger inside of her. My manhood flares at the tip when I feel how tight she is, a preview of what

she'll feel like when she's wrapped around my greedy cock.

“Tell me to stop,” I snap, “and I will.”

But when I slip my finger in and out, she says nothing, instead gifting me the sweetest moans as she shifts her hips in time with me. I knew I'd get her to do any damn thing I wanted.

CHAPTER FIVE

B onnie

How has this happened? It's like I've sacrificed my common sense at the altar of my need.

He says I can make him stop if I just say it, but each time he spanks me—lightly, not hurting—it's like my body wants him more and more. Now I'm staring at him over my shoulder as he slips his finger inside me, his other hand caressing the place he spanked.

"You're going to come for me," he snarls. "Then I'll leave you here to think about your manners."

"Don't you want to spank me again?" I say.

My core is so hot with pleasure, my clit burning, a spot deep within, aching and begging for more. Relief touches me at the thought of him leaving me after I come, if I *can* come for him.

This is new territory for me. It means I don't have to tell him my secret.

"I told you that you'd like it."

He raises his hand.

"No... stop."

This is a test. *Will* he stop? His finger pauses inside of me, tickling my pleasure spot. His hand lingers in the air.

“Each time you s-spank me,” my voice falters as he slowly moves his finger within me, teasing me, “you have to answer a question.”

“Are you making the rules now, eh?” He smirks, lowering his hand and tapping me possessively on the ass.

“That’s one question,” I say. “Or I *will* tell you to stop. If you don’t, you’ll have to live with that.”

“I’d never force myself on you,” he says with disgust.

Somehow, I knew that already. I should believe this man’s capable of anything. There’s no reason to assume he’s got a single civilized bone in his body, but somehow, I know there’s good in there.

“What’s your real job?” I ask, then my voice trails off as he slips his finger deeper, moving it quicker.

It becomes challenging to think about anything else beyond the blazing sensation between my legs. It’s more than the physical feeling. It’s how he stares at me, too, as if he’s never seen a sexier sight. No man has looked at me like that. Ever. Definitely not a tall, muscular, intense man like Blake.

“I’m the leader of a Scottish crime syndicate. I run the city, Bonnie. Some call us the Kilts. I run every single block.”

His finger moves faster and fiercer in tempting circles.

“What happened between you and dad?”

He spanks me twice, one on each cheek, kissing pleasure stinging across my skin and shivering around my thighs.

“I only... asked... one... q-question.”

It’s getting more and more difficult to speak. I’m so wet that his finger makes noises as he goes around and around.

“I’ll spank you twice whenever you ask something you shouldn’t.”

He stares at me firmly, but it’s difficult to keep looking over my shoulder with my body gripped by pleasure. It cascades through me in compulsive waves.

“Do you sell drugs?” I ask.

Spank, that kissing, stinging feeling that somehow adds to the pleasure, adds to the fire between my legs.

“Never,” he growls.

“Do you hurt people?”

His finger moves quicker inside, possessive circles that send me closer to the edge. I’m panting, my hips shifting in time with him, chasing the pleasure. It must be instinct because I’ve never done this before.

“If I have to,” he says, then spanks me again. “You’re so close. Your pussy is pulsing for me. You’ll be ready for my cock soon.”

I slide away from him, crawling across the bed, turning and drawing my knees to my chest. My heart is suddenly thundering with panic.

“No, Blake,” I snap. “You said you were going to leave me after...”

He stands at the end of the bed, his massive manhood outlined in his pants. There’s so much tension in every inch of his body.

“You belong to me now. You’ll do anything I want.”

“I’m not going to have sex with you like *that*.” I snap my fingers. “You can’t force me.”

“I’d *never* force you,” he roars. “Stop saying that.”

“You can’t just kidnap me and then expect me to become some sex doll,” I snap, even as my body tries to play tricks on me. My lust attempts to propel me across the bed, to bend over and offer up my ass again.

My bottom stings against the sheets. It’s like I’ve slipped back into everyday reality after putting some distance between us. Looking at this situation from the outside, it’s clear there’s something wrong. I shouldn’t be so willing to throw myself at this man. To *give* myself to him, considering the circumstances.

“Anything I want,” he snarls.

“No,” I say, thinking of my secret, that this is the farthest I’ve ever gone. “We haven’t even kissed, and you think I’m going to spread my legs and... and *no*, Blake. Maybe you’re not used to hearing that word. Maybe you think you’re above it, but I’m telling you *no*.”

He smirks, fierce passion in his eyes. It’s like there’s so much he wants to say, so many methods he intends to use to claim me.

“Is that what you want? A kiss?”

“It’s not *about* that.”

“But do you?”

His voice gets husky, sending more tingling, totally inappropriate feelings through my body. My sex yearns for his touch again. My core longs to feel his fingers, his tongue, even his manhood stroking me, but I know what would happen if he brought his huge manhood to my pussy, claiming me with his touch.

I’d panic. I’d freak.

“I don’t care,” I lie. “I just need you to know... I’m not like your other women.”

He laughs gruffly. “What other women?”

“You’re a criminal boss. A leader of a crime organization, you said. The *Kilts*. That means you probably have a different woman every night.”

“You’re wrong.”

“What? So, you don’t have a girlfriend? Or *girlfriends*, plural?”

“I thought we had a deal where questions were concerned.”

“That’s not much of an answer.”

He laughs again. I’m sure there’s a mocking tone in there, as if he finds the concept of me standing up for myself amusing. I’m almost tempted to read something else into his laughter, especially when he reaches his hand out, gesturing to me.

Admiration?

“Come here, Bonnie.”

I should say no. This man has been bossy to the extreme. I need to let him know I won't do anything he says. I should be thinking about escaping. If I'm going to be a private detective someday, the last thing I should do is fall for a crime boss, but my lust and confusing desire sends me across the bed, the air kissing at my naked sex, teasing at the wetness there.

He takes my shoulders and pulls me up so I'm kneeling on the bed. Leaning down, his warm breath tickles my cheeks and moves down my neck, teasing me afresh. His lips crush against mine with boiling hunger. I gasp at the force of it, the desire immediately doubling, tripling, growing massively inside of me as his rough lips claim mine. I savor the texture, the heat, and every beat of the moment.

He grunts in pleasure, his hands sliding down to my naked ass, indulging in touching me as our mouths open and our tongues move together. Nerves buzz across my lips and all around my body, spawned from the kiss, feeling the aching within that tells me this means something.

This man and me, this *stranger*, my dad's best friend... We're going to be something one day.

When his hand strokes over my belly toward my sex, I force myself to push against his chest, shaking my head. “I can't do this. I can't give you what you want.”

“You *can*,” he snarls, his hand squeezing my ass at the same time. “You *will*.”

“No,” I yell. “I'm a virgin, okay? So you can't force me to be your personal plaything. You *can't* treat me this way. It's not fair, and I won't stand for it.”

“A virgin.”

He steps back as if I'm radioactive, staring down at me. I can't tell exactly how he feels about it, but it doesn't look good with his eyes narrowed. Suddenly, I'm gross to him.

“Yeah,” I snap. “So, if you planned to have an instant nympho, you’ve made a big mistake. I’m not that woman.”

“You’re a... virgin.”

“Didn’t you hear me the first time?”

I have to be as fiery as I can so he can’t see the emotions he brings out in me. Crazy, I want him to tell me it’s okay. I don’t have to be ashamed. I shouldn’t want *anything* from this man, but I can’t deny it.

“Damn,” he says, turning and striding for the door.

That’s it? *Damn?*

He opens the door and slams it behind him. He’s gone.

CHAPTER SIX

Blake

“Are you good?” Malcolm asks as we drive out to the meeting with Enzo at a shopping mall food court.

I stare out the window at the passing countryside. I left Bonnie a couple of hours ago when she dropped that bombshell into the middle of our heat.

She’s a virgin. She’s never been with a man, and there I was, letting out the full beast, spanking her, owning her. I can’t lie. I still want to spank her round, creamy ass, still want—need—to make it turn a gorgeous shade of red as her curves ripple for me, but there was dread in her voice when she revealed the truth.

It was like she thought I’d want her less. I had to leave before I told her, *Good, because I meant it. I own you—every inch of your young virgin body. No other man will ever see your soaked slit.* I didn’t even drive her to a finish.

“Boss?” Malcolm says.

I look at my second-in-command, nodding. “Fine.”

“Wonder what Enzo’s going to offer,” Malcolm mutters, scratching at the small scar just above the right side of his lip.

“Stopping his attacks would be the place to start. Anything less is wasting our time. He’s lucky nobody’s been injured yet, but he’ll need to reimburse us for the damages.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

I sigh darkly. “We’ll have to make him stop, just like I had to make his father stop. A bullet to the head. It’s the only thing men like Enzo understand.”

For Isla... for Bonnie’s mother and Cameron’s wife.

As I’m thinking about my old best friend, my cellphone rings. It’s Cameron.

“Yeah?” I say, answering.

I try not to think about our old phone calls before Isla and the fallout. We’d laugh and banter as we did when we were children and young men before he said he wanted nothing to do with me. This is our friendship now—tense phone calls, with both of us avoiding any mention of the past.

“How did the interview go?” Cameron asks. “I haven’t heard from Bonnie.”

I swallow, rare guilt touching me. With some distance from her, I can see I may have acted rashly, but I can’t bring myself to let her go. The thought of releasing my woman is plain wrong.

“Excellent,” I reply. “She’s going to be my live-in maid. You won’t need to worry about your rent or bills.”

“Live-in maid?” Cameron says. “That wasn’t part of the plan.”

I shift awkwardly in my chair. I’m supposed to be hard, closed off from any softness, but I can hear the panic in Cameron’s voice.

“It works better this way. I’ll take care of her. Don’t worry.”

“Why isn’t her cellphone working?”

I read it in his tone, the implication.

“I’d never hurt a woman,” I snarl, “and I’d especially never hurt Bonnie.”

“I know you’d never hurt a woman,” he replies, “but that doesn’t change the fact I need to speak with her.”

“Come for dinner at the house one day,” I say, knowing I can’t let them speak before I’ve convinced Bonnie of our story. She needs to *agree* to be my live-in maid.

“Swear on Isla’s grave that Bonnie is safe.”

“I swear,” I say instantly. “I’d never hurt her.”

Cameron sighs down the phone. “She needs to text me at least or leave me a message. This is suspicious, Blake.”

“I’ll speak to her when I get home. I’m heading to a meeting right now.”

“Ah, a meeting,” Cameron says, judgment in his voice.

“I’m not giving control of the city to the Italians,” I tell him, “so they can run their drugs, sex-trafficked women, and protection rackets. No more legitimate businesses. No more Kilts keeping the city safe. Is that what you’d prefer?”

He hangs up, leaving me to stew in my anger with Cameron’s hypocrisy. The life is too good for him, despite the fact it keeps the city safer.

I grit my teeth, stare out the window, and think of Bonnie.



Enzo and I sit across from each other in the corner of the fast-food joint. At nearby tables, our men sit, talking quietly, ready to leap into action if either Enzo or I do something stupid.

Enzo’s a young man, full of jittering energy. He has slick, shiny black hair, a golden tooth winking every time he shows his teeth, a gold watch on his wrist, and a dark blue suit that probably costs more than most people’s rent.

He always stands out because he’s an inch or so taller than me and just as wide.

“The attacks need to stop,” I tell him.

He grins tightly. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Really? An amateur line like that?

“We’ve got you and your men on camera, Enzo. Don’t play games.”

He flinches, sitting back. “Well, shit.”

“What are you thinking?” I growl. “No matter what else is true of him, your father did well setting up the betting businesses. The Italians have been doing well from those for years. Why risk all that?”

“Do you really have to ask that?” Enzo snaps. “The balls on you, Scotsman, talking about my father. I’ve been waiting since I was a kid to take over the Italians.”

“But you’re not the leader,” I remind him. “Massimo is. You’ve gathered a few wild men to do some foolish things. It won’t end well for you. I’m giving you a chance because, luckily, you haven’t injured anyone yet. Back down. Pay us for the damages. Go back to your legitimate businesses.”

“Or what?” he says, his voice trembling.

He hasn’t lived long enough in this world to hide his fear. He hasn’t stalked through the night with a gun in hand, prepared to inflict whatever damage is necessary to keep the business ticking along.

“You know what. We’ll be forced to go to war. Men will die. Innocents will die. In the end, you’ll lose. I’ve got far more firepower. This is a silly game.”

Enzo slams his fist on the table. Suddenly, men leap to their feet, causing the other food-court customers to turn and stare at us. I gesture to Malcolm and my men, and they sit down. After a pause, Enzo does the same.

He stares at me for a long time without speaking. “Talking about my dad isn’t the way to make me stop. He was a good man.”

As a leader, I’ve learned to force away things that might lead me to trouble. I can’t tell Enzo what I think about his insane statement, not after what Enzo’s father did.

“It’s all ancient history,” I snarl. “We need to focus on the now. Our men’s finances, their families, their mortgages. More

boys will lose more fathers if we go down this road.”

“Maybe I’m fine with that,” Enzo says. “Maybe that’s the way it has to be.”

I sit up in my chair, leaning forward. Enzo tries to keep his tough-guy act going, but he can’t hide the quiver in his lips. His eyes flit left and right as though searching for an escape. I keep staring at him, letting him read the murderous intent in me, the willingness to end him if it comes to it.

“You’ve got your whole life ahead of you. You could do anything, be anybody. You could take the money from the betting businesses and choose any career you want. Or travel the world. Find a woman, settle down. Don’t make me hurt you.”

Enzo’s cheeks turn pale. He tries to laugh it off, but it comes out sounding weak.

“You think I’m scared of you?”

“Yes, I do. No more attacks and you owe us seventeen thousand for the damages.”

Enzo doesn’t reply for a long time, looking up and down as though somebody’s going to decide this for him. Finally, he says quietly, “I loved him so much. My father. He was the best man I knew. Why did you have to take him from me... for one mistake? We *all* make mistakes.”

I think of Isla, of how she looked when Cameron and I found her. The horror she endured at the hands of Enzo’s evil father, but like many sons, he has a blind spot.

I wonder about my future children with Bonnie. Will *they* have a blind spot with me? Would I want them to? Or would I want to be a man they could be proud of?

“Do we have a deal or not?” I say. “You know I’m right. We’d crush your little group of renegades if it came to it. Your boss, Massimo, might even help us.”

Enzo sighs. “Yeah, Scotsman, we’ve got a deal. I’ll send the cash to your bar downtown.”

I stand, offering my hand. “This is the smart move.”

He stands and shakes my hand reluctantly.

“A handshake means something in this life,” I tell him as we shake. “You understand that, don’t you?”

“No more attacks,” he snaps, snatching his hand away. “You don’t have to rub it in.”

He turns and strides from the table.

Once he and his men are gone, I tell Malcolm, “Beef up defenses on all our properties, just in case. Use the business fund to pay the men overtime. I don’t trust him.”

“Will do, boss,” Malcolm says.

CHAPTER SEVEN

B onnie

I thought he would lock my door after the phone incident, but I'm free to wander around the house. When I return to the second kitchen, I realize why. The landline phone has no reception, meaning there's no way to contact the outside world.

I end up in the garden with the small, happy, black dog. As I stroke him, I read the name on his collar.

"What am I going to do, Archie?" I whisper, trailing my fingers through his fur. "Dad doesn't even know what's happening."

"I told him you were my live-in maid."

I turn at the sound of Blake's voice. He stands next to a giant stone flower pot, wearing a dark red shirt with the top buttons undone, showing me a glimpse of his broad chest.

"And he bought that?"

"He wants you to send him a text confirming it. I invited him for dinner one day, but that can't happen until you agree to our story."

"Until I agree to let you kidnap me, you mean," I hiss.

Blake walks over slowly, his hands in his pockets. The late-day sunlight catches the experience in his hair, the glinting

silver. Each second is a battle, a war in my body not to feel anything for this man.

“All his financial problems will be fixed,” he says.

“That’s good,” I reply sarcastically. “At least I’m not cheap.”

Archie leaves me and pads over to Blake. When Blake kneels down and tenderly strokes the dog, something tugs at my soul, heart, and vision for the future as I imagine Blake showing similar affection to our children with the same half-smile.

“I missed you, boy.”

“And there I was thinking you weren’t human at all.”

Blake looks at me as he continues stroking his dog. “Are you hungry?”

“Are you changing the subject?”

When he smirks, I remind myself I’m *not* his prized pet. I don’t feel a warped sense of victory every time I win a smirk from him. I don’t want to cheer and sing whenever he aims those captivated eyes at me.

“You have to maintain a body like that.”

I’m sitting on the stone step with him standing above and across from me. The second he says this, I leap to my feet, marching right up to him, not thinking about what I’m doing until I’m standing beneath him.

“And what’s *that* supposed to mean? *A body like that?*”

He steps forward and catches my hand as I slice it through the air. “It means you’re curvy in the best sense. It means I’d hate to see you waste away and lose your voluptuous body. It means I’m rock hard every time I look at you, and I almost explode when I think about how full and ripe your ass looked earlier.”

He kisses me again. I push my hands against his chest, meaning to shove him away, but then I feel his rippling muscles. Something triggers in me, and I sink into the kiss, magnetized and unable to fight it. He grabs hold of my hips.

Surely, this can't be a trick. He can't fake that snarling passion, the eagerness in his hands.

"I lost control before," he says breathily. "Can you blame me? You're too beautiful, Bonnie."

How would Dad feel if he knew about us? He was your best friend.

I don't say the words.

"Eat with me," he says. "I promise I'll be civilized."

"Are you sure you won't freak out and march from the room?" I hiss. "You know... like you did before."

He strokes the hair from my face, tucking it behind my ear. The tenderness of the gesture shocks me. "That wasn't what you thought."

"Oh, and what do I think?"

"You tell me."

"No." I tighten my hold on his chest, digging my fingernails against his firm muscles. "*You* seem to know already."

"I was worried I would lose control again," he growls. "When you told me you're a virgin, it made me want you more."

"Why?" I ask in disbelief.

"I told you. You belong to me. Now, you *really* belong to me. No other man has ever touched you. It makes you more special."

"More valuable? A better commodity?" I snap.

"Are you going to eat with me or not?"

"Couldn't you force me?"

"I could, but I already told you. I don't want to force you to do anything."

He's sending me so many clashing signals I don't know what to believe. Then my belly rumbles as if deciding for me.

"Fine," I say, "but that doesn't mean *any* of this is okay."

He shrugs. "Fair enough."

I shouldn't be excited about this. Fluttering butterfly wings shouldn't dance through my belly. This isn't—I remind myself forcefully—a *date*.

But it feels like a date.

We sit in the garden, fires trapped in metal grills flickering and sending their heat across the patio.

Archie sits at our feet, gnawing on a bone as a waiter brings out a tray with two plates, a jug of juice, and two glasses. The attendant looks like one of the security guards, his expression impassive. I won't be getting any help from him. Do I *want* help? Do I *want* to escape?

“Do you do this with all your women?”

Okay, fine, sue me. I kind of like getting a rise out of him.

He snaps his gaze to me, scowling. “There are no other women.”

“That's exactly what a playboy *would* say.”

“I hope you like steak,” he grunts, gesturing to the plates.

I look down at the meal—steak with greens, corn, and fries.

“I do,” I say, “but don't expect me to say *thank you*.”

“The only thing I expect is you to eat and keep that body nice and curvy for me.”

I roll my eyes. I can't let him see how much his compliments mean to me because they mean *a lot*.

I was bullied for my weight in school. Nothing too extreme, just jocks and douches doing their usual mean stuff, but to have this tall, handsome, intense man showing me *all* this attention... Yeah, it's a boost to the ego. I can't deny it.

He cuts into his steak. “What's your goal, Bonnie?”

“That's a broad question,” I counter.

He looks at me as if to say, *Not everything has to be a fight*.

“What do you want to do for work? You seem like a woman with a dream. I knew that the second I saw you. You don’t want to be a maid.”

“Oh, no,” I say with heavy sarcasm. “I’ve always dreamed of being kidnapped and held on a massive estate by the Scottish mafia. Are you kidding?”

He chuckles, and I can’t help but laugh along with him. Our eyes meet, and something happens, a connection, as if we both view the absurdity of the situation. I return to my new favorite word.

Should. It *shouldn’t* feel like something we can laugh at.

“I thought we had a deal where questions were concerned, huh?” I say.

“Spanking only goes one way, Bonnie.”

I shift in my seat, ignoring the tingling moving over my skin, coiling around my thighs, trying to send me across the table and into his lap.

“I want to be a private detective,” I tell him.

His eyebrows shoot up.

“What?” I say. “Is that really so shocking? Did you expect me to say I wanted to be a baker or something?”

“I’d tell you to relax,” he replies, “but I like it when you get all passionate. Why a private detective?”

“Do you really care?”

“Yes,” he says firmly. “I do.”

Maybe I ought to laugh at this. How can he care when he’s keeping me prisoner, disabling the phones so I can’t call for help?

But I believe him. More fool me.

“If you were friends with dad, you know what happened to my mom.”

He nods seriously. “Yeah, I know. It’s an evil thing. The world’s a terrible place.”

Coming from a mafia boss, this is ridiculous, isn't it?

When he was spanking me, when we were playing our question game, he said he doesn't sell drugs. I wonder if that extends to other criminal activities.

“A hit-and-run driver who was never caught. Is it hard to figure out why I'd want to be a private detective? I want to help people. I want to catch the bad guys.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Blake

I blink, wondering if I've heard her right. A hit-and-run driver? Is *that* what Cameron told her?

My woman speaks passionately as she goes on, gesturing with her hands. It pains me, but I have to remember that her passion has come from a lie. I'd be one sick man if I shot her down now, if I took this passion and twisted it with the truth. It's not my place to tell her.

"I'm *going* to help people," she goes on. "I just need to figure it out."

"You need the financial freedom to pursue your dreams," I tell her.

She meets my eye nervously, a flickering motion. She can't know how her every gesture and little look threaten to turn me savage or to awaken other parts of me, a romantic I never knew existed.

The fire flickers against the flush in her cheeks.

"Why do I feel you're hinting at something?"

"No hinting," I say. "Agree to tell your dad you're staying here willingly, and I'll give you the freedom you need."

"So, you're bartering for my body, is that it?"

"I could take your sweet body any second I wanted." I lean across the table, staring down at her parted lips, kissable and

so perfect for other uses, too. “You can say you don’t want it. You can fight and rage, but we both know you’re lying.”

She stares down at the table. “I’ve never done it before. I don’t know... No, we’re *not* talking about this.”

I wonder if she was going to say, *I don’t know what to do*.

That’s simple. I’d show her the way.

“We’re bartering to keep you here. I want you here. In exchange, I’ll solve your dad’s money problems and pay you separately, enough so you can follow your dream.”

“Why?” she whispers.

“You know why,” I growl.

“What, just because you find me attractive? Is that it?”

It’s such a small way to phrase it, reducing what we share. Finding her attractive, as a description, doesn’t come close to what I feel for her.

“What else are you going to do?” I snap. “This is a good chance for you.”

“Wait a second.” She sits up with her hands clasped together. “Would *you* be able to help me find the hit-and-run driver? You must have connections.”

I suppress a sigh. An image of Isla flits across my mind—how she was when we found her, the argument with Cameron, and the falling-out that led to us going our separate ways. I’ll still never understand his position.

“It was a long time ago,” I say uncomfortably, not wanting to lie to Bonnie.

“There must be a chance.”

I shake my head. “It was over a decade ago. Any evidence is long gone now.”

“So I have to live my whole life knowing the person’s out there, whoever ran my mom down. I’m never going to get justice.”

You already have justice, I want to say. I made sure of that.

We say nothing for a time, eating quietly, and then she lays her cutlery down. She's about to say something serious, but there's a line of juice sliding down her chin. I take a napkin and reach over, dabbing it.

She laughs and shakes her head. "I'm a bit of a dork, right?"

I grin. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

It's another moment, like when we laughed together before.

It's a strange place to exist, constantly hovering between being an unchained beast and something else, something tender.

"Are you serious about your deal? You'll help me become a private detective?"

"If you're sure it's the path you really want to take."

"I used to want to be an artist," she murmurs. "I still draw sometimes and paint, but... you'll laugh."

Reaching across the table, I take her hand. I hold it as gently as possible, feeling the warmth and tenderness.

"I won't."

"I feel like it's my duty," she says after a pause. "With what happened to Mom... I owe it to her to go out into the world and make it a better place."

"You can make the world a better place with your art," I tell her.

"You haven't seen it. Maybe it's crap."

"Then draw something for me. I'll get you some supplies and some clothes, too."

"You'll still finance my private detective training? It's like I said. I owe that to Mom."

It's Cameron's decision to lie to his daughter. I get that, but it's also put her in a horrible spot. She thinks she has to ignore her art and pursue this path, all based on a lie. Isla wasn't killed in a hit-and-run. That would've been mercy compared to what really happened.

“Anything you want,” I say. “As long as you stay here with me and tell your dad it’s by choice.”

She snatches her hand away. “By choice,” she repeats.

“Yes, by *choice*,” I say firmly. “Don’t make me punish you again. We didn’t finish last time.”

She flashes a look at me, biting her lip. This triggers a fresh awakening of desire, my balls aching as they swell, my manhood stiff, and my tip already leaking.

“I’ll call Dad,” she murmurs. “We need the money. We’ll be homeless otherwise, but you have to do something for me as well as the private detective stuff.”

I smirk. “Is it strange I like it when you make demands?”

She smiles in response. I find myself thinking about the rest of our lives, how it would be a good way to live, trying to get my woman to smile, each one a gift. The romantic clashes with the beast. Both are as eager as the other, as fierce, as hungry.

“Look into Dad’s finances,” Bonnie mutters. “I think he might be gambling again. I don’t want him to get the rent money and then blow it straightaway.”

I nod. “That’s fair. I’ll do that.”

“Then I’ll stay,” she replies. “It doesn’t mean I’m your personal slave, though.”

“You’re my personal virgin,” I tell her.

But you won’t stay that way for long.

I almost say it, but then she looks down at the table, both cheeks turning a pink shade so bright it’s almost red.

“You still haven’t told me anything about you and dad. You were friends, okay, I get that. But what happened? Why have I never met you? Why has dad never mentioned you?”

“We had a falling out,” I say, hating that I can’t share the truth.

If she learned what really happened to her mother...

“About my line of work,” I say, which is true, but it’s not the *whole* truth.

“Dad didn’t agree with it?”

“No,” I tell her. “Even when I explained I was doing everything I could to keep the city safe, to stop the other crime organizations from taking hold. I’ve worked hard for years to rid this city of sex traffickers and drug dealers, but none of that meant a damn thing to Cameron.”

Because of Isla. Because of the choice I made.

“So, how do you make your money,” she says, “if you’re the leader of this crime organization?”

I almost answer, but my old instincts kick in. I’m almost certain Bonnie isn’t working for the police, but when I really look at that notion and study this certainty, I realize I have no basis for it other than how I feel. Other than simply, insanely, *trusting* her.

“Let’s not talk about this over dinner,” I say.

“Nice subject change,” she murmurs. “I guess you only ever tell your *other*—”

“Bonnie,” I growl. “You need to stop saying that. You need to stop even *thinking* about it. There aren’t any other women. I haven’t been with a woman in...”

“In what? Days?”

“In over a decade,” I snarl, leaping to my feet, causing Archie to whine and tilt his head up at me.

She’s driving me closer and closer to the admission, to the truth of what she makes me feel. She’s driving me so close to the edge I almost roar it all out right here.

She gasps, staring up. Whether the shock comes from my sudden volcanic eruption or from what I shared, I don’t know.

“You can finish without me,” I say gruffly, turning and walking into the house.

I march through the house, knowing I can’t fight this need forever. Knowing I’ll have to tell her how I feel and what she means to me, eventually.

Cameron has already made me lie to her. What was he thinking, withholding the truth for all these years?

Taking out my cellphone, I call Malcolm. “Look into Cameron Wilson. I need to know if he’s gambling.”

“Will do, boss.”

Hanging up, I lean against the wall, letting out a shaky breath. I never lose my cool like that, but Bonnie brings it out in me.

CHAPTER NINE

B onnie

I lie in bed in the middle of the night, wearing the new PJs waiting for me when I return from dinner. I sat out there, eating my steak, trying to figure out why Blake flipped so fiercely. He seems to hate it when I mention his other women. I enjoyed pushing his buttons at first, but when he jumped to his feet, I knew I'd gone too far.

Why does he care so much? It could be because there's some truth in there. He wants to protect his secret playboy lifestyle. He doesn't want me to discover the truth—that he has estates all over the state housing women, kidnapping them, using them, tricking them with laughter and smiles and tender touches into believing something more could happen.

Or it could be...

I sit up with a huff, thoughts torturing me. I can barely let myself think about it, but there's a chance, isn't there? A chance his rage could come because he doesn't want me to believe he'd want anybody else. He only wants me. We're enough for each other, and we always will be.

Earlier, one guard visited my room with a cellphone. I called Dad as he watched me, breezily telling him, "I volunteered. It's a good deal, Dad. We won't have to worry about bills, and Blake has even agreed to help with my private detective training."

“Did you tell him the reason?” Dad asked tightly.

“Uh... yeah. Why?”

“Just... just wondering. As long as you’re okay...”

Dad doesn’t know that *I* know they were best friends. As far as he’s concerned, Blake is a complete stranger to me.

Dad’s question has me wondering about Mom. So does the way Blake looked at me when I said *hit-and-run*. It was quick, a passing flinch, but there was something, the tightness in the corner of his mouth. Or maybe it was something else entirely.

The house is quiet and dark, the surrounding countryside devoid of all sound, the feeling of isolation even more intense than it already was. Whatever the case, I can’t sleep. Climbing out of bed, I walk to the door, push it open, and wince as it whines on the hinges.

I walk down the hallway using the flashlight on my phone. Their cellphone jammer can’t break *that*, though I haven’t got a charger. I left that at the apartment along with all my stuff. I’ll have to ask Blake to pick up some things for me. I’m becoming way too comfortable here, way too fast.

I poke my head into the rooms. There are several neat guestrooms, a game room with a pool table, and a bowling alley. There’s a theater and a shrine of sorts at the end of the hallway. Electric candles sit beneath a display cabinet, the light bouncing off the photo frames.

I walk across the room, studying the photos. The one in the middle has three people: a little girl and two boys on either side with their arms thrown over their shoulders.

I look at their faces. The boy on the right is *Blake*, I realize. He’s got the same eyes and the same smirk, though there’s a lightness to him I can’t imagine him having now. No, that’s not true. When he laughs and softly strokes the hair from my face, I can see it and *feel* it then.

I study the other two, wondering who they are, my mind ticking, forming connections. The door whines behind me. I turn to find Blake wearing shorts and a T-shirt filling the doorway. When I spin, my flashlight shines over him, giving

his eyes a demonic look. Demonic and somehow hot, even more intense than they've been yet.

“What are you doing in here?”

“The door wasn't locked.”

He walks slowly toward me, his shoulders broad, veins standing up on his tight-muscled skin. “That isn't what I asked you.”

He stops inches from me, close enough to feel the heat in his body.

“What is this place?” I murmur. “Who are those people?”

He smirks. “No, Bonnie, that's the wrong question. The right question is, when will we finish what we started yesterday? And the answer is *now*.”

I squeal as he lifts me off my feet, cradling me to his chest. The hallways are whirring past as he carries me to the bedroom, the art and the weaponry flying by. He drops me on the bed, and another squeal escapes me when his hands immediately dart to my pants.

“I shouldn't reward you for snooping,” he growls, “but I can't stop thinking about how close you were. You need to cream for me.”

I almost tell him *no*. He can't keep changing the subject.

Clearly, that shrine means something. The photos mean something. Those *people* mean something.

He pulls my pants off and slides his hand up to my sex. He growls as he grips my thighs, kneeling at the end of the bed and pulling me toward him. It all happens so fast.

He's got his face pressed against my core, his mouth open so I can feel his upper lip against my clit, his lower against my hole, his tongue darting out and stroking against my folds. I whimper as a cord of hot pleasure strikes through me. He grabs my legs like he's addicted to them, to me, to my shape, to the curviness kids once bullied me for.

“You taste perfect,” he growls. “Has anybody ever done this to you before?”

“N-no,” I moan.

“Good.” He sinks his hands deeper into my thighs. “You’re going to cream for me like a good girl. You’re going to soak my mouth with your come.”

You can't avoid my questions forever, I almost scream, but I can't summon the words. I can't summon anything other than lust-filled moans as he licks my pussy possessively, growling like he's getting pleasure from the act of giving it. He pulls me closer to him, driving his mouth against my sex. The feeling is entirely new as his tongue swirls around my clit.

“Getting soaked for my cock.”

“N-no,” I manage to say, pushing past the moans. “I'm n-n-not ready.”

“You *feel* ready.”

“*Blake.*”

He pauses, looking up at me, his lips glimmering with the moon and starlight filtering through the window.

“Relax,” he growls. “Just be a good girl and come for me. I can't stop thinking about it.”

He slides his finger inside me, moving it in enthralling circles, and then licks my clit so hard and fast I can't think about anything else. It's like there's pleasure stowed up inside me from earlier when he brought me so near the edge.

He sucks my clit into his mouth and pushes against it with his tongue, over and over, driving the pleasure deep within me. My hips start moving, even as I tell myself he can't distract me with steaminess. He can't kill my curiosity with lust, but that's exactly what he's doing, his mouth opening wider, his tongue moving quicker, fiercer, my clit getting hot, euphoria expanding into a big ball of sizzling attraction.

He fingers me deep, my walls feeling stretched, reminding me of his huge outline and *massive* size. I don't think I'll be able

to take him. He seems impatient like he's waiting for me to tell him I'm ready for the real thing, but will I ever be?

My thoughts drain to nothing but desire as he flickers his tongue like a flame, setting fire to my pleasure, triggering an orgasm with my hips shaking, my legs trembling, and the world crashing down.

"Yes, yes," I gasp, struggling to believe this is my voice, that *I'm* the one giving myself to the pleasure.

He groans in response, slipping his finger deeper. There's nothing I can do except ride the pleasure while his tongue attacks me fiercely, his finger finding a sweet spot that triggers another surge of pleasure.

Part of me detaches a piece of my mind that watches this happen. I stare in disbelief as my dad's ex-best friend savagely groans and snarls as he possesses my sex, one hand gripping my thigh with complete ownership, holding tight as he shifts his tongue up and down, owning me.

Yes, I moan or try to. The pleasure turns the word into a shaky sigh as if stowing up the release from earlier, the release I never felt because I told him I was a virgin.

"That's it," he groans possessively. "Yes, yes, *yes*."

He licks me again with somehow more obsession. I can't think. All I can do is let go.

My hips judder, and the mattress whines beneath me as a blistering, white-hot sensation washes through me. My core aches, and my clit thunders with clashes of release, and I just keep pumping my hips, chasing more and more pleasure, knowing I can do this.

I can take him. All of him. Nothing else matters.

Then the orgasm shudders to an end. The sudden influx of confidence leaves me, and I fall back, panting, feeling silly for ever being so sure.

Blake leans back, staring at me with those fierce eyes.

"You're ready," he growls.

But I'm not.

CHAPTER TEN

Blake

My muscles are swelling, my manhood doing the same, precome making my tip tingle as I stare down at her soaked slit. I can still taste her eager pussy and feel the release she gifted me with. I stand, looming over her, my body trembling as I try to control myself. *Try*, and know I can't.

"You need this," I say, somehow forcing the words out.

She draws her legs up, just like before. When she squeezes her legs together, I can still see her sex, its glistening, tempting pinkness.

"No," she whispers.

I wonder why she's speaking so quietly, and then I hear the sob trying to break through her voice, the pain attempting to smash through her resolve.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have let it get this far."

"You're telling me you don't want it?" I smirk, sitting on the edge of the bed and reaching over.

She shifts against me when I stroke down her leg from her knee, down the back of her thigh toward her sex. Every signal in her perfect young body tells me she needs this, but then she grabs my wrist, shaking her head.

"Who were those people in the photos with you?" she says.

I withdraw my hand and turn away.

“Are you changing the subject, Bonnie?”

“It’s a fair question.”

I stand and pace up and down. I should’ve locked the door or removed the shrine when Bonnie arrived. It’s difficult to think about anything else that doesn’t involve my woman, difficult to remember the Italians and the potential war and Cameron and even Isla. All of it, everyone, pales compared to my Bonnie.

“Well?” she says.

“Why are you trying to start a fight now, eh?” I say huskily.

She shoots me a look of pure sass and confidence.

I imagine one of our kids trying to lie and say they’ve done their homework. Their mother bear will give them the same look with her penetrating eyes and pouting lips.

“Why are *you* trying to change the subject?” she counters. “You can’t expect me not to be curious.”

As she speaks, she looks around for her pants.

I meant what I said to her before. I’d never force my lust onto her, even if my desire roars at me to rush to the bed, grab her thighs, throw them open, and sink between them again.

I’ll lick her eager pussy until she’s flowing with more release until her whole body is tingling, and she can’t take it anymore. She can’t say no because the desire inside of her won’t let her.

She pulls on her pants, shuffling into them.

“I’m sorry,” she says, catching my gaze. “I know it’s probably annoying. You know, letting you do that... then saying I want to stop, but I can’t just make myself ready.”

“It’s fine,” I say gruffly.

The last thing I want to be is one of those men who starts pouting if their woman says they don’t want to have sex. I’ve seen those types at bars and clubs and out in public with a hangdog expression as they sulk next to their woman, not man enough to either accept it or walk away.

“One of them was you,” she goes on, sitting on the edge of the bed, “and it’s weird. I feel like I recognize the other two, but I can’t be sure.”

I clench my teeth and grind them from side to side. “Why does it matter?”

“Because *they* clearly matter to *you*.”

I spin on her. She flinches beneath me, squeezing her hands tighter together. The flutter of fear across her expression is the last thing I want to provoke.

“Why do you care what matters to me?”

She springs to her feet and stares at me with all the bravery befitting my woman. “That’s a stupid question. Why do I *care*? You’ve made me care by keeping me here. By... kissing me and everything else. By telling me you were Dad’s best friend but refusing to tell me anything about it.”

My mind returns to those days, the laughter, the camaraderie, and the good times.

She places her hand on my chest. I love when she does this. She squeezes down, and her fingernails dig into me like she can’t stand the idea of letting me go. It’s a feeling I know well, the same one I experience with her, the unwillingness, the *pain* of letting her go.

It’s why she’s still here and will always be with me.

“Was it Dad in the photo?”

I try to mask my expression, but I must flinch or somehow give myself away.

“And the girl was Mom,” Bonnie whispers.

I try to turn away, but she takes my face with her free hand and directs my expression to her. She forces me to stare at her.

“Tell me I’m wrong. I *knew* I recognized them.”

I want to lie, to say she’s wrong. I want to get out of this, so I don’t have to explain, but she’s right. I’ve trapped myself.

When I kiss her, she shoves against my chest as if meaning to push me away. Then our mouths open in their obsessive way, and instead, she pulls me *toward* her. We kiss hungrily, able to forget about the tension for a while, but then she gives me another shove.

“Am I wrong?”

I let out a breath.

She keeps her lips close, standing on her tiptoes. She can't know how difficult it is for me not to collapse against her, not to encircle her in my arms and completely own her, every inch.

“Am I?” she goes on. “I won't kiss you again until you tell me.”

“Is that the new game?” My hand slides down to her ass. “I prefer the old one.”

She whimpers when I spank her, her eyes widening. I'm learning to read the pleasure in her expressions, the constellations of her lust.

“You, Dad, and Mom were friends when you were kids?”

“You're persistent, aren't you?”

I try for a smirk, but it feels false.

“Yeah, I am. I owe it to Mom to be. When I'm a private detective—”

“Do you even *want* to be a private detective?” I growl.

“You're changing the subject again.”

I stare, and she nods firmly.

“Yes, I *do*. So I can help people get justice. Maybe I'll even find the person who killed Mom.”

“Is that your only reason for wanting to be one?” I ask.

I'm thinking of Cameron, wondering how he could do this and lie to his daughter about what happened to her mom, but at the same time, I get it completely. He wanted to protect her.

“Y-yes,” she says after a pause. “But who cares? Everybody needs a reason.”

“What about your art?”

“You haven’t even *seen* my art. You’re talking like it’s this super important thing. Anyway, you’re changing the subject *again*.”

I sigh and take her hips as softly as I can. “I can’t talk about this. You need to understand.”

“You can’t talk about the fact you were friends with my parents? You can’t explain that?”

I force myself to step away from her. “No.”

“Why?” she demands.

It will involve too much pain, too much delving into dark areas of the past better left untouched, but she’ll have to find out eventually, won’t she?

Goddamn it, Cameron.

“I just can’t.” I turn away, making for the door.

“Then I’m not staying here,” she snaps.

I spin back to her, stalking across the room. She gasps when I grab her shoulders.

“You’re staying here as long as I need you to,” I growl. “You’ll stay here forever if that’s what I want. You belong to me, Bonnie. You belonged to me the second you walked through the goddamn door.”

“You’re a monster,” she whispers.

“Then what does that make you?”

When I kiss her, the conflict melts away. Our bodies take over. Our souls...

That’s a hell of a thing, *me* thinking about souls, but it feels like the truth, like we’re fusing. We kiss far longer than we should, considering she’s supposed to be mad at me.

“That’s the last time we kiss until I get the truth,” she snaps, marching to the bed. “Go on, then. If you won’t give me the

truth, leave me alone.”

With the taste of her still on my lips, I turn and walk to the door, throw it open, and stalk into the hallway.

This is getting messy.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

B onnie

I wake to a knock at the door.

Sunlight filters through the window, and I think about the restaurant for a second. I think about walking into the living room and finding Dad passed out on the couch, shaking him awake, and telling him he needs to head out and look for work as he promised.

Another knock, and I peel my eyes open, staring at the ceiling of the four-poster bed. What is that even called? A bed curtain? There are intricate patterns on the violet material.

“Ma’am,” a male voice says. “Mr. Baird has asked if you’d give Archie his morning walk.”

I walk over to the door. My body is still sore from yesterday. As I slept, dreams threw memories of our clashing bodies at me, the closeness we shared, but my mind is aching, too, from how we left things.

“Where is Mr. Baird?” I ask.

“Attending business. He’ll be back this evening. Will you take Archie? I have something else for you, too.”

The second I open the door, the small, happy black dog comes rushing in. He yaps excitedly and jumps up on my leg. I lean down, warmth filling me, pushing away the stress from last night.

Stroking Archie, I tickle him behind the ear, then cradle his face. “Who’s a good boy, huh? Who’s the *best* boy?”

I’d expect somebody like Blake to have a big, scary, grumpy dog—not this happy, energetic ball of fluff. I wonder if it says anything about him, like there are hidden doors inside him, places of kindness and affection. I’ve *felt* those places in snippets when he kisses me and holds me, but the crime boss always comes out.

The security man stands a respectful distance away. He’s staring down the hallway as though purposefully not looking at me. Then I realize why. I’m still in my PJs. Would Blake be pissed if this man checked me out? I guess he would since I *belong* to him.

“Archie’s leash is by the rear door of the first kitchen,” the man goes on, “and I have this for you.”

As Archie runs circles around my feet, the man offers me a wrapped gift. The man is tall and lean with light red hair, his eyes aimed anywhere but at me. Even as he gives me the present, he stares down the hall.

“Did he order you not to look at me?” I ask.

“It’s disrespectful to ogle your employer’s...” he trails off, as if not knowing the right word.

“Girlfriend,” he finishes.

I take the gift, warning myself not to get childishly giddy at the term *girlfriend*, especially considering what happened last night.

“Is that the rule with all his girlfriends?” I ask.

The man flashes me a look, grimacing tightly.

“What is it? You’re not supposed to talk about his other women?”

He stares for a moment, looking straight at my face as if scared of being disrespectful to me by even glancing downward at my body.

“What?” I press, sure he wants to say something.

“This is all new to me,” he says and hurries away.

What does that mean? That Blake never has girlfriends? He told me he hasn’t been with a woman in over a decade, but that easily could’ve been a lie to reel me in. Or maybe it’s the truth.

Maybe he’s chosen me when nobody else could turn him into the animal he becomes in the bedroom. I don’t want to be flattered. I want to stay mad, pissed at him for leaving me to wonder about Mom and Dad.

Placing the gift on the bed, I walk down the hallway to the shrine I investigated last night. Just like I guessed, the door is locked now. I shake it in the frame, trying to turn the handle, but it doesn’t work.

I was right, then. He tacitly admitted it last night. He and Dad and Mom were friends.

Archie whines, staring up at me. “Sorry, boy, I’ll give you your walkies soon.”

I return to the bedroom and unwrap the gift. It’s a box, not small, not large. As I tear the paper away, revealing the art set, a smile lifts my lips, pushing away the pain, the doubt, and the stress.

He’s left a note too.

Bonnie,

I know we didn’t leave things on the best of terms, but I saw how your face lit up when you mentioned your art. I want you to spend the day with Archie, not worrying, not obsessing, just doing what you love. If I’m lucky, you’ll have a gift for me later—a picture, before you let your mind fall into the gutter, but I don’t expect that.

I just want you, for today at least, to be happy.

With warmth,

Blake

I read the note several times, struggling to believe this is the same Blake from last night. The Blake who growls savagely

when he claims me. The Blake who angrily left my room without giving me answers.

The set must've been expensive. It has sketching *and* painting materials.

Archie yaps, head tilted, staring at me as if to say, *Hey, human, what's taking so long?*

I walk Archie around the rear grounds. They're far larger than I thought, with two rows of well-tended plants sitting on either side of a large green area. There's a stone fountain at the end. This is where I thought the garden ended from the window, but it goes on. There's more greenery and then a small pond.

Archie whines and pulls when we get to the pond. The walls of the estate sit a few dozen feet away, tall, imposing walls I wouldn't be able to climb in a million years. I'm trapped in paradise.

"Okay, boy, chill out." Leaning down, I unclip Archie from the leash. He immediately lopez over to the pond, sniffing around the edges, looking back at me with a big grin on his face.

It fills my heart with light to see him like that. I sit on the greenery, wishing I had my art set with me. I could sketch the pond and see if my old skills still exist. I can't deny the tickling in my mind, the temptation to try my skills again.

It's what Mom would've preferred, I know, pursuing art instead of the private detective stuff. Blake seems to think I don't *want* to be a private detective, and maybe there's some truth in that. Perhaps if life had been different and Mom hadn't died, I might choose a different path.

Splash.

I leap up as the pond water ripples. Archie has jumped in. I rush to the edge, looking down at the stagnant water and the algae. It doesn't look clean enough for swimming.

"Archie, come here, boy."

He yaps as he floats to the middle. I can't really call it *swimming*. It's more like his body takes him there, and then he starts yapping and going under, then yapping again. My heart pounds as I realize my mistake. He can't swim.

"Wait there, boy," I yell, not thinking as I run to the edge.

I leap into the water. It stinks as it rushes around me, way deeper than I thought. It flows up and around my head, submerging me as I kick my legs and wave my arms, focusing on Archie. What if he gets hurt because of me?

I manage to find him in the mayhem of my kicking limbs and wrap an arm around his body. My arm strains as I paddle for shore, gasping and holding Archie tightly because he's flopping about in my grip as if trying to escape.

"Wait, boy," I gasp and then drag him onto shore, my body cold and thick with sticky pond water.

I roll onto my side, coughing up a mouthful of water, chest straining.

Archie laps at my face, his tail wagging. At least he's okay, but then he turns, wretches, and coughs. He coughs again, and bile spatters onto the grass. Then he whines and slumps down.

"*Help!*" I scream, jumping to my feet and rushing over to the wall of the estate.

There's a guard at a booth on the other side. I cup my hands around my mouth and scream even louder. A man comes rushing out, tall and lean. It's the same one who gave me the gift earlier.

"What is it?" he asks frantically.

"It's Archie. He's swallowed pond water. He's sick. We need to take him to the vet."

"Show me."

I run through the grass, my breath coming way too fast. I'd never be able to live with myself if I was responsible for... I can't even think about it. I can't even bring myself to picture it for one second about this innocent doggie if this turns out badly.

Archie is squatting when we return to him, forcing out a poo, gagging, and retching at the same time.

“He might get over it,” the man mutters.

I wheel on him. “And he might *not*. We have to be sure.”

“I’ll have to check w—”

“No,” I cut in. “There’s no time. I *won’t* let this happen. You’re taking us to the vet right now.”

“You can’t go.”

“I can, or I’ll tell Blake that *you* were the one who delayed when his dog needed help. Got it?” I step right up to him, glaring. “*Got it?*”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Blake

“Apparently, she gave Dorman one hell of a time,” Malcolm says from beside me with a soft laugh. “Go easy on him, boss. The way he tells it, she got right in his face and used *you* as leverage. Told him she’d offer him up on a silver platter to you if anything happened to Archie.”

I shouldn’t grin, but it’s difficult not to feel at least a flicker of pride when I hear about what my woman did. She jumped into the pond to save Archie, dragged him to shore, and then screamed and sassed her way to the vet. I can’t help but smile at the thought of my woman standing up to one of my men.

“I don’t think anyone could’ve stood in her way,” I say.

I’m looking out the window, but I can feel Malcolm’s eyes on me.

“What is it?” I ask.

He knows better than to lie. I’ve always been able to tell when my second-in-command is hiding something.

“I’ve never seen you like this before. That’s all.”

“Like what?”

I turn to find him stroking a hand through his mop of red hair, a tight grimace on his face. “You sound as if you’re... more than a little interested in this young woman.”

“That’s one way to put it,” I say. “Another is to say I’m obsessed. Another is to say I was certain she would be my wife the second I saw her. She belongs to me, Malcolm.”

“She’s Cameron’s daughter,” Malcolm mutters. “Is that going to cause any problems?”

I think back to the last time we properly saw each other, before the phone calls and our friendship became distant and tense.

“I’ve been trying not to think about how he’ll react.”

“That’s strange for you to avoid a problem.”

I laugh. The driver is behind a partition, sound-proofed, meaning we can speak frankly. Malcolm would have to speak more respectfully if my other men were with us.

“Yeah, I can’t deny that, but it’s complicated.”

Malcolm doesn’t press, giving me time to stare out the window and think about last night, my woman pushing me for more information. It was difficult not to let it all out—the truth about her mother. That would mean revealing Cameron’s lie.

It’s not my place to do that, but lying to my woman is wrong.

“I’m so sorry.”

Bonnie rushes to me the second we walk into the reception area. Her shirt and trousers look damp, and the smell of the pond comes with her. Her hair curls as it dries, yet she’s never seemed more beautiful or angelic—the woman who saved my dog.

Dorman stands beside the door, off to the side, as if waiting for Bonnie to run... and then what? He’s been given strict instructions not to touch her.

“Where is he?” I ask.

“The vet’s with him now. They’re giving him a pill to calm him down. They think it was more the panic than an infection, but they’re giving him a once-over, just to be safe.”

I step close, lowering my voice. Dorman and Malcolm move a respectful distance away, sensing I want privacy with my Bonnie.

“It’s not your fault,” I tell her, my voice as soft as possible. “He’s always trying to get into the pond. I should’ve thought to tell you.”

“But if I hadn’t got him out...”

She trembles, her body as much as her voice. There’s so much genuine kindness in her, so much love. It’s easy to imagine her aiming that love at our children, future dogs, and our life filled with it all.

“Relax.” I place my hands on her shoulders, knowing Dorman and Malcolm will find this a strange sight, the boss showing affection, but I can’t leave my woman to drive herself to a panicked mess. “He’s safe. He’s going to recover. You did the right thing. I’m going to check on him. Wait here, okay?”

“Okay.” She breathes shakily, walking over to the chair and dropping. “I’m sorry.”

I look at Dorman. He stares back at me, fear entering his eyes. It’s a necessary skill in my profession to tell when a man is scared. Dorman looks ready to run for the door. I stroll over to him, holding his gaze, lowering my voice so only he can hear.

“What was your plan if she made a run for it?” I ask.

He swallows. “I’d have to let her go, boss, then tell you. I wouldn’t be able to restrain her physically.”

I nod. “That’s the right answer. These were special circumstances. I understand why you acted the way you did. Let’s put it behind us.”

He breathes a sigh of relief, though it’s not as if he’d face execution as he would with the Italians. I pay my men well, and they’re right to be concerned about their position.

I walk down the hallway. The receptionist says nothing as I push the door open, probably knowing who I am or at least sensing I can go where I want, especially when my Archie needs me.

Pushing open the door to the examination room, I find a man in a white jacket with his sleeves rolled up. Archie is sitting on the table, tongue hanging out and panting. He tries to leap at me when I walk over.

“Easy, boy,” I say, softly touching him. “I’m the owner.”

“Mr. Baird?” the vet says.

“Yes.”

“Excellent. Listen, the little guy’s going to be okay. I’ve given him something to relax him. As far as I can tell, he hasn’t got a serious infection. I understand he was only in the water for a short time?”

“Yes,” I say. “Then my girlfriend rescued him.”

Girlfriend.

The word comes out so easily, so *truthfully*. It feels like a fact already.

“That’s fine. I will give you a prescription for more relaxants, but otherwise, keep an eye on him, and I’m sure he’ll be okay.”

I tickle his side softly, leaning down and looking him in the eye. “Hear that, boy? Nothing to worry about.” He licks the end of my nose.

I turn at a knock on the door. It’s Bonnie, standing at the small window, peering in. I gesture for her to come inside, and she rushes over to the table. Archie yaps softly and turns to her. Bonnie cradles his face, stroking gently.

“You don’t hate me, boy? I’m sorry. I’ll never let that happen again.”

“You can collect your medication at the front desk,” the vet says. “I’ll give you a moment.”

He leaves the three of us alone. Bonnie turns, staring at me, her hand working gently at Archie’s fur.

“I can’t believe I let that happen,” she says.

I cradle her cheek with my hand. She turns toward the touch as if needing the warmth, savoring it. “It’s not your fault. You didn’t know.”

When I lean in for a kiss, she turns her face at the last second, giving me her cheek instead.

“Remember what I said?” she whispers. “No more kissing until I get the truth.”

I step back, biting down.

“Is that the game you want to play? Trying to resist each other? I remember how badly you wanted it.”

“Do you want to talk about this *here*?” she snaps, nodding to Archie.

She’s right.

“Thank you for saving him,” I say. “I’ve still got business in the city. Dorman will drive you home. If you run, I’ll cancel the payment I’ve arranged for your dad.”

“Ah, awesome,” she says, with conflicted emotion in her voice.

It’s like she wants to melt for me, wants us to return to the closeness, but she’s also determined to stay as pissed as she can.

“We’re back to normal. Threats and blackmail and kidnapping.”

I leave the room, glaring at Dorman, my temples pulsing. I’m supposed to control my woman, but she’s like a force of nature, chaotic and captivating.

“Get her and Archie home.”

Malcolm follows me outside.

“You good, boss?”

“Any news of Cameron and his gambling?”

“Not yet, but we’re digging.”

“I want to help him,” I say, “but not if it means fueling his addiction. Find out.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

B onnie

“If it weren’t for you, I would’ve run,” I tell Archie, wondering if I mean it or trying to convince myself.

I’m sitting at the corner table of the second living room. It has a stone hearth with a shield over the fire and a Scottish flag pattern. The rugs are plush and thick, and the whole room throws me back in time, especially with the setting sun clashing with the ornate-style lamps.

Archie lies on his side on one of the rugs. It’s interesting how his black fur mixes with the brown of the rug. It makes sketching him an interesting challenge, though I’m not sure if I will include the rug. I’m focusing on *him* for now, on his stretched legs and his mouth open. His chest rises and falls softly.

“I need to take care of you,” I go on.

He blinks one eye open, his lip twitching as though he’s smiling.

I’ve spent the day not doing much of anything. I tried the door upstairs again, the one with the shrine, but it was locked.

So then I sat with Archie in my arms, watching TV until that got boring, and I decided to use the art set. The moment my pencil touched the page, the second it made a soft *tsk* noise, it grabbed hold of me, the art, the need to turn this touch of the

pencil into an entire image. I didn't expect this rush of purpose and positive feelings.

Archie is a good subject since he's so relaxed by his pills. We work together until the sun completely sets, my belly beginning to rumble. I grab lunch in the kitchen and find the fridge and cupboards well-stocked. We could stay here for a few weeks and never need to leave.

"Should I have kissed him?" I murmur.

Archie whines and yawns, rising to his feet with perfect timing. I've just completed the sketch, deciding to forgo the rug and pretend he was lying in the garden instead. He pads over to me, staring up, mouth open in that classic smile of his.

"What do you think, hmm?"

Archie sits and nuzzles my leg with his head.

"You're exhausted, aren't you? I'm so sorry."

I've lost count of the times I've said that to him, but it doesn't feel like enough. I could say it a thousand times, and it still wouldn't be enough.

Over and over, I replay the moment he leaped into the pond. I've showered and changed since then, but I still feel the water in my hair and throat. I still feel the pain of not knowing if I led to this sweet doggie's end. Archie suddenly runs to the front window, yapping, so he can't be *that* ill and tired.

"What is it, boy?"

But I already know. A few guards have changed shifts today, and Archie hasn't reacted like this. Now, he's in overdrive, yapping in excitement. Blake must be home. I stand and brush my outfit down, even as I tell myself I don't have to impress him. I turned away when he tried to kiss me for a *reason*.

He's hiding a secret about him and Mom and Dad, so I should be mean and distant until he tells me the truth, but when I think about kissing him, my lust triggers.

It's more than lust, too. It's this feeling of belonging, this tickling within, that tells me with Blake, I don't have to

question if I have a place, never have to wonder if I could be *his*.

He's made it simple. He *told* me I was his. Sure, he imprisoned and kidnapped me, but it doesn't feel like that.

Maybe that's why I quickly sign my name in the corner of the picture and take it into the hallway. I wait at the door, Blake pushing it open, looking sleek and strong in his pale shirt. The top buttons are undone, and his sleeves are rolled up, every inch of him firm and tempting.

He flashes a look at me. At first, I think he's going to snap, but then he kneels and greets Archie. The dog has his energy back, yapping and running in circles, but then he loses interest and lopes toward the living room.

"Is that normal for him?" I ask, anxiously gripping the sketch.

I've got to be careful, or I'll end up tearing the paper.

"No," Blake says, walking toward me, "but he seems okay. By tomorrow, it'll be like it never happened. What's that?"

He speaks in clipped sentences as if he's holding something back.

"I used the set you bought for me."

"Let me see," he says, reaching his hand out.

I know why he's doing this. Because I refused to kiss him... and fine, we'll let it be this way. We'll let the tension exist between us until he tells me the truth. I'm not weak. I'm not tempted by his lips, the memory of his touch, or the need to smooth over this conflict and find a place of warmth again.

Yeah, right...

Our hands touch as I hand him the paper. That familiar yet crazily enchanting electricity burns up my arm and sizzles through me, willing me into his embrace.

"This is incredible," he says, sudden husky emotion entering his voice. "When you said you sketched... this is next level, Bonnie. This is truly excellent. I can't even... *this*... can I keep this?"

I study him as pride whelms within me, wondering if he may be faking his reaction, but he seems genuine.

When I nod, his lips twitch, a gift of a smirk.

“Thank you,” he says. “Have you eaten yet?”

“No.”

“Can we share a meal... or would that break one of your rules?”

“I’m not the one keeping secrets,” I snap.

He laughs gruffly, pushing past me. “Meet me in the kitchen if you change your mind.”

I watch him go, studying the tautness of his back, his arms triggering a need in me—the need to fall into them and feel them wrapped protectively around me.

Archie follows Blake around the corner, out of sight.

It’s like we’ve never kissed. Like he’s never told me I belong to him. He never said he hasn’t dated, implying he only wants me. None of this magic has happened. None of this closeness.

With a sigh, I decide to head to my bedroom. I want him badly, but I can’t let him treat me this way, as if I’m a dog too, and he can command me any way he wants.

I yell when Blake comes running down the hallway with Archie at his feet. He’s like a different man from the one who just left me. There’s something like rage in his eyes, flaring as he gazes down at me.

Then he swallows, shaking his head slowly. “Oh, Bonnie.”

“What is it?” I ask nervously. “What’s happened?”

“It’s your dad. Somebody broke into his apartment. He’s missing.”

I stumble and fall against the wall.

It’s weird. Even as it happens, I’m thinking, *Come on, don’t be melodramatic.*

It doesn’t help. The news has violently crashed into me.

“What? Why?”

“We’re not sure. It might have something to do with his gambling debts.”

“What debts?” I ask.

“We’re still looking into that, but you said it. He’s got an issue with gambling. He used to enjoy it too, back in the day...”

He trails off, and we share a sour look. *Back in the day* refers to the dark period Blake won’t talk about, the secret he’s keeping.

“But we’ll need your help. I didn’t want to involve you.”

“I *want* to be involved,” I snap, marching right up to Blake, staring up into his fierce expression. “I want to help any way I can.”

“We’ll need a list of where he goes, where he gambles, and any friends or associates.”

“Have you contacted the police?” I ask.

Blake nods, surprising me. “He’s been registered as a missing person.”

“I thought you were going to tell me not to trust the police.”

He sighs darkly. “Life isn’t as simple as you want to make it, Bonnie. It’s not a question of *wrong* and *right* and *truth* and *lies*.”

“What’s that, huh? Bad poetry?”

Suddenly, he loops his arms around me and squeezes me so I’m crushed close to him. I try to fight the fiery collision at first, but then his lips are on mine. Fighting isn’t even an option. I take solace in his arms, kissing him, so I don’t have to think about Dad. I don’t have to think about the bad things that could be happening.

“We have to get to work,” Blake says fiercely, pausing the kiss.

He’s right, but I push my lips against his anyway.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Blake

“My men are scouring the city,” I tell Bonnie, leaning against the doorframe as she sits at the kitchen table.

The overhead lights are on, and the garden is dark, letting me study her in the window’s reflection. She crosses her arms, anxiety clear in every breath. She tightens the fold of her arms.

Even now, the beast in me awakens. With each movement, she shifts her curvy body, the shape of her clear in the loose-fitting T-shirt, the fabric resting against her in all the right places. I walk over and gently lay my hand on her shoulder, reminding myself to be civilized. “You should eat something.”

“Maybe I’ll starve myself until you tell me the truth,” she says. “Maybe that will make you more honest.”

“I can’t share private stuff about your dad,” I say.

She leaps to her feet, the chair whining on the floor. Spinning, she glares up at me.

“My dad might be dead, Blake. Or maybe he’s being tortured. Who knows? And you’re worried about what? About telling the *truth*?”

I step forward, taking her shoulders, but then she pushes my hand away and strides over to the window.

“I don’t think you’re ready for this news, not now, not when Cameron’s fate is uncertain.”

“How many excuses are there?” she hisses. “The truth is the truth. Whatever happened, it happened. It’s not fair for you to keep it from me. It’s not fair for me not to know who you are. Or who dad is. Or who Mom *was*.”

I drop into a chair at the table, picking at the wood and staring at her.

“I could’ve run today,” she says, facing me slowly. “We both know I could have. Your man wouldn’t have stopped me. I saw the way he was looking at me this morning. Or *not* looking at me. He was scared. I doubt he would’ve grabbed me if I’d run. I’m right, aren’t I?”

“Yes,” I say, impressed.

“But I chose to stay,” she says, approaching me with careful steps as if she’s worried about setting off a landmine. She already has an explosion of certainty inside of me.

“I stayed for Archie.” She kneels, grabbing my hands, squeezing them tightly as she gazes up at me with tears in her eyes. “I stayed for you because something’s happening between us. I know it is, but I can’t let myself care if you won’t... won’t... tell the truth.”

She breaks down. The stress becomes too much for her as she pushes her face against my legs and weeps. Agony rips right down my middle—agony and defeat. I’m never supposed to let my woman crumble like this. I stroke her shoulders gently.

“It’s okay, Bonnie.”

“I want to know what’s going on.”

“Come here.”

Leaning down, I wrap my arms around her, lift her, and sit her on my lap. She pushes her face against my chest, crying as I smooth my hands through her hair, hoping to comfort her.

“Are you sure you want to hear this?” I ask.

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“It will change everything. Your whole life.”

She leans back in my arms, staring firmly at me. “That’s more reason for me to know.”

She looks so beautiful with that determined, stubborn expression on her face, her eyebrows knitted. I can’t fight the urge to lean in for a kiss, but she turns away from me. My lips come to rest against her cheek.

“No kissing until the truth,” she says, her breath catching.

“We’ve already broken that rule.”

She grabs my shirt tightly as she stares up into my eyes. “No, I mean it. Dad’s missing. My world’s falling apart. I’ve already lost one parent. Tell me.”

With a sigh, I stand and stare out the window. It’s like I’m looking into the past, into all the pain and rage from long ago. I never guessed I’d be explaining this to Isla’s daughter one day. I’m sorry, Cameron. She has to know.

“Your mom wasn’t killed in a hit-and-run,” I say.

She gasps, “Look at me.”

I turn. Her hands are clasped in front of her so tightly that her knuckles turn white. I wish there was a way I could shield her from this.

I could become the savage I was when she first interviewed, drag her into the bedroom, and *tell* her she has to do what she’s told. That includes keeping questions to herself, but there’s too much tragedy in her eyes. It tugs at something in my heart, a place I never knew existed before I laid eyes on Bonnie.

“Say that again,” she demands, her voice rising.

I approach her slowly, but she backs away, shaking her head.

“She wasn’t killed in a hit-and-run,” I say.

“Then h-how?” she stutters.

I want to hold her so badly it hurts, to take some of this pain from her, but it’s clear she doesn’t want to be touched.

“There was an Italian. He’s the father of a man called Enzo—a wild dog in the current Italian mob. His father was called Francesco.”

“Okay...”

She can’t keep the tremor out of her voice. My heart tugs again, drawing my mind to the future, to standing beneath the altar with the knowledge I can keep her safe forever. She never has to experience agony like this.

I’ll hurt anybody who tries to make her suffer.

“Your dad isn’t going to be happy I’m te—”

Telling you this, I was going to say, but then she yells over me.

“I don’t give a *crap*. You’ve told me too much not to tell me everything.”

She’s right. I’ve gone too far.

“I grew up with your dad,” I go on, knowing I’m betraying my onetime best friend, but also knowing I can’t leave Bonnie with half the story, “and Isla. We were friends as teenagers. I joined the Kilts growing up, though they weren’t called that then. They were a loose collection of criminals. Your dad had a home and parents. So did Isla, but I had nothing.”

“Nothing?” she whispers.

I wave a hand. “My parents were killed when I was a kid. It’s not part of this story.”

“*Killed?*” She walks slowly toward me, gently taking my hands. “What happened?”

“A home invasion,” I murmur, the memories more potent than usual, probably because of my woman’s closeness. “It went wrong... for him and my parents. My dad fought back, wounding the guy. He bled out, but so did my parents.”

“Oh, Blake...”

“It’s fine,” I say.

“You don’t have to act so toughly. I can see you’re hurting.”

I hold her hands tightly.

“The point is,” I go on, “I was drawn to the life, but your dad disapproved. So did Isla, but we stayed friends. Then, one day, we were at a mafia party. Your parents were never part of the life, but they sometimes attended these with me. Francesco saw Isla. He decided he wanted her.”

“Wanted her?” she whispers.

I stare into my woman’s eyes. She gets the point. He wanted to use her, to make her his.

Like me with Bonnie?

No, *no*.

The difference is I’d never do what Francesco did. He was a monster.

“When she told him she had a boyfriend, he took it as an insult, a sign she was trying to humiliate him. He found her. He-he did things to her, Bonnie. I can’t be specific.”

“Evil things?” she whispers, tears flowing silently down her cheeks.

“The worst,” I say gruffly. “Then, when he was done with her, he killed her and *bragged* about it. I told your dad we couldn’t let this stand. I told him we had to end this scumbag’s life.”

“Good,” Bonnie says fiercely.

“You approve?”

She nods, more tears sliding down her face. “If he did that to Mom, he deserves everything he got.”

“Your dad disagreed,” I say.

“*Really?*”

“He wanted me to go to the police. He wanted to do it the so-called right way, but back then, the Italians owned the cops. I knew there would be no justice. So, against your dad’s wishes, I took it into my own hands. I killed that bastard myself, and that’s what led to my rise to become the leader. It started a war. I took charge, and your dad vowed never to speak to me again.”

“Because you went against his wishes?”

She can barely contain the sobs now, her voice cracking.

“Exactly,” I reply. “Over the years, he calmed down a little. We talk on the phone sometimes, but that’s what ended the best friendship I’ve ever experienced. We were like brothers once, but he could never forgive me for killing Francesco.”

She gulps as if running out of air, pushing her face against my chest as the sobs grip her. I hold her tightly as she cries, minutes passing. I feel so damn inadequate—no clue how to fix this—but it can’t be fixed. It all happened so long ago, but not for my woman. For Bonnie, it *just* happened.

“You have to go,” she says, disentangling herself and wiping her cheeks. “Don’t you? To find Dad?”

“I don’t want to leave you.”

“But you *have* to,” she snaps, “unless you want me to go out and start looking.”

She laughs dully.

“That’s me, right? The private detective. I’m going to find the man who killed Mom. Do you know how many times I said that to Dad? He always told me I’d do great. He let me believe the killer was still out there.”

“Bonnie—”

“Please. Find him.”

I move to touch her again, but she backs away.

Turning, I say through gritted teeth, “I’ll get to work, and I’ll unlock the door. There are more photos in there if you want to look.”

She says nothing, so I leave.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

B onnie

I sit on the floor beneath the shrine, Archie in my lap as I hold the photo album. It's been maybe an hour since Blake left, striding from the kitchen with his shoulders square, intent painted on every powerful inch of him.

The photo album shows Mom, Dad, and Blake standing in a park together, Dad with his arm around Mom. Blake stands at Dad's other shoulder, already two heads taller, his dark hair swept back as he smiles at the camera. He *smiles* with more happiness than I can believe. I can't imagine Blake grinning like that now, so carefree, with no darkness glinting in those penetrating eyes of his.

Archie whines and rolls onto his back, offering me his belly. I scratch him as I flip the page, finding a photo of Dad and Blake that was taken up close, both of them smiling into the lens as the sun shines brightly behind them.

"All my life," I murmur, scratching Archie under the chin, "I wanted to find the man who killed my mom. That was the reason, boy, but I don't think I ever *really* wanted to be one. It was my mission, but the mission's already over."

He groans as if he understands me.

"And now Dad's missing, and Mom... Jesus, poor Mom. What she must've gone through at the end."

I cry again, annoyed at myself for letting the tears come so easily. It's like Blake has torn a hole open inside of me, wrenched me apart, and let agony spill in, but I can't blame it on him. I prefer knowing the truth, even if it hurts like hell.

I lie in bed for a long time, convinced sleep will never come. My heart is pounding too fiercely, my nerves too taut as I think about Blake out there, searching for Dad. A thought slithers into my mind. What if Blake invented it all—the story of Dad's kidnapping and the circumstances of Mom's death?

As soon as this thought arises, passion shoots it down. My need to be with Blake forever obliterates it. I think back to when he told me, the husky pain in his voice, his eyes locked on me. I don't believe he lied. Maybe it would make my life easier. Then I could go back to seeing him as my kidnapper and nothing more.

He's the man who avenged my mother. Maybe I should feel something else about what he did—anger that Blake would take the law into his own hands. Regret that this man, this monster Francesco, isn't facing legal justice.

Truthfully, I'm relieved. He'll never hurt anybody again. He got what he deserved.

Somehow, sleep takes me. I close my eyes, and when I open them, sunlight fills the room and Archie is curled up in a ball, pushed right up against me. Someone knocks on my door. Soon the knocking gets louder.

"Hello?" I call.

"It's me."

Even tired, Blake sounds in control. It gives me a small whisper of hope.

"Can I come in?"

"It's your house," I say, unable to keep the bitterness out of my voice.

When he pushes the door open, Archie hops down from the bed and runs across the room. Blake kneels and greets his dog, stroking him over the head and up and down his body. Every time he does this, I think of children. I think of a world in which none of this is happening. Dad's not missing. He and Blake are still friends.

"So?" I say, climbing to my feet.

It must say something about me—about *us*—that self-consciousness touches me. I'm wearing my clothes from last night, crumpled and probably stinky. I tell myself it doesn't matter. This isn't about me and Blake and kissing and closeness.

"Did you find him?" I ask.

Blake walks over to me and wraps his arms around me. I thought I'd be too eager for news to embrace him, but when I feel the security of his solid body, I lean against him, resting my cheek against his firm chest.

"Do you remember Enzo?" he says after a pause.

"Francesco's son?"

Sickness swirls through me when I say the name of my mom's killer.

"Yeah," Blake says and pauses. "He's got your dad."

"What do you mean, *got*?"

I end the hug. It's too tempting to lean against him and savor the warmth, to let everything else fall by the wayside. It's too tempting to forget about the rest of the world.

Blake runs a hand through his silver-peppered hair. He looks tired, triggering the would-be wife in me. I want to sit him down, tell him to relax, make him a snack, and be there for him... but another time. Or another life.

"I spent the night hunting down leads. This led me to the Italians and finally to Enzo. The second I saw him, I knew he was involved. He couldn't hide the smug look on his face. Your dad's been gambling. He's run up a debt to Enzo. Of course, Enzo was happy about that."

“Why?”

Blake frowns. “He’s never forgiven me for what I did to his father. After I told him the truth, even after Massimo—the new head of the Italian mafia—condoned my actions, he still can’t let it go. He thinks his father should’ve been fined.”

“Fined?” I snap. “For killing my mom?”

Blake nods. “He’s sick in the head. He knows me and your dad used to be best friends. On the surface, he can say this is about gambling debt, but we both know the truth. He’s doing this as revenge and worse.”

Blake swallows, cutting himself off. I step up against him, reading his face, knowing he wants to hide something from me.

“No more lies,” I say firmly. “What’s worse?”

“I don’t have to tell you this,” he says. “You don’t need to know.”

“But you’re going to,” I reply. “I know you are. I know you’re more than a kidnapper.”

He grits his teeth, nodding. “Maybe I am, but it was easier when I was in charge.”

“You’re still in charge, aren’t you?”

“Not with you, Bonnie. I don’t feel in control.”

He steps forward and draws me into his arms again. It should be the worst time for a kiss, but my instincts don’t care. When he pushes his lips firmly against mine, I answer, standing on my tiptoes and throwing my arms around his shoulders.

“What’s worse?” I demand, as the heat rises inside of me and tempts me, once again, to forget everything else.

“Enzo wants you to pay your dad’s debt personally. I offered the money on the spot, but the sick bastard wants *you* to pay.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Because it makes him feel tough. Powerful. When he mentioned your name, I must’ve flinched or something. I don’t

know... shown some sign of how much..."

He looks at me with something like softness. "I care about you," he finishes.

Affection expands in me. If the moment were different, I'd kiss him again and maybe let the kiss lead to other things, but Dad's out there. He needs me.

"I have to go," I say.

Blake is shaking his head before I'm done speaking. "No."

"Yes," I snap. "There's no other choice. We can't let him keep Dad. If you have the money, let me go. Let me pay. Then he'll let Dad go."

"Maybe he will," Blake says, "but he could also use the chance to take you hostage, too."

"I don't want to hear any of this," I hiss. "He has Dad. I can get Dad back. It's that simple."

"It's *not* that simple," he growls. "I can't risk anything happening to you. I'm meeting with Massimo soon. He'll talk sense into Enzo."

"What about Dad in the meantime? What if Enzo's hurting him? You have to take me to them."

"I can't." He bites down. "I *won't*."

"Then I'm leaving." I march for the door. "I won't stay here if you won't let me help."

Blake grabs onto my hand, spinning me around. The Blake from day one returns, the fierceness, the intimidating stare. "You. Are. Not. Leaving."

"So, we're back to that, huh? You're just as bad as Enzo. Kidnapping me like he kidnapped Dad. You can pretend you're better, but you're *not*."

I pull away from him, making for the door again.

"I can't let you get hurt," he snarls.

He grabs my shoulders—not hard, but not soft either. Then he lifts me up and carries me to the bed.

“You’ll have to stay in your room until this is over. I’m sorry.”

He scoops up Archie and walks toward the door. I leap to my feet, meaning to run around him, but then Blake lurches ahead and shuts the door quickly behind him. I hammer my fist against it, thinking of Dad, thinking of all the terrible things that could happen to him.

“I hate you,” I scream, not meaning it even for a moment.

“You hear me, Blake? I *hate* you.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Blake

I hear Bonnie's voice in my head as Malcolm and I drive out to the city, a Kilt car following us. Her words bounce around my skull, harsher each time.

I hate you, she screamed. I deserve it but probably worse. She wants to do the right thing and save her dad, but she doesn't understand the life and doesn't understand what Enzo could do to her. If I gave her the details of what Francesco had done to Isla, maybe Bonnie would have some idea, but I'd never do that. It would break her.

"It'll be fine, boss," Malcolm says. "Massimo will see sense. Enzo can't make absurd demands like forcing a daughter to pay for her father's debits. If we've got the money, he has to take the payment. This is business, after all."

I nod, teeth gritted, hoping my second-in-command is right.

I slam my hand against the steering wheel. "*Fuck.*"

Malcolm sits beside me. He drove on the way up, but I was too filled with buzzing energy to sit placidly in the passenger seat.

"That was a waste of time," I growl.

During the meeting with the head of the Italians, we learned Enzo has disappeared and missed a meeting this morning. He's not answering his phone, even from Massimo, the boss.

"This isn't about the money." As I speak, I imagine punching Enzo so hard that his gold tooth flies out of his mouth. "Enzo just wants to humiliate Cameron and get his daughter to grovel in front of him. Or worse, he'll hurt them both. He'll start another war."

"A war?" Malcolm says.

I stare fiercely at him. "If the Italians cause Bonnie one second of pain—if they physically hurt or destroy her by hurting her dad—it's war. I'll kill Enzo and every member of his little clique. Nobody will be safe."

"You really care about this girl," Malcolm says.

"Yeah, I do." More than anything.

"Find a way for us to reach Enzo," I tell Malcolm. "Phone numbers of all his businesses, all his associates. He doesn't want the camp to contact him but wants to play games with us. I bet he hasn't made it too difficult."

"I'll put the feelers out right now," he says, taking out his phone.

I rub my eyes, fighting the idea of sleep. I can't rest until my old best friend is safe. Until the future grandfather to my *children* is safe.

My cellphone rings. It's Dorman, one of the guards on my estate.

"Hello?"

"She's gone."

I sit upright, a jolt running through me. "What do you mean, gone? She was in her bedroom."

"The window's open. She must've climbed down the trellis for the creepers. The plants are disturbed."

"But she must be on the estate," I snap.

“We’re looking.”

“Keep looking. I’m on my way.”

Malcolm is busy on the phone, but he quickly buckles his belt when I speed out of the parking spot.

Bonnie, what did you do? I can’t protect her if she’s on the run. She must be hiding on the estate somewhere. I drive fast, speeding away from the city. As I near the estate, Dorman calls again.

“Still no sign of her,” Dorman says on the loudspeaker as I drive.

“We’re almost there,” I reply. “Have you checked every room?”

“Yeah, and the grounds.”

“What about the security footage?”

“It shows her leaving the house, but then she walks into a blind spot.”

I drive up to my estate’s large gate, waiting as the guards trigger the electronic opening mechanism. As the doors slowly widen, showing me more of the greenery and the estate, I realize what my woman did. It was a crazy plan, but I can see it clearly.

She appears from just beside the gate and runs through the opening gap, ducking left into the small forest which borders my estate. Her hair’s tied up, her ponytail bobbing as she runs, her arms pumping fast. She climbed out of her window, then hid near the gate, knowing I’d return, and it would have to open. She’s tenacious. Perfect motherhood material, but there’s no time to dwell on that.

I leap from the car, running after her, breath loud in my ears. Disaster scenarios taunt me. My mind tortures me with all the things Enzo could do to her if she gets away and somehow returns to the city. Evil, ugly images, and vicious sounds. I push them away as I hurry through the trees.

I catch up with Bonnie quickly, jogging just behind her. She’s determined. She ducks her head and runs fast. A roar escapes

me when she trips. I'm there quickly, leaping into the underbrush to cushion her fall. I catch her and cradle her in my arms as she slams against me.

"Boss."

I look up to find Dorman and two other guards standing nearby, ready to obey my commands. If I told them, *Take her to her room*, would they do it? That would leave me with the problem of watching another man touch my woman. The beast would come out, a blind rage gripping me as I taught these men—*my* men—a lesson.

"Leave us," I growl.

They turn and walk away immediately.

Bonnie sits up, staring down at me, her eyes glistening, her cheeks red.

"What was your plan?" I say, sitting up.

"To save Dad," she hisses. "What did you think? I can't let them have him."

"You don't have the money," I snap. "You don't know where Enzo is. You were just going to... what, Bonnie? Run back to the city and hope you ran into him?"

She stands abruptly. I stand just as fast, my hands raised, ready to grab her again if I need to.

"Yeah, great. I'm an idiot. Thanks for pointing it out."

"I never said that. I *would* never say that."

"The kidnapper with a heart of gold."

I hate you, bounces around my mind, her words from this morning.

"Your hands..." I step forward, relieved when she lets me gently take her wrists. She's got small cuts on her palms. "Did you really climb down that trellis?"

"Yeah, it was difficult." She stares up at me, eyes still shining, but she's holding back her tears. "I'd do much worse to keep Dad safe."

“Oh, Bonnie.”

I hug her, wondering if she’s going to push me away, but she lets me hold her, and even slides her hands around my body, gripping onto my back. I rock her gently, leaning down and pressing my face against the top of her head, inhaling her scent.

“You know I can’t let you leave. Enzo’s the sort of man to do evil things to you for some sort of sick revenge. I’d die. I’d kill before I let that happen.”

“I just want Dad to be okay. Let me help.”

“I have to keep you safe.”

She gazes up at me. “You can’t make that decision for me. He’s *my* dad. If you care about me, you’ll let me help. You’ll listen to what *I* want. I know this started with me as your prisoner... but there’s something else here, isn’t there? Or am I crazy?”

“No,” I say, a weak reply if there ever was one.

I could tell her that there’s more than something happening. It’s everything. It’s the entire world. It’s need and fate and love—yes, *love*—growing between us.

“I’m taking you back into the estate.”

“What if I fought you?” she says. “Would you restrain me?”

I swallow, tension gripping me like a giant hand crushing my ribcage.

“Don’t worry,” she sighs. “I won’t force you to do that. You’re a criminal, after all. Who knows what you’d do to me?”

“Bonnie, I’d never hurt you,” I growl.

“But that’s part of your job, isn’t it? Hurting people?”

“Only people who deserve it.”

“So, you’re a gang boss with a moral code?”

“Yes,” I say firmly, ignoring her sarcasm. “I am. Come back to the estate. I’ll explain what we’re doing to find your dad.”

“And when you find him, you’ll let me help. You won’t force me to stand by and just *hope* you save him.”

I should tell her no. I should remember the man I was before she turned up for the interview before she cracked open my cold heart and gave me a preview of the life I could live.

“You’ll let me come?” she asks, moving closer, staring up at me. “You know why I need to do this. You know it’s because you risked everything to avenge Mom. You started a war for her.”

“I can’t imagine losing you,” I whisper.

She steps close. “This isn’t your decision to make unless you’re *really* going to keep me prisoner. Unless what I want doesn’t matter to you at all.”

“You’re too clever for me,” I say, sighing. “If I’m certain I can keep you safe, you can come.”

As she smiles, I wonder if I’ve just made the worst mistake of my life.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

B onnie

We sit in the garden, the sunny weather clashing with the darkness inside of me.

As I watch Archie running around, rolling in the grass, and grinning happily, I find myself able to relax the tiniest bit. Guilt grips me the second I feel this, the calm I don't deserve, not when Dad could be suffering through hell.

Blake sips his coffee, his forearms tense. My hands twitch as though urging me to grab them, to feel him, to feel his power.

He smirks.

“What?” I say, returning his smile somehow.

“I'm trying to work out if you're a spy.”

“A spy?” Amazingly, I laugh, and then I quickly kill the laughter. I don't deserve it. “What makes you say that?”

“I don't want you thinking of me as a bad person,” he says gruffly.

His hand is resting on the table. I reach over and touch it, the heat activating inside of me. It's instant every time we touch, as though with our warmth and our spark alone, we can block out everything else. He turns his hand over and interlocks his fingers with mine.

“Is this about the stuff in the forest?” I murmur. “I'm sorry—”

“You don’t have to apologize,” he growls. “You’re right. I kidnapped you. I’m the leader of a criminal organization, but it’s not as simple as you think.”

Any second, the door behind us could open, and one of Blake’s men could charge out here and tell us they have news of Dad and Enzo. Blake said I could come, but I can tell he’s pissed about it, but at least he’s listening to me.

“You can talk about anything with me,” I tell him.

He looks at me sharply. His mouth trembles, going from a smirk to something else, something brimming with emotion. It’s difficult to call Blake *soft*, but there’s some gentleness there.

“Will you tell anybody?”

“No,” I say. “Not if you don’t want me to.”

“And I can trust you?”

I squeeze his hand. “You *know* you can trust me.”

He smiles, just for a second, giving me a glimpse of the kid from the photo album, the one without the darkness.

“Big words from a woman who just made the world’s greatest escape attempt.”

Again, laughter takes hold of me, but this time, I don’t end it. I let myself laugh. He laughs too. It’s a miracle that we can do this so recently after my run for freedom. I wonder if this is how regular relationships work, but when our eyes meet, I find I don’t care. I can’t care. It’s working for us despite everything.

He leans forward. “The Kilts have been working with the police for over ten years.”

I gasp, “But you said you were a criminal organization.”

“We are, as far as the other criminal groups are concerned, but after what happened with Isla, I knew I wanted to change the way things worked. If the police hadn’t been so corrupt, we could’ve gone to them like your dad wanted. Maybe we’d still be friends now.”

Silence follows as we both imagine that other world—Blake swinging by as I'm growing up, becoming a family friend. Would it have made us impossible? In a deranged, selfish way, I'm glad I never knew him before.

"I began to work with the few good cops in the city. Slowly, I moved the Kilts' finances from drugs and intimidation to financial. We blackmail corrupt politicians, bankers, and people who can take the hit and deserve it. We maintain legitimate businesses. It's true, we launder money, but we help the city, too."

"Help?" I ask.

"Food kitchens, charities, things like that. When it comes to violence, we never hurt civilians. If the other gangs force us, we'll fight. We'll kill."

"And the police allow this?"

"They turn a blind eye. They know that if the Kilts hurt somebody, it makes the city safer."

"If you're working with the police, tell them about Dad," I say.

"Malcolm's talking with them and trying to find Enzo's location, but it's not as simple as that. The police have to be careful about our connection. If we serve up criminals on a platter, they'll take them, but they won't do our job for us."

"So, you're not a crime boss?" I murmur.

"I am. We break the law, but I try to stay on the good side of the bad."

"The good side of the bad," I repeat. "I kind of like that phrase."

"It explains that nothing is ever simple."

"You can say that again."

We sit quietly for a time, watching as Archie tires of his play and slumps down in the sun on the grass. He lies on his side and stares up at me.

"I don't think you're a bad person," I murmur. "Just so you know."

“Good,” he says.

“Before you told me the truth,” I go on, “even after you kidnapped me, I didn’t think you were a bad person. What does that say about me, huh?”

“I think it says more about *us*,” he says passionately. “You were right before. There’s something more here. Maybe with your private detective skills, you could root it out, eh?”

I shake my head.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

“All my life, I wanted to be a private detective to find the person who killed Mom, but you already found him. You already gave him his punishment.”

“You don’t want to be a private detective anymore?” he asks.

“Does it matter?” I snap, pulling my hand away. “We’re sitting here talking about my hopes and dreams while Dad is out there.”

“It *does* matter,” Blake says, “because you matter. You’ve wanted this your whole life.”

“Based on a lie. If Dad wasn’t missing, I’d hate him for the lie, but I can’t.”

“What will you do instead?” he asks.

I *know* what I’ll do. In my wildest dreams, I can pursue any career I want, any passion. He’ll always be there to support and nurture me while we’ll have a family to care for and children to invest our love in.

I shrug, knowing I can’t say all that. “Work so I can help support Dad.”

“You should draw,” he says. “That picture of Archie was incredible. You’ve got talent.”

“Do you know how rare it is to make it as an artist? In the meantime, I’d have to work to live.”

“No, you don’t,” he growls, sitting up, infused with fire.

“I would,” I reply. “Everybody has to work. Just because you think I’ve got talent—”

“I *know* you’ve got talent.”

“It doesn’t mean the rest of the world would agree.”

“You won’t have to—”

I wonder what he was going to say. He hinted I wouldn’t have to work. Maybe he was going to say something similar. My heart sparkles as I imagine him telling me I never have to worry about work or money or anything, just us, our family, just a life more magical than I ever could’ve envisioned.

Suddenly, the door crashes open behind us. It’s Dorman, the guard who took me and Archie to the vet. Thankfully, the little guy seems fully recovered now.

“Malcolm’s on the phone,” he says.

“Does he know where Dad is?” I ask breathlessly.

Dorman looks at Blake as if asking his permission. With a subtle nod from Blake, Dorman goes on.

“Yeah, he’s got the location. Enzo wants to meet. He’s demanding that Bonnie be there.”

I stare at Blake. “Remember what you promised.”

“We’re taking extra guards,” he snaps at Dorman. “A separate car for Bonnie with four men in it. If anybody tries to hurt her, you’ll sacrifice your life to keep her safe.”

“Boss,” Dorman says, turning for the door.

“I don’t want to get anybody hurt,” I murmur once he’s gone.

“Then stay behind,” he snaps.

We both know he could make me. It comes back to what he said about him not wanting me to view him as a bad person.

“If I do that, *Dad* might get hurt. I’m coming.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Blake

Enzo gives us a location outside the city, a nonoperational mill that looks ready for demolition. It sits in the middle of a large gravel parking lot, half a mile off the main road. My men are quiet as the driver guides us toward the mill.

Bonnie's in the car behind us with four of my most trusted men. I have given each one of them strict orders to do whatever's necessary to keep her safe.

The driver stops in the parking lot. There are two cars parked out front, so Enzo's here somewhere.

Picking up my walkie talkie, I radio the other car. "Lock the doors. Don't let Bonnie out until I give the signal." *If* I give the signal. I've got the cash in the trunk. There might be a way out of this without including Bonnie. The cars are bulletproof and explosive-resistant, meaning Bonnie will be safe inside.

"If anything happens to us," I go on, "take Bonnie back to the estate."

"Boss," comes the reply.

I climb from the car, my hand near my hip and my weapon. The mill has few windows, a couple of them shattered. I'm wearing a bulletproof vest, but a well-placed shooter could still take me out. The windows appear to be empty.

As I approach—Malcolm at my side and two other men behind us—Enzo and a gang of his men emerge from the entrance. His gold tooth winks as he grins. He looks amped-up, his steps jittery, as if he's getting ready for a fight.

He's got five men, and two of them are holding Cameron.

My walkie's in the car, but I know Bonnie must gasp when she sees him. She's probably demanding for my men to let her out, my woman with the passion in her heart, the fire in her gut, the caring, maternal instinct which will never extinguish.

Cameron doesn't look injured. His clothes are dusty and dirty, but he seems unharmed, and he's walking without the assistance of Enzo's men. He meets my eye with a look I recognize from childhood, half guilt and half fear. It drags me back to the past, but I close off that part of myself, remember the war, remember the killing, remember who I have to be to keep my woman safe.

Enzo takes a step forward. He doesn't seem to realize how outgunned he is. As I search the faces of his men, I don't see readiness there. I don't see grit. They've made a mistake, and they know it. I don't think they're even wearing bulletproof vests, the amateurs.

"Did you bring the cash?" Enzo says. "And the girl?"

"No," Cameron says, his voice weak, reminding me of the shell he became after Isla's death. "I told you. My daughter is *not* part of—"

"You don't get to decide that," Enzo shouts, wheeling on him. "Shut your mouth or we'll shut it for you."

"You won't do that," I growl. "If you were going to hurt him, you would have. You think you're playing a clever game, Enzo. You think you can kidnap people and get your sick kicks, and as long as you don't go *too* far, you'll get out of this in one piece."

"Is that a threat?" he snaps, sounding like a temperamental little child.

"I'm not just talking about your life," I reply. "You've gone AWOL from the mob. You've kidnapped a civilian without

permission. Your position has never been secure, and now you've screwed yourself. Massimo will hear about this. What do you think he'll do to the men who joined you on this little mission?"

Enzo shifts from foot to foot, trying to hide his fear. His men do a terrible job of hiding theirs. They exchange glances. Reading people has always been part of my job. They already regret joining this idiot, and now I've confirmed that feeling.

"Do you have the money or not?" Enzo snaps.

"I've got the cash. When Cameron's safe, it's yours. Let him go."

"Nah-uh-uh." Enzo shakes his head slowly. "You're forgetting something. His daughter is going to get her big ass out here and pay the fee herself."

I bite down when he says *big ass*. He's got a mocking tone, as if her size is anything but perfect and a bad thing. The idea is laughable.

"Why?" I growl. "Will that make you feel like a tough guy?"

"It's the deal," he says, "and it's a small price for what you did."

"I took out the trash."

"You killed my *father*."

"After he assaulted and murdered an innocent woman just because she had a boyfriend. After the war, the mob realized I was right. Ask any Italian these days, and he'll tell you he'd do the same thing. You need to let it go."

Enzo turns quickly, staring at the closest Italian, a broad man with a sizeable belly and a gold watch on his wrist.

"What do you think? Did he do the right thing?"

The man hesitates, looking at me and then at Enzo.

"You can still get out of this," I say. "If you stop this now and give me Cameron, I'll tell Massimo you all cooperated. Enzo forced you to go AWOL. You wanted no part of it. You can get

out with your jobs intact. You made a mistake following this asshole. Don't make another."

The man sighs. "He's right, Enzo. I'm sorry, but this is madness. Make some money, you said. Easy cash. Now we've got the Kilts ready to take us out."

Maybe this can end without blood.

"Are you kidding me?" Enzo yells, then spins to the man on his other side, tall and lean with slicked-back hair. "What about you? Did he do the right thing, killing my father?"

"Did he really kill a woman? An innocent woman? Not even for a hit or nothing? Just because?"

Enzo turns to me slowly, much of the fight draining from his face. "The g-girl."

"No," I snarl. "This is over. Malcolm, go get Cameron. Men, if they try to stop him, start shooting."

Malcolm walks past Enzo. The air tinges with possible violence. We've all got our hands next to our guns, ready to fire if it comes to it.

Then Malcolm has his hand on Cameron's arm. He leads him past me toward the car. Cameron and I share a look. It's something I haven't seen from him in years, something I never thought I'd see again. Gratitude.

"You've all got a choice ahead of you," I say, looking over at the Italians and ignoring Enzo. He bristles as if he's going to protest and throw a tantrum, but he doesn't interrupt me.

"You can stay with Enzo and sign away your lives. Massimo will exile you all, at the very least. Or maybe he'll be in a bad mood..."

I don't have to explain what would happen if their employer was angrier than expected if they stay with Enzo. The Italians didn't go the same route as the Kilts—helping to fix the city, providing funding for charities, and doing things to improve instead of destroy.

"Or you can leave now, return to the city, and I'll speak to Massimo on your behalf. I'll tell him you surrendered the

hostage without violence.”

The men exchange more looks, their resolves faltering. This is something else I’ve trained myself to do. Read men when their courage begins to wane or when their stupidity begins to win out.

Finally, they walk toward the car, one by one, and then all together. Enzo watches them, his mouth falling open, his golden tooth winking at me again. “You can’t just... are you... you *can’t*...”

“They can. They are.”

I walk across the parking lot to Enzo. The closer I get, the stranger it feels looking at somebody slightly taller than I am. He squares his shoulders.

“So, this is it,” he grunts. “A few fancy words from you, and they go running.”

“It’s common sense,” I say. “It’s the thing a reasonable man does when he realizes he’s bet on a losing horse. That’s you, Enzo, but we can leave it here. No more attacks, no more games, and you walk away. Leave the city before Massimo finds you. He’ll only exile you, anyway. You’re causing problems none of us need.”

“A silver-tongued talker, that’s you,” Enzo snaps. “Or maybe you don’t just use that tongue for talking, eh? Maybe you use it on that whale in the car.”

My fists clench, even as I try to summon the coldness, the icy shield I’ve used countless times to hide my emotions during these tense meetings, but Enzo won’t leave it alone.

“I saw the way you looked at the meeting,” he goes on, “when I said her name. It’s how you look now. You care about this girl, don’t you?”

I sense nobody is nearby us. Cameron is out of earshot.

“If you think I care about her,” I snarl, “you’re an idiot for saying anything bad about her. Ever. You need to shut your mouth.”

“Why? You won. Just be careful I don’t find your pretty woman and—”

I can’t take it anymore. My body surges with adrenaline, my heart thumping, violence flaring. He’s gone too far. Nobody gets to threaten Bonnie.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

B onnie

My gaze has been on Dad, assessing him for injuries, trying to figure out how badly the Italians treated him. Malcolm walks him toward our car. As he gets closer, I'm relieved to see Dad look unharmed except for the defeated expression on his face. Physically, though, he's okay. He made it out alive.

Then my gaze snaps to Blake. He launches himself into an attack on the Italian, Enzo, the man who's an inch taller than him and just as wide. I yell and reach for the door handle, pulling on it roughly, but it's locked.

"Miss," the driver says. "I can't let you out."

"I have to help him," I snap.

"He doesn't need your help."

Enzo ducks under the first punch and then throws a vicious right hook. He's wearing gold rings, glinting with the quick violence of the movement, leaving me to imagine what would happen if a devastating punch like that landed.

Blake steps back, ducks his head, and fires a shot in Enzo's face. Even with the distance and the car windows dampening the sound, I hear Enzo's strangled cry. He collapses onto the ground, and Blake steps forward, looming over him, fists clenched at his sides.

It's out of place, but my mind has been doing funny things lately. I remember the first day when he seemed like a wild animal, looming with the same intensity he has now.

"Are you done?" Blake roars, his voice carrying.

Enzo must tell him *yes* because Blake turns and walks toward his car. I want to go to him, hold him, thank him, and tell him it's okay. He can let some of the fire go. Then his voice comes through the walkie. "Get Cameron in the car. We're rolling out."

Malcolm opens the door, nodding for me to budge up. I move into the middle seat next to one of Blake's other men, letting Dad climb in next to me.

"Bonnie," he whispers, pulling me into a hug. "I'm so sorry. I never wanted it to be like this. I never wanted to be a part of this. Bonnie, oh, Bonnie..."

I hold him tightly, stroking his shoulder, stunned by how small and fragile he feels.

I've always been a part of this, I almost say, but talk of Mom can come later when we're alone.

"He really likes you," Dad comments, as Archie sits at my feet, pawing the air for attention.

I smile and lean down, stroking him under the arms, the place that makes his body wriggle as if he's having the best time of his life.

The car ride home was quiet, Dad sitting next to me, my hand clutched in his tightly. I want to continue the lie, almost let Dad believe I'm here as a cleaner and nothing else. Okay, maybe *that* part can stay secret for now.

How the hell are we going to tell him? Will Blake even want to, or will he want to end *us* now that Dad's safe? But the rest of it, Mom, the murder, the lie...

"Dad, I know the truth."

Even in his fresh clothes and showered, he looks small and somehow broken. My heart pangs when he flinches, gritting his teeth, not asking *what* truth I'm talking about. I think he already knows.

"Why did Blake tell you?" he says.

"So, it's true?"

I *can't* tell Dad why Blake told me. I can't explain that we were holding each other, my lips sore and needy from kissing, our closeness somehow feeling warm and starry despite the spanking at the start.

Dad sighs. "Yeah, it's true. Blake had no right to tell you."

"Blake just saved your life," I say, feeling the need to defend my man against my dad.

I haven't even *spoken* to Blake since coming home. He's been holed up in his office making calls, presumably to the Italians, to inform them about what happened with Enzo.

"Why did you lie to me?" I ask. "All this time, thinking the killer was still out there... Why did you say that?"

"If I told you the police had caught him, you could've checked."

"But why?" I snap. "I could've taken the truth."

"You were a child."

"You've kept up this lie for years, Dad. Not just when I was little. Even then, you could've told me somehow. A bad man hurt Mom. Another man got rid of the bad man."

"And you're okay with that?" Dad snaps, slamming his hand on the table. "You don't think there's a problem that Blake murdered somebody?"

"No," I say fiercely, completely meaning it. "That man, Francesco..." I force myself to say his name.

"He did the worst things to Mom. He killed her brutally and for nothing. Because he thought he had a right to do whatever he wanted. Blake told me the police were corrupt. There would never be any justice—"

“Your mother made me promise.”

Dad’s voice rises, and he stands, pacing up and down in the garden.

“She made me promise to never be a part of that life.”

“Did you tell Blake this?”

“He already knew. He was there when I made the goddamn promise.”

“So, it was a choice between keeping the promise and letting the psycho go free and hurt more people... or taking him out.”

“Taking him out,” Dad repeats. “You’re not supposed to know any of this. About his real job. About this world. Any of it.”

“You kind of put me in a tough spot by getting kidnapped.”

There it is, not an outright lie, but not the truth, either. It’s enough to let Dad assume I learned the truth about Blake when Enzo kidnapped Dad. I don’t need to share about the steaminess initially, the tingling all over my body, and the sparking light in my heart.

“Imagine if that man was still alive,” I say. “After what he did to Mom... Imagine, Dad, just think about it. It wouldn’t be fair.”

“I never wanted to hurt you,” Dad replies, walking over to me and kneeling beside my chair, taking both my hands, and looking at me with so much emotion I could cry. “I only ever wanted to protect you from this life, from the darkness of the world.”

I say nothing, and then Dad cries, big drowning sobs that tug at the daughter in me. I hold his hands tightly, whispering, “It’s okay, Dad. I understand. I know why you did it, but I would have preferred the truth.”

“The truth is, I’m a hypocrite,” he whimpers. “I say I want to protect you, so what do I do? I gamble. I force *you* to be the grownup. I get kidnapped. I force you to work for a criminal.”

“I like working for Blake,” I say.

“You do?” Dad asks.

“He’s a good man.”

Dad laughs through his tears, staring up at me. “How can you know that?”

Panic strikes me again. We’re getting too close to the truth, and I can’t even think about that now. I can’t imagine explaining to Dad that I want—*need*—his old best friend. He’s Mom’s friend too, the man who avenged her. It’ll be too much for him after the kidnapping. Or is that an excuse?

Instead—shamefully—I gesture to Archie, running up and down the garden. “Just look at that little guy.”

“What about him?”

Dad snuffles as he rubs his cheek.

“I’ve seen Blake with him. I’ve seen his kindness. He’s not some scary mob boss. He’s just a man trying to do the right thing.”

“This is all so insane,” Dad says, “but at least we’re safe. At least we’re together. I’m so sorry, Bonnie. For lying. For gambling. For not being the dad you deserve.”

“You are the dad I deserve,” I tell him fiercely. “You’re the most loving man I know. The fact you’re still so heartbroken over Mom’s death is proof of that.”

He smiles shakily, clasping both my hands. I wish this moment could be pure and untouched by any creeping thoughts of the future. Of telling Dad the *whole* truth. What if he tells me I have to stop, that I can’t be with Blake?

“I’m going to lie down in the spare room,” Dad says. “All of this...”

“It’s a lot,” I murmur. “I understand.”

“And you don’t hate me?”

“Dad, I could *never* hate you.”

Dad leans up, kissing my forehead softly. “When Blake’s done, tell him to come and see me.”

With that ominous note, he leaves me to wonder just what he's going to say.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Blake

“I couldn’t let him threaten you,” I say from the garden door.

My woman flinches, turning from her art set and looking up at me. Her hair is down, spilling beautifully to her shoulders, her cheeks so full of life.

Maybe it’s the fight, the thought of losing her, but my need is fiercer than ever. This should be a time of pure emotion, but I can’t tame the animal within. I can’t stop my balls from expanding and my shaft from going solid, as if we’ve just survived a disaster and *now* is the time to create our child and secure our future.

“Threaten me?” she asks, standing.

We have to be careful since her dad is on the estate somewhere.

“Toward the end, when his men were leaving, Enzo said some sick stuff about you. That’s why I lost my cool. I never do that, not during business. People can say anything, but with you...”

She walks close to me but stops short, glancing at the house. She’s having the same thoughts as I am.

“Sneaking around with my girlfriend is something I never thought I’d do at forty-one,” I joke.

She laughs, a gorgeous miracle. It’s like she’s pushing away all the drama and uncertainty.

“I think that’s the first time you’ve told me your age,” she says.

I smirk. “Is that a problem?”

Her hand trembles as she raises it, placing it against my chest. Instantly, my body responds, thrumming with the heat and the implication. My balls have never felt so swollen, so ready, my head hazy with desire.

“Not even a little,” she says, then quickly snatches her hand away.

“You’re worried about your dad finding out?” I ask.

She nods. “He knows *I* know about your job. I kind of lied—well, hinted—that I learned after the kidnapping. He was so torn up that he didn’t ask any probing questions. He wants to see you. He said to visit his room when you were done. And... wait a sec.”

I laugh when she cuts off abruptly, even if laughter’s the last thing we should indulge in. With my Bonnie, it’s like a bubble closes around us every time we’re together, the concerns of the world bouncing away from us.

“What?” I ask.

“Just now, did you call me your *girlfriend*?”

I lean down, risking a lot but needing to touch and taste her. A shiver runs through her curvy, young, perfect body when I grab her hips, though I have to keep most of myself tamed. Or as tame as possible.

“It’s an understatement,” I growl, then press my lips against hers.

She kisses me with just as much passion. It’s like all the tension has stowed up inside of us, and now it’s allowed to come out. She moans through the kiss, her hands smoothing over my arms, up to my shoulders. Then she pushes against me, forcing herself away.

“We can’t do anything,” she whispers.

“Don’t worry,” I growl. “I know it’s your first time. I’ll be gentle... or I’ll try, at least.”

It’s impossible to keep the savage shiver out of my voice, the volcanic-like trembling that hints at everything we’re going to do together.

“It’s not that,” she murmurs, “or not *just* that. What about Dad? We haven’t told him about us.”

“Oh.”

I step back, realizing she’s probably right. I revealed the truth to Bonnie when it wasn’t my place, and now I’m going to claim his daughter too, but that doesn’t stop the need from expanding, taunting, and tempting.

“You might be right,” I say reluctantly.

“*Might* be?” she counters.

“I want you. I won’t be ashamed of that.”

“Anyway, what would we even tell him?” she says. “*Oh, hey, Dad, this man spanked me, and now we want to go all the way.*”

No, we’d tell him we’re going to be together forever. We’re going to have a family. Bonnie must take my silence badly because she folds her arms in that pouty, sassy way. Even Archie senses something is up, tilting his head up at her.

“Dad said he wanted to talk to you.”

“I know. You told me.”

“Well, better not keep him waiting.”

She turns away. I can’t help myself. Swatting my hand out, I spank her juicy ass, making those thighs shake.

She spins on me, unable to hide the smile on her face. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Punishing you for being so sassy,” I tell her matter-of-factly. “Not that it’s a bad thing.”

“We have to be good until Dad knows,” she says, but her voice is weak.

“Soon,” I say, turning away.

I’m not sure how long I’ll be able to fight this urge. My woman deserves the truth. We belong together.

My thoughts clash with endless images of Bonnie as I walk up the stairs and knock on the door to the spare room I’ve given to Cameron. My stomach stirs with rare nerves. This will be the first time we’ve spoken in person for years.

“Hello?” he calls.

His room is front facing. Bonnie and I were just in the garden. It’s calculations like this that should make me feel small and mean and pathetic. Sneaking around behind his back...

“It’s me.”

“You can come in.”

I push the door open to find him sitting on the edge of the bed. It breaks me to see *him* this broken so many years after her death. Standing, he marches over to me. He moves so quickly, I wonder if he’s going to punch me in the face, but he sticks his hand out, offering it for me to shake. I take it tentatively.

“Thank you for saving me.”

We shake. “I wasn’t going to let that bastard keep you.”

He withdraws his hand. “But did you *have* to tell her, Blake? About Isla?”

“She demanded to know,” I reply, knowing the reasoning is frail.

Without Bonnie’s blessing, I can’t explain her melting in my arms, her sadness touching deep places inside of me, places that were supposed to die the second I became the boss.

“She found the shrine.”

“The shrine?”

That’s right. Of course, he won’t know.

“Of Isla?” he asks.

I nod. “There are photos of us, too. From the old days.”

“The old days,” he repeats. “Sometimes, they seem like yesterday, and other times, they seem like a million years ago. You know what I mean?”

“I do. Completely.”

“Can I see it?” he asks.

“Sure.”

I lead him through the house to the wing where Bonnie’s room is. My hunger stirs afresh when I look through her open bedroom door and see her disturbed sheets.

Later, once the sun has set... No, I can’t visit her. I can’t claim her, not with Cameron here, but can I really fight it?

Cameron walks slowly into the room, walking over to the lights and the photos. With his back to me, he begins to shake.

“I didn’t know you even thought about her anymore.”

“I think about her all the time, and you, Cameron. Our friendship.”

He turns and slowly walks toward me. “I won’t lie. I’ve got questions like, why does Bonnie know about your business? Why did you have to tell her? Just because she demanded?”

Before I can answer, he goes on, “But for now, Blake, I just want to give my old friend a hug.”

I’m shocked as he leans in. He was always more emotional than me, pulling me into hugs when we were kids, even when I playfully argued. Now, I don’t argue. I hug him back. My oldest friend. He pats my back, ending it. “I need sleep. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

“That sounds like a plan.”

He pauses at the door, looking over his shoulder. “We had some good times, the three of us, didn’t we?”

“The best,” I say fiercely.

Once he’s gone, I stare at the photos, knowing this is more complicated now. I also know something else. Bonnie is

calling for me. Our future is calling, and I can't fight it anymore.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

B onnie

I lie in bed, knowing sleep won't come to me tonight. After everything that has happened, I probably should be thinking about Dad. I wonder how we're going to tell him, but my mind keeps returning to something Blake said when we were together in the garden. He called me his girlfriend and then said it was an *understatement*.

He implied I mean a lot more to him. I caution myself not to get carried away or let my wishes conquer reality. I also can't deny this desire inside of me, this ferocious need for it to be true. If we're more than boyfriend and girlfriend—if he sees me as more than a kidnapped woman to spank—maybe we can tell Dad.

Maybe we can explain that... My thoughts trail off when the door opens softly, the whining noise drawing my attention. I sit up, wondering if Archie is nosing the door open or if Dad wants to come and talk things through.

The curtains are drawn, but there's so much light out here compared to the city. The moon and starlight wash into the room, shine through the curtains, and cast a steely glow across the rugs to the door. Blake steps into the glow wearing a sleeveless shirt and shorts, presumably what he wears to bed.

My heart thunders as I stare across at him, the steely light catching his naked arms, glowing up and down each vein, each throbbing muscle.

“What are you doing?” I whisper.

He shuts the door behind him quietly and strides across the room. His whole body is heaving, his chest rising and falling as if he can't contain the fierceness. He stops at the bed, staring down at me. His manhood presses through his shorts, solid and huge, reminding me all over again that I'm a virgin, and I've got no idea if his massive dick will even fit inside of me.

My body shimmers, telling me to try at least, telling me to reach forward and touch him.

“I'm doing what I should've done the second I saw you,” he growls.

I should say *no* when he climbs onto the bed, holding himself up by his powerful arms and kissing me captivately.

No doubt our lips were made for each other, not when we fuse so effortlessly, his manhood pushing through his shorts and pressing against my groin. My sex aches as he grinds against me. I think of my virginity, and we haven't told Dad yet.

“Blake,” I whisper. “I'm not sure...”

“You belong to me,” he growls. “I told you that before, but I didn't explain how much you mean to me. I didn't tell you that the second I saw you, Bonnie, I knew we were going to be together forever. I knew we were going to have a family. I knew you were going to make the most incredible mother. I knew I was going to be your husband. I knew I was always going to support you.”

I can barely keep up as his passionate words rush out, his voice getting huskier than usual as he speaks. His warm breath teases me, tickles over my lips, and touches my cheeks.

“Do you mean it?” I say.

“I've never meant anything more.”

We kiss again. I'm not sure who starts it this time. We're both starving for it, mouths open, tongues finding each other.

I stroke down his back and slip my hands beneath the fabric of his shirt so I can feel his naked muscles, the swollen, bulging

power in each sinew, pushing against my palm, teasing me even more. I squeeze down, digging my nails in. I'm sure I feel them bend.

He's so hard, his muscles and his manhood. He groans as he shifts his hips, teasing my pussy with each movement.

"The second you saw me?" I gasp, breaking off the kiss and staring into his eyes.

"I let my animal nature out when I spanked your perfect, round, juicy ass, but yes, there was more there. Every time I look at you, I get a new dream. I dream about our family sitting next to a fire with you sketching us, both of us laughing as we try to get our kids to sit still."

"I want that too," I whisper.

Part of me warns me to hold this back and not share every single thing I'm feeling. There's also this fire inside of me, this undeniable burning that tells me he's being honest.

"What?" he says, pushing himself up to look at me with a better view.

I can read the disbelief when I gaze into his intense, wolfish eyes—almost silver in the moonlight. He doesn't know my body has been aching with the same desire, the deep pulsing calling me to a future much brighter than the past.

"I want a life together," I murmur. "A family. A wedding. Kids. Blake, *please* tell me you're not tricking me."

"I could say the same to you."

Our lips fuse with heat, the passion unstoppable.

His hips move again, surging against my sex, his stiff manhood grinding and making me crazy. It's a struggle to keep moving my hands over his back with all my attention focused on his stiff cock moving like he's possessed.

"I mean it," I moan. "I want it all, but..."

... *we should wait.*

"But what?" he says. "If we both want it... if you want my cock to claim your young, tight, soaked pussy... if we both

need it...”

At each pause, he kisses me, my neck, my cheek, and finally my lips again.

“I do need it,” I say.

But what about Dad? He doesn't know.

“I just can't believe you feel the same.”

“I felt it the *second* I saw you.” He kisses me again. “All my life, I thought I'd never find a woman. I never felt anything for anybody the way I feel about you. I thought it was just who I was. The sort of stuff I'm made of, maybe. Too tough. Too mean. You changed everything.”

I don't say *but* the next time he kisses me. The lust carries us away as our lips meet with more obsession. Each meeting of our tongues and clashing of our lips is so much sweeter now that I know he wants it all, too.

A trick, a lie, a game, but no, it's none of that. I trust him. He saved Dad. He defended my honor against that monster, Enzo.

Blake groans insistently when I pull at his shirt, leaning back to let me lift it over his head. His muscles gleam in the low light, each one like carved rock, his chest bulging and his abs solid.

“Your turn,” he says, smirking as he grabs my hoodie.

I lift my arms. He groans when he realizes I'm not wearing a bra. Shame tries to touch me when my breasts spill free. I can feel how large they are, and a horrible memory strikes me from months ago when I was in the bathroom studying myself, wondering if they were symmetrical.

I was wondering if any man could ever want me. I've got no doubt when Blake pushes my breasts together. Another groan shudders through him huskily as he sucks one of my nipples, moving his tongue around it and then taking the other in his mouth.

He makes a savage panting noise, my nipples tingling as he keeps sucking and licking possessively. He focuses on one, his

other hand massaging my other breast, his fingers stroking across my nipples.

“When you moan like that, you almost turn me into a goddamn beast again,” he growls.

“Like w-what?”

“Like how you just did,” he says, then takes my nipple in his mouth.

He licks it quicker, then sucks on my nipple as he leans back, finally letting it go.

“I need to see all of you.”

I try to think of something sexy and confident to say, but I’m still a virgin. Nerves still cling to me.

“Ditto,” I whisper.

He grabs my PJ pants and pulls them down. Then he grabs my panties. I lie here, naked, my wet sex tingling as he looms over me.

He grabs his shorts and pulls them down. I gasp as his *enormous* cock springs up. I’ve got no frame of reference, but I can’t imagine he’s normal-sized. He’s thick and long and his head bulges with a big glistening point of precome, a big vein moving down one side as if all his passion is trying to burst out of him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Blake

There's never been a more perfect sight.

I can't think about Cameron, the fact we sort of became friends again. I can't think about how we should tell him before I go on.

When I came to my woman's bedroom, I never expected her to say she felt the same. She wants it, too.

Now she's lying beneath me, her ample breasts red and wet from my attention, her legs propped up as if she's presenting her soaked, shiny entrance, her folds swollen with lust, her clit begging for me to rub and please her, to drive her to an orgasm.

She's propped up on her elbows, her curvy, beautiful belly rising and falling quickly. Her belly makes me think of the future, of children, and it only adds to my desire. Her face is a pretty picture, her cheeks flushed, and her hair messy.

"Do you want me to..."

She trails off nervously, nodding at my cock, my length solid and tense. Precome leaks out of me endlessly.

"Have you ever sucked a dick before?" I snarl, unable to hide how much this turns me on.

She bites her lip, shaking her head.

“Good. Mine’s the only dick you’ll ever taste. Nobody else, Bonnie.”

“Nobody else,” she whimpers, sitting up. “What do I do?”

“Open your mouth and suck on my tip. You don’t have to take the whole thing. Grab my shaft and stroke it with your perfect hand.”

She holds her hand up, a mischievous grin on her face. “Oh, so even my *hand* is perfect, huh?”

“Everything about you is perfect.”

She shuffles to the end of the bed.

I remind myself that this is her first time, forcing myself to shut down the animal impulse inside of me. The beast, the carnal need, roars to grab bunches of her hair and drive my cock to the back of her throat, to fuck her pretty mouth until she’s gasping, and then push my soaked cock into her begging slit.

She deserves better than that. Better than the beast. My balls swell when she grabs onto my shaft. I groan as she lowers her mouth toward my sex. When she takes me, I know I can’t let her do this for long. She sucks my tip nervously, moaning gently.

“Can you rub your wet pussy at the same time?”

She reaches between her legs, stroking her sex as she bobs her head up and down. She licks around my head, hot fire washing up and down my shaft as she strokes. At the same time, she rubs her pussy. Her breasts bob up and down captivately as she moves faster.

“Look at me,” I growl.

She opens her eyes wide, staring up at me with my dick in her mouth, stroking quicker.

“Hmm?” she moans.

I know what she’s asking. If she’s doing it right. As if that would ever be a question.

“You. Are. Perfect.”

She keeps sucking me, her tongue swirling, my tip burning as if gathering all the energy, all the lust, ready to erupt and let it all go.

“Lie back,” I tell her, my balls almost full, my seed swelling.

“Did I do it wrong?”

“No,” I growl. “You did it right, but I don’t want to explode in your pretty mouth. My seed belongs in your pussy.”

Where it will fuse with her body and start the life we both want.

What about Cameron? I won’t think about that now.

I stroke my cock up and down as I return to the bed, spreading her spit and my precome, making my length slick. Kneeling over her, I reach down and palm her pussy, my fingertips greeted with her wetness, her hole beckoning to me with her sticky pleasure.

“You’re going to take every inch,” I tell her, voice shivering.

“Every. Single. Inch.”

“Hmm-mm,” she moans, nodding. “Just... go slow at first, okay?”

“I’ll try,” I snarl.

She makes the cutest whimpering noise when I lower myself on top of her, pressing down with my hard body, every muscle tearing at me, every inch of me snarling for my woman.

I hold myself up with one arm, grabbing my dick with the other, guiding it to her hole. Moving my head in circles around her entrance earns me more captivating moans, her body shuddering the quicker I go.

“Are you t-t-teasing me?”

“I just love hearing you moan.”

Before she can reply, I push against her, feeling her tight, young walls squeezing me. She gasps, gripping my back, digging her fingernails in harder than she has yet, like she thinks the force of our lust will send her flying off the bed.

Her hole is tight and warm, but her expression brings me just as much pleasure. It's the way her lips shift, her mouth opening, the shock and desire warring in her eyes.

"You're... huge," she whispers.

"You can take it. Your body was made for me."

"What if I can't?"

"Then I bend you over and spank your thick creamy ass until you're ready. I don't care if it takes all night."

Her eyes widen, telling me she likes that idea.

I inch deeper, terrified for one second I'm going to let it all go. Her pussy tightens, squeezing my tip, then the upper part of my shaft, the pressure getting lower and lower on my fat dick the deeper I get. She smooths her hands up to my neck, clinging on, tugging on me.

"It's starting to... feel... different."

I push in the final inch, almost howling when I feel her squeezing my base, so tight, so *mine*. It's like my eager young woman doesn't want me to leave her.

"There's no space between us at all," I moan, laying down against her, my mouth finding her neck and biting possessively.

"That's the way I want it," she whispers.

Her breath catches as I begin to slide out, then slide back in again, feeling her nerves in the pressure of her pussy. It's the way she hugs onto me, squeezing tight, but as we rock together, I feel her relaxing.

Just a little. Just enough. She's still tight and hot and squeezing me with so much pleasure, it's a struggle not to let go. When I lean back again, I can read the pleasure on her face, her trembling lips.

"Oh, oh," she moans.

I pump my hips faster, already addicted to the feeling of her slit, the wet noises her sex makes as I drive inside of her, over and over. Her moans change quality when I lean back more,

giving me a perfect view of her breasts. They bounce, hypnotizing me as I fuck her at this new angle, her moans high-pitched and frantic.

“That’s your spot, you perfect girl,” I growl. “I can tell. *That’s* your perfect spot.”

She moans, shifting up and down on the end of my cock, causing her breasts to sway so that it’s difficult to look at anything else. In the silvery light, I can make out the veins moving across her perfect tits, the life, the lust inside of her.

The angle is awkward as I lean down, but it’s worth it to take her nipple in my mouth. I suck on it as my hips slip into overdrive, my cock sliding out until her slit kisses my tip... and then back in, deep, right up into the spot, which makes her whimper.

I lean back again as we flow into our rhythm, the base of my cock feeling like it swells when she shifts her hips in time with mine.

She smiles even as her lips tremble.

“That’s... *your*... spot... huh?”

I pound into her young pussy faster and harder, the mattress whining.

She gasps and throws her head back. There’s nothing theatrical about what she does, no hint that she’s *putting on a show* as others might. She’s merely giving herself to the pleasure, following it wherever it goes.

I stare down, past our bellies, at the sight of my cock disappearing between her thighs. There’s something so captivating about driving my dick deep and hard and the reverberation of her body. Her moans get more urgent. Her pussy squeezes onto me again and again, as if hinting at her orgasm.

“Y-y...”

She can’t speak. Veins rise on her neck, her mouth open. She’s not moving her hips anymore, as if the pleasure has paralyzed her.

Seed tries to rush up my shaft, but I keep pounding her, my tip hot and tingly as a long, tangled moan escapes her. Oh, damn. *Yes*. She's creaming all over my dick.

I stare down as her come squirts down my length, big white signs of her release, smooshing against her lips and spreading over her needy-as-hell pussy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

B onnie

I never knew a feeling like this existed.

It hurt at first. Not pain-pain, but discomfort, and I wondered if I was going to have to tell him to stop. Now, after we've fallen into our flow, our bodies clashing for... I don't know how long, but *now*, my entire body is tingling all over.

My nipples feel extra sore—in the best way—from where he was sucking them. My thighs ache with the release. Warmth swells in my belly as though hinting at where this will lead. Best of all is the feeling between my legs. The searing brightness, the pulsing deep within, at that spot he's been driving against ever since we started.

I try to look at him as the orgasm flows through me, but it's difficult to direct my gaze to do anything consciously. All I can do is rock with him as I ride this feeling, this wave of pure euphoria lifting me.

His moans heighten the ecstasy. There's captivation in them, primal release, possession, *obsession*. If I had any doubts about what he said, they're gone as I listen to his intent moaning. As the orgasm ends, he slows down, lying atop me so I can feel his muscles against my body.

Crazily, there are no nerves about his solid body against mine, no self-consciousness. Nothing. Was I really a virgin...

however long ago? My head is light, a dreamy smile on my face.

“I need to see that juicy fucking ass,” he whispers urgently in my ear, “bouncing up and down for me.”

I almost don't say it. It's like the old Bonnie rises inside, the nervous virgin, but I'm done with that. I make the decision right here. He's my man and I won't silence myself.

“Don't you want to spank me, too?”

He rewards my words with a deep moan, his breath against my neck.

“Bend over,” he says, pulling his cock out of my pussy.

It's only when he's gone, I realize how badly my body wants him back. I don't know much about sex and multiple orgasms, but I'm sure I can do it again. I feel it deep within, the hungry pleasure, the need for a release.

“Nobody else,” he says fiercely, standing at the edge of the bed, “will ever see your ass. Your round, full, beautiful ass. Bend over just for me.”

I look over my shoulder. “Just for you.”

He gets closer and starts stroking his hands over my ass. Every inch of me is hot for him, wriggling against him. The virgin version of me has disappeared, and I can be sassy just like my man—*my* man—likes it.

“You better keep this ass nice and juicy for me.” He spans me softly, more of a love tap, a tingling kiss of pleasure emanating from the point. “And these hips.”

He slides his hands to my hips. I shiver because I can feel it, the weighty head of his huge cock gliding up my inner thigh toward my entrance.

He stares at me with a tight jaw, his temples pulsing. I'm amazed. Proud, even. To Blake, the only man who matters, I'm irresistible.

“You're going to cream on this dick again before we're done,” he says, showing a flicker of the beast he was the first time.

Reaching back, I claw against his belly. The angle is awkward, and I can't do it for long. His abs are hard and tense. He's ready to crush his cock into me.

Be gentle, I almost say, but that's the old Bonnie. That's the Bonnie who thought she wanted to be a private detective, not an artist. This *is* art that we're doing—the way our bodies are talking to each other.

He clutches my hips with more intent. Spirals of euphoria tease up both sides of my body. His touch is electrifying me, my pussy sore but throbbing warmly, my belly tingly, everything ready.

“Fuck me, Blake.”

He smirks, baring his teeth. He's becoming the beast, confirmed when his hand comes down in a possessive spank.

“The way your ass bounces...”

There's awe in his voice. I've never felt so sexy, so wanted, never believed it could be true. Not for me. Blake could have anybody, and he *chose* me. We chose each other.

His cock glides up to my clit. He pushes against me, grinding his slick head against that spot of soaring pleasure.

“Your pussy was made for me,” he growls. “I'll never get tired of telling you that. It's the truth. Remember it, Bonnie. If any other man touches you, he's dead.”

His cock keeps teasing my clit. I'm trying to listen to his words, but the jolts of ecstasy are making it difficult. I'm almost vibrating against his cock, like he's got me under complete control.

I'm his. I *belong*.

“Do you...”

He pushes against my clit, and I shift against him, moaning when he hits the perfect point.

Oh, please let this relationship never end. I know it won't.

“Understand?”

“Yes,” I whimper. “I don’t want anybody...”

I trail off with a moan as he slips up and into me. He fills me up straight away, grinding right up to his base. He’s groaning as if he can barely contain himself, his hands stroking over my ass like he’s worshipping it.

“Taking. Every. Inch.” He pushes even deeper, and I almost collapse forward. There’s too much swelling want between my legs with his cock pushed completely inside, tickling at that deep-within place.

He’s talking to my body, telling me we’re going to have kids. The future I only painted in my mind, but it’s going to happen.

He slips out slowly, forcing me to feel every tiny movement. Every shift in the pleasure, the near release. I sink back against him, and he growls in approval. I do it again, and he takes a shuddering breath.

“Your ass is bouncing for me.”

“It’s only yours.”

I keep bouncing as he crushes his powerful hips forward and grinds his cock deep. We rock together, my ass shifting as he leans down. He wraps his arm around me and starts massaging my breasts.

His rock-hard body pushes against my back, letting me feel every sweaty, steamy outline of power. He plays with my nipples as he pushes deeper, if that’s possible.

“You need to cream on my dick. You need to tell me you’re... *ah*, ready for a future.”

I moan as the pleasure erupts, a star expanding, the orgasm crashing into me with so much force I collapse onto my front. He follows me, never stopping his hips, pounding into me as I reach up and claw onto his sides. My arms ache at this angle, but I can barely feel it, barely feel anything except his cock slipping in and out of my pulsing core.

“Good girl.” He leans forward. “That’s... it. You’re creaming. You’re drenching my... *ah*, my dick.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” I moan, the only words I can produce as I float in this feeling.

He shudders and collapses atop me, his seed spilling inside me. He stays on top of me for a while, his cock wilting in me, our bodies connected until the last moment. Then he rolls aside.

“Come here,” he says, raising his arm.

I shuffle into place. The word *belong* bounces brightly around my mind.

“It feels so *right* here, you know?” I say breathlessly, my heart still pounding as I lay my cheek against his chest. His chest thuds, too.

“It’s where you belong.”

“I was just thinking that. *Belong*.”

He leans down and kisses the top of my head. “It’s the truth.”

I make circles on his sweaty, hard chest. “I don’t know if you’re a beast or a gentleman, Blake.”

“With you, I’ll always be both,” he says, touching my hand. “I’ll be an animal when it comes to defending our family. To protecting you and the kids.”

“The kids,” I whisper. “It’s like they’re already here.”

“I wish.”

I kiss his chest. “Me too.”

After a while, there’s a tapping at the door. Nails on wood.

“I can guess who that is,” Blake says, standing naked, the contours of his body catching the silver low light.

He walks over to the door and opens it halfway, shielding his nakedness from the hallway. His body is only for *me*.

Archie pads in, whining, sitting at Blake’s feet.

“I think he wants to go out,” I say.

“I’ll take him,” Blake replies. “Wait here for me. We’re not done.”

I sit up in bed, watching my man hurriedly pull on his clothes, Archie following him everywhere with love in his eyes, staring up.

“When did you get him?” I ask.

Blake adjusts his shirt. “The shelter, about three years ago. He was a mess when I found him.”

“Oh, God. He’s doing great now.”

Blake smiles over at me. Our eye contact makes me shiver, anticipating what comes next.

I just can’t think of the telling Dad part.

Blake leaves with Archie at his feet.

I lie back, close my eyes, and smile.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Blake

Archie paws at the glass door, whining softly.

Standing in the shadowy dark, a figure smokes a cigarette, the end flickering. I open the door and step into the bracing cold, peering through the dark.

It's Cameron, his head down as I approach. The grass is cool against my feet. I like it, the freshness waking me up. I need to be alert.

I've still got his daughter all over me, her taste in my mouth, her skin, her sweat, the heat, her virginity. I took it all, and now I've got to talk with her dad.

"Blake," he says, tossing the cigarette butt and immediately lighting another. "One of your guards gave me a pack. Hope you don't mind."

I nod, watching him watch *me*. His eyes are as sharp as when we were kids, like when he asked me if I was rolling with the Scottish mob. I laughed and told him no. I lied to him because this path was never for him, but he always saw through the lie.

"I heard something interesting," Cameron says. "Walking through the house. Couldn't sleep... I was walking through the halls, and I heard something."

His voice shudders, his hand shakes, and the lit end of his cigarette shifts around like a firefly.

“You don’t need me to tell you what I heard?”

I shake my head. “I get it.”

“You *get* it.” He laughs darkly. “I knew you went down a different path. I knew you had done some bad things, but you always seemed like a good person deep down. I couldn’t forgive you, but I could never hate you, either.”

“And now?” I say. “Do you hate me?”

He takes a long inhale of his cigarette. “She’s my daughter. She’s *Isla’s* daughter. She’s half your age.”

“That’s all true,” I say.

“Is that all you’ve got to say?” he snaps.

I sigh, feeling caught between two versions of me, the teenager and the man. *Isla’s* face flashes across my mind, her supportive smile, her understanding eyes.

“You were both my best friends,” I tell him. “You let me feel like a normal person. I’d never want to betray you. I’d never want to hurt you.”

My voice is calm, but there’s a weight inside of me. He needs to understand.

“How does that involve screwing my daughter?” Cameron waves the cigarette, ash fluttering. “That’s an interesting way not to hurt a man.”

“We’re trying for a baby.”

Cameron gapes at me. He was about to puff on his cigarette, but his hand slows then stops, and his eyes narrow.

“Is this a joke?”

“I haven’t dated for over a decade. I’m not what you might think I am—some rich asshole taking advantage of women. I never planned on finding *Bonnie* so clever, so funny, so talented, so warm, so loving, so selfless, so...”

I trail off, realizing Cameron is smiling, but when I stop, he pushes the smile away, glaring.

“She’s special,” I go on. “She’s the first woman I’ve ever felt *this* for.”

“This?” Cameron says. “What’s *this*?”

“I’d do anything to protect her, anything to help her chase her dreams. Anything to give her the life she deserves.”

“This is why she knows so much about Isla, about your business.”

“I can’t lie to her,” I say. “I’m sorry. I really am. I wish she wasn’t your daughter, but we have a connection. She feels the same. She told me tonight. You remember what you used to say about Isla?”

“Don’t,” he says, his voice tight.

We say nothing for a while, watching Archie pad around the garden and finally climb the steps, lying flat on the stones. I try not to think of Bonnie waiting for me upstairs, the silk sheets wrapped around her curvy, naked body, wondering where I am.

“You can’t tell me you feel the same,” Cameron finally says. “When I saw Isla, the universe clicked into place. It all made sense. We were childhood sweethearts. It *was* love at first sight, and I don’t care what anybody says.”

“That’s it. The universe clicking into place—”

“Are you saying you love my daughter?”

I stare steadily at him. “With everything inside of me. With all my heart—my heart, which was cold and dead before she walked into my life. With everything I have. With the rage that led me to kill that bastard after what he did to Isla.”

My voice cracks as I think about the truth of these words. I love her. I loved her the second I saw her.

“With everything in me, I love her,” I continue, steadying my voice.

“And you’ve told her about this connection, have you?”

“We want children together. We want a life together.”

Cameron lights another cigarette. I can't even remember him finishing the last one.

"She really wants the same?"

"Yes."

"Because it wouldn't be hard for a man like you to twist a nineteen-year-old's head up pretty damn easily."

"You're right," I say. "I've got the money and the connections to force any woman to do anything I want. If I had the urge for it, I could have twenty models on this estate at all times, doing whatever I commanded when I commanded. Or a socialite. An actress. Anybody."

"Are you bragging?" Cameron says in disgust.

"I'm telling you the truth," I snap, "so you understand. I could have it, but I never wanted any of that. I thought I'd die alone, but then I met Bonnie."

"And this started with her job?"

"Yes."

He shakes his head slowly. "That wasn't even a week ago."

"When you know," I say firmly, "you know."

He flinches, no doubt remembering when he said that exact thing to me. He was talking about Isla and their engagement when they were still too young to get married.

"I know you'd hate me if I was using her," I say, "but I'm not. We're in love. We agree on the path we want our lives to take. We're more ready for marriage and a future than most people are after months or years."

"I've never seen you like this before," Cameron says, softening a little.

"I've never *been* like this before. I've never felt this."

He groans, massaging his forehead. "I lied to her for years, Blake. I thought the truth would break her, but she's stronger than I guessed. Or maybe I'm just a coward."

I pat him on the shoulder. “You’ve always been a good man. You’ve lost your way. That’s all. Let me help you. A gambling program, a job, health insurance, a decent place to live.”

I’ve made similar offers before during our phone conversations. Normally, he says no. Now, he sighs. “Maybe, but I want to do something legitimate.”

“We’ve got charities all over the city. Dog shelters, food kitchens, walk-ins for vulnerable women.”

“Really?” Cameron says.

“Why are you so surprised?” I snap. “We saw what evil men can do. It works like this, Cameron. Sometimes, my men visit these assholes if the cops can’t or won’t. Maybe we put the fear of God into them. Maybe we monitor them after and keep scaring them until they’re too terrified to ever touch another woman.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Cameron whispers.

“So you know there’s still darkness in this life. It’s better than it was when we were kids, but it’s still there.”

“I thought I was going to swing on you. When I heard... what I heard. I thought about punching you. What excuse could you have? That’s what I asked myself, but it’s not an excuse, is it? It’s the truth.”

I nod.

“I’ll need to speak with Bonnie.”

“And then what?”

“Decide,” he says, “if I want this to carry on. If Isla would have accepted it. If I want to work for you when I know parts of your business are dark. There’s a lot to think about.”

The beast almost emerges in me, a snarling fanged thing, urging me to grab him, shake him, and tell him with violent certainty that I’ll be taking his daughter no matter what.

I calm myself, calm the fire. This is my oldest friend, her father. He deserves respect.

“I understand,” I say. “Talk with her, and then tell me she doesn’t mean it. She doesn’t want it. I’m not sure what happened here. I’ve never believed in fate.”

“Me neither. Fate wouldn’t have led that monster to Isla.”

I sigh grimly. “I can’t apologize for what I did to that man. He deserved worse.”

“When I was with those guys, Enzo and his men, I was listening to them... the way they brag about the things they’ve done. They were talking about this woman, about the things... Anyway, I was thinking about Francesco.”

Blood-red violence flashes through my thoughts, the cold fact of the killing. There was no rage in me, not when I did it, not at the crucial moment. Just the ice-cold fact of what he’d done to Isla and what I was doing to him.

“He would’ve been out of prison by now, I bet,” Cameron says.

“It’s possible.”

“Good behavior. Good lawyers. I bet he would have.”

“He’s where he belongs now,” I say. “I’ll never regret what I did.”

“You’re right,” Cameron says, walking past me. “He is, and he deserved much, much worse.”

He walks toward the house, and Archie comes and sits by my feet, looking up at me.

“I never thought he’d say that,” I tell him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

B onnie

I pin the sketch of Archie to the noticeboard. It's my fifth, one for every day since Dad knocked on the bedroom door, but I thought it was Blake.

"Come in..."

My voice was way too seductive. Or wannabe seductive, at least.

Then Dad's voice cut through the mood. *"We need to talk."*

I told him everything, how much Blake means to me. We are certain of our future, but Dad said he needed time to think it over.

We're all staying on the estate. Blake and I are doing our best to keep away from each other. Dad hasn't explicitly told us to stop, but we figured it would be the respectful thing to do. At least once a day, our resolve breaks. We find each other in a tsunami of lust, unable to stop ourselves.

Archie sighs from the rug, lying in a patch of sunlight. I'm still wearing my PJs, though it's almost midday. Since we're staying here, we don't have to scramble for work or worry about my cruddy zero-hour contact at the restaurant. Zero hours are fine by me for now, but I'm getting restless.

My art is an outlet I wish I'd invested in more. I wish I'd remembered this love—painting and drawing with Mom. Each

sketch of Archie brings something new, I hope, and Blake is always telling me I could be an artist.

“But what sort?”

“Any sort you wanted,” he replied, kissing my shoulder as we lay together in bed.

So maybe that’s the next step. Do some research and make my dream specific, just like it was in the world before. I never wanted to be a private detective, but it gave me a specific goal. A mission. Find the monster, but my man found him and made him pay.

Standing, I walk into the ensuite and take a shower. After changing, I return to the bedroom, Archie lying on the silk sheets and looking up at me.

“Want a walk around the grounds, boy?”

He smiles and leaps down.

Dad joins me for the walk, making me wonder if something is up. He looks healthier since being here, eating Blake’s food and wearing clean clothes. He walks with his hands in his pockets, looking at the ground, then smiling fleetingly over at me.

“It’s the real thing, isn’t it?”

“It’s the realest thing I’ve ever had,” I say. “I know it’s weird for you, Dad, but there’s something special between us. I love him.”

I haven’t told him that yet. How can I if he hasn’t said it? Doesn’t he love me?

“I’ve watched you two together, when we’re eating meals, or when we were watching the movie a couple of nights ago. You’re being respectful. You don’t want to offend me, but, oh, Bonnie...”

I rush forward when the tears flow, hugging him and stroking his back.

“It reminds me of how your mother and I looked at each other,” he says, his voice shuddering as he pushes away the tears. “You can’t fake love like that. I can’t stand in your way. You have my blessing.”

“Really?” I yell, then laugh. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to bust your eardrums, Dad.”

He leans back, grinning, turning the glistening in his eyes into happy tears. “It’s okay. You’re excited.”

“That’s an understatement,” I say, smiling as I remember what Blake said when I asked if I was his girlfriend. I never could’ve guessed we’d be so much more.

“I know you, Bonnie. I may not have always been the best father.” He waves a hand when I try to protest. “We both know it’s true. That’s okay. Well, not okay, but...”

“I get you, Dad,” I say.

He looms so apologetic, hanging his head.

“I never should’ve lied to you. After spending time with those men, I can’t keep denying it. Blake was right to do what he did.”

“Dad, he was right before,” I say softly. “Francesco... the stuff he did to Mom. Blake never says the specifics, but he doesn’t have to. I know what happened.”

“He’s a good man. I can see that, and with you, Bonnie, he’s a *new* man. I just need you to tell me. You’re sure this is what you want. You don’t have any doubts. You don’t think you’ll wake up in fifteen years and ask yourself what the hell you did?”

“I’ve never been more sure about anything,” I say truthfully. “In fifteen years, you’ll have a bunch of grandkids. Or even ten. Eight. You’ll see. We’ll prove we belong together.”

I keep my secret concern to myself, the taunt that Blake hasn’t said *I love you*. We talk about the future, the house, the kids, Blake turning more of his business legitimate, and my

potential art career. He says he wants to be my husband. Surely that means he loves me as much as I love him.

“I believe you,” Dad says.

Archie yaps and turns, darting behind me.

“Hey, boy,” Blake says, his deep voice instantly triggering the wave of want in me.

That’s never going away. Or if it does, something shinier, sweeter, and warmer will take its place. Our life is a rocket ship now.

I’m crying as I turn and look over at my man. He’s wearing a slick, dark blue suit, the top button undone, his lips shaped into a warm smile when he sees me. He knows these are happy tears.

“I won’t stand in your way,” Dad says, “and maybe you and I could have a go on the bagpipes one day.”

. “Wait a second. You play the bagpipes? I laugh in disbelieving delight.”

“We used to,” Blake says, walking over and meeting my eyes intensely with so much stowed-up desire and love—yes, *love*—in the look. “When we were younger. Before...”

Francesco. Mom.

Blake offers Dad his hand. “You have my word. I’ll always keep her safe.”

Dad shakes it. “Thank you.”

I can’t wait any longer. I throw myself into Blake’s arms. He spins me around, laughing, but we don’t go for a kiss. We hold hands, but Dad doesn’t seem to mind, kneeling down to stroke Archie.

“I’ve got good news,” Blake says.

“Oh yeah?” Dad looks up.

“Enzo is in federal custody. Massimo exiled the other men from the city. We’re putting the pressure on the Italians.

Massimo's a businessman. He sees sense. Soon, we can legitimize this whole city."

Dad stands, reaching over and patting Blake on the shoulder. "Isla would be proud."

We all walk together, and then Blake leans down and whispers in my ear, "Pack a bag."

"Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Blake

“Are we almost there?” Bonnie says, curled up on the large couch of the private jet.

She’s wearing a dress that was made for her body, outlining those sweet tits and those thick, delicious thighs that will always drive me wild.

I’m sitting next to the bed, reading a book. She’s been sleeping, making the most endearing sounds. In the end, I stop reading and watch my woman as I’ll always watch over her.

“Not that I know where *there* is,” she says, sitting up and smiling angelically.

“I love you,” I say.

She gasps, and I know I’ve waited long enough. The other thing will happen, and it will be the best thing in our lives, but this is sweet, too—saying the truth I’ve been trying to hold back.

“I didn’t want to say it before Cameron gave his blessing, but I love you, Bonnie. I loved you the second you walked into my office. I love you so much. You’re changing me, and I want it. I need it. I need *you*.”

I’m stumbling over my words in my passion.

“I love you, too,” she says, throwing herself at me.

We meet in a steamy kiss, my hand gliding up her leg, pushing aside her dress and inching toward her sex. It's hot, tempting me.

"Nah-uh," she says with perfect sass. "No touching unless you tell me where we're going."

I smirk, pushing my hand further as her young body shivers for me. "We'll see about that."

She sits opposite me in the chauffeured car, a blindfold over her eyes as the Scottish landscape sweeps by. With hills that look like paintings, a single road winds through the glory of it with jagged cliffs off in the distance.

"We're here for a week," I say, teasing my woman.

She laughs, adjusting her dress, making me swell at the flash of her legs.

"Oh, goodie," she says sarcastically. "We're *here* for a week. Where is that again?"

"I'll give you a hint," I say as the car comes to a stop. "I'm wearing a kilt."

"You are *not* wearing a kilt."

I lean across the car and take her blindfold off. She laughs in delight, clapping her hands together when she sees I'm telling the truth.

"Why?" she says. "I've got to say, you're really styling that."

I grin. "It's a special occasion. You're a bonnie lass. I've got the Scot in me. We're the Kilts, and now you're my queen."

I open the car door and step out, then take her hands. She rises, collapsing against me. I sweep her around in my embrace, taking in the Scottish countryside. The hills roll beneath us with the stark silver sea and the cliffs in the distance while the wind whips lightly at us.

Kneeling, I feel the road against my bare knee. I promise myself to remember every moment, the way my woman smiles and cries, raising her hands to her mouth as if to protect her joy.

I take the ring box from my inside jacket pocket.

“Bonnie Wilson,” I say.

“Oh, Blake...”

I open the ring box displaying a silver band with a large stone with the character of my woman, her curves and her brightness. “Will you marry me?”

“Yes,” she yells, leaning down as I stand up.

I slip the ring onto her finger and then sweep her into my arms again. She throws herself up against me, laughing as I spin her around and around, the landscape rushing past.

“I love you! I love you!” she sings.

“I told you when this started,” I say as I smile, placing her down. “You’re mine.”

“Let’s call Dad,” she says after a moment.

My smile widens. The sun is slanting downwards, late afternoon, breaking through the clouds. “It’ll be morning there. Let’s hope he’s up.”

She laughs. “He’s with his new best friend. Have you seen Archie lately?”

I hug my woman and kiss her forehead. “He’s a traitor,” I joke.

She video-calls Cameron, holding the phone sideways. He appears with Archie in his lap. The little dog has taken a real liking to him. Before we left for the trip, Cameron was talking about possibly becoming a dog trainer one day. Now, he’s smiling. More and more, he’s looking like his old self.

“Did you say yes?” Cameron smiles.

“Of course, I did!” Bonnie says.

“I’m so happy for you both, and this little guy is, too.”

Archie sits up, almost as if planned, and yaps excitedly at the camera.

EPILOGUE

THREE WEEKS LATER

B onnie

I sit at the window, flicking through all the paintings I finished in Scotland.

Blake took me to our lodge after proposing—a large, beautiful place built into the side of the cliff with clear views of the crashing waves.

“I’ve got a surprise for you,” he said and took me to a room that stood alone, each wall a giant window, giving me the best view of the landscape, and art supplies of every kind, letting me experiment.

“I’ll try, but only for you,” I told him.

Then I rediscovered painting, my love for it soaring, my obsession growing. Now, I’ve put them all in a book. Dad helped me find a website that could do it, but he didn’t see what I wrote on the last page. When I read the final words, my whole body shimmers with warmth, love, and belonging. I’m going to give the book to Blake later.

I leave my bedroom, walking down the stairs and past the armor, the weapons, and the touches I’ve added—a plant pot here, some flowers there, opening a few curtains, and even ordering new rugs. Blake always smiles, approving and encouraging.

I go to the garden, chest whelming and pride soaring when I see Dad standing in front of two dogs, his hands raised,

keeping them sitting in the grass. I sit and close my eyes, letting the sun rest against my face.

Enzo is in prison for racketeering, carjacking, drug dealing, and murder. The other men are gone. We're safe. Blake told me yesterday he's working with the Italians to make the city even safer.

"And if they won't," he said, *"I'll make them."*

I don't mean to fall asleep, but it's too nice out here, with the sun and the sound of Dad talking to the dogs. It's warming up. When I open my eyes, Dad is looking down at me.

"How long have I been asleep?"

"An hour," Dad says, reaching down with a smile and taking my hand.

I let him help me to my feet. "Where's Archie?"

"He ran inside when Blake came home."

"Wait... Blake's home now?"

"He just got here."

I think of the other times he's returned home, coming to my room to find me at my desk, leaning down and kissing my neck. I rush to my bedroom. There he is, sitting on my bed with the book in his hand, Archie at his feet.

"These paintings are beautiful, Bonnie," he says, and then he flips to the last page.

He reads the words I wrote.

I'm pregnant.

Looking up, his eyes glisten. His body trembles as he stands and walks toward me, looming like the giant he is... my man, my protector.

"This is the start of the rest of our lives," he says, leaning down and kissing me.

EPILOGUE

SIX MONTHS LATER

Blake

“I don’t know why he likes it so much,” Bonnie says, laughing as she cradles her bump, our little boy.

We’re in the living room, the fire crackling, the windows dark and wintery. Cameron stands next to me, his bagpipe on his shoulder, looking much better than when this started. His cheeks are full, his smile comes easily, and we’ve been spending time together remembering the old memories and making new ones.

I smile at my woman as I lift my bagpipe. Pregnancy has made her so much more beautiful, the flush in her cheeks emphasized by the flickering fire. She’s got so much passion and love in the hand that rests on her belly.

“Anything yet?”

“No way,” she says. “He’s waiting for the music.”

“I can tell ye why he likes it so much, lassie,” Cameron says in a heavy Scottish accent. “This is the music of the gods.”

Bonnie laughs, the sound always lighting me up. Every smile and every gesture adds to the love, each moment more perfect than the last.

There’s still a beast in me in the bedroom. Her breasts have become so full, her sweet nipples so sensitive. She shivers and

creams when I take them in my mouth. No, not here. I focus. But later...

We begin to play, going slowly and mournfully at first, and then picking up into heavy rhythms. Cameron is better than me, but we make something good between us.

"I told you," Bonnie beams, her hand shifting as our little man kicks.

I stop playing, but Cameron keeps going alone, his instrument filling the room with deep tones. I place my hand against Bonnie's belly, struggling to imagine a world where I went with my original plan. Grow old alone with no children and no love, but it never could've worked with anybody else.

"I love you," I whisper, leaning down and kissing her bump, then placing my cheek against it.

Bonnie strokes her hand through my hair. "Are you letting him kick you in the face?"

I grin as our little man shifts some more. "I don't mind."

Archie walks into the light of the fire, stretching out, yawning, and then hopping up into my lap. He scrambles to get to the bump.

"Be nice, boy," I tell him, standing up.

Archie gently perches on the arm of the chair, leans over, and licks Bonnie's bump as our boy kicks. Bonnie giggles, and Archie turns, a big grin on his face.

"Well done, laddie," Cameron says, cutting the music off. "You're a fierce Scottish dog, aren't ye?"

Bonnie and I share a long look. My wife, who looked so beautiful beneath the altar, the wedding dress flowing down her body, her wild, perfect hair flowing down her back, our love flowing through our hearts... endlessly.

Soon, our boy will be here to share in the love.

EPILOGUE

SIX YEARS LATER

B onnie

I stand outside Ewan's room, experiencing that wave of motherhood that sometimes feels like intoxication. It happens whenever they do something sweet or funny or *anything*—this growing feeling inside this is who I was meant to be.

There's art on the walls, sketches of children and dogs from my business. I'm proud of what I've accomplished, of Blake for protecting the city, and of Dad for going overseas to volunteer with rescue dogs. Most of all, I'm proud of Ewan's voice as he talks to his little sister.

"Which one do you want to be?"

"*Lochness*," Aila says, her three-year-old voice gloriously mangling the word.

"That's cool, sis."

Ewan is so clever, speaking older than his age, with sharp eyes like his father. He's got deep, dark red hair and a smile that reminds me of a photo I saw of Mom. I peer around the door, watching Ewan take Aila's hand and guide it to the toy.

"*I the monster*," Aila sings.

Ewan smiles down at her, broad for his age. Aila sits with her legs splayed, walking the green figurine up and down the carpet.

Ewan catches me looking and grins.

“What is Mommy going to be?”

I walk over to them, the sun shining through the window. It’s morning, and Aila often demands that her big brother plays with her before school. It’s the cutest thing ever how Ewan always says yes. He’s her hero.

“Mommy is going to be the destroyer of fun,” I tease. “Daddy’s waiting for you in the car.”

Aila throws herself forward. “You’re the best brother ever.”

“I love you, sis.”

I pick Aila up, walking down the stairs with Ewan. We sold the estate and bought a large house in the suburbs, closer to the city for work and school. It still has large grounds, a fence, gorgeous greenery, and plenty of space for the kids.

“You’re the best mommy,” Aila says in my ear, melting my heart all over again.

Ewan throws his arms around me at the door, hugging my hips. “See you later. Love you.”

He walks down the steps toward where Blake leans against the car, his hands casually in his pockets. He’s wearing a T-shirt, showing off those arms that always tempt me. When he smiles over at me, his light-silver beard catches the light.

“Wave to Daddy and Ewan,” I say, turning to Aila.

“Bye-bye, Daddy. Bye-bye, bro-bro.”

I laugh in delight. This is what she calls him since his name is too difficult. Ewan loves it.

Blake locks eyes with me. After years of marriage, raising kids, being together, the intensity of our eye contact has never lessened. We blaze with love and need. It never stops. It never will. Even when I’m pregnant, or I’ve just given birth, he wants me. He’s never *not* wanted me once in all these years.

Once they’re gone, I carry Aila inside.

“Do you want to know a secret?” I whisper.

She's already done her magic trick. Falling asleep at ultra-speed. It's probably for the best. I shouldn't tell her before I tell her father.

We've got another little bundle of joy on the way.

EPILOGUE

ELEVEN YEARS LATER

B lake

“That’s good, son,” I say, stroking the blades of the kayak through the lake’s water, Ewan doing the same ahead of me.

The Scottish sun is blazing down, a rare day of a clear sky sending warmth down to us, the lake glistening with the shine. On the shore, Bonnie sits with the five-year-old triplets: Skye, Maisie, and Lorna.

Looking over, I can’t help but smile, remembering the moment we learned Bonnie was pregnant with triplets, the love we felt as each one came into the world, and how brave my wife was as she did it.

Ewan smiles at me. He’s turning into a strong young man, his shoulders broad. People say he looks like me when I was his age. Cameron said that before we left, grinning as he leaned down to pat the old boy, Archie. We were in the office of his dog rescue shelter in a city almost entirely legitimate, living a life I never could’ve imagined before Bonnie.

“Race?” Ewan asks as I reach him, and we glide together. We let the soft rocking of the lake steady us, and I laugh, looking across the sun-kissed water at Bonnie.

She sits with one of the girls on her knee, bobbing her up and down. It’s too far to see which of our funny, beautiful children, but I see the affection and the bond from here.

“You sure you’re up for that?” I tease, looking over at Ewan.

He laughs, grinning and nodding and flashing me his biceps. He tenses them in the wetsuit. “I’m going to be like you, Dad. You’ll see.”

“I’ll be proud of you however you turn out, son.”

He smiles wider. “I love you, Dad, but that doesn’t mean I’ll let you win!”

He suddenly slashes his kayak blades through the water, darting ahead. I almost drop mine from laughing so hard, but then I go after him, my arms pumping. I quickly catch up with him, but the closer I get, the more effort he puts in.

He breathes hard, ducking his head, his back muscles working. I get closer, closer... I could overtake him, but then I slow down.

Bonnie stands on the shore when we climb up, a big smile on her face. Her cheeks are flushed with the sun, with life, with family, and with contentment that never wanes.

“I saw what you did,” she whispers, standing on her tiptoes and kissing me softly. “You’re the best dad.”

“And *you’re* the best mom.”

Aila looks up from her book. She’s lying on a towel, holding her paperback like she never wants to be parted from it. I love seeing her passion for reading.

“*We’re* the best family,” she says, “because you let me read *all day*.”

We laugh together.

THE END

Want more? Check out my latest release *Falling for My Mom’s Boss* [here](#), or subscribe to my newsletter [here](#) to get a free, new, original story and stay up to date.

Turn the page to get a sneak peek >

FALLING FOR MY MOM'S BOSS

CHAPTER ONE

Madison

I carry Mom's hot cocoa into the living room, placing it on the coffee table. She lies on the couch, her hand laid across her forehead like a painting of a Victorian lady who's had enough.

"Thanks, Maddie," she says, sitting up with a yawn.

It's late, the lamps are lit, and the open curtains of our apartment are showing the lights of the opposite building. Our neighborhood isn't the best, but thanks to Mom's hard work hopping from job to job, it's not the worst either.

She has a new job that pays better than any of her previous ones. She's assistant to a man called Jacob Jennings, the CEO of a large media distribution conglomeration—websites, TV stations, radio, and podcasts all flowing from him. As an aspiring journalist, the job excited me more than her others. Then I made the mistake of looking up Jacob Jennings online.

As Mom sips on her cocoa, I drop onto the armchair, trying not to think about forty-two-year-old Jacob, with that severe look in his pale eyes. They're blue, but they almost look white as he stares at the camera, arms folded in one shot, his firm muscles straining the fabric of his suit.

His lips are flat, not smiling. Except, if I stare *really* hard, I'm sure I can see the beginnings of a smirk. Like he finds the world funny but won't grace us with a smile.

His reputation is one of honesty and integrity, which triggers even more silly thoughts in me. Thoughts like what a great couple we'd make, me with my little website, making strides

with my own projects, and Jacob at my side, fighting for the truth beside me.

“What are you thinking about?” Mom asks, laying her cocoa down and brushing her hair aside. Hers is straight and blond. Apparently, I get my brown hair from my dad, though I’ve never met him.

“Nothing,” I murmur. “Just tired.”

I can’t tell Mom about the thoughts I’ve harbored for Jacob. I can’t afford to tell her about the secret dreams which feel real... dragging my fingernails down the front of his shirt, feeling his muscles beneath, staring up at him, and seeing lust in his expression.

Yeah, right.

I’m sure billionaire CEO Jacob Jennings is just *waiting* for a nineteen-year-old wannabe journalist. I’m sure he’ll *love* how curvy I am and will *adore* my lack of experience. I bet he doesn’t have *any* supermodels or actresses or socialites and other *not-me’s* throwing themselves at him all day long.

Sarcasm takes the sting out of it, sometimes.

“Tired,” Mom repeats. “I know the feeling.”

“I’m proud of you,” I tell her. “It must be difficult...”

I don’t need to say anything else. She’s one of Jacob’s assistants, and apparently, he’s a bit of a hard-ass. *Cold* and *blunt* and *scary* are words Mom has used to describe him.

“When he asked me to collect some files for him earlier,” Mom says, “I thought I was going to melt. It’s the way he looks at me... it’s never outright rude. He’s always polite, but there’s something in his eyes...”

I swallow a ridiculous, angry response. It’s not as if I can yell at Mom for getting that weird, dreamy lilt to her tone, one I’ve never heard before. Sure, Jacob may be just a rude jerk, and that’s why Mom’s voice shakes when she talks about him. Is there something else going on? What if she *likes* him?

Mom hasn’t had much luck in dating. First with my dad, who ran out on her when she was eighteen and pregnant, igniting

my desire to become a truth seeker, to uncover mysteries. Then later, a series of boyfriends who never treated her right. Perhaps Mom thinks Jacob is going to change everything. He's the man she's been waiting for, which is fine... I have to believe that. I can't imagine competing with Mom for a man.

I've seen Jacob in a few photos online, researched him a little, and learned about his determination to always get down to the facts, but that doesn't mean these feelings nestled deep are facts.

I've never had a crush. I've never daydreamed about a man while at the restaurant, serving patrons, or while working on my budding journalist website. I've never had a man wander endlessly into my thoughts, tempting me... until Jacob.

"But the money's good," Mom goes on in a musing tone, "and it's better than the lawyer's office. Or the call center. Or the carwash."

"I love you, Mom," I say.

She leans back like she didn't expect that. Maybe it's because she can tell part of it comes from guilt, from knowing that I'm nurturing a need that would twist Mom up. Either I'm crushing on her mean bully of a boss or I'm crushing on a man *she's* crushing on.

"I love you too," she says after a pause.

"I just want you to know I'm grateful," I say. "*Really* grateful. You've worked so hard to give me a good life. Having a child at eighteen, alone, and raising her... alone. It's impressive. *You're* impressive."

Her smile is pure warmth, but then it falters.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

She stands quickly. "Oh, *crap*."

"What?" I ask.

"I left my USB storage device at work. It's got important material on it. Oh, *crap, crap*."

I normally laugh when Mom gets herself into a state like this. Not in a mean way, but it reminds me how young she is, thirty-seven, but with soft features that make her appear even younger. When she gets anxious, muttering *crap*, it's almost like she's my sister.

She's not freaking over leaving a lasagna too long in the oven or forgetting to pick up the dry cleaning. She's already walking toward her bedroom. Her exhaustion is clear in her movements, the way she drags her limbs as though she's ready to collapse any second.

"Where are you going?"

She pauses. "Where do you think? I have to get the drive. If somebody arrives tomorrow and sees I've left it on my desk... I need this job. *We* need this job."

I glance at the clock. It's nine thirty p.m. "Mom, you've got work again soon. You should be sleeping."

She scoffs. "I won't be able to sleep if—"

"I'll go," I say suddenly. "Give me your pass."

She turns, facing me fully. "Are you sure you wouldn't mind?"

"Not even a little. I love driving ever since I passed my test. It's awesome. It's practice."

Even if I hated driving, I'd say whatever was necessary to convince Mom to let me do this. She deserves a rest after working so many hours.

Jacob's company is in the middle of a merger with an online-based distribution platform, resulting in heated meetings, shouting, and long hours for all Jacob's employees... including Mom. She'll be gone early tomorrow, long before I wake up to leave for the restaurant.

"And you need your sleep," I tell her.

"What if somebody sees you?" Mom mutters.

"Is it really a big deal? I'll head in, get the drive, and leave. You told me Kelly's son came in last week to collect some work stuff for her, didn't you?"

I remember because she mentioned him as a way of hinting at my dating life. She's always probing, convinced I must have *some* interest in *somebody*. She'd freak if she learned I only have an interest in one man.

"Only if you're sure..."

"It'll be fine," I tell her.

She gives me her keycard and explains where her desk is. It's on the top floor outside the main conference room in the "pen" as she and the other assistants call it.

"I won't be long," I say after I've pulled on my sneakers and my jacket. "Get some sleep, please. You deserve it."

"Okay, but if you talk to anybody, say I forgot my phone or something. Don't mention the memory drive."

I wasn't lying about driving. Following the GPS, I savor the short journey to Mom's office.

The lobby of the building is dark, but the marble floor gleams under the softly lit lamps. At the desk, the security guard is listening to music. He lifts one earphone as I approach.

"Hi, my mom forgot her phone. Her name's Veronica Lewis. She works on the top floor as one of Mr. Jennings's assistants."

The man is older, with lines on his face deepening as he frowns.

"I'll be in and out in five minutes," I tell him.

"If this is a trick, Miss Lewis will lose her job."

"I'm her daughter," I tell him. "That's the last thing I want."

He sighs. "The security footage has captured you, so let me see your ID."

I take out my driver's license with a flare of pride, the same one I feel every time I need to show it. "I promise. Five minutes."

He writes down my details, then gestures for the turnstile doors.

I hurry through the building, to the elevators, imagining myself working for a large company like this. When the doors open, I rush across the open-plan room to Mom's desk, the one closest to the door. The memory drive is still plugged into her computer. It's an easy mistake to make. I take it out and pocket it quickly.

Then footsteps pound down the hall so loud and confident they seem to shake the walls. I turn and walk fast, but then a door off to the side opens violently.

It's Jacob, ducking his head as he walks beneath the doorframe. He's wearing a T-shirt and casual jeans, his silver hair messy as if somebody has run their hands through it. Okay, I'm imagining it's *me* who did just that.

"What are you doing here?" he says.

I realize what Mom means. His voice is *cold*. He sounds pissed. I have to play this right. I can't risk Mom's job.

[>One click Falling for My Mom's Boss<](#)

INKING THE SOLDIER

CHAPTER ONE

Kayden

There's always howling in my dreams. My service animals, Gunner and Sergeant, would never howl like that in real life.

When I was overseas, doing what had to be done with my best friends—one, then the other, since life is cruel—they were like assassins. Stalking, silent, acting only when I needed them to, but in my dreams, they howl, scratch, and sniff frantically so that I wake up to the sound of it. Sometimes, I *jolt* awake. I don't let myself think about that for long.

My alarm clock screeches, and I sit up, glancing at the time as I always do. It's five a.m. Some people think discipline comes easy to us ex-service folks, but that's never been the case in my experience. Some of us become less disciplined once we're out of the system.

The pull of the bed is real, the softness of the pillow, the mattress beckoning and telling me if I return to bed, the dreams will be sweeter.

Instead, I force myself to walk through my apartment, quickly brush my teeth, and pull on my gym clothes, folded the night before. At the door, as I pull on my sneakers, I catch sight of myself in the mirror. There's this aura around me. Haunted almost. But I don't let myself think about it.

It's time to run.

I'm waking up now, thoughts of Gunner and Sergeant drifting away.

It's easier to focus on the physical act of running, to hone in on the discipline to complete the five miles to the gym. Head ducked, no music, just my breath and the slap of my sneakers on the pavement.

Every so often, I look over my shoulder. It's not that I expect any of the alleyways, tunnels, or the entrance of the park to be hostile, but instinct drives me.

The world is dark, my chest cold as I draw in the late winter air, a taste of spring telling the world it will soon be over. There's a light sheen of ice over several cars.

As I run, I pass a man driving in a car, a young girl asleep in the passenger seat, her face pressed against the window. He's at a light red light and, when he looks at her, I can see the love there, the protection, the family.

Family.

The word bounces around my head with the pace of my running steps.

It's something I often dreamed of having, especially when I was overseas. I'd dream about finding the perfect woman to have children with, a woman who could look past my darkness and see... see what? See the potential, see my need to claim her, to make her mine, to protect her.

But she never arrived, and that's fine.

Just keep running.

Maybe she doesn't exist.

"I don't know what you expect," Connor told me once. He served with me throughout the 2000s and the early 2010s before we both retired and pursued our own careers. *"Just find a pretty girl and stick a ring on her finger. The rest will take care of itself."*

I laughed at that, though there was a grimness to it. I wish it was that easy, but there's a danger a man like Connor couldn't be aware of. He saw some action. He experienced a lot of the same sort of stuff I did, but he's able to joke it away, able to laugh at it, stick it in a box, never look at it.

That's what I do. Stick it in a box. Except I feel hollow. Often like I'm pretending.

I can't inflict that on a woman.

Finally, I reach the gym, finding Connor in the parking lot, leaning against his truck. He's a few feet shorter than me, but that's not a brag. Most people are shorter than me.

He wears his hair long these days, whereas I keep mine Marine-short. He ties his up in a man bun, his beard thick and still almost completely black despite his thirty-seven years.

He kicks away from his truck, sipping on his coffee.

"You're making me look bad, old man," he banters.

I grin and wink. Nobody would ever guess how much effort it takes to smile at my friend. Nobody needs to know. As long as I keep myself together, as long as the howling in my dreams doesn't invade my waking life, I consider that a success.

"Got to show you infants how it's done."

We laugh as we head toward the gym. I'm only four years older than Connor, at forty-one, but Marines will find any reason to talk crap. It's far better than talking about the *real* stuff.

We work our ass off in the gym like we do most mornings. We disappear into a world of metal and sweat and physical determination, gritting our teeth and growling and letting out the monster in here so we don't let it out anywhere else.

"How's the dating app?" Connor asks me on a break between sets.

I look at the clock, the timer telling me when it's time to lift more weights. My muscles are throbbing, my body pulsing in a way I like.

"The dating app," I repeat.

He chuckles, nudging me. "Don't tell me you haven't signed up. You said you'd do it. You don't remember, do you?"

"I probably said that to shut you up," I say, laughing darkly. "Some men are perfectly fine living on their own. I've got my

business. I've got... working out. I've got lots to keep me busy."

Connor frowns. "You used to talk about starting a family, is all."

"Hmm."

It's the most I can muster as a response. Connor knows me well enough not to push it, so we keep working.

After the workout, as the sun is rising, we walk out toward his truck.

"Are you going to see Marty about the tattoo soon?"

I swallow, nodding, finding it difficult to think about Sergeant. I got a tattoo of Gunner soon after he passed, but I've held off on Sergeant. Some people might say that's because of how he ended his life, the German Shepherd with that glint in his eyes, that smile even when he was growling.

"Yeah," I say. "Today, in fact. I think it's time."

"He was a hell of a dog," Connor says. "A hell of a friend."

"Yes. He was."

"You got a busy day apart from that?"

"A few one-on-one sessions."

Those are my favorite sorts. I'm a dog trainer, and part of that job is giving classes, but I'm far more comfortable working exclusively with one animal than I am standing in front of a class of people.

Connor offers me his fist. "See you tomorrow, brother."

I bump it. "And you."

Running back toward my apartment, my thighs burn and my calves ache. I run by a doorway where a man is saying goodbye to a woman, holding her, then giving her a passionate kiss.

It doesn't matter, I tell myself.

I've got my work.

I don't need a woman.

Later, I pull up outside Marty's studio. He's ex-military and the place where Connor and I get all our tats done.

The sun is at its peak now, bleeding through the thick, silver clouds, reminding me of how long I've been awake. I've already had three one-on-one sessions with dogs who needed various degrees of help.

The tattoo studio is all glass on one wall, meaning I can sit with my back against the opposite wall and get a view of the street through the cloudy design on the glass spelling Marty's name.

"He shouldn't be too long," the receptionist tells me.

I nod, watching cars pass by outside.

The buzz of the tattoo guns being used in the next room reminds me of silly, out-of-place things, especially since I retired from the military eight years ago.

"Hey, Luna," the receptionist says as the main door opens.

I look over, just to check. Check what? This stranger in a civilized city in a nice part of town isn't going to suddenly pull a rifle.

Whatever. I look, and my world suddenly changes.

The howling comes back, but it's a different sort than before, like an animal inside of me is finally free, bashing at the bars of its cage, expanding until there's nothing but shredded metal.

The woman is young, perhaps half my age. I shouldn't even be looking at her, let alone thinking about charging across the room and bringing her into my arms, holding her tight, telling her she's everything I ever wanted.

This *stranger* is the woman I used to dream about when the bullets started flying.

She's on the shorter side, her body curvy in her faded blue jeans and her punk black top. Her hair is tied up in a ponytail, giving me a perfect view of her cute features, her somehow

simultaneously shy and sassy smile, her wide eyes, and her button nose.

Turning, she looks at me, then takes a step back, like she's shocked.

Maybe she is. I'm staring at her like she already belongs to me. Because, in my mind, she does. She was mine the second she walked through the door.

>One click Inking the Soldier now<

TOP READS

Looking for your next read?

Here are my top 10 reads:

[Inked by My Best Friend's Dad](#)

[Texting the CEO](#)

[The Accidental Text](#)

[Inked by the Mafia Man](#)

[My Sister's Man](#)

[Texting My Dad's Best Friend](#)

[My Ex's Dad](#)

[Inked For Life](#)

[Creamed](#)

[Taking Care of the Mobster](#)

NEWSLETTER

Get a free, new, original story NOW by joining my mailing list
and staying subscribed.

CLICK HERE >> [Get a FREE book now](#)

A MAN WHO KNOWS WHAT HE WANTS

[Book 1: Baby Lust](#)

[Book 2: Veteran](#)

[Book 3: Built](#)

[Book 4: Bambino](#)

[Book 5: Rescued](#)

[Book 6: Leader](#)

[Book 7: Professor](#)

[Book 8: Burned](#)

[Book 9: Worldly](#)

[Book 10: Pistol](#)

[Book 11: Policed](#)

[Book 12: Driven](#)

[Book 13: Lucky 13](#)

[Book 14: Lumberjacked](#)

[Book 15: Protector](#)

[Book 16: Carpenter](#)

[Book 17: Italian Stallion](#)

[Book 18: Gardener](#)

[Book 19: Budapest Billionaire's Virgin](#)

[Book 20: Billionaire's Babysitter](#)

[Book 21: Cocky CFO](#)

[Book 22: Fireman's Filthy 4th](#)

[Book 23: Mechanic](#)

[Book 24: SEAL's Secret](#)

[Book 25: Police, Pooch, and Smooch](#)

[Book 26: Fireman's Fake Fiancée](#)

[Book 27: Billionaire's Virgin Ballerina](#)

[Book 28: Bitcoin Billionaire's Babysitter](#)

[Book 29: Veterans Day Daddy](#)

[Book 30: Cowboy's Christmas Carol](#)

[Book 31: Police Officer's Princess](#)

[Book 32: Statham](#)

[Book 33: Bodyguard](#)

[Book 34: Greek God](#)

[Book 35: Billionaire Single Dad's Babysitter](#)

[Book 36: Mountain Man](#)

[Book 37: SEAL's Justice](#)
[Book 38: Royal Romance](#)
[Book 39: Doctor Mountain Man's Special Delivery](#)
[Book 40: Crocodile Dan D](#)
[Book 41: Mountain Man's Secret Baby](#)
[Book 42: Doctor Bad Boy's Secret Baby](#)
[Book 43: Cop's Babysitter](#)
[Book 44: Nanny for the Cop Next Door](#)
[Book 45: Small Town SEAL's Saving Grace](#)
[Book 46: Cop's Fake Fiancée](#)
[Book 47: Billionaire's Nanny](#)
[Book 48: Cowboy's Babysitter](#)
[Book 49: Steamy](#)
[Book 50: Brother's Best Friend](#)
[Book 51: Possessive Professor](#)
[Book 52: Firefighter's Babysitter](#)
[Book 53: Soldier's Secret Baby](#)
[Book 54: Ward's Independence Day](#)
[Book 55: Doctor Next Door](#)
[Book 56: Possessive Policeman](#)
[Book 57: Coached by the MMA Fighter](#)
[Book 58: Boss's Babysitter](#)
[Book 59: Virgin in New York](#)
[Book 60: Rock Star's Baby](#)
[Book 61: Possessive Protector](#)
[Book 62: Possessive Australian](#)
[Book 63: Best Friend's Brother](#)
[Book 64: Possessive Cowboy](#)
[Book 65: Summer Romanced](#)
[Book 66: Possessive Prince](#)
[Book 67: Lovers's Enemy](#)
[Book 68: Cop's Best Friend](#)
[Book 69: Possessive Firefighter](#)
[Book 70: Football Next Door](#)
[Book 71: Doctor December](#)
[Book 72: Possessive Canadian](#)
[Book 73: Blue Collar Billionaire](#)
[Book 74: Possessive K-9 Cop](#)

[Book 75: Possessive Brazilian](#)
[Book 76: Hockey Obsession](#)
[Book 77: Possessive Boston Irish American MMA Fighter](#)
[Book 78: Halloween Next Door](#)
[Book 79: Possessive Russian](#)
[Book 80: Baseball Mine](#)
[Book 81: Cop's Caribbean Captive](#)
[Book 82: Instalove Island](#)
[Book 83: Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 84: Thanksgiving with Dad's Boss](#)
[Book 85: Possessive Italian Neighbor](#)
[Book 86: Possessive Portuguese](#)
[Book 87: Possessive Christmas Cop](#)
[Book 88: Russian's Obsession](#)
[Book 89: Possessive Doctor's Christmas](#)
[Book 90: Possessive Parisian Pilot](#)
[Book 91: U.K. Boxing Day](#)
[Book 92: Jealous Russian Stalker](#)
[Book 93: Italian Mountain Man](#)
[Book 94: Aggressive Russian](#)
[Book 95: Possessive Valentine](#)
[Book 96: Possessive Hunter](#)
[Book 97: Dad's Russian Mafia Friend](#)
[Book 98: Russian Teacher](#)
[Book 99: Australian Obsession](#)
[Book 100: Russian Next Door](#)
[Book 101: Dad's Irish Friend](#)
[Book 102: Nanny for the Russian Mafia](#)
[Book 103: Best Friend's Dad](#)
[Book 104: Basketball Babymaker](#)
[Book 105: Possessive Veterinarian](#)
[Book 106: Brother's Fireman Friend](#)
[Book 107: Brother's Canadian Cowboy Friend](#)
[Book 108: Summer Vacation with Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 109: Dad's Italian Mafia Friend](#)
[Book 110: Dad's Irish Mafia Friend](#)
[Book 111: Dad's Football Friend](#)
[Book 112: Possessing His Dancing Queen](#)

[Book 113: Brother's Cop Friend](#)
[Book 114: Halloween With Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 115: Claimed By Her Boss](#)
[Book 116: Possessive Rider](#)
[Book 117: Dad's Ex-Biker Buddy](#)
[Book 118: Possessive Undercover Cop](#)
[Book 119: Falling For Her Boss](#)
[Book 120: Claiming His Fashionista](#)
[Book 121: More Than Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 122: Thanksgiving With Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 123: Bossy Italian](#)
[Book 124: Christmas With Dad's Mafia Friend](#)
[Book 125: Maid For The Italian Mafia](#)
[Book 126: Nutcracker](#)
[Book 127: Cowboy Cerrone](#)
[Book 128: Chef's Kiss](#)
[Book 129: Claimed By The Russian](#)
[Book 130: Bought By The Italian Mafia](#)
[Book 131: Hot Nerd](#)
[Book 132: Dad's Italian Mafia Boss](#)
[Book 133: Mine](#)
[Book 134: Taken By The Thief](#)
[Book 135: Curves Ahead](#)
[Book 136: Her Mafia Valentine](#)
[Book 137: Doctor Valentine](#)
[Book 138: Maid For The Irish Mafia](#)
[Book 139: Winning Her Curves](#)
[Book 140: Dad's Cartel Best Friend](#)
[Book 141: Dad's Greek Mafia Friend](#)
[Book 142: Lawyer's Obsession](#)
[Book 143: Attending Her Curves](#)
[Book 144: Maid for the Russian Mafia](#)
[Book 145: Priest](#)
[Book 146: Claimed By Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 147: His Curvy Office Obsession](#)
[Book 148: Easter with Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 149: Veterinarian's Obsession](#)
[Book 150: Curves For Her Older Boss](#)

[Book 151: Mob Lawyer's Curves](#)
[Book 152: Maid For The Doctor Next Door](#)
[Book 153: Possessive Forest Ranger](#)
[Book 154: Nurse For The Russian Mafia](#)
[Book 155: Dad's Fireman Friend](#)
[Book 156: Russian Mountain Man](#)
[Book 157: Possessive Italian Doctor](#)
[Book 158: Dad's EMT Best Friend](#)
[Book 159: Claimed By The Publisher](#)
[Book 160: Mr. CEO](#)
[Book 161: His Curvy Castaway Obsession](#)
[Book 162: Claiming His Reunion Obsession](#)
[Book 163: Claimed By Dad's College Friend](#)
[Book 164: Dad's Detective Best Friend](#)
[Book 165: Attending The Russian Mafia](#)
[Book 166: Dad's Biker Best Friend](#)
[Book 167: My Dad's Russian Mafia Friend](#)
[Book 168: Possessive Landlord](#)
[Book 169: Gardener For The Mafia](#)
[Book 170: Possessive Fighter](#)
[Book 171: Claiming Her Sweet Curves](#)
[Book 172: Possessive Camp Counselor](#)
[Book 173: Claimed By Dad's Italian Best Friend](#)
[Book 174: Possessive Neighbor](#)
[Book 175: 4th of July With Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 176: Claimed By Her Enemy](#)
[Book 177: Bodyguard's Obsession](#)
[Book 178: Falling For The Player](#)
[Book 179: Possessive Alpha Cop](#)
[Book 180: Her CEO](#)
[Book 181: Falling For Her Dad's Boss](#)
[Book 182: MMA Fighter's Obsession](#)
[Book 183: Possessive Lawyer](#)
[Book 184: Claimed by the British Rockstar](#)
[Book 185: Summer Obsession](#)
[Book 186: Paris with Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 187: Claimed by the Possessive Fireman](#)
[Book 188: Possessive Trucker](#)

[Book 189: Falling for Dad's Enemy](#)
[Book 190: His Undercover Maid](#)
[Book 191: Her Innocent CEO](#)
[Book 192: Bratva Boss's Babysitter](#)
[Book 193: Sold to the Bratva Boss](#)
[Book 194: My Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 195: His Cabin Obsession](#)
[Book 196: Driver's Obsession](#)
[Book 197: His Unexpected Love](#)
[Book 198: London with Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 199: Hot Neighbor](#)
[Book 200: Maid for the Hollywood Heartthrob](#)
[Book 201: The CEO and the Wedding Planner](#)
[Book 202: Claimed by the Italian](#)
[Book 203: Dad's CEO Boss](#)
[Book 204: The Mob and His Messenger](#)
[Book 205: Rome with Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 206: Haunted by Her Curves](#)
[Book 207: Her Vampire](#)
[Book 208: Bidding for Her Curves](#)
[Book 209: Claiming His Student](#)
[Book 210: CEO's Dog Trainer Obsession](#)
[Book 211: Pool Girl](#)
[Book 212: Possessive Writer](#)
[Book 213: Maid for the Mafia Informant](#)
[Book 214: Thankful for Him](#)
[Book 215: Madrid with Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 216: My Best Friend's Dad](#)
[Book 217: Taming Her Beast](#)
[Book 218: All I Want For Christmas is You](#)
[Book 219: Falling for His Captive](#)
[Book 220: My Christmas Carol](#)
[Book 221: Preacher's Daughter](#)
[Book 222: Her Hitman](#)
[Book 223: Claimed by Her Best Friend's Dad](#)
[Book 224: My Roommate's Dad](#)
[Book 225: His To Claim](#)
[Book 226: Matchmaker Backfire](#)

[Book 227: Saved by the Hitman](#)
[Book 228: Valentine's with My Best Friend's Dad](#)
[Book 229: Lost and Found](#)
[Book 230: Electing For Her Curves](#)
[Book 231: Barcelona with Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 232: Claiming His Forever](#)
[Book 233: Hearts On Campus](#)
[Book 234: Intern for My Best Friend's Dad](#)
[Book 235: Paris with the Billionaire](#)
[Book 236: Open Heart \(Dr. Love\)](#)
[Book 237: Meet Me In Monaco](#)
[Book 238: Maid for the Hitman](#)
[Book 239: My Best Friend's Navy SEAL Dad](#)
[Book 240: Groomed For Love](#)
[Book 241: Model for the Mob](#)
[Book 242: Vegas with Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 243: Goldie Locks](#)
[Book 244: Driving the Mob](#)
[Book 245: Hollywood Hearts](#)
[Book 246: Caring for the Bratva](#)
[Book 247: Dr. Good](#)
[Book 248: Curves, He Wrote](#)
[Book 249: Picture Perfect Love](#)
[Book 250: Ranger Ben](#)
[Book 251: His Princess](#)
[Book 252: Down Under With Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 253: Falling For Dad's College Rival](#)
[Book 254: Dear Soldier](#)
[Book 255: His Shooting Star](#)
[Book 256: Malta with My Best Friend's Dad](#)
[Book 257: Not My Neighbor](#)
[Book 258: Trapped with My Best Friend's Dad](#)
[Book 259: Love in London](#)
[Book 260: Crashing into Love](#)
[Book 261: My Protector](#)
[Book 262: The Inheritance Clause](#)
[Book 263: Claimed by the Hollywood Heartthrob](#)
[Book 264: Never the Bride](#)

[Book 265: Dear Mr. Author](#)
[Book 266: Lessons From My Best Friend's Dad](#)
[Book 267: Fit For Me](#)
[Book 268: Loving Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 269: His Little Stowaway](#)
[Book 270: Date for the Boss](#)
[Book 271: Dear Mr. Hunk](#)
[Book 272: The Dare](#)
[Book 273: Gamer Love](#)
[Book 274: Unexpected Love](#)
[Book 275: Not My Romance](#)
[Book 276: My Ex's Dad](#)
[Book 277: Claimed By The Best Man](#)
[Book 278: Wrong Car, Right Guy](#)
[Book 279: The Accidental Text](#)
[Book 280: His Next Trick](#)
[Book 281: My Dad's Rival](#)
[Book 282: Rock My Love](#)
[Book 283: Inked By My Best Friend's Dad](#)
[Book 284: My Heart](#)
[Book 285: Mr. Judge](#)
[Book 286: Developing Her Curves](#)
[Book 287: The Love Boat](#)
[Book 288: My Sister's Man](#)
[Book 289: Falling For My Dad's Friend](#)
[Book 290: Tell Me Everything](#)
[Book 291: No Complaints](#)
[Book 292: Miss Taken Identity](#)
[Book 293: Texting the CEO](#)
[Book 294: Inn Love](#)
[Book 295: Taking Care of the Mobster](#)
[Book 296: Creamed](#)
[Book 297: My Brother's Best Man](#)
[Book 298: Loan Shark Love](#)
[Book 299: The Forbidden Man](#)
[Book 300: Burning For Him](#)
[Book 301: Texting My Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 302: The Man in The Painting](#)

[Book 303: Falling for the Photographer](#)
[Book 304: Crushing on My Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 305: Taming the Playboy](#)
[Book 306: High Roller](#)
[Book 307: Sleepover with My Best Friend's Dad's](#)
[Book 308: Wrong Place, Perfect Time](#)
[Book 309: Tempting to Touch](#)
[Book 310: Her Scent](#)
[Book 311: Dirty Talk with My Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 312: Loving the Scot](#)
[Book 313: Becoming His Cowgirl](#)
[Book 314: Forgetting Christmas](#)
[Book 315: Puppy Madness](#)
[Book 316: He Loves Me Lots](#)
[Book 317: Crushing On My Brother's Best Friend](#)
[Book 318: Claimed By The Detective](#)
[Book 319: Playing For Keeps](#)
[Book 320: Claimed By The Killer](#)
[Book 321: Falling for My Mom's Boss](#)
[Book 322: Kidnapped By My Dad's Best Friend](#)

BRATVA BEAR SHIFTERS

[Book 1: Dad's Russian Mafia Bear Best Friend](#)

[Book 2: Babysitter For Dad'd Russian Mafia Bear Friend](#)

[Book 3: Dad's Bratva Bear Friend](#)

LAIRDS & LADIES

[Book 1: Possessive Highlander](#)

[Book 2: Taken By The Highlander](#)

[Book 3: Highlander Alpha](#)

RUSSIAN UNDERWORLD

[Book 1: Brooklyn Bratva](#)

[Book 2: British Bratva](#)

[Book 3: Bratva Billionaire](#)

[Book 4: Bratva Babysitter](#)

[Book 5: Bratva Boss](#)

IRISH WOLF SHIFTERS

[Book 1: Dad's Irish Wold Shifter Friend](#)

[Book 2: Claimed By The Irish Wolf Shifter](#)

[Book 3: Claimed By The Enemy](#)

INKED BY LOVE

[Book 1: Inked by My Best Friend's Dad](#)

[Book 2: Inked by the Mafia Man](#)

[Book 3: Inked For Life](#)

[Book 4: Inked by My Sister's Ex](#)

[Book 5: Marked By Ink](#)

[Book 6: Inking The Billionaire](#)

[Book 7: Inking the Solider](#)

TEXT ME YOU LOVE ME

[Book 1: The Accidental Text](#)

[Book 2: Texting The CEO](#)

[Book 3: Texting My Dad's Best Friend](#)

[Book 4: Texting My Dad's Best Man](#)

[Book 5: Texting My Hot Tutor](#)

[Book 6: Texting Mr. Hollywood](#)

[Book 7: Texting The Tattooist](#)

COLLABORATIONS

- *[Alpha's Arms \(Makes My Heart Race Book 7\)](#)
- *[Winter Kisses: An Instalove Possessive Holiday Romance](#)
- *[Her Ride \(Men of Valor MC\)](#)
- *[Ringin' His Bells: A Filthy Dirty Christmas](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Follow my Amazon Author page for more
A Man Who Knows What He Wants
and other series

CLICK HERE >> [Flora Ferrari Author Page](#)

