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KING OF

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DEPRAVITY

PIPER STONE

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Published by Stormy Night Publications and Design, LLC.

[www.StormyNightPublications.com](http://www.StormyNightPublications.com)

Stone, Piper

King of Depravity

Cover Design by Korey Mae Johnson

Images by Depositphotos/konradbak and Shutterstock/ansharpphoto

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## PROLOGUE



*M*allory

The moment I walked into the room I'd known something was wrong. The air was sucked from my lungs as I turned my head, struggling to catch sight of him. Almost instantly I sensed him moving closer. I couldn't hear his approach, I felt it just as I had before.

"Stay away from me." Saying the words meant nothing.

"Now, now. You know I won't do that. My sweet, innocent fawn. What a bad girl you are," he said in his dark, dangerous voice.

He hadn't touched me.

Yet.

But I'd felt him the moment he'd arrived.

The predator.

A man who refused to take no for an answer.

The cold shiver trickling down my spine clashed with the explosive heat building in every cell, a need so intense that the only thing that mattered was touching him.

Kissing him.

I could feel his heated breath even though he was across the room. He'd stalked me, obsessing over every detail, preparing for what would happen when he'd tracked me down.

Just like he'd promised he would.

"You shouldn't be here," I managed.

"Yes, I should. And do you want to know why?" His voice reeked of depravity, drawing me into the same darkness swallowing half his massive figure.

I remained silent, miming the words as he said them out loud for me.

"Because you belong to me."

The first time I'd met him, I'd feared he was a serial killer, the thick outer layer of clothing and the darkness of the snowy day incapable of hiding his true nature. He'd given off an aura of danger and dominance, both chilling and enthralling. I'd never been one to surrender to any man. But in the middle of the worst time of my life, I'd lost myself, yielding to a monster.

I hadn't known just how much it would change my entire life.

Now the hunter had found his prey.

And this time, he would never let me go.

Passion burning deep inside.

A hunger so profound that I couldn't breathe.

Or think.

"Never."

"You should have known better than to try and run from me." His husky voice dripped over me like a velvet blanket, his heated breath brushing softly against my skin leaving me incapable of thinking. The few words said ignited the fires erupting in my system, my nipples swelling from the thought of his rough intentions.

He would take me.

Use me.

Fuck me.

There was only want so captivating that nothing else mattered.

But him.



His touch.

His wet mouth pressing against mine.

His tongue exploring.

His fingers dancing along my skin until I was no longer capable of focusing.

Indecent thoughts, ones so filthy and sadistic flowed through my mind leaving me tingling all over, my pussy wet from raging desire.

With a single snap of his hand, he ripped the thin gown from my body, exposing my nakedness beneath. As he raked his hooded eyes down ever so slowly, I was frozen in the moment, sinful thoughts tickling the back of my mind.

I reached out, longing to touch his skin, to feel the power he exuded, gorging on the flow of electricity soaring between us. But he cocked his head, his nostrils flaring. He was in full control, refusing to allow me satisfaction.

Not yet.

Not until he'd gotten everything he hungered for.

All of me.

My total surrender.

I'd sensed him watching me in the shadows, lurking like the predator he'd become.

"I wasn't trying to run, at least not from you."

His laugh was as dark as his eyes had become, as if attempting to hide the devil inside. Only I had managed to break through the coated armor, exposing the man underneath. And what I'd seen had frightened me, his need to devour my body and soul palpable, yet we were like moths to a flame, incapable of staying away from each other.

"Yes, you were, at least at first. But I can sense your hunger."

Even though I shook my head, I basked in his beauty. He was so strong, his chiseled muscles a thing of perfection, as if God himself had created the ultimate man, everyone else paling in

his likeness. His skin glistened in the firelight, his chest rising and falling from the intensity of his need.

As he shoved me onto the rug, the crackling sound of the fire ebbed and flowed with the rapid beating of my heart. He pinned my arms over my head, wrapping his long fingers around both my wrists. I was going nowhere. He'd hunted me, tracked me. Now that he'd found me, there was no turning back. He would never let me go.

He took a deep whiff, holding the heated air in his lungs, never blinking as he showered me with his look of brutal affection. There was something so magnificent about the feeling of being captured, the weight of his body comforting. Perhaps I was his prisoner, but I'd been the one to capture his heart.

He pressed his knees between my legs, pushing them to the sides, nestling against my aching pussy. I was so wet, juice trickling down the insides of my thighs. As I wiggled in his hold, I sensed his amusement.

“You will never get away from me again.” His statement held dark emotion, highlighting his frustration that had built from our separation. I shouldn't have run. I shouldn't have believed I could ever get away from him.

He was the air I breathed, the nourishment my body craved.

My drug.

As he exhaled, I tingled all over, wrapping one leg around his muscular thigh. He pressed his thick cock against my wetness, grinding his hips seductively, reminding me what I'd abandoned. His hold around my wrists remained firm, his fingers digging into my skin as he rolled the rough pads of his fingers down my neck, brushing them tenderly along my side. But I knew the moment wasn't about tenderness. He was incapable of romance.

But I didn't care.

Our hunger knew no bounds and I was ready to beg him to fuck me. Breathless, my heart thudding, I arched my back, a single moan escaping.

His chuckle was even darker. “My little fawn is hungry tonight.”

“Yes.”

He jerked my leg, bending it at the knee and pushing it to the side. Then he gave me a brazen look of lust before snapping his other hand around my wrist, placing my other leg in position. “You’re such a bad girl.”

“I know.” My whisper was hoarse and as I dragged my tongue across my parched lips, his savage sounds filtered into my ears. He was nothing but an animal, his needs becoming primal. “I should hate you. You’re nothing but a monster.”

“But you can’t. You won’t. And there’s a fine line between love and hate, a need that can never be denied. I am a monster, or the devil if you prefer. But all that matters is that you’re mine. You’ve always been mine.”

As he thrust the entire length of his cock into my tight channel, all the anxiety and uncertainty faded, only desire that would never be satisfied remaining. I was his.

His lover.

His possession.

His salvation.

His body shuddering, he threw back his head, grinding his hips as my muscles stretched, my pulse racing. I’d never known pleasure, the taste of pure rapture, until I’d met him. Until I’d surrendered to him. Now he was all I could think about.

Could dream about.

Could want.

He pulled out, lowering his head until our lips were almost touching. I longed to touch him, to feel the heat generated through my fingers, cascading all throughout my body. When he rubbed his lips across mine, I darted out my tongue, the single taste of him sending a shower of vibrations into my body. My core was no longer just heated, but exploding from licking flames.

His brutal thrust jarred my senses and as he developed a rhythm, I stretched my legs open even wider, purring as his skin pressed against mine. Everything remained a beautiful blur, pushing me into a realm of bliss. He was forceful and rough, unforgiving as he'd always been, but there was so much more to his almost desperate need.

As if the time away had stripped him of what was left of his humanity.

As if only I could fulfill his dark needs.

With every savage plunge, I tossed my head back and forth, but he never blinked, his eyes searching mine. Within seconds, an incredible wave of sheer pleasure powered into my system, the climax as unexpected as the man himself.

“Oh. Oh...” I jerked up, struggling in his hold but it was no use. The throes of ecstasy, the jolts of electricity stripped me of any rational thoughts. The cresting wave turned into another, sweeping through me like a firestorm. Breathless, I murmured his name over and over again.

“Say it. Say it loud. Let me know how much you hunger,” he whispered, the tone even huskier than before.

“Fuck me, Brogan. Just fuck me.”

As his eyes penetrated mine, his expression hardened, his thrusts more brutal than before. When his muscles tensed, I squeezed my pussy, clamping around his thick cock like a tight vise.

And as he erupted deep inside, filling me with his seed, his dark whisper, a promise of continued danger would haunt me long into the wee hours of the morning.

“No one else will ever touch you again.”

## CHAPTER 1



*Three weeks earlier*  
*Brogan*

Blood, sweat, and violence.

That's what my family had been forged in decades before. While we'd suffered our share of losses, death was considered an acceptable part of our brutal world. My father had taught us years before to expect tragedies and that we'd be forced to go against the saving grace of God on numerous occasions.

That had come to pass over the years, enough bloodshed endured that I was immune to the savagery of it. I had no issue killing an enemy or some stupid slug who'd decided to betray our family because that's what was most important in life. Family.

We were Irish through and through, my mother and father's heavy accent a testament to what Pops had called 'the old days in a country of scandalous cads.' He'd always been capable of making me laugh. Much to his chagrin, his four children had grown up very Americanized, our accents indistinguishable. But my mother made certain each one of us understood that we were a tight clan. If any one of us was challenged, that meant we all were, and we'd fight to the death if necessary in order to protect the family.

Our experiences had turned me into the brutal man I was today.

I liked to cause pain, the need increasing over the years. My years of formal education had provided an innate knowledge that my psychosis had a name, but that didn't matter to me. I'd been the one to classify other people's neuroses, labeling them damaged goods for the rest of their lives, some far too broken to be repaired. I specialized in fixing what couldn't be fixed, even if the repair was short term, held together by duct tape and drugs. I was considered an expert at what I did, performing miracles other professionals had told me.

However, the world of a psychiatrist also carrying the same demons hadn't been easy, which is why I'd lost everything I'd worked so hard to achieve.

I'd made a single mistake that had allowed the monsters I'd managed to keep on a tight leash to escape. Since then, I'd become a hunter, longing to find the perfect prey. There was no reason for me to be thinking of such darkness on this festive day, but lately, it was all I'd been able to think about. The desire was becoming an overwhelming need, which didn't bode well for my lack of patience.

While I'd hidden my brutal longings well, those who knew me insisted I was more of a butcher than a lover, something both my mother and father would disagree with. But at my core, I was brutal, savage, and more merciless than my older brother could ever be. While his preferred method of handling business was as suave as his expensive suits, I used mind control to fuck with anyone daring to get in my way.

I was good at it. I'd trained for years to see through the bullshit, helping hundreds of desperate people in their time of need. Once a respected psychiatrist, I'd specialized in working with serial killers. At the time their methods had filled me with equal parts horror and fascination, but now they allowed me to attack our foes from avenues even hardened Mafiosos couldn't plan for.

But not today. Today was meant for a celebration of life and family, however jaded or repulsive we might seem to the rest of the world.

My brother was thriving when he'd been at death's door only months before. Cancer was a treacherous bitch.

"A toast to Liam. May he live a long and happy life. And produce many children." As our father lifted his wineglass, I glanced around the table, my entire family beaming. My older brother, my best friend and confidant had been cancer free for six months, his prognosis excellent.

He'd once been at death's door, losing nearly eighty pounds, so weak he couldn't lift a two-gallon bottle. Now he was bulked up from brutal daily physical training, his skin no longer gray. It was truly a blessed miracle.

I was surprised when my mother had invited our priest, but last rites had been requested at one point and he'd been considered part of the family for years. Father O'Brien was genuinely happy for all of us, especially Liam.

He lifted his wineglass, his smile genuine. "May you be blessed for many years to come, honored by a wonderful family, including one of your own." When he gave my mother a look, I could tell she'd been talking to him about the state of our family as she usually did.

While my father might not approve of the priest as not only her confidant but her therapist as well, it seemed to give her great joy.

"Aye," my mother said in her Irish brogue. "I need grandchildren."

My father burst into laughter, the rest of the family as well. I simply glanced at my brother, noticing the amused look on his face. He'd known what was coming. He'd waited on purpose to consider finding a girlfriend because he'd been certain he was going to die. Perhaps this would allow him to enjoy his life once and for all.

"That would require me to find a wife first," Liam said, also laughing, lifting his eyebrow as he returned my gaze.

My father winked at my mother, which indicated the two of them had a secret. Their old ways were insufferable at times, including their thoughts on arranged marriages. I doubted

Liam would stand for such an ancient custom, even though our father would challenge his sense of duty and honor. I'd learned at a young age that power meant wealth, and my father was considered one of the most powerful men in America, the family's extreme wealth kept private or the Feds would be knocking down our doors.

"Uh-oh. Father has something up his sleeve," my sister Erin said, her giddiness unusual. She was always the quiet one, spending hours inside her room. It was good to see her so happy.

"You can always tell," Fiona said, giving me a roll of her eyes. She was the feisty one in the household, refusing to follow rules, but I loved her dearly. We were lucky the entire family was so close.

"We have the perfect woman for you, my son," Mother told him.

There was no doubt Father O'Brien had an idea of what they were cooking up.

Liam threw up his hands. "Oh, no, you don't. You're not fixing me up with the Pakhan's daughter or the Cosa Nostra's niece. I refuse to marry either one of them."

"No," Father said as he returned to his blood-rare steak. "I've found someone of more importance to our family."

Now he had me curious. At least I wouldn't be pushed into carrying on the family traditions. As the black sheep, I was lucky my father hadn't banished me from the fold. I'd mull that over another day. For now, I was happy Liam was doing so well.

There were too many rumbles in the street, the Bratva threatening war, which they'd done on two occasions. It was ridiculous given the last time had ended with the aging Pakhan losing his life to an unknown assailant, at least according to the law enforcement officers who'd investigated the heinous scene then closed the case. The Bratva were considered scum to almost everyone in Chicago.



I grinned at the thought. The bloody assassination had been my brother's fine work in motion, his skills at breaking and entering any facility something to marvel at. He'd subsequently suggested to the chief of police that the city was better off without the savage man. All had been quiet for the last six months, so much so I'd become concerned, voicing my thoughts to Liam who hadn't taken me seriously.

And now, I found out my father was looking for a long-term alliance, which a wedding would help create. I pitied my brother. He'd be browbeaten into accepting his responsibility.

I sat back in the chair, shifting my glass of bourbon back and forth on the table when something caught my eye. Chuckling, I lifted my glass to an associate, a man with a large appetite for everything. Women. Food. Drink.

And power.

I pushed my plate away, leaning toward Liam. "Excuse me for a minute, brother."

Liam turned his head, following my gaze. "You'll need to explain one day why you associate with known criminals." While he had a partial lilt to his voice, my brother had never understood why I'd associated with members of other crime syndicates, forming an association of sorts. The Brotherhood. The group had been formed years before by two dangerous, influential sons of some of the most ruthless mafia organizations in the world.

Those two I considered friends, although they'd been rivals in college. At least our alliance helped keep bloodshed at a minimum due to preventing the unnecessary wars often crisscrossing the United States. "Because I need to get away from your ugly mug every now and again. Excuse me, Pops. I'll be right back."

My father wasn't any happier with my association than my brother, but I hadn't given him any choice and what did it matter? I wasn't the heir apparent for the Callahan Empire.

I strode toward Phoenix, unable to keep from laughing. He had two women at his table, both of which were looking at him

like he was a god reincarnated. Phoenix Diamondis was the merciless ruler of Philadelphia, his brutal tactics well known. I held out my hand, a smile crossing my face. “How do you do it?”

He snorted, his handshake just as formidable as the man. “Which part? Being a sexy beast or ruling a good portion of the county?”

“Both.”

“It just comes naturally.” His arrogance was part of his charm, but he was the kind of man you didn’t want to cross.

“What are you doing in Chicago, my friend?”

“I thought I’d take a look at the windy city for a change.”

“Uh-huh. Don’t get any ideas. My brother is prepared to take the helm and he’s not fond of the Greeks.”

“Now, did I say I was associating with any of them?” His eyes twinkled as if he held a secret, everything about him screaming of his Greek heritage.

“Duly noted. They are pigs.”

The banter was a good escape from the recent months of being on the edge. Since losing my license to practice psychiatry, I’d floundered in my father’s regime, not interested in the least in taking on the role of underboss or second in command. I wasn’t the kind of man to take a backseat to anything.

“Yes, they are. And they’re dangerous.” His sudden solemn turn was a clue to what he was doing here.

“A challenge?”

He nodded, scanning the restaurant as if expecting to see an enemy. “One that needed to be handled. I promise not to destroy your lovely city.”

“Go ahead. We’ll just rebuild it our way.”

His laugh boomed in the crowded location, the restaurant a favorite of both my father and brother. It had been at least two years since we’d been here as a family. “And I’m certain you’ll do that with flair.”

“Exactly.” His eyes suddenly narrowed and when he eased back the edge of his jacket, placing his hand on his weapon, I tensed, immediately reaching for mine. “What the fuck?”

Before I had a chance to respond, hair stood up on the back of my neck. I had no doubt we were under attack.

Hard cracking sounds occurred seconds later, a sudden burst of wind catching me off guard. Then the shattering of glass was the real indication of what was happening.

An assassination attempt.

Just who was the target?

Both hands on the weapon, I jerked toward the family table just as additional shots rang out, the loud popping sounds scattering through the restaurant as if kettles of popcorn had been placed on every table. I didn't hesitate, firing off an entire round, the magazine emptied within seconds. My training intact, I reached for the second clip, ducking down as the vacuum of noise shifted, the screams of customers echoing in my ears.

And blood. There was blood everywhere, tables overturned as people rushed to get out of the massacre.

“What the fuck?” I heard Phoenix yell as he fired off several shots of his own.

There was no time to waste, and I lunged toward the table, knocking Erin to the floor, covering her with my body for protection.

“No. No!” my father yelled, dragging my mother away from the window as the two soldiers assigned as guards continuously fired through the shattered window into the street.

There was no way to tell who was firing. I crawled toward Fiona, touching her arm, yelling at the top of my lungs as I pulled my hand away.

It was covered in blood, her eyes open wide in terror.

“Stay here. Do not move.”

She nodded, her entire body shaking, blood soaking through her dress.

I scrambled to the other side. "Liam!" Then I fired off another few shots before jerking away from the window, tossing a chair aside and dropping down. That's the moment I noticed my brother's eyes.

His vacant eyes as they stared up at the ceiling, his body riddled with bullets.

## CHAPTER 2



*M*allory

“Move your ass, Jodie. And maintain your position. What the fuck is wrong with you?” the photographer barked, which was his only method of communication.

I glared at him from the sidelines, shivering to the point goosebumps had covered nearly every inch of skin over thirty minutes before. Michael Chevell might be considered the most creative photographer in the world, but to plan a holiday photoshoot for backless dresses on a frigid late October day in Montreal was ridiculous. It was obvious he couldn't care less about the models hired for the festive shoot.

Jodie did her best to plaster on a saccharin smile even though she was shaking like a leaf. Her pose was stilted, which meant she'd be forced to do it again. And again. Michael was a perfectionist, which is why he was the most sought-after man in the business.

I kept my hard glare from the sidelines, sipping my fourth cup of bitter coffee just to try to stay warm. In the last ten minutes, I'd planned deliciously evil ways of killing him.

Driving a knife into his heart.

Putting a bullet in his brain.

And my personal favorite.

Drowning him in a vat of scalding oil.

I hated few men in my life, but he was on the top of the list, even if he was attempting to make me famous. *Don't provoke him. Just smile and take it.*

Even if my inner voice had provided a solid solution, that didn't mean I couldn't envision his bloodied body in the forefront of my mind while performing like a seal. I had far too much of my father's savage personality in me, much to my mother's disapproval. What few knew is that I wouldn't have a single problem or feeling of guilt if I did drive an icepick between his eyes. I'd been programmed that way and was proud of it.

Finally, I blocked out his irritating voice, tipping my head toward the sky.

Sun.

Glorious sun on a bitter cold day.

It was a gorgeous late morning, not a cloud in the sky. I hadn't been in such a good mood in weeks, maybe months. The photo shoot I was about to finish was part of the reason. I'd never made so much money modeling, enough to pay the bills for a full six months if not more.

And there was more work promised, including a trip to Italy for fashion week. I was giddy from the experience, even if the photographer was an asshole. But I was used to that. I could handle men who thought they were all that and a bag of chips with ease.

“Honey, get your ass moving and suck in your stomach, for fuck's sake. You're a fat cow and I'm getting sick of it. Plus, I don't want to be here all day.” Michael was rude, arrogant, and damn good looking. He was one of the few photographers I'd worked with who wasn't gay. That made him the haughty son of a bitch he was, especially since he could get any girl he wanted. I'd seen him with three at a time, which made me sick. He called them the flavor of the night and none of the beautiful women had enough self-respect to kick him in the balls.

I glanced at Jodie, feeling sorry for her. She was the typical girl from the Midwest, her family far too Hallmark material for her to be able to handle the ugliness of modeling. When I noticed the tears in her eyes, I finally couldn't take it any longer. She was skin and bones and Michael was only feeding her neurosis with his nasty words. I'd caught her throwing up in the bathroom after eating an apple.

"Leave her the fuck alone, Michael. Why don't you go stick your dick into an electrical outlet? It's obvious you need it recharged."

There wasn't a person on the set who didn't suck in their breath. No one talked to the famous Michael in such an egregious manner. I noticed the flash in his eyes, but it wasn't rage like everyone else expected. The man had lusted after me for months, making my life as miserable as possible but I hadn't given him the time of day let alone a single second of knowing whether his raunchy comments bothered me.

And they didn't, other than the fact he could put the word out that I was difficult to work with and my career would be finished.

Then again, he knew better than to invoke my wrath or my father would make him fish food within the hour. That gave me leeway to yank his chain.

He slowly turned his head in my direction, narrowing his ice-blue eyes. I smiled at him sweetly, blowing him a kiss then turned away on purpose.

"Girl, you have balls," Kendra, the costume handler, said under her breath.

"*Someone* needs to cut him down to size."

She threw a look over her shoulder, her expression full of distress. "You don't know his temper or what he can do."

I'd never flaunted who my father was and what he did for a living. There was no need, but to see her very much afraid of a pompous prick like Michael allowed me to take a moment of appreciation for my father and everything he'd built. I'd always been considered a princess, pampered in every way,

but the reason I adored the man who'd raised me was because he cared about his family more than his billions of dollars or the empire he'd built. While I was determined to create a life on my own, it was wonderful to know I had him to fall back on if necessary.

"And I couldn't care less," I told her.

Against the asshole's wishes, I returned to the heated building, the blast of hot air exactly what I needed. Seconds later, Jodie bolted into the rented facility, bawling her eyes out from whatever additional horrible thing Michael had said to her.

"You're worthless, Jodie. You're also a pig," he shouted after her seconds later. As he headed in my direction, I took a deep breath, shifting back and forth on the ridiculously tall heels.

I planted my hands on my hips as he strode toward me, his massive body towering over mine. When he lowered his voice so no one else could hear, I held my breath.

"Do you know what I do to prissy little girls like you?" he asked, issuing a growl that was so low and husky, I had to strain to hear it.

"I'm certain you'll be happy to tell me."

He crowded my space, but I refused to budge. "I strip away their defenses, tossing them in a cage for a couple days until they beg and plead, promising to do anything I ask. That's when I fuck them raw, spending hours taking what belongs to me. And when I'm finished, I toss them aside like the trash they are. I suggest you keep that in mind the next time you dare to raise your voice to me."

"Is that a threat?" I asked casually.

His chuckle brought out the beast inside of me, the one my father had said was hereditary. "Sweetheart, you can take it however you want to, but expect it will happen sooner versus later."

The son of a bitch deserved all the vile thoughts I'd had before. Sadly, I couldn't allow it to get messy at this point.



Now I was ready to tell the asshole exactly what I thought of him. It would also take an act of God not to yank my switchblade from my purse, carving my name in his chest before slitting his throat. I marched over to him, rearing back and slapping him across the face. “How dare you. That ‘pig’ is a beautiful young girl. The reason you love to tear people down is because you’re completely inadequate, your cock the size of a sweet gherkin.” To prove my point and without thinking, I wrapped my hand around the bulge in his pants, twisting until he cried out in pain.

“I was only half right. It’s much smaller.” My temper had finally gotten the best of me. I could count fashion week out, but to see the look of hatred in his eyes and the glee in everyone else’s was well worth possibly losing my career.

“You bitch! You’ll never work in this industry again,” he struggled to say.

I waved my hand at him and walked off the set. No one treated me that way.

Within five minutes, I was in my car, my fingers wrapped so tightly around the steering wheel they ached. I spun out of the parking lot, flicking him the bird.

“Son of a bitch,” I huffed, glaring into the rearview mirror, half expecting him to be running after me.

I continued to replay the interaction, wishing I’d said a few other choice and very derogatory statements. As soon as the phone rang, I knew exactly who was calling me. My agent.

“What the fuck did you just do?” Sally barked. “You just fucked up your last assignment.”

“You do know Michael Chevell is a pompous pig. Right?”

“I don’t care if the man wore bunny ears and did the photoshoot naked. You were there to do a job, not to start a war. How many times has this happened? Too many. I’m finished with you. Consider your contract terminated.”

I didn’t have to retort but if I had managed to do so, the woman who’d called herself my best friend more than once wouldn’t have enjoyed my words. I tossed my phone into the

seat, smiling broadly. Just seeing the look of shock on Michael's face had been worth it.

As I headed for my sweet little house I'd paid for by myself, I realized I'd forgotten to drop off my mother's birthday present. While she couldn't stand getting older, ignoring the special day of the year, that didn't mean I wouldn't spoil her with gifts. She'd pretend she was offended but I'd always catch her smiling not long after opening the gift. I switched lanes, returning to the interstate, turning on metal music as I headed toward their estate.

By the time I rolled up to the set of massive iron gates fronting the long, curved driveway, I was in a much better mood. Fuck Michael. Fuck modeling. I'd concentrate on the business I'd shoved aside, graphic design my first love. I'd been lured into modeling by a guy who'd reminded me of Fabio from all the early romance novels I'd read. The first gig had been terrible, paying a little over minimum wage, but it had led to something special for a little while.

I pressed my fingers against my lips and my favorite soldier who'd been banished to the doldrums of monitoring the estate from the small guardhouse winked, likely expecting me. I'd often surprised my mother with a trinket or flowers since my father sucked at all things romance. After pulling in the front and killing the engine, I heard my phone chime. Then I realized there were three calls, all from upcoming modeling gigs. There was no doubt they were calling to cancel.

Rolling my eyes, I hopped out, grabbing the present, fluffing the bright red bow before scampering up the massive set of ornate stairs. I opened the door slowly, almost immediately met by one of the housekeepers. Maria also knew my sneaky methods, grinning then quietly closing the door behind me. She pointed toward the living room, and I tiptoed in that direction, surprised to hear my mother's voice angrier than I'd heard it in a while. I leaned back against the wall, knowing better than to interrupt. My father's temper was explosive.

"I won't let you do that," my mother snapped.

“You have no say in the matter, Lucia,” my father said. While he hadn’t raised his voice, I sensed he was ready to explode.

“Bullshit. I’m her mother. I refuse to allow it. *Mia figlia non sposera un maiale.*”

I shrank back, my breath caught in my throat. My mother had insisted that I learn Italian, teaching me herself. It was another mother-daughter interest my father hated since he’d refused to learn and it allowed us to talk about him when he was in the same room. Now the knowledge sickened me.

*My daughter will not marry a pig.*

Marriage? Was this some kind of joke? While my father might be mafia, he’d never subscribed to methods used by other powerful syndicates. There’d never been any need.

“Do not speak in Italian!” He’d finally lost his cool. “She’s my daughter and will do what I say. Period.”

“No!” she screeched.

Then I heard something I thought would never happen, not in a house that had been full of so much love and laughter.

The sound of my mother’s sharp, shocked cry when my father struck her. My entire body was stripped of all breath, my mind reeling from the ugly realization of what he’d done. Why? How could he have done something so horrible?

The silence in the room was deafening. I was sick to my stomach, trying to figure out what to say to him, or if I should intervene. While I loved my father with everything I had and would do anything for my family, I couldn’t stomach either his sudden need for violence against his wife or his desperate need to marry me off as if I’d never mattered to him.

“Why, Grayson? Why?” my mother finally asked, her voice filled with sorrow.

He grumbled something under his breath that I couldn’t understand. “It will keep the fucking Russians from entering Canada.”

She exhaled, the sound almost as terrifying as the brutal slap. “That’s what this is about? You’re worried about the Bratva?”

“They’ve already killed four of my men. The proposed alliance will ensure a line of power they won’t be stupid enough to cross. Plus, we’ll have additional inroads to the United States that we wouldn’t have otherwise. It’s a win all the way around. There is no other choice!”

“For whom?” she asked. “Our daughter? She will never forgive you for this. Never.”

“It’s a done deal, Lucia, and Mallory will do exactly what I tell her to do. She has no other choice. The engagement will be announced by the weekend. Mallory will get used to it. She may even like the man selected.”

That was all I could take. I couldn’t hear another word. Between the modeling event and this, my mind was buzzing with a fog that wouldn’t go away anytime soon. How could my father do something like this to me? How? I was stunned, barely remembering making it back to my car. As I started the engine, a single tear slipped down my cheek. I wiped it furiously, struggling with the good girl I’d always been.

I’d followed the rules, been a team member and worshiped my family, but I couldn’t stomach a responsibility of this nature. And I shouldn’t be forced into spending a lifetime with someone I didn’t know, let alone love. Or like. There was no possibility a marriage could be successful if you didn’t even like each other. None.

Gasping, I almost hyperventilated as the haze wrapping around my brain formed a mist in front of my eyes.

Poor Samuel. I almost ran him over as I floored it past the gatehouse. At least I didn’t run smack into one of the stone pillars, wrecking my car to add to the shitty day it had already been. It wasn’t even two in the afternoon.

“No. No.” The two little words were the only ones that didn’t have the worst expletives attached to them.

Fuck. Shit. Damn. Hell. Son of a bitch. Asshole. That covered the basics at least.

For now.

What could I do? How was I supposed to handle this? Outright refuse? Maybe pretend to go along with it and run away? Right. Where could I go? Granted, I had money of my own saved away. It wasn't like I needed my father's bank account or the waiting trust fund to survive. In fact, I hadn't touched the trust fund he'd established when I was a baby. I'd had no need to.

Okay. Okay.

When I had to throw on my brakes a split second before smashing into the car ahead of me, I accepted the fact I wasn't fit to drive. Maybe I wasn't fit to do anything but get drunk. No, that wasn't going to solve anything. But a drink would help calm my nerves until I could figure out what I needed to do.

"Think. Don't be a dumb bitch." Was it possible I could use the anger I felt toward Michael to help me out of the jam? And it was a huge one. Big. Really big. Oh, God. What I needed was advice. And girl time. Yes. That was a good idea. I managed to snag my phone off the seat without crashing, my hand shaking when I dialed my best friend's number.

We'd been besties since grade school, even though we'd gone through a full year of hating each other. We'd laughed about that ever since. I only prayed to God she would answer.

"Hello, bitch." Her greeting never got on my nerves.

"Hey, slut. I need you. I mean I really need you." My throat remained almost totally closed.

"Boy trouble?"

"Life trouble," I managed, hating the shake in my voice.

"You don't sound good."

I slowed down for a traffic light behind another car. The second red went to green, I beeped my horn with so much ferocity, I shocked myself.

"Holy crap. Are you okay?" Jillian asked.

"No. Can we meet for a drink at our favorite bar?"

“Wow. Miss Workaholic needing a drink in the middle of the afternoon? Now, I’m worried. I’ll meet you there in fifteen minutes.”

\* \* \*

O’Grady’s was one of the most popular local bars in Montreal, the three Irish brothers who owned it so good looking that they filled every single girl’s fantasy. And probably half the married women. Jillian was already inside, finding a bar-top table so close to the bar I had to squeeze past several burly men. Ordinarily, I’d enjoy the fleeting feeling of hard bodies pressed against my curves, but not today.

Actually, I was annoyed enough I shoved one of the lumberjack-like men a little too hard. His quick snarl as he pulled back his arm to throw a beer-laden punch was quickly replaced with a wink and a glisten in his eyes as he grabbed my hips, pulling me closer.

“Aye. Look at the lass.” His booming voice was sexy enough, rugged with a hint of rasp that probably had women swooning in their high heels, but I did nothing but glare at him. There was no doubt my irritation was obvious because he seemed instantly offended, but that didn’t keep him from grinding his hips.

“Don’t keep pushing me, buddy. You won’t like what happens.” I gave him another hard shove, ignoring the whoops and hollers from his buddies. By the time I slid onto the barstool, I knew exactly what I needed to do, even if it was for a short duration.

Get the hell out of town.

“That was quite the entrance,” Jillian said, fanning her face in purpose.

“I’m not in the mood for assholes. I’m up to here with them.” I raised my hand, dragging my index finger across my neck.

“Hmmm... Sounds like it’s a beer and shot kind of afternoon.”

“Straight tequila is fine with me.” When the same jerk barked at me, I issued a growl so deep that he pulled back, almost falling over.

“What’s going on? Your face is flushed.”

I threw my hand in the air, motioning for anyone to bring us libations before I blew a gasket. “First of all, I told Michael the fuckhead photographer off.” It was easier breaking the ice with the lesser of the evils.

“You did? Are you kidding me?”

“Nope.” When a nice enough looking guy approached, I rattled off drinks, shooing him away almost instantly.

“And he did what?”

“After telling me he’d hunt me down locking me in a cage? He fired me then made certain he ruined my career.”

Jillian shrank back. “Well, if it’s any consolation, you’re on the cover of *Vogue*.” She pursed her lips together as she yanked the glossy magazine from her huge, bright blue Hermes purse. I’d never been capable of understanding what she saw in a thirty-thousand-dollar bag.

When I continued to grumble under my breath, she leaned over the table.

“Did you hear me?” she asked.

“What? I’m trying to tell you I had a shitty day and you haven’t heard the last of it and... Whoa. What did you say?” She slid the magazine across the table, bobbing up and down in her seat.

“You really didn’t know?”

“No.” I could no longer find any words. What little girl hadn’t experienced two dreams as a kid? One, planning her lavish wedding and finding the perfect dress to stand beside the man who’d captured her heart.

That now made me want to vomit a little in my mouth.

Two, to grace the cover of a high fashion magazine. At least I’d accomplished one of them in my life. I yanked it into my

hand, hopping up and down on the barstool, snarling after receiving funny looks from two different groups of men. Fuck them. I had something to celebrate.

“You look fantastic,” she said, sighing as she stared at the cover.

“You do realize it was photoshopped. Right?”

Her eyes opened wide then she gave me a sour look. “Don’t bullshit a bullshitter. That’s you through and through, the most gorgeous woman in the world.”

Snorting, I rolled my eyes. “Hardly.” When the drinks arrived, the poor waiter barely had time to place the shot glass on the polished wooden surface before I snagged it from his fingers, throwing every last drop into my mouth. When I thumped it down with a dramatic flair, he nodded his approval.

“One more. I’m celebrating the end of my life,” I told him.

Jillian cocked her head. “What’s with the extra drama? What else happened?”

“My father wants to marry me off to a stranger. On top of that, he hit my mother.”

She started to laugh until she noticed the look on my face. “Whoa. Are you kidding me?”

“Do I look like I’m kidding?”

“Is your mother okay?”

I nodded, although I knew the single slap would haunt her for years to come. “I think so. She’s tough.”

“Uh-huh. Like you,” she teased. “Who is the would-be suitor?”

“I have no idea and I don’t give a shit who it is. I’m not going to marry some two-bit, burly asshole from the States just to make my father, the notorious mafia man even richer.” I realized I’d raised my voice a teensy bit too much, every single rugged brute in close proximity backing away as if I suddenly had two heads. That was always the reaction when a man found out who my father was.



She shrank back, her shoulders slumping. “I was always afraid of something like that.”

“You were?”

“Isn’t that what all crime syndicate families do?”

She’d lowered her voice, but I thought she was kidding at first. Then I laughed, shaking my head. “My dad is powerful but he’s not like that. At least that’s what I believed my entire life.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Honestly? I need time by myself to think and there’s nowhere in all of Canada I can go where he won’t find me.”

“So, what then?”

I tilted my head, allowing a smile to cross my face. “Do your parents still own that cabin in Colorado?”

“Yeah, of course but... wait a minute. You want to hide out there?”

“I do.”

Jillian sat back. “I don’t know. My parents are very protective of the location. I haven’t been allowed to go there alone.”

“Pretty please. I’ll make certain nothing happens to it. I just need a few days, nothing more. Besides, you owe me.”

“For what?” She sounded indignant.

“For the time I scooped you out of that asshole’s bed before he forced you to go any further? Remember? The guy I beat up?”

While her face turned red, she laughed. “My little ball-busting friend. Fine. When are you leaving?”

I thought about it and sighed. At least my passport was in order. “The sooner the better. Today. And you must promise not to tell my father a single thing.” I gave her a hard look and she fisted her hand, raising her arm. As we bumped knuckles, she nodded.

“Don’t worry. Not a word.”

At least I could count on someone.

“But I need to warn you,” she continued. “The location is very secluded, as in there’s no one around for miles. There are also wild animals on the mountain. Bears. Cougars. Wolves. My father used to set out traps because there were so many. Granted, this was years ago, but just be aware.”

I gave her a look. “I wouldn’t care if you told me the abominable snowman had been discovered there. As long as there are no men to bother me, I can handle anything. You seem to forget, I’m a dangerous woman when pushed.”

As she laughed, I felt a sense of relief. For once, I was doing what I wanted, not what was expected of me.

And it felt damn good.

## CHAPTER 3



*“It’d be a mistake to push a man to violence, if violence is what he has dedicated his life to perfecting.”*

*—James Reece*

*Brogan*

Thoughts of retaliation festered in my mind, a swarm of locusts.

I fisted my hand, spots of blood forming in my eyes. There were no words of solace that would curtail my rage, no reminders that things happen for a reason or that time would heal all wounds. That simply wasn’t the case.

Silence.

The overwhelming lack of sound after the tragic event was what I’d remember first. Then my mother’s wailing as she’d cradled her firstborn son in her arms, her face splattering with his blood had pushed me over the edge.

Only Father O’Brien, who’d been uninjured in the massacre, was talking, praying for my sister and brother continually. I wanted to shut him the hell up, but he’d been in the middle of the melee. He had a place beside my family.

I sighed, trying to figure out who’d learned that the entire family would be at the restaurant. While the fact we’d been

sitting in front of one of the windows peering out onto the main road had been reckless, it was the middle of the day, several of my father's soldiers positioned outside and no rumbles on the street of a possible hit.

And there'd been few people who'd learned of the gathering until this morning. That left a bitter taste in my mouth. While the event had been planned by my father, there was no way he'd allow anyone outside of the family and our trusted men to know our plans. What the fuck?

The assassination had been executed well.

I'd gone after the bastards to no avail, their getaway timed perfectly, disappearing less than two minutes after the first shots had been fired. The subsequent melee had kept our soldiers from discovering any information about them, which had done nothing but irritate both my father and me. However, my father had believed that he was infallible, his hold on the city and the ring of power enough to keep the family from being targeted.

He'd been wrong.

News of the assassination had reached every darkened street and office building in the city as well as the bordering states. The fact there was fresh blood in the water would bring out the piranhas in full force.

"Where the hell is the chief of police that you're so friendly with?" I barked, the ache in my head increasing. I was covered in my brother's blood, my hands reeking of the coppery stench. I fisted both, noticing the way the caked blood changed colors.

"He'll be here or else," my father answered, heading toward two of our soldiers who'd tried to find any information from the rats we employed in the streets.

I moved ahead of him, glaring at Lorenzo, one of my brother's main men. "What did you find?"

His gaze was sheepish. "No one is talking, but the vibe is chilly."

Translation. People were freaking terrified to open their mouths because of fear of retribution. That sounded like something Ivan Korski could manage, the Russian prick. He was my age, pretending like he was king of the hill with his father slaughtered. I should have taken the pompous son of a bitch out myself.

“Sweep the entire fucking city,” my father snarled as he continued to pace the floor of the hospital corridor. At least a dozen of our soldiers had arrived, some for protection and others to receive orders. “I need to know the person responsible.”

“Yes, sir,” Lorenzo answered, immediately heading out of the waiting room.

The police had done a cursory investigation, at least in my mind, uncaring about the loss of life. It had taken all my resolve not to beat one of the officers to death given the caustic questions they’d asked.

“This has Bratva written all over it,” I told him. While the act had been brazen, not so much so that Ivan wouldn’t feel cavalier enough to do it. However, it was obvious I was more certain of it than my father.

Pops threw a glance at me then toward Father O’Brien.

My father had aged in a few hours, his gray eyes giving away his sorrow. My mother was still inconsolable, forced to be sedated in order to keep her from wailing my brother’s name.

“Maybe so, but we won’t jump to any conclusions.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it.”

“You act as if you care, Brogan.”

I recoiled, reeling back, fisting my hand. “He was my brother. Of course I care.”

He lifted his head, studying my eyes before nodding. “Then be a good boy and do as you’re told. Your time will come.”

My time.

The torch had been passed onto me, something I'd never wanted, but there was no way I could refrain from accepting it. That was the way of our world, the deep family ties as important as breathing. I pulled him aside, away from the rest of the family as well as the trusted men guarding us.

"I'm curious, Pops. How did the group of assassins know where we'd be?"

"You do not question me!"

"It's my right as the only surviving son," I shot back.

His face turned beet red and within seconds, he had his hand around my throat.

"What are you doing?" Erin screeched as she raced toward us.

Father O'Brien came closer, which irritated the both of us.

"This is a hospital, gentlemen. Please refrain from physical violence." His words were said quietly, without emotion, but I could see worry in the father's eyes.

When my father released his hold, I bristled but Erin pushed me away, shaking her head. She could be the voice of reason when she wanted to be.

"We need to go after Korski," I said after a few seconds. "He's seeking retaliation."

Ivan was a pig, his empire close to crumbling after his father's murder. He'd sworn vengeance and he'd gotten it, which meant a war. Even if my father didn't want to talk about it, the fact the man had made good on his threat needed to be dealt with.

"Perhaps. We will, but not now," my father hissed.

"Then our reputation will take a hit. We can't afford that."

He lifted his head, the pain in his eyes surprising. My father had always been a hard man, never showing emotion during times of tragedy. Today was different. "Perhaps you've learned more than I believed."

"You know nothing about me, Pops, because you haven't taken the time for a conversation."

As he bristled, I noticed Erin's expression of disdain. She stood stoically, trying to be as grownup as possible, yet the dark blood covering her face and clothes was a harsh reminder of the loss we'd suffered.

"You are still my son and will do as I say."

Exhaling, I hadn't planned on starting a fight. "Fine. I'm going to see Fi."

"Leave her alone."

I shook my head, doing my best to curtail my anger. "As I said, I'm going to see my sister." I didn't bother waiting for his terse reply, heading to the examination room, pushing my way inside.

Her skin was pale, her eyes brimming with tears. But when I came into the room, she threw out her arms.

"It's okay." As I wrapped mine around her, easing onto the edge of the bed, she finally burst into sobs. She was the stoic one, the girl who was never bothered by the drudgery of her world. Now, to see her like this tore away the rest of my soul, the need for vengeance almost all I could think about.

"Please tell me it's all a terrible dream."

I leaned back, wiping tears from her face. "I wish I could."

"So Liam is really dead?"

All I could do was nod, the ache in my heart growing. "But you're going to be just fine."

"How? Why? He'd just been given his new life."

"I know, honey. I promise you that I will find the person responsible."

Sniffing, she looked away. She looked so frail in the hospital gown, her lower lip quivering. "When you do, I want you to carve his name in their chests before you kill them. Promise me you'll do that. Promise me."

She'd never talked about violence, or the actions required of my father and his men. Both my sisters had been protected. "I

will, Fi. I promise you that I will. You just get some rest. Okay?"

"Don't die on me, Brogan. Please don't die on me."

Her words nearly broke my heart.

As I walked to the door, looking back just once, I realized maybe I was more like my father and brother than I'd originally thought.

The only thing on my mind was doing exactly what Fiona wanted me to do to the bastards. Only I'd carve more than just my brother's name into their chests. I'd gut them as well, waiting until they pleaded for mercy before putting a bullet between their eyes.

And I'd enjoy every minute of it.

\* \* \*

Violence.

It had been a way of life in my family, but almost no one had known the ache that had building inside, deep in my core. Nor had they realized the hunger that had churned for years, my violent desires reaching a breaking point. No one understood my level of anger.

Except for my brother.

He'd been the saving grace, nurturing what was left of the goodness inside. Now that was gone, disappearing the moment my brother had taken his last breath.

The man inside who'd cared for life, protecting minds while attempting to salvage what was left of their soul would never see the light of day again.

A rush of adrenaline flowed through my veins as I thought about the vile things I'd accomplish in the future.

And no one would ever stop me.

There were two things that Liam had tried to instill in me over the years. While he was only a few years older, he'd taken the



time to encourage then push me into learning the trades of our business. That had been his fancy way of telling me to hone my weapons and observation skills, forcing me to practice with various guns so there wasn't one I couldn't handle with full control.

He'd always teased me about being the studious one, preferring books to action. Maybe that had been because one of my first memories of the mafia life was seeing my father blowing a man's brains out before turning the gun on a woman who'd betrayed him. On that day, I'd sworn I'd never succumb to injuring a female. My father had called me soft.

Well, I'd hardened over the years, enough so I no issue shedding volumes of blood, doing what was necessary in order to keep the peace within the family organization.

Tonight, I felt that need burning so brightly that if I wasn't careful, there'd be no way of directing the rage.

My father believed I hadn't kept track of what was happening within our organization, but he was very wrong. He'd soon find out just how responsible and aggressive I could be. The Bratva were to blame, their unsuccessful attempts at destroying aspects of our business remaining in the craw of the new Pakhan, he himself out for revenge for the death of his father.

I knew where the foot soldiers ate, slept, and fucked, having trailed them for weeks. They'd never known of my presence, never suspected that at any time I could have slit their throats or torn out their hearts. I'd pulled back every time, keeping the memory of their whereabouts and business activities in the back of my mind.

For all the good my self-control had done.

It was time to send a message. I shifted from the shadows, toward the house where four of the soldiers lived together, easily slipping inside through the back door, which they never kept locked. While I wanted to follow through with my promise made to Fi, tonight couldn't be that time. They'd be on edge, keeping a lookout for immediate retaliation.

I moved through the house in utter silence, a reminder of the events only hours before, yet I could still hear the popping sounds made by the volley of gunfire, the shrieks of customers who'd fled for their lives.

In one hand I held a Glock, in the other my favorite hunting knife. As soon as I moved to the darkened hallway, the silence was broken by the ugliness of a sporting event. Then I heard laughter. I remained against the hallway wall, shifting closer.

Only seconds later, I smiled, throwing my arm back, firing off two shots in rapid succession. As the Bratva piece of shit started to drop, I snapped my head in the other direction, feeling the other three advancing. They must think I was stupid. I advanced like the predator I'd become, firing off additional shots, dropping two of them, spinning and ducking as one of the motherfuckers started peppering shots at me with his assault rifle.

I lunged forward, slicing him from one ear to the other, wasting no time before throwing my arm out to the side, driving the sharp blade into the Russian's guts. When he screamed, I turned my full attention to him, twisting my hand and slicing upward.

*"Irlandskiy kusok der'ma,"* he wheezed. Irish piece of shit.

Grinning, I moved closer. *"Pust stervyatniki khorosho piruyut segodnya vecherom."* May the vultures feast well tonight. His eyes opened wide, the blue light coming from the television highlighting his sneer.

As I yanked out the knife, wiping the blade on my pants, I took a deep breath, enjoying the coppery stench of blood. Turning abruptly, I scanned the floor, walking over the dead bodies to the back door.

I'd accomplished what I'd come for, the message savage enough the Pakhan would know we were on the warpath.

And soon, they'd learn that dealing with me was something out of their worst nightmares.

\* \* \*

The hard slap my father issued was to be expected, even if his ugly words of disappointment had no effect on me.

“What the fuck did you think you were doing?” he gritted out the question as his icy glare matched mine.

“Business.”

He seemed shocked by my answer. “Now, you want to be a part of this organization? My organization?”

I advanced, slamming my fists on his desk, which seemed to shock him. Good. It was past time that I had that effect on him.

“I’ve always been a part. Did my brother not tell you how he spent hours training me to shadow him? To follow in his footsteps?”

Another shock to his system. I seemed full of them today.

He looked down, his face crumbling as I’d seen in the hospital. “You and your brother had a special relationship.”

“Yes, we did, which is why his death will be avenged.”

“We can’t do that. Not this way. Do you know what you’ve done by attacking Ivan’s men?”

“Do you think I care? Whether you want to admit it or not, the bastard is to blame and I will do something about it if you won’t.”

His features softened. “This wasn’t supposed to be how it went.”

“And how was it supposed to go, Father?”

When I noticed a nervous tic on the side of his mouth, I was floored. My father’s brutal hold was dissolving quickly. “A wedding. You did not pledge such an atrocity to the fucking Russian.”

“Ivan had no sisters, no daughter.”

“Not with the fucking animals,” he threw out. “I would never accept that for my son. My. Son.” The words echoed in the room.

I took a deep breath.

“Then who was Liam required to marry?”

“I made a deal with Grayson Montgomery. We’ve formed a truce.”

Now I was the one who was shocked.

“Montgomery? That man is Canadian slime.” He’d been our nemesis in the construction industry for a full decade, derailing several projects because of theft and extortion. He was next on my list of enemies to remove from the face of the earth.

“Yes, I had a long meeting with Grayson and we came to acceptable terms. Our combined forces would allow us to garner additional manpower in order to eradicate the Bratva.”

It was the first time I’d ever heard my father admit to any weakness. That was disconcerting enough I wondered what other secrets he’d been holding onto.

“Liam agreed to this unholy liaison?”

“It wasn’t his choice to make. It’s mine as his father.”

“He was almost forty years old, Pops. I think he had the capability of making his own decisions.” I couldn’t help but laugh. Arranged marriages were archaic.

His face turned beet red, his entire body shaking as he pointed his finger at me. “You have no idea what it means to follow in family traditions. You couldn’t care less. Sometimes I’m shocked you’re even my son.”

This time, the words echoed in my ears, an ache settling into my system. Laughing, I looked away, shaking my head. “Well, Pops. I’m now the only son you have because of your refusal to believe the Bratva had plans on destroying us. I blame you for his death.” I turned sharply, starting to walk away.

“Don’t you think I’m not blaming myself for what happened? Your brother warned me and I didn’t listen. I thought I had the situation under control. Then I had a threat and there was no choice but to make the alliance. Whether you like it or not, son, you’re now in the family business that you never wanted to be in.”

“Don’t you think I already know that, Pops? There will be blood spilled whether you condone it or not. What’s the saying? Violence begets violence? I plan on painting the streets in Bratva red.”

“Be careful, Brogan. You have no idea how powerful Ivan has become.”

I thought about his words and huffed. “And you have no idea how powerful I’ll be.”

\* \* \*

Ryan O’Toole, one of my father’s soldiers and my best friend, threw a condescending look in my direction when I stormed into my office, immediately taking long strides toward my desk. Several hours had passed since my caustic meeting. I’d driven the entire city, searching for a single one of Ivan’s men, my hunger to continue the threat overwhelming. It would seem the fuckers had decided to lay low for a while.

My fury uncontrollable, I threw my arm across the desk, watching as everything on the surface came crashing to the floor, my iMac monitor smashing into pieces. What the hell did I care? It was only money. Blood money to be exact.

“They will die by my hands.” I made the statement after the startling noise had subsided, slamming my palms against the surface of my desk before glaring at him.

Ryan eyed me cautiously before allowing a smile of amusement to cross his face. He was the only one who’d ever seen me this angry. I hadn’t gone off the rails since I’d lost my medical license. He’d been here to witness the blind rage when I’d destroyed another version of the expensive computer as

well as my iPhone and several glasses I'd pitched against the wall.

"I take it someone finally came forward." His statement almost made me laugh.

If Ivan the pig had understood my message, he'd yet to try to retaliate. I couldn't wait until he did. I was eager and ready to take him head on.

I snapped my head in his direction. He knew better than to interrupt my tirades. At least he should remember the way I'd been as a teenager, unable to stop my fists from flying when a kid bothered to step in my way.

I'd changed, my anger controlled, or so I'd thought. Now I knew better. I flexed my fingers, taking a deep breath. I could still taste and smell blood and I hungered for more.

Ryan and I had been friends for far too long, our history including acts of malevolence and bloodshed. Our acts of defiance had landed him in jail for almost a year while I'd gone on to an Ivy League school. I'd never forget his sacrifice when I'd been the one who'd beaten the man nearly to death.

It was perhaps the only reason I'd allowed him to continue breathing when he challenged me.

Which was far too often.

I paced the floor, enjoying the crunch of glass and metal beneath my feet. Things could be replaced; a life taken too soon was something else.

"Fuck, no," I finally answered. "It would seem Ivan plans on laying low."

"You're positive it was Bratva." He lifted his eyebrows, his gaze pensive.

"Without a doubt."

He took a deep breath. "I heard about your interesting visit to a house in the west side. A one-man army."

"It was necessary."

"Your father is none too happy."

“Tell me something I don’t know. There is no doubt the Bratva are responsible.” The silence between us was awkward, more so than normal.

“What about that buddy of yours who was at lunch? You’re certain he didn’t have anything to do with it?” Ryan headed toward the bar, pouring two drinks sans ice. As he brought me a glass, he lifted his eyebrow, trying to determine whether I’d calmed down enough to be approached.

I snapped the glass from his hand, the liquid coming dangerously close to spilling over the edge. I’d just refill it again. And again if necessary. “Phoenix is a good guy, albeit his happy go lucky nature gets under my skin. He had nothing to do with slaughtering my brother. If he’d wanted me dead, he could have done so many times in private.”

“I had to ask.”

I rubbed my forehead, trying to collect my shit. It was becoming impossible. “You mean Pops required you to ask.”

He looked away, his jaw clenching. “What about Fiona?”

His question held a hint of the way he felt about her. “She’s fine. The bullet went clean through her shoulder. She’s lucky.”

“So are you. If you’d been in your chair, you’d be dead.”

As I glanced in his direction, I nodded. Lucky wasn’t the word. I’d never felt such despair in my life. “Yeah, the luck of the Irish.” I stared at the glass of whiskey before consuming a good half, the slight burn doing nothing to make me feel any better. “What are you doing here?”

Ryan should know better than to try to snow me with bullshit. There was total transparency with the man. We could easily call each other’s bluff and did when necessary. He worked for my father and his loyalty was to him for fear of retribution, but our friendship was just as strong and vital in both our minds.

“Your father sent me.”

“Uh-huh,” I said, half laughing. I’d gone off halfcocked, chasing down one of the getaway cars for almost a mile, shooting in broad daylight. Then the killing spree, which

hadn't sated my appetite for bloodletting. Nothing at this point would except for hunting down Ivan, spending days reminding him that fucking with the Callahans had been his last mistake. My behavior wasn't acceptable. I'd been lucky after racing out of the restaurant that the assholes had taken side streets that led into the warehouse section of the city or my ass would be behind bars. It didn't matter my father owed more than half of the police department as well as a solid portion of the corrupt politicians. "He sent an emissary to tell me to stop being a hothead."

I'd seen the look of despair in my father's eyes, had felt his increasing weakness. He wasn't cut out to handle the Bratva on his own, hence the unsavory alliance with the Canadians. I knew nothing about their daughter, nor did I want to learn. I wasn't going to be forced into an unwanted marriage under any circumstances. Period.

"Basically."

"Oh, there's a but this time." I tossed down the rest of my drink, laughing to myself. My father remained contentious that I hadn't wanted a part in the business. Well, fate had other things in mind. Now I'd have no choice given my father's upcoming retirement, as if I could honestly believe he'd walk away on a permanent basis.

Ryan seemed more uncomfortable than usual, staring into his drink, which wasn't like him at all. "Isn't there always with your father?"

Snickering, I headed toward the bar. "Let me guess. Don't attack anyone. Don't start a war."

"Not yet anyway. That's not it."

"What the fuck does he want?"

"For you to leave town for a couple days. He thinks it's too risky for you to remain in Chicago."

I threw my head over my shoulder, already starting to laugh. "Translation. My father needs to make certain I don't lose my temper, which will start a war before he's ready to do so."



He grinned like some kid. “There’s that too, but he’s got a good point. You were meant to die in that attack.”

After taking a deep breath, I glanced down at the mess I’d created as Blazer trotted into the room, the German Shepherd cocking his head but not making a single sound. Maybe he was used to seeing my outbursts as well. “Fine. I’ll leave town.”

“And you know I’m going with you. Your father’s orders.”

“I don’t need a goddamn babysitter other than Blazer. He’ll do just fine.”

“You need protection.”

“Not where I’m going.”

As he shook his head, he walked closer. “Brogan. Your father isn’t going to allow it. You know that. After your personal vendetta, soldiers will be sent to track you down.”

“Maybe, but I don’t care. You’re not coming with me. You go back and tell him I refused to play his game.”

“Your father was particularly poignant about his orders. He said if you refused, unless I came back bloodied and bruised he’d skin me alive.”

I rubbed my jaw, chuckling under my breath. Then I threw a solid, brutal punch to his jaw, knocking him off his feet. As his glass flew out of his hand, smashing into the bookcase, Blazer cocked his head, his tail shifting back and forth slowly.

“What the fuck was that for?” Ryan snarled as he struggled to move to a sitting position, rubbing his jaw before wiping his hand across his bloodied mouth.

“There you go. Now you’re bruised and beaten, and my behavior is exactly what he expected.”

“This won’t convince him.”

“I’d be happy to give you more.”

“Fuck off.” He struggled to his feet. “I’ll figure something out. But you shouldn’t be doing this, and you know it.”

“What I know is that my brother was murdered, and my father doesn’t seem to give a damn. That infuriates the hell out of me.”

“It’s not like that.”

“Yeah, it is.”

Maybe getting out of town was the best thing to do, although the fact my father wanted me away from my sisters left an even worse taste in my mouth.

I’d take a couple of days at my favorite place in the world to regroup. After that was my brother’s funeral, and nothing could keep me from paying my last respects. I fisted my hand, another wave of anger mixed with sadness crushing down on my system like a heavy weight that might never be lifted. After laying his body to rest, praying for his peace and salvation, I’d have a long discussion with my father.

I was taking over as leader of the organization.

Then I planned on going hunting.

No one fucked with my family.

## CHAPTER 4



*M*allory

Colorado.

I'd heard it was one of the most incredible, breathtaking places on earth and whoever had coined the area as God's country hadn't been wrong. I'd never been to the Western Rockies, only flying into LA and New York for modeling shoots, there long enough to glance at each city from the airplane flying in and out. I took a deep breath as I climbed out of the rental Jeep, the view of the mountains unlike anything I'd seen before.

Canada had beautiful countryside, extraordinary cities that could take your breath away, but this could only be described as majestic. There were a couple of inches of packed snow on the ground, still fresh, untouched by the hand of man. Just amazing.

It was colder than I'd anticipated, but I'd brought enough winter gear I'd be comfortable. I'd also stopped at one of the local grocery stores, stocking up on a few necessities including bottles of wine. I had plans on sitting in front of a fire, pretending like I was on vacation while the world around me crumbled.

Maybe it would come to a fiery end, and I wouldn't be forced to deal with the travesty of my life. The thought gave me a chuckle knowing my father should be in a conundrum right about now. Granted he'd eventually check the airports but

finding me here would be like discovering a needle in a haystack.

As long as my bestie kept her mouth shut.

I'd left my mother a message, which had nearly broken my heart. I didn't want her to worry yet I couldn't dare tell her anything about my trip or it was possible my father would beat the information out of her. I was still sick to my stomach because of what happened.

My throat had remained tight during the entire trip, my mind trying to process what had led up to the events. I'd been so self-absorbed in my modeling career that I hadn't paid any attention to what was happening in my father's businesses. Not that he normally told me anything. Maybe if I knew why this was so important that would help. Help what? Make it easier to toe the line like a good girl? Not this time.

I grabbed my bags, heading toward the gorgeous front door. I'd expected a rustic cabin, not something straight out of *Architectural Digest* magazine. With the panoramic views of the mountains, the dozens of windows I'd noticed meant there likely wasn't a room without having the mountains as a backdrop.

I'd made a good decision.

Or so I hoped.

The key was exactly where Jillian had said it would be and the moment I opened the door, I was in awe just walking in. A stone fireplace took front and center just off the foyer, the massive creation reaching all the way to the cathedral ceilings, the wooden beams surrounding it glistening in the dazzling sunlight.

I dropped my bags, turning in a full circle, giggling like a schoolgirl. The place was gorgeous, leather furniture adorning the polished wooden floors, the plush animal skin rug drawing my attention. For some reason I walked into the middle of the room slowly, still trying to take it all in. With the snowcapped mountains highlighted in the floor-to-ceiling windows, I knew this was exactly the kind of place I wanted to own. I didn't

need a big city or constant travels to other lands. Just the quiet peace of the wilderness.

Exhaling, I headed into the kitchen, shaking my head at the sight of the glistening appliances, including the Wolf cooktop taking front and center on the massive granite counter. ‘Wow’ was the only word that seemed appropriate.

I couldn’t help searching through the cabinets, finding the oversized pantry stocked with canned food and spices. The freezer also had dozens of pre-portioned meats, all labeled. And as I glanced at the wine cabinet, I knew I would want for nothing.

It was time to get settled in for my sabbatical. While I’d promised Jillian I’d only be here for a few days, at this point I didn’t know what I should do except lay low for an extended period of time. Fuck the rest of the world and what my father considered my responsibilities.

Fifteen minutes later, I’d brought everything inside, managing to start a fire. There was enough firewood to last for a full season if not more. I certainly wouldn’t be without heat. After grabbing a glass of wine, I headed toward the bank of windows in the living room, leaning against the glass and staring out at the mountains.

Then out of the blue, my eyes became blurred as tears formed. I’d tried not to become emotional, ignoring the reality of what I’d have to face. Now everything seemed overwhelming, my future hanging off a steep cliff, dangling over the edge. If I didn’t follow through with my father’s wishes, what would happen to his organization and my structured world? I couldn’t answer the question.

So I allowed the tears to fall.

\* \* \*

Coffee.

Fresh, steaming hot coffee.

I took a deep whiff as I stood on the front porch. There was the incredible scent of snow in the air, the waning sunlight still trickling shimmers of gold across the landscape. There were trees everywhere, the forest surrounding the property thick with them. The cabin was located a few miles up on one of the mountain ranges, thick, low-hanging branches aligning the isolated, partially graveled road leading to location.

I'd almost turned around twice, my GPS sketchy from lack of service.

I was so glad I hadn't. As I took a deep breath, holding the crisp air in my lungs, a cold shiver trickled down my spine. Why did I continue to have an ominous feeling furrowing in my stomach like butterflies gone wild? At least the ridiculous imagery brought a smile.

The front porch was complete with an old-fashioned swing and as I sat down, I realized I'd never felt so lonely in my life. I held the mug in both hands, grateful for the warmth of the thick ceramic. After a few seconds, I closed my eyes, pushing my feet on the porch so the swing would rock.

A creaking sound of the I-bolts holding the swing in place caught my attention, adding to the morose feeling that had settled in my system. Had I been rash in my decision to come here? Could I have convinced my father I wouldn't be a good fit for some American mafia guy? No. My father would never have listened to me. At least not in this case. I'd been his princess up to now, but business obviously took precedence.

I took another sip, holding the liquid in my mouth, swallowing only after a sudden sharp sound caught my attention. I could have sworn I heard a howl. Another shudder jetted into my system. I'd been cavalier about wild animals, but I'd certainly never had to encounter them before.

Unless asshole men with small dicks groping me in a club counted.

While I heard nothing else, my curiosity got the better of me. I moved off the porch, taking a few steps closer to where I thought I'd heard the noise. There were no other sounds except for the light rustle of what remained of brown leaves on

several of the closest trees. I waited a few more seconds before turning around.

There it was again.

Clear and distinct.

A howl. Whatever the creature, it was crying out in pain.

I shrank back, trying to decide whether or not to ignore it. The third horrible cry nearly broke my heart. There was no doubt the animal was in pain and since the sound was coming from the same location, I had a bad feeling the creature was trapped. What should I do?

After a few seconds, I remembered seeing a bat in one of the closets. As least I could have something to protect myself with. I headed inside, placing the coffee on the entrance room table then retrieving the weapon. Maybe I was being foolish but I was an animal lover, begging for a dog for Christmas for as long as I could remember. My father had refused. Only later did my mother tell me he'd been mauled by a German Shepherd when he was a kid.

I headed outside, both hands firmly planted around the wooden handle. As I headed toward the woods, I continuously scanned the area. I was no expert, but it was entirely possible the sound had been a mating cry.

No, wait. Not this time of year.

As I crept deeper into the forest, a lump forming in my throat, my inner voice chastised me about a dozen times. I could die on this mountain, and no one would find me until the snow melted in the spring. I rolled my eyes at my dramatic tendencies, trudging through the crunchy snow, stopping every few seconds to listen.

There was nothing but silence for at least two full minutes. Then there was a series of whimpers. That was no bear or cougar. The sound reminded me of a dog. I'd passed by a few cabins on the way, which could mean a dog had gotten loose or away from their owner, now lost and trapped.

I picked up my pace, forced to fight fallen debris, almost tripping a few times. When I rushed out of a bank of trees, I

was floored with what I found. A medium-sized dog was struggling with something holding him or her down. I took a deep breath, carefully walking closer.

As soon as the dog swung its head in my direction, I could see pain and terror in its eyes. Not only did I realize he was a male German Shepherd puppy, but I seethed from the sight of why he was in so much pain.

His leg was caught in a trap, from the looks of it, a bear trap. Oh, dear God. As I walked closer, I tried to smile. His poor little body was shaking, a growl erupting from deep in his throat.

“It’s okay, baby. I’m going to try and help you.” I inched closer, thinking about the fact my father had been bitten as well as realizing an injured animal could react on instinct, lashing out at everything. Fortunately, he seemed to realize I wasn’t here to hurt him, pawing the snow as the growl shifted to a baleful whimper.

Fuck. This was bad. As I walked a little closer, I said a silent thank you to the gods above. The trap had been caught on a limb almost exactly the same size as his back leg. However, with one false move, the razor sharp, rusted teeth would dig into his leg. I hunkered down a foot away, slowly offering him my hand.

“You’re going to need to trust me, little guy. If you don’t, we’ll both get hurt.” He whimpered again, first shying away from my fingers then dipping his head, licking them slowly. “Good boy. Okay, now. Let’s see what we can do.”

I was no hunter, but at least my father had insisted I go through some extensive survival training. He’d warned me at an early age that I could be kidnapped or worse, which had always left me with a hollow feeling inside. Now I was grateful he’d taken the time to provide some knowledge, even if none of his courses had dealt with animal traps.

What I knew I’d learned from watching television and nothing else. Fear trickled through me but if I didn’t help the little guy, he’d die either by loss of blood or being dinner for another



beast of the wild. I wasn't going to allow that to happen. "I'm just going to grab a few things. Okay?"

He cried when I walked away, trying to rip his leg free. I could swear I heard the trap creaking. This was getting bad. I found several thicker limbs, realizing quickly that I'd need to pry the trap open. I certainly didn't have the strength to do it. Leverage was the only thing that would work.

After positioning several limbs and the bat near the trap, I rubbed my hands together, giving him another look then patting him on the head. This was going to get dicey. After several attempts at finding a limb that would work, struggling to open it even a few additional centimeters, I finally managed to pry it just enough I could use the bat to wrench it open. Or so I prayed.

Even though I was chilled to the bone, beads of perspiration were rolling down both sides of my face, more from anxiety than exertion. I'd never been so terrified in my life and I'd had to face several horrific incidents over the years.

I took off my knit hat, putting it over his head, pulling it down over his eyes. He immediately tried to pry it off, which meant he wasn't paying attention to what I was doing. I might have one shot at this. There certainly wouldn't be two. I took several deep breaths then counted to three.

When I tried to wrench it open, the damn trap wouldn't budge. I took another shallower breath, blinking away tears. This was going to work. Period. Using every ounce of strength, I concentrated, shocked when the opening increased. Then I jammed a larger limb inside, scrambling to pull the pup free. The second I did, the brittle limb was snapped into several pieces.

I jerked back even more, falling onto my back, the puppy sitting firmly on my chest. While he continued to whimper, he started licking my face, his tail wagging.

Even though the tears continued to fall, I couldn't take the time for a good cry. I had to get him inside in the warmth and see how bad his leg was. If necessary, I'd head back into the small town in search of a vet.

I struggled to my feet, thankful he was still a puppy or there'd be no way I could carry him. As soon as I had him in my arms, exhaustion settled in from the waning adrenaline. I had no idea how far I'd walked, but at least I had my footprints guiding me in the snow.

By the time I made it back to the cabin, he'd fallen asleep in my arms. I almost collapsed when I walked in, gingerly easing him on the couch and standing back, forced to grip the back of the sofa to keep from falling to my knees. Shivering, I stoked the fire before removing my coat. Then I knelt in front of him, examining his leg. While he had a few puncture wounds, they weren't deep and from what I could tell, his leg wasn't broken.

A strangled sigh escaped as I rubbed his muzzle, only then realizing he was wearing a collar, but there were no tags. "Oh, little baby. I only hope your mommy or daddy come looking for you. Let me get your leg cleaned up."

The little tyke didn't fight or growl as I bathed his leg in warm water, wrapping it with gauze I found in one of the bathrooms. He'd likely chew the thick bandage off, but I'd deal with that when it happened.

By the time I'd finished, the exhaustion had crept into every muscle. I pulled two steaks from the freezer, putting down a bowl of water. Then I grabbed a glass of wine and a blanket, moving to the couch beside him.

"What am I going to call you?" I fingered his collar, twisting it slightly. Then I noticed his name was on a small brass plate. "Blazer, huh? I like that name." His tail thumped and I adjusted the blanket. At least I'd managed to save him.

I continued petting him as I studied the brightly burning fire, almost mesmerized by the flames, the hissing sound of the wood comforting. What was I doing in another country all alone? I had to be out of my mind for thinking this was an adult way of handling the situation. I was twenty-three years old, the experience of modeling making me older. As I lifted the glass, licking beads of merlot off the glass, I mulled over how bad getting married would be.

Would I be allowed to have a career or expected to pop out babies? Would I be confined to the man's house? Jesus. We weren't in the Stone Age, but I'd heard stories of other arranged marriages that turned my stomach.

Either way, I couldn't solve my problems right now in the middle of the wilderness. As I heard the howl of wind, I took a gulp of wine. At least the two of us were warm and safe against the elements. I laughed, hating the fact the sound was so bitter.

After placing the glass on the coffee table, I slid further down on the couch, keeping my hand on Blazer's back. "Sleep well, baby. We'll find your parents. I promise."

I closed my eyes, taking several deep breaths, trying to envision the man I'd hope to marry one day.

Tall, broad shouldered with dancing green eyes. Maybe Mr. Right would drop on my doorstep one day.

Ha.

That wasn't going to happen, but a girl could dream.

\* \* \*

*Bam! Bam! Bam!*

What the hell? I jerked up, gasping for air, uncertain what I'd heard. When there was nothing but the sound of the howling wind, a slight pinging sound as if limbs were hitting the house, I took a deep breath. It had to be the wind. I glanced at the sleeping pup, shocked he was still under the cover. Then I noticed the fire had died down.

How long had I been asleep?

I sat up slowly, trying to shake the cobwebs from my brain. Then another series of pounding noises forced me to jump. Shit. How could anyone be at the door?

Blazer lifted his head, his tail thumping.

“Just stay here, boy. Let me see what’s going on.” I’d left what was left of the bat in the trap, but I wasn’t going to the door without having a weapon handy. I scampered into the kitchen, searching through several doors until I found a large knife.

Oh, yeah. That’s the way I greeted all visitors. As I started to walk out of the kitchen, I noticed snow was falling at a fast pace. Great. I should have listened to the weather before I came on my vacation. Correction, escaping my life in its entirety. Blazer was whining, still on the couch, his head up as he stared at the door.

Given his tail was thumping and he wasn’t growling, maybe a Colorado serial killer wasn’t standing behind the closed door. I kept one hand wrapped around the handle of the knife, hesitating before opening the door. The snow was falling even harder than I’d believed, blowing sideways, swirling around the front door. The near whiteout conditions blocked an easy visual of the hulking mass of a human being on my doorstep. Judging by the size, it had to be a man, but his face was covered by a scarf swallowed by the hood of his jacket.

“Um. Can I help you?” There was no sign of a vehicle other than mine. Did that mean he’d trekked through the snow? If so, from where? I involuntarily lifted my arm holding the knife, my grip even firmer. Pinging icicles sliced against my face and I was shivering.

*Woof!*

When Blazer bounded off the couch, his entire backside wiggling, I tried to grab his collar. “Be careful, Blazer. You’re still recuperating.”

The stranger leaned over, petting the pup before lifting his head in my direction, allowing me to catch a glimpse of what seemed like colorless eyes. But his body exuded a strong vibe of electricity, a quiet hum buzzing all around me. That was impossible, but every muscle was tingling. When Blazer returned to my side, his cocked his head to the side.

“Hi. Um. Who are you and why are you at my door in the middle of a snowstorm?” The question seemed rhetorical, but I

needed proof the pup belonged to him. Maybe Blazer was just friendly to everyone.

The stranger remained, glancing over my shoulder then returning his icy stare back to the dog. He was at least six foot two or three, but it was impossible to tell anything else given his bulky clothing.

After a few seconds, I was as frosty as the frigid air pouring in through the open door. “Well, here’s the deal. If you’re not going to say anything, I’ll assume you’re trying to sell me something and politely say, even if that isn’t my personality, thanks but go away.” I was being silly, but the standoff was only creating icicles in my bloodstream.

He remained quiet. Maybe he couldn’t speak.

“Okay. I’m shutting the door now.” I followed through with what I told him I was going to do, but as soon as I moved the door by an inch, he placed his foot on the threshold. My reaction was as instantaneous as his. I raised my arm, pointing the blade toward his throat. While he opened his eyes wide, which allowed me to catch a glimpse of how green and luminescent they were, there was a hint of amusement in them.

That yanked at the girl inside who’d grown up wanting to be a tomboy instead of a princess. I managed to press the tip against his jugular, offering him a challenging look.

I wasn’t expecting him to snap his hand around my wrist, twisting my arm but as the shot of pain curled my toes, my protective side took over. I cracked my foot against his kneecap, but it was as if I’d hit a brick wall, the bulking mass not budging a millimeter.

The way he yanked me around, pressing his chest against my back stole my breath. He held me like a lover would, and when he shifted, no amount of clothing could hide the fact he was hard as a rock.

My God. The man was aroused because of this? As a whiff of his aftershave filtered into my system, I was briefly lightheaded. Oh, no. I wasn’t going to be intoxicated by anything having to do with the man. I was furious, stomping

on his foot with everything I had, breaking free, snorting when a single laugh pushed up from my throat.

But he grabbed my arm again, this time his chest rising and falling. Still, he didn't make a single sound. What was up with that? Was it recognizable? Now I wanted to rip the scarf from his face to expose the prize underneath. Or the monster.

He bent my wrist just enough I knew with a sharp twist of his hand he could snap my bones. I allowed the knife to slip through my fingers, panting as a burst of pain jetted down my arm.

“You need to get out.”

He shook his head. Well, at least I knew he understood English. The harsh action forced his jacket open, which allowed me to see the handle of a gun. Shit. The man was armed. He certainly hadn't been hunting, unless it had been for fresh meat of a different kind.

“I'm not leaving,” he said gruffly.

“If you don't, I'll throw you out.” I stared at him defiantly, narrowing my eyes. It was impossible not to notice his gorgeous eyes or massive physique. I hated the fact a quiver trickled down my legs.

Had someone discovered where I was, one of my father's enemies determined to destroy my family's regime? That was crazy, an absolutely ridiculous thought. But stranger things had happened.

He took a single step closer, a sly grin crossing his face. “I'd love to see you try.”

“I will.”

“Do it.”

My God, the man's challenge was almost like a dare. As he raked his heated gaze down to my feet, I shuddered inwardly. I could swear he was undressing me with his eyes.

“My boyfriend should be back any second,” I blurted more nervously than before.

The grin on his face told me he didn't believe a word I was saying. I was a terrible liar, incapable of hiding anything from my father. What made me think it would be any different with a mountain man killing machine?

His eyes had a sparkle in them, obviously knowing I was lying to him. There was no other human within miles of us. He inhaled, holding in his breath. When he let it go, his nostrils flared. Was he having an orgasm because of the perfume I was wearing? Oh, my God. I had no doubt I was going to be sick.

*Think. Think! How are you going to get away?*

In the middle of a snowstorm? That wasn't plausible under any circumstances.

"You and I both know you're lying," he growled, the husky tone popping goosebumps down my arms.

"Who are you?"

I could tell he took another deep breath. The seconds ticking by only added to the wretched tension. "A very bad man."

No man's voice should be that deep and dark, the seductive vibes just as electrifying as his eyes. I was shocked the current continued to flow, reaching every cell and muscle, the heat building in my core unlike anything I'd experienced before. It inspired thoughts of passion, the kind that made your knees buckle, so velvety smooth that my mouth was suddenly dry.

"Oh, yeah? Well, I'm a very bad girl."

What was this, tit for tat? I lunged toward him, shoving my fists against his rock-hard chest. As if I weighed nothing, he spun me around, propping me over his raised knee, bringing his hand down in rapid motions. What in God's name was he doing? Spanking me? He was the intruder. Oh, when he let me go, I was going to snag the knife. This time I'd use it.

"Get off me!" My pitiful cries were met with a deep chuckle, the round of discipline continuing. He swatted me hard and fast, moving from one side to the other. I couldn't breathe, the shock of being treated like a little kid stealing my ability to think clearly. Even worse? The dampness between my legs was increasing as fast as the heat creeping along my cheeks.

The sting of the harsh punishment took a backseat to the level of humiliation of being spanked by a stranger.

A very bad man. Was he trying to prove it or warn me? I suspected both.

As hard as I fought, there was no getting out of his grasp. But I refused to stop fighting, sliding back and forth until the friction forced a whimper. This was the most embarrassing thing I'd been through in... forever. No one had dared lay a hand on me this way.

As the pain built to a strange frenzy, I closed my eyes, willing the horrible experience to be over. All the while, I heard the thump of Blazer's tail. Had he been through this with his master several times? Wait. I wasn't convinced Blazer belonged to him.

"Stop. Just stop!" My whines only provoked the man into bringing his hand down even harder. I stopped moving altogether, hoping that would make him think I was giving in.

He exhaled, finally stopping the wretched action, taking a few seconds to caress my aching bottom. All I could think about was being thankful there was a layer of denim between my bottom and his massive hand.

When he righted me, I was flustered, incapable of putting a full sentence together. He narrowed his eyes, allowing them to travel down the length of me, the thick bulge remaining between his legs.

"Fuck!" My hiss was followed by Blazer woofing then jumping on the man's legs. That allowed me to back away, holding and rubbing my wrist. "What do you want? Who are you? A bad man isn't going to cut it. Are you Blazer's owner or some crazed monster? Maybe homeless?" He certainly wasn't penniless judging by the quality of his ski jacket and the snow-covered boots he wore. So who was he?

When he advanced, I backed away.

He grabbed the knife, tossing it outside then slamming the door.



I backed away more. Now I had no clue what I was supposed to do. I couldn't run. Even if I managed to get inside the Jeep, I'd never get down the mountainside in this weather. From all appearances, I was fucked. Had one of my father's enemies been following me? There were too many questions and suddenly, I felt lightheaded, my heart racing. It was strange as I also felt warm. That didn't make any sense whatsoever.

"Who are you?" Whoa. Was I slurring my words just a little bit? That wasn't possible. I'd had maybe three sips of a glass of wine. Okay, so I hadn't eaten anything but how was that possible? "Just... Just go away. Okay? I don't feel..." Had it suddenly gotten dark in here? As everything became fuzzy, I tried to turn, heading for the couch, crawling my fingers along the back, bumping into the armrest as I tried to feel my way into sitting down. I could tell Blazer was barking but the sound was like a roaring freight train in my ears and...

Oh, no. I...

## CHAPTER 5



*B*rogan

Wide, luminescent eyes the color of violet petunias. Pale skin that had shimmered even in the dim light of the snowstorm. Lush, ruby red lips that had drawn my attention from the second she'd opened the door.

So unexpected.

So beautiful.

And all alone.

I'd been drawn to her raven curls that bounced against her voluptuous breasts as she peppered me with questions that I had no intention of answering. The fewer people that knew of my existence, the better. I'd anticipated being alone on the mountain, not running into a problem less than an hour after I'd gotten to the cabin. Damn Blazer for running away, but if anything would have happened to him, I'd never be able to forgive myself.

The woman had been brazen to tackle a bear trap, the rusty piece of shit unstable, but the tines had remained sharp. I had no idea how she'd been so ingenious.

There was no reason I should be attracted to her. She wasn't my type. There was an unruly air about her, but her feistiness had drawn me in the moment she'd challenged me at the door. I didn't know her name, yet I'd wanted to fuck her after the second look. That wasn't like me either.

Yes, I was a very bad man, so much so the stricken girl should be terrified of me. But she'd fought me as if her life had depended on it.

That was unusual, even for the women who'd grown up in the world of the mafia. This girl was entirely different. However, my instincts had told me she was hiding from something or someone, much like I was.

Now I was stuck with her, at least for the time being. That wouldn't be good for either one of us. I wasn't in the mood to share space with anyone but Blazer.

Jesus Christ.

I barely managed to grab the woman in my arms before her head smashed against the sharp edge of the coffee table. As I held her sagging body in my arms, Blazer continued to whine, nudging my leg as if worried about her. I was drawn to the thready pulse in her neck and the way her lips pursed. I traced the soft skin of her throat with my fingers, trailing them down the length of her arm before shaking my head. What the hell was I doing?

I was able to gather a scent of perspiration and a hint of some exotic flower, the combination irresistible.

I also smelled fear, which trumped her bravado. She had no idea she remained in the arms of a monster. As I brought her limp body closer, I did the unthinkable, pressing my rough lips against her soft ones, darting my tongue inside. She tasted of cinnamon and red wine.

As soon as my eyes claimed her body, my balls tightening, Blazer let off a distinct howl. In his short duration in my life, he already knew my moods, the darkness often prevailing.

"Yeah, I know. It's your fault," I told him gruffly. Only I'd been the one to leave the back door open while getting wood. It had been just long enough he'd spotted a deer, or a rabbit or God knows what animal, bounding into the woods. At only eight months, he was full of energy, his endurance unlike any other dog I'd had. He was also a frigging knucklehead. He'd

run until he collapsed just to have a small chance at sinking his teeth into a rabbit or some other small critter.

I lifted her legs, gently easing her onto the couch, brushing long hair from her face. After covering her with the blanket left on the seats, I backed away, my cock immediately twitching. She was one insanely gorgeous woman.

Now what was I supposed to do? The storm had kicked up in intensity, enough that trekking back to the cabin wasn't feasible, especially if Blazer was injured. I'd made it as far as the trap but wouldn't have found it hadn't it been for the light blue material sticking out a couple of inches from the snow. Thank God, I'd been able to follow the mystery woman's tracks for a solid half mile. But if it hadn't been for the fire she had going in the fireplace I'd still be lost in the storm.

I ripped off my gloves, shoving them into my pocket then moving around the table. "Let's see what we have, boy." I hunkered down, lifting his leg. He'd managed to get his leg caught in the trap. Had she managed to get him out? It had to be her. There was no one else around.

"I guess you had an angel on your side. Huh?" I rose to my feet, glancing over the couch then yanking off my jacket and scarf. At minimum, we'd be stuck here through the night. I had a bad feeling the woman had been close to getting hypothermia by helping Blazer. I owed her a debt of gratitude, even if she'd pulled a knife on me.

A snarl rose into my throat, but there was no sense in making a single sound. She was a strong little thing, a fighter and she'd been taught basic techniques. Little did she know fate had her running into a real predator, not the wildlife hiding in the shadows.

After tossing my coat and scarf over the back of the chair, I studied the cabin. It was a hell of a lot nicer than the one I'd rented on the fly. But getting out of Chicago quickly had meant taking what was available. And with no plans on staying longer than a couple of days, it didn't matter what the interior looked like.

The snowstorm was the unknown and I was already highly agitated.

I glanced at Blazer, surprised when he jumped on the couch, lying down on her legs. A real ladies' man. Chuckling, I moved toward the fire, grateful there was a pile of wood stacked next to it. After tossing in a few pieces, I headed for the kitchen. She'd laid out two steaks. Evidently, she'd planned on taking care of my dog for as long as necessary.

The pantry and refrigerator were stocked, the liquor cabinet as well. It appeared she also had plans on being here for an extended period of time. Well, I wanted no part of being in her world. I'd come here to seek solace, calming the angry beast, even if the rage continued to swallow every other emotion.

I headed back to the living room, moving toward the fireplace. I couldn't seem to take my eyes off her. I'd been completely aroused the second her body had been crushed against mine, my cock aching more than it had in years. There was no reason for it. None. The last thing I needed was a distraction, although a fraction of my mind had a feeling it wouldn't be a bad idea.

The taste of her sweet lips lingered on my tongue, which kept my body fully tense. Fuck. There wasn't a worse situation to be in at this point. I took another sip before rolling the glass in my fingers, closing my eyes.

Another batch of fresh images of the massacre tore through my mind. The assassins had been messy, killing three innocent bystanders and injuring six others in what appeared to be a desperate attempt to destroy my family. Fortunately, desperation caused people to make mistakes. Ivan was well known to be a perfectionist, anal in all aspects of his professional life. Why the sudden fury? I didn't need a psychiatry degree to know that either he'd been shoved into a corner or there was more bad blood between him and my father than either Liam or I had been made aware of.

If my father was part of the reason for my brother's death, I'd kill him with my bare hands, blood or not. I took another gulp,

closing my eyes as I remembered the Bratva scum and how weak they'd been.

Did I feel guilt for killing the four soldiers? Not at all. They'd signed up with the Bratva knowing their life was held in check. Taking a bullet was a rite of passage. Were the Irish any different? I liked to think we were more civilized, but the rational side of me knew better. I sat down in the chair, leaning back and staring at the fire.

As I brought the glass to my lips, I allowed myself to feel the ache of loss for the first time. I'd spent three days being angry. Healing hadn't been on my agenda, but there was little else I could do. Fuck it. I wasn't a patient man. The storm hadn't been on my radar. Laughing softly, I eased my head against the back of the chair, trying to shove aside the emotions as well as the memories.

That was almost impossible.

*"And that's exactly how you do it."* I could still hear his voice telling me that, pumping his fist after I'd fired a round of ammunition, every bullet hitting the same spot. He'd been the one giving me lessons.

Liam always had a grin on his face, even when handling the toughest aspects of business. He'd never taken himself too seriously while I'd treated every major aspect of my life as if I already carried the weight of the world on my shoulders.

"Oh..." Her anguished moan cut through me and I slanted my eyes in her direction. She was shivering.

After sliding the glass onto the table, I moved closer, feeling her forehead. At least she wasn't running a fever. However, she needed additional warmth other than the roaring fire. Hypothermia had almost gotten to her. I moved through the house, finding extra blankets in one of the downstairs closets. After tucking her in, I stood staring at her for a full two minutes, Blazer giving me the evil eye.

Shaking my head, I headed for the kitchen. The pup needed food and I needed another drink. Maybe an entire bottle of liquor at this point. Blazer trailed behind me, barely limping. I

was grateful for what she'd done, even if she'd been nuts to try to handle the trap on her own. Her adventure could have ended badly.

I eyed the steaks then hunted for a pan, finding a thick cast iron skillet inside one of the cabinets. I was hungry, what little food I'd had not enough to sustain a growing boy. Snorting, I placed it on the range top, giving him another look. "She'll be out of it for the rest of the night. We need food. Right?"

His whine was followed by a wag of his tail.

As soon as I turned on the burner, I refilled my drink. Then I glanced out the kitchen window. The storm should let up by morning. I wasn't going to be caught spending any more time with the woman than necessary. I had business to return to. A dark chuckle erupted from my throat.

Soon, the hunt would begin.

\* \* \*

*Mallory*

Soft lips. The hint of a tongue.

And a strong, masculine scent.

A shudder trickled through me as I blinked several times, dragging my tongue across my lips.

Then I woke with a start, immediately disoriented, jerking to a sitting position. My head was screaming in pain, my mind fuzzy, the feeling of cotton balls inside my mouth. Even though I tried not to move until I figured out where the hell I was, I allowed my eyes to scan the periphery. Flames licked at wood, the roaring fire splashing warmth across my aching skin.

Cabin.

Colorado.

Oh, God. The man. Not just any man, but a mysterious stranger with a bad attitude.

Everything came rushing back to me, scenarios playing out in my mind and none of them had a decent ending.

Rape.

Murder.

Dismemberment.

The same little voice that had warned me about the rugged man laughed at me. If he'd wanted to do me harm, why had he found another blanket to put over me? I thought about what had transpired and when I shifted across the sofa, the dull ache in my butt reminded me that he'd already taken advantage of me.

As soon as I planted my feet on the floor, another woozy wave jetted through me. I tossed the covers aside, unable to see Blazer. Had the man taken him away? In a snowstorm? And what was that smell?

I took a deep whiff as I struggled to my feet. He'd cooked something. Not just something, but the steak I'd planned on having for dinner. When I was finally on my feet, still unstable, I glanced around the room. There was no sign of him. I made my way into the kitchen, noticing the heavy cast iron skillet, two plates in the sink. Maybe he'd fed Blazer but...

The moment I heard a single woofing sound, I grabbed the now cool skillet, heading in the direction of the noise. It had come from just outside the rear of the property. Before I had a chance to open the door, he did, Blazer bounding inside first. My natural instinct and all the training I'd been given through over the years kicked in.

I swung the heavy weighted pan toward the stranger's head, coming within millimeters of connecting.

But his reaction was quicker than mine, one of his hands smashing against the bottom, the other wrapping his hand around mine, preventing me from doing anything else. As he walked me backward to get inside, the hood of his jacket



shifted to his shoulders, allowing me to catch my first glimpse of the man who'd appeared on my doorstep.

He had the most enigmatic green eyes I'd ever seen, the deep emerald coloration even more vibrant with the flecks of gold surrounding his irises. They were twinkling, a complete mismatch to the twist of his lips on his chiseled face. His hair was burnished gold tinged with highlights of copper, the thick waves pressing against the collar of his jacket. He was taller than I'd originally thought, at least six foot three. Sadly, the winterwear continued to hide his physique.

Not that I should care in the least.

However, what continued to strike me the most was how much power he exuded. For a few seconds, I was frozen in time, uncertain what to do.

"Be careful, woman. You won't like what happens with you threaten me," he said in a gravelly voice, his eyes sliding down to my breasts.

I shivered, my heart hammering in my chest.

"Isn't that what you're doing? Threatening me?" I shivered from the door still being open, or so I wanted to tell myself. There was a strange, full press of animal magnetism that not only took my breath away, it sent a shower of need straight to my core. That wasn't like me, especially around deranged assholes.

He lifted his gaze toward the pan, issuing a tsking sound. The man knew how to get under my skin and not in a good way. "Quite the contrary. Given the weapon you have in your hand, it would seem you're threatening me."

The touch of his fingers was heated, my skin on fire. He continued backing me into the room, kicking the door shut. Was he fucking with me?

"You barged into my house," I told him. "You acted as if you owned the place, which you don't. Then you..." I couldn't even mutter the words. The idea that he'd spanked me continued to gnaw at my gut. "You won't tell me your name.

You don't belong here." The howling wind drew my attention briefly.

His chuckle held a deep resonant vibe, sending a series of sensations down to my toes. When he easily wrenched the pan from my hand, I jerked out of his hold. Blazer remained near, his tail thwapping back and forth as he whined.

"Does he belong to you, Blazer?" I asked, laughing at myself for expecting any kind of affirmation. But when the dog moved to the stranger's side, at least I felt somewhat better the man wasn't entirely evil.

"Blazer. Lie down," the asshole instructed him. His eyes never left mine as he stripped off his coat, tossing it aside onto the floor. As he walked toward me, I backed away myself, trying my best not to trip over anything, making more of a fool of myself than I'd already done. He headed into the kitchen briefly, sliding the pan across the kitchen table. But within two seconds, he was back, taking long, deliberate strides in my direction.

I allowed myself to gaze down the length of him and to my disgusted surprise, my mouth watered. The ridiculous mountain man-style flannel shirt couldn't hide his broad shoulders and chest or the way the material was stretched across his muscular arms. As my eyes drifted down the length of him, I swallowed twice. The tight faded blue jeans only added to his masculine appearance, accentuating the thick bulge between his legs. Dear God, the man was built like Adonis, only carved out of the finest stone. Not the cheap stuff. I could feel a nervous tic forming on the corner of my mouth and I was furious with myself for being so attracted.

A wave of electricity crackled between us as he narrowed his hooded eyes. What little he'd said indicated a slight Irish accent, but so sexy that my mind drifted to a romantic setting. Lush green grass and flowers in the spring. A light breeze with glorious sun overhead. Perfect for a picnic.

What the hell was I thinking? This monster of a man would never enjoy something so frivolous. I took a deep breath, folding my arms as I studied his lips. I could swear the man

had kissed me with them. When I pressed my fingers across both, I noticed his breathing had changed.

He was paying attention to everything, and while I didn't know him at all, I could swear he was undressing me with his eyes, his hunger knowing no bounds. "You need to leave. Now."

"I can't. The storm."

He was playing a game with me, pushing me and my boundaries.

Men loved to play games. I'd experienced that far too often. Even my father's right-hand man Gio had attempted to lure me into his darkness, pretending he didn't care when he'd been watching me for years, long before I'd reached legal age.

Shit. I moved around him toward the back door, turning on the outside light. I'd obviously been asleep for hours. There had to be close to two feet of snow outside with more coming down. Another breath caught in my throat. I didn't need this. I just wanted peace and some time alone. Damn it. I chewed on my lower lip, trying to figure out what to do. Whoever and whatever he was, I couldn't shove him out into the storm.

"Name," I demanded, turning sharply.

"Brogan. Yours?" He took his time turning around, the electricity crackling between us leaving my ears ringing.

"Mallory. You don't get my last name because we aren't going to be friends."

Snorting, he nodded several times. I could see his wheels churning just like mine had done, trying to figure out what he was going to do with me. Suddenly, the air around me was sucked into a vacuum, the ringing turning into buzzing. "I'll grab a pillow for you. You can take the couch." My throat was in knots, my stomach churning.

He took a step closer.

Now I sensed his hunger had become something else entirely. Something much darker.

He approached like a true predator, yanking me into his arms and against his massive chest. “I’m glad we got the names out of the way.”

Nothing could have prepared me for the roughness of his actions or the passion that erupted between us. As he pulled me onto my toes, a part of me knew I should fight him, resist in every way, but his dominance and the richness of his scent was overwhelming in the most delicious of ways.

“What does that mean?” I whispered.

His wry smile was the only answer I was going to get. He lowered his head, the feel of his hot breath trickling from one cheek to the other keeping my pulse rapid. When he fisted my hair at the scalp, I pushed hard against his chest, my body stiffening. Yet I couldn’t help myself, curling my fingers around his shirt, desire exploding from deep within.

“I guess you’ll have to wait and see.”

“Who are you?” I managed, although I wasn’t certain my question was loud enough for him to hear.

“That you already know. A bad man.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean? Are you a criminal? A killer?” Now I was terrified all over again.

His eyes pierced mine, his nostrils flaring. “Yes. Both, but to answer your question, it means that for the duration of this storm, you belong to me.”

## CHAPTER 6



*M*allory

Possessive.

Overbearing.

Power hungry.

Brogan was all three and I'd ordinarily fight with tooth and nail to get away from someone who was just one. But he'd caught me completely by surprise, countering my pushiness with arrogance and sexual prowess. And strangely I'd been so drawn to him that I didn't mind his aggressive hold.

Or the feel of his rugged body pressed against mine.

But belong to him? Not a chance.

I shoved hard, managing to break free. When I tried to race toward the kitchen, he was there, the grin on his face as if this was a game of cat and mouse. All he needed to do was take long strides in my direction and he managed to shove me against the wall, planting his hands on either side of me.

"Don't fight me," he said, the tone so dark and demanding that I was suffocated.

I was shocked my core started to pulse, hard and insistent, the desire spinning from deep within, the need so primal that my heart was racing. But I couldn't give in this easily. I pressed my hand against his chest, cocking my head. "I don't want you."

“Don’t you?”

“No.”

He captured my hand with his, squeezing my fingers. My nipples stiffened, forming tight peaks and the smirk on his face indicated he noticed how aroused I’d become. “You’re lying.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Your body betrays you.”

“To hell with you.” I couldn’t think clearly, the roar of need so intense that I remained in shock. I’d never wanted a man this way, not to the point my panties were already damp.

When he crushed his mouth over mine, the savage fever shared between us pulsed, rocket fuel reaching an explosive point. My lips opened involuntarily, accepting his tongue without hesitation. His lips were firm and warm, and my entire body seemed to yield to him without regard to danger or repercussions of any kind.

I wasn’t expecting the way my body responded, need unlike anything that I should feel or want, but his touch was powerful, his hold even more so. There was no pretense to this, nothing that would indicate anything other than sheer animal attraction, but as he explored the deep recesses of my mouth, I arched my back. He ground his hips back and forth, pressing his thick bulge into my stomach.

I wasn’t the kind of girl to swoon over any man, but my mysterious stranger with a brogue accent had awakened a sleeping princess, allowing her to feel something raw and forbidden. I tugged at his shirt, fighting the tight hold of his waistband until I was able to slide one hand underneath. The single touch seared my skin, my mind reeling from the filthy thoughts driving everything else away.

Brogan grabbed my thigh, yanking my leg around his hip, pulling me away from the wall and into a deep arc as he dominated my tongue. The taste of bourbon and charred steak was a powerful aphrodisiac, tempting my taste buds as his heated body taunted mine. Just the feel of his carved muscles

against my fingertips was enough to steal my breath, my pussy so wet the scent of my longing wafted between us.

To my disgust, I realized I was torn between wanting him more than I had any other man and arguing with myself about allowing this to happen.

He yanked on my hair, tilting my head at an awkward angle, immediately brushing his lips across my jaw then down the side of my neck. When he sucked on my pulse of life, I realized how precarious it was being here with him. If he was a serial killer, no one would find me for days, perhaps weeks. He'd admitted he was a killer, but was he just hiding behind a mask, making the heated moment that much more explosive?

Every sound he made was guttural, close enough to ragged growls that I released a heavy breath, trying to keep my eyes open. He dragged his tongue further down, tugging on my sweater until he was able to expose the crest of my breasts. Chuckling darkly, he cupped one, kneading with his long fingers. Then he pinched my nipple between his thumb and forefinger, and I shuddered all the way to my knees.

"What are you doing?" I couldn't believe I was bothering to ask. It was evident what he was doing. Maybe I needed to hear him say it.

"Taking what I want," he breathed against my skin, easing back then ripping my sweater over my head, tossing it aside. The look in his eyes as he cocked his head was as if he was prepared to devour me, not just claim what he believed he had a right to.

I was floored at his level of dominance. Even if I told him no, he wouldn't stop.

And maybe, just maybe, I didn't want him to.

I rolled my hand down his back, marveling in the way his muscles felt under my fingers. When he wrapped his hand around the back of my neck, squeezing, I stared him in the eyes, trying to read his thoughts. He was a blank palette, except for the lust that brimmed in them like wildfire.

He pulled me into a deep arc, raking his teeth down my neck. I struggled to hold onto his arms, gasping from the way he was holding me. When he licked between my breasts, stars floated in front of my eyes, forcing me to blink several times. He snagged the thin lace of my bra, yanking until I heard the material rip. The single growl he issued was so dark, the sound so dangerous that I couldn't stop trembling in his hold.

But the second he engulfed my nipple, pulling the tender tissue into his mouth, every ounce of tension faded away, every sense of my body's betrayal tossed aside. I wanted this, to feel something that I hadn't before, allowing the mystery of not knowing him to add to the sensuality of our tryst.

Perhaps he sensed that I'd given in, pulling away just until he was able to once again look into my eyes. He was so masculine in everything he did, completely dominating even in the way he yanked off his shirt from his neck.

As I was allowed to feast with my eyes, I was taken in by the amount of ink covering his torso. His chest and arms were covered, the mostly black and white art reminding me of what a warrior would choose. The ache burned, the need to touch him increasing.

We never took our eyes off each other as we finished undressing. The second my panties were off, he advanced once again, pinning me against the wall. As he kissed me again, hungrily, without reservation, instinctively I returned the touch, brushing my fingers from his chest to his shoulder, tangling them in his long strands of hair. He nipped my lower lip, teasing me, increasing the desire until it was in a frenzied state.

This time, I became the aggressor, sliding my tongue inside, but it was clear that he was in charge, sucking on my tongue as he eased his hand under my bottom. He yanked me off my feet, holding me close as he shifted his head back and forth, exploring every inch of my mouth. The kiss was passionate, unbridled, and stole what was left of my breath. Every sound erupting past the moment of intimacy was animalistic, pushing me to the limits of unbridled desire.



When he finally pulled our lips apart, I studied the flecks of gold surrounding his irises. Maybe a part of me longed to see warmth, but there was nothing but a cold abyss, as if the man had no soul, merely claiming what it seemed he truly believed belonged to him.

A strange sense of foreboding crowded the deep desire, as if we were playing with fire and on borrowed time.

Who was he and why did he consider himself so dangerous?

He said nothing nor did he blink as he spun me around, taking long strides toward the couch. As he eased me down, his pupils became dilated, his jaw tightly clenched.

He was a gorgeous man in every way, long and lean while every muscle was well honed. The tattoos extended to one leg, sliding down his thigh as it always meant to be there. And his cock was a masterpiece, so long and hard that I wondered how it was going to fit.

And I couldn't wait to find out.

While he was gentle in his actions, I had the distinct feeling that he wasn't going to continue being that way. Brogan straddled my legs, pinning me down, giving him the strong advantage. He could do anything he wanted to me. He narrowed his eyes, raking them down the length of my body, his nostrils flaring.

I shuddered just from the way he was looking at me, the flush of heat adding to the excitement. He took his time flexing his fingers open, rolling the tip of one across my face. As he trailed them down, I found that I was holding my breath. Everything he did was as if he was obsessed in getting to know my body. When I reached out to touch him, he gave me a hard look. Then he placed one arm then the other over my head.

His silence was unnerving, but it added to the buildup of passion, keeping me lightheaded, ripples of excitement creating a wave of dancing prickles on every inch of my body.

Just watching him was entirely different than the few times I'd been with other men, the wafting scent of my desire

escalating.

After cocking his head, he continued his exploration, pressing his fingers into my skin as he dragged them down my chest, swirling the tip of his index finger around my belly button. Then a low and husky growl erupted from his throat as he cupped both breasts, immediately pinching my nipples between his thumbs and forefingers. Everything about him was intimidating, from the look on his face to his heated touch.

I tried to keep my arms over my head, but it was almost impossible, the longing to explore on my own overwhelming. The slice of pain was instant but so was the wetness between my legs. I was fully aroused, my nipples aching to have his mouth around them. As if reading my mind, he slowly lowered his head, capturing one, sucking as he continued twisting the other. Every sound was pulling me even further into a vacuum, my mind shutting down.

Some part of me knew this was wrong, but it felt as if we belonged together and always had. The heat was intense, drifting then sliding like an avalanche straight into my pussy. I closed my eyes, allowing the raw passion to explode even more. He pinched even harder, making me wince in pain, but the wetness between my legs only increased.

I bit my lower lip to keep from crying out, arching my back as I clasped my hands together. He shifted his mouth to my other nipple, the combination of pain and pleasure one of the most intense sensations I'd ever felt. Nothing should feel this good, this extreme.

When he shifted lower, dragging his tongue down my stomach, I tensed. He gathered my legs, pushing them up and out, immediately blowing across my aching pussy. I continued to toss my head back and forth, struggling with another wave of embarrassment. I was so open and exposed, incapable of meshing the reality of what we were doing with the insanity of it. I didn't know him. He was a stranger and I'd opened up, allowing him access to the most intimate parts of me.

Finally, a moan escaped, the sound frazzled. I blinked several times, trying to avoid eye contact as the heat built to a

crescendo. I sensed he was watching my every move as he lowered his head, darting the tip of his tongue around my clit.

“You can’t do this,” I said with no passion behind the words. In fact, a part of me wanted to beg him, which disturbed me almost as much as what was really happening.

“But I am.” He chuckled in the same darkness from before then slid his tongue between my swollen folds.

The amount of pleasure he’d already given me was incredible, all the resolve I had crumbling away. As he licked up and down several times, all the tenderness faded away, his actions become rough and needy. Now the guttural sounds he made floated between us, creating a hum that buzzed straight into my brain.

He continued taunting me, sucking on my clit then licking me fully, lapping my cream. When he finally rimmed my opening, I opened my legs even wider, longing to push down his head, forcing him to drive his tongue deep inside. My body was writhing, my mind a huge blur and the moment he drove his tongue all the way inside, I bucked up from the couch, the strangled sound leaving my throat unrecognizable.

My entire body was on fire, burning so brightly that I could swear flames were licking against my thighs. He finally plunged two more fingers inside, flexing them open before sliding his tongue alongside. Now he was brutal in his actions, the force pushing me up and down on the couch. The fact he wasn’t saying much only added to the forbidden sin we were committing, and my thoughts turned filthy as the need continued to grow.

I longed to have his thick cock in my mouth, sucking until he erupted deep in my throat. Then I’d lick him clean before sucking on his balls. I almost laughed from the lurid thoughts, but the naughty line of thinking was shut down as I came harder than I’d ever come before, the orgasm sweeping through me so quickly that my mouth opened but there was no sound.

He was masterful with his lips and tongue, elongating the pleasure, taking me to a wave, something I’d never

experienced before. I dug my nails into my palms, writhing beneath him as he refused to let me go. As the wave settled, I panted, licking my dry lips and finally looking down at his face. It was glistening, his eyes narrowed but he had no intention of letting me go.

I was floored at my body's response, the way I couldn't stop tingling. The utter bliss he'd given me was shocking, my core now erupting in a delicious fire. He rubbed his lips on one inner thigh then the other before starting again. Within seconds, he brought me close then pulled back, rimming my pussy opening several times.

"Oh, yes. Please..." I couldn't beg him. That wasn't me.

The way he lifted his head, peering at me with hooded eyes was telling, his need to dominate all of me only increasing. "Please?"

I laughed nervously, ashamed I'd given in so easily; he'd ignited a fire that refused to be denied. "Lick me."

He buried his head into my pussy, growling the entire time he licked me furiously, thrusting his fingers inside with wild abandon. I wasn't certain I could take any additional pleasure, my body already exhausted. Then when he pressed his thumb against my asshole, I tensed, gasping for air.

"Relax," he murmured before driving it inside, hitting the tight ring of muscle. That was all I could take, another climax roaring through me.

This time, a scream erupted, a haze forming around my eyes. He licked hard and fast, sucking on my clit until it was extra sensitive, and only when I stopped shaking did he lift his head. There was even more of a carnal look in his eyes, a need that wouldn't be denied. He would take me again and again.

When he started to climb over me, my stomach coiled, the need building to another level. I remained tense, although I wasn't certain why. Maybe because the look in his eyes was something I'd never seen before. This wasn't just about ravaging me. He wanted to devour me whole.

Blinking several times, I studied his cock and balls, thick and heavy, swinging between his muscular thighs. My mouth watered all over again.

As he pressed the full weight of his body against me, he returned his lips to mine, kissing me roughly, savagely. The taste of my sweetness on his tongue was evocative, arousing me even more. He rubbed his groin back and forth, creating a friction between us that would only continue to build. I was wet for him, and he knew exactly what I was thinking, what I wanted.

But he continued taking his time, forcing me to wait until he was ready, until I was so wet that I'd beg him once again.

"You will give yourself to me." His words weren't a question but a command, one that he would likely issue several times during the course of the night.

"Yes," I offered. There was no other answer to provide because that's exactly what I wanted to do.

He tangled his hand in my hair as he slipped the tip to my entrance then intertwined his fingers in mine. With one brutal thrust, he forced the entire length of his cock inside. I couldn't hold back a scream as my muscles stretched, pulsing as they clamped around the thick invasion. He was so big and hard that I was shocked my body accepted the savagery.

He pulled out until only the tip was inside, teasing me as he nipped my lower lip, dragging his tongue across the seam of my mouth. Then he drove in again, this time more brutally. Gasping, I dug my nails into his palms, squeezing his hand with mine as my chest rose and fell in time with his.

"That's it. Just relax."

His voice was softer than before, comforting in a way I hadn't expected. As I wrapped my legs around him, shifting the angle, he drove in even deeper. My voice was strangled from the sheer pleasure, my mind remaining a blur as he held his stance, his cock throbbing inside of me.

I could swear his shaft was expanding, filling me completely. My muscles ached, my heart racing as he tipped me toward

pure ecstasy. I blinked several times, realizing he was frozen over me, studying me intently. There was such darkness to his eyes, both imploring but they were also haunted. The entire moment was also frozen in time, our connection building. That shouldn't happen but I could sense it.

Feel it.

Need it.

Hunger for more to the point I was ready to beg again.

He was relentless, every muscle aching, every nerve on fire as the blood pumped wildly through my veins.

A smile crossed his face as if sensing I understood what this was, accepting him into my life without questioning his intent. When he pulled out this time, he threw his head back, finally closing his eyes. Then he pumped hard and fast, pushing me to the point of madness. How could anything feel so wild and beautiful, all sense of rationality disappearing?

I was obliterated by the rapture, succumbing to a man I shouldn't want but one who'd awakened the woman inside. His actions were primal, his muscles tensing, and I sensed he was close to coming. But he continued driving me to utter delirium, never wavering. Never stopping. I was exhausted but still hungering for more.

And he gave it to me. The heat from his skin was forming a barrier around us, more explosive than before. I thought there was no way I could experience the kind of pleasure I had before.

Then I felt myself crashing into a wall, the wave from before spiraling down, overpowering everything else. Moaning, I eased my head to the side, his near violent actions keeping me on edge. He powered into me harder and faster, his stamina never wavering.

But the closer he came to releasing, the harder I fell into the darkness of the man and the moment. With a hard jerk of his hips, he erupted deep inside, filling me with his seed.

I was breathless, sliding my hand free and wrapping my fingers around his neck. Nothing had prepared me for the

moment of bliss, satisfaction that I'd never known before. When I lolled my head to the other side, he eased away, using a single finger under my chin, forcing me to look at him. The smile on his face was a combination of continued need and amusement.

“Breathe, sweet Mallory. We're just getting started.”

## CHAPTER 7



*B*rogan

Sex.

It was pleasurable, a necessity, but nothing had prepared me for the sweetness of her pussy or the way I wanted to invade her mouth, driving my cock inside. Everything about her was unexpected, pushing me in ways I didn't think possible. As I pulled her off the couch, the look in her eyes drew me into her world, driving the passion I'd felt to an entirely different level. I pulled her through the cabin, not taking no for an answer.

She didn't make a single sound, allowing me to take her up the stairs. Only when I'd reached the top did she point toward one of the doors. I stormed inside, not bothering to turn on a light. Then I tossed her onto the bed, immediately crawling behind her. I adored the way she continued to fight me, this being no exception. The moment she tried to scramble off the bed, I wrapped my hand around her ankle, dragging her toward the edge then tossing her onto all fours.

I was hungrier than I'd been in a long time. If I had to be honest with myself, I'd say no woman had ever drawn me in this quickly and this hard, exposing the dark, sadistic needs that I'd often shoved aside. Few women could handle my desires, but I had a feeling this beautiful woman could become as insatiable as I was.

Yet she didn't belong to me and even if she did, keeping her could prove to be caustic if not deadly. Before she had a



chance to scramble away again, I pressed the tip of my sex against her swollen folds, wasting no time driving it deep inside once again. The heat and the way her muscles constricted yanked at the beast inside of me. I continued to remind myself that this was nothing more than animal attraction, cold, hard fucking that was only a means to satiate my needs.

But as my cock expanded, filling her completely, I had a feeling what this would become would ultimately break me entirely. I adored the sound she made, the soft murmurs that she didn't know she was making. Even the way her breathing remained ragged yanked at the beast inside of me.

She swung her long hair from side to side, her fingers wrapping around the comforter. After a few minutes, we were both breathless, but I refused to stop, plunging like the crazed man I'd become. I wanted to continue fucking her for hours, filling her several times, covering her lush body with my cream. She was entirely too beautiful, which was a danger all its own, my boundaries pushed to the point of no return.

“Uh. Uh. Uh. Uh.” Her moans turned into purrs, her body surrendering to my every need.

Every muscle was tight, my cock aching, yet the warmth of her pussy was incredible, keeping my heart thudding hard against my chest. I could feel the anger easing, the need building. The woman had no idea how often I'd take her, using her.

Tasting her.

Fucking her.

My mind was ravaged by the need, pushing her hard as I thrust inside. There was no pretense to what we were doing, but the raw pleasure was too powerful to ignore. I dug my fingers into her hips, the force I used driving her into the comforter. She panted, clawing the bedding as I refused to stop. I wanted more. I needed more.

And I would have everything I wanted. I closed my eyes, trying to control the beast, longing for this to last for hours.

But I sensed I was losing control, my balls aching to the point of sheer anguish. She'd done this to me, a stranger that should never have come into my life, but as the need continued building, I was already starting to wonder if I could spend any length of time without her.

I fistfisted her hair, yanking on her head until I was able to see the shimmer crossing her skin. I had no idea how much time had passed, nor did I care. The only thing I could concentrate on was fulfilling my needs, satisfying the hunger that always festered inside.

As I rode her long and hard, I felt the shattering effects of tension fading, my entire body shaking as I erupted once again.

And this time, I was the one who threw my head back, issuing a hard bellow.

Still unable to focus, I collapsed around her, dropping us both to the bed. The way she fit in my arms left me restless, already longing for more. As I breathed across the nape of her neck, she took quick breaths, one hand still furred around the comforter. I wrapped my leg over hers, keeping her in place.

Shit. What the hell had I just done?

*Enjoyed yourself, asshole. Nothing more.*

Then why did it feel like more, almost as if karma had slapped me brutally in the face?

Mallory wasn't going anywhere, and it had nothing to do with the ferocity of the weather. I held her against me, aimlessly brushing my fingers along the heated skin of her arm. I was surprised that she remained silent, as if there was no necessity to ask questions, but I sensed otherwise. Maybe she'd resigned herself to the fact she knew she wouldn't like the answers. Whatever the case, the silence left a dull ache inside. Only when I sensed she'd fallen asleep did I ease from around her, leaving the bed and tugging the comforter over her naked body. I could drown in her for hours, never able to get enough.

I'd never felt this way before, although it had been months since I'd bothered to be with anyone. There was no reason

other than I'd grown bored of women used as eye candy and nothing more. That had been a requirement of my father, to ensure his boys appeared the powerful men we were in every way.

I padded toward the window, peering out through the blinds. The snow was still coming down at an alarming rate. As I shifted my head toward the bed, I was forced to accept I'd used her to devour the sadness and anger that had almost consumed me. But the blinding rage would return with even more of a vengeance.

And where would she be at that point? Safely tucked away in a cabin, hiding away from the rest of the world? Now that I'd had a taste, foregoing another due to distance and family requirements would be difficult. Fuck. What the hell was I doing with my life? I had an obligation that had started the moment of my birth, one that burned so brightly, nothing else could matter.

The need continued to swell like a festering wound, already nagging at me to take her again. First, I needed another drink, the experience leaving my thirst unquenched. I turned on the bedside lamp then moved toward the door, turning and studying her once again. The fact my cock was already swelling brought a strange smile to my face. Before heading downstairs, I noticed her suitcase near the dresser.

My curiosity about her continued to grow. I remained where I was before heading toward it, lifting the top with my foot. She'd yet to put her clothes away. I suddenly felt guilty peering at her things, which surprised me even more than finding her adrift in a sea of snow.

Suddenly I had a conscience? That wasn't possible. I'd lost that years before with my sense of humanity. I was playing with fire, but up here, the only thing that would get burned was possibly her heart.

I'd need to risk it because at this point, there was no turning back.

Blazer was sleeping on the couch, his chest rising and falling normally. I moved into the kitchen, grabbing the bottle of

liquor, and headed back toward the fire. After refilling my glass, I added another couple of logs to the fire, wondering whether anyone had tried my cellphone. There wouldn't be coverage, but it was possible a text had already been sent, a message of some kind.

I grabbed my jeans, yanking it from my pocket. As soon as I touched the screen, I noticed the text from Erin.

*Where are you?*

There was nothing else, but I gathered a sense of urgency in the three little words. Erin had always been both my protector and someone I'd vowed to protect with my life. I hadn't told her anything, including about my father's demand I leave town, which was something else to feel guilty about.

I'd make it up to her later, even though I'd still try to keep her protected.

I took a swig of my drink, thinking about what I would say to Mallory. There would be questions and even small ones could draw her attention to who I was. If she told anyone about our time together, that could place her life in danger. Damn it. What had prompted me to seduce her?

Everything.

Her scent.

Her lush lips.

The fact she'd had a torch in her eyes, condemning me from second one.

And the way she'd fought me off not once but twice.

My cock was now fully engorged, the need to claim her tight little ass nearly driving me mad. I'd allow her to rest for a couple of hours. Then I'd take her again.

At least that brought a smile to my face.

I remained where I was, studying the fire for a few minutes. There was so much at stake, more to lose given Liam's death. I took swig after swig of my drink, thinking about the last conversation I'd had with him the night before his death. I'd thought it cryptic then. And now? I wondered if he hadn't been threatened or maybe he'd had a premonition about his death. I'd thought it was his fear that his cancer would return. Now I was beginning to think it had been about his imminent death from an enemy. Maybe there was some information to glean from remembering what he'd said.

*"Do you ever wonder what happens when you die?" Liam asked out of the blue.*

*"For us? We go straight to hell. I can only imagine the fires licking at our heels the moment we cross." When I realized what I'd said, I sighed. "That was shitty, man. I'm sorry."*

*He lifted a single eyebrow, his grin infectious. "Not to worry, my brother. I don't fear death. Whether or not the devil takes us or sends us packing should be interesting. I just wonder if there's a way to look back on your life."*

*"Maybe so. Why?"*

*Liam shook his head. "I don't know. I've been threatened so many times by enemies that it doesn't bother me any longer."*

*"Were you threatened by somebody? Tell me and I'll make certain it doesn't happen again."*

*His laugh was boisterous as usual, more so now that he felt better. "I'm your big brother, remember?"*

*"But you're the one who needs protecting, wimp." We both laughed. I was bigger and stronger than he was and had always been.*

*When a somber look crossed his face, I walked closer. "There's going to be some changes in the organization."*

*"Yeah, you're taking over."*

*He shook his head. "That's not everything. We'll need to make different alliances, altering our business practices and I need*

*you right by my side. My underboss.”*

*“Hmmm... I don't think Pops would like that.”*

*“Since I'll be running things, it's what I want that matters. We need a show of force. Enemies come from everywhere. The ones to worry about are those who have the most to gain and it usually has nothing to do with money or possessions.”*

*I studied his pensive face and sighed. “I'm not going anywhere.”*

*He lifted his drink toward me, the hard glint of his eyes as unusual as the conversation. As we clinked glasses, I had the distinct feeling there was more to whatever was going on, but he wasn't prepared to tell me.*

If only I'd pressed him on what he'd alluded to. I took another swig of the bourbon, realizing I'd already consumed most of the glass. The angst remained, the darkness that I'd fallen into years before keeping me on edge. As I rested against the back of the chair, my eyes caught the wooden stairs, and I allowed a smile. Maybe the reason karma had shoved Mallory into my life was so that fate wouldn't force my hand before I knew all the facts. My brother had had patience.

I had none.

It was time to follow in his footsteps, going into discovery mode. There was also something my father hadn't told me. When I returned, he and I would have a heart to heart.

Whether he liked it or not.

I still couldn't figure out how someone had known where we were at the restaurant. What few possibilities I'd thought of didn't seem feasible, but a sick sense of betrayal remained in the back of my mind. I had plans on turning the city upside down until I found answers. Even if my father didn't approve.

I rolled the glass across my forehead then polished my drink off. “What do you think, Blazer? Time to get a few hours of sleep?”

When there wasn't even a thump of his tail, I twisted my head, a smile crossing my face. If I had to take a guess, I'd say he found a warm place to sleep. I set down my glass and headed for the stairs. Once inside the doorway, I leaned against it, studying the pup as he curled up next to the woman I'd just fucked.

The one who'd saved his life.

I remained where I was for a full two minutes, finding it odd that out of all the things that had happened to me in my life, seeing the two of them together touched me. I'd lost the ability to have but so many emotions, pretending to be the happy go lucky guy. There was another classic example of my dysfunction, the clinical name as uninteresting as the realization that I was more antisocial than I wanted to believe.

With her, everything felt different. Sure. Maybe I was overblowing the way I felt, replacing my continued lust with contrived theories that I'd used on so many others. Whatever the case, she unnerved the fuck out of me.

I moved to the single chair in the room, sitting down and studying her in the dim light. She was even more beautiful sleeping, the light shimmer floating across her cheeks as lovely as the swell of her breasts peeking out from beneath the sheets.

As I eased back, Blazer lifted his head, thumping his tail twice. Then he returned to snuggling with his savior. That's the way things were supposed to work, only my family hadn't subscribed to anything normal.

That's one reason I couldn't have her in my life. She didn't deserve to live in my brutal world.

I closed my eyes, ignoring the rush of need.

For now.

\* \* \*

"Mmm..." I shifted, an unknown scent wafting into my nostrils. As I opened my eyes, I sensed a presence,

immediately reaching for my weapon. I jerked up, gasping for air until I remembered where I was.

The cabin.

Fucking snow.

And a woman who'd awakened my senses. My cock was aching, the scent of our sex still in the room, and I had a sense that she'd watched me sleeping for some time. It wasn't like me to fall asleep, unable to wake up when someone was near. That could cost me my life, but there was no doubt she'd been closer, crouching near me, trying to figure out who the hell I was.

The thought was both startling as alluring, making me want her even more.

She was sitting on the edge of the bed, a mug in one hand, my weapon in the other. While she wasn't pointing the hard, cold steel at me, she was casually keeping it wrapped in her long fingers. She was also studying me as if attempting to determine who the hell she'd just had sex with.

I moved to the edge of the chair, placing both hands on the upholstered arms.

That's when she chose to point the weapon directly at me, a smirk on her face, her eyes lit up with all the fire I'd seen the night before, but for an entirely different reason.

"That's not a toy," I told her, which garnered me a sly smile.

"I assure you, I know how to use a weapon, although I prefer a Beretta to your Glock."

Her admittance startled me. When she took a sip of whatever was in the mug, I tensed and the second I shifted to try to stand, she waved the weapon as if I should know better than to challenge her.

She took at least one more sip before lowering her mug, nodding toward the small table beside the chair. "I brought you coffee. I figured you as a man who prefers it black and strong. Am I right?"



I couldn't help but grin, even if she was enjoying taking command for the moment. "You'd be right." As I sat back, I grabbed the cup, enjoying the warmth from the mug, bringing it to my lips. Strong indeed. It was harsh to the taste, but exactly as I preferred it.

"So, who are you?"

Her question held no emotion. I couldn't help but notice Blazer had snuggled up to her leg, his head on her lap. "I told you everything you need to know."

"You mentioned that you were a bad man. That could categorize several million people in our country alone. Plus, it's a copout."

"You know my name." The woman was tough.

"How about your profession?"

"Psychiatrist. What about yours?" If we were going to play twenty questions, I would get something out of this. How many women knew their weapons unless they'd been in the military or were undercover officers? I ventured a guess I was wrong on both counts, but there was an air about her that was already troubling me.

"Model."

I lifted an eyebrow, grinning again, the answer far too farfetched not to be true. "You're beautiful enough."

"Hmm... But you don't believe me."

"Why would a model be stuck in the middle of nowhere? Don't you need to sell your wares constantly?"

"Contrary to what people, especially men might think and against my behavior last night, I'm not a whore. In fact, my face and body are on the cover of *Vogue* this month."

"Impressive."

She snorted, irritation crossing over her lovely face. "Perhaps, but since I no longer have a job thanks to an arrogant prick, the cover is yesterday's news."

"Who is this prick?"

The way she was eyeing me, searching for my soul was fascinating. “His name is Michael Chevell, one of the world’s most prominent photographers. He’s also a chauvinistic pig who believed I should give him head every time he took my picture. When I tore him a new one, he blackmailed me. I won’t be able to model anything except maybe a bag of feed or a tractor for some big box hardware store.”

She had a biting tongue, but I wasn’t shocked she’d stood up for herself. “So, now what? Do you live off your rich earnings for the rest of your life, living in the lap of luxury?”

“Hardly. I’m not rich by any means. And I honestly don’t care about the finer things in life.”

“You mean like this cabin?” I challenged.

“Not mine.”

“Interesting. So you’re running away from him and his... claws.”

At least that got me a single smile. “Let’s just say I’m running from my life. But this conversation isn’t about me. Why would a psychiatrist need to carry a weapon in this wilderness you speak of?”

“Touché. I’ve always carried a weapon since a serial killer attempted to track me down after I refused to testify in his behalf at a particularly grisly trial.” She didn’t seem the least bit bothered by my statement.

“Did he cut up and eat people?”

“Honestly? Yes. He tracked down beautiful actresses on the street, taking them to his cabin in the wilderness, enjoying their company for days before making them into the night’s dinner festivities.” Why I was pushing her I wasn’t certain, except her change in attitude indicated she’d been taught to be careful with her surroundings. Maybe I was testing her resolve. She didn’t flinch at all. Impressive.

“And that’s your profession?”

“That’s why they pay me the big bucks.” I took a gulp of coffee. I certainly wasn’t going to tell her I’d been stripped of

my qualifications, my medical license revoked, or anything else about my real life. The less she knew, the better in case anyone realized we'd spent any time together.

She debated my answer, shifting her gaze toward Blazer, placing her half-full cup on the floor so she could rub his head, scratching behind his ears. "Was that your specialty?"

"Yes, although it didn't start out that way. At first, I was treating unhappy socialites with more money than common sense. I learned quickly that they were hoping for prescriptions, not for any actual help."

"How boring."

Now I laughed. "Very much so. Serial killers and other vile criminals are far more interesting. Being able to get into their minds, finding out what pushed them into performing such heinous acts was exhilarating, expanding my mind. The methods they used for capture and torture were creative."

"Methods you adapted?"

"Come now. Do I look like a crazed killer to you?"

The way she looked at me with a twinkle in her eyes forced my cock to twitch and she licked her lips in response. "Do they really have characteristics anyone could bank on?"

"No. That's the frightening thing. They could be anyone. Your next door neighbor. Your brother. Your teacher."

"Your lover."

I crossed my legs, giving her a sly look. "Absolutely." The carnal tension between us had my balls tightening. I studied her for a few seconds, the desire building. Then I beckoned her with a single finger. When she tried to ignore me, I issued a harsh growl. "Either shoot me or come here."

"Tempting. Which one to choose." When she pointed the barrel at my chest, I took a deep breath. The little vixen had no idea she was playing with the kind of fire that would get her burned. When she was foolish enough to walk closer, my hunger roared to the surface.

I placed the cup on the table with a defined thump of the ceramic and grinned.

Then I watched her, enjoying the way she believed she was being cunning as she approached, giving me a haughty but heated look. No one had enticed me as much as she had. When she finally came within reach, I snagged her wrist, first yanking the weapon from her fingers then dragging her over my lap.

She yelped, fighting with me immediately as I yanked up her robe, exposing her rounded bottom. Then I proceeded to give her a hard spanking.

“What are you doing?” she demanded, wiggling on my lap to the point the friction forced my aching cock to full extension.

“When you pull a gun on someone, you better be prepared to use it.” I smacked one side then the other, the need to fuck her furrowing deep inside.

“I was prepared. Trust me.” She moaned, almost managing to get out of my grasp. I threw my leg over hers, yanking her against me.

There was nothing like the tingling sensations coursing through me as my palm connected over and over again. As her skin warmed to a sweet blush, my mouth watered. This was just the beginning.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” A grin remained on my face from the way Blazer was looking at me, his ears perked up. I brought my hand down four more times before caressing her skin, her scent of desire wafting between us.

She shifted back and forth, her soft moans enflaming the need even more. When I started again, she threw her head over her shoulder, giving me a venomous look.

“I’ll get you for this.”

She had no way of knowing her threatening words only turned me on even more. As my raging desire continued to increase, so did the way I felt about her. As if she already belonged to me. The need was mind blowing, so extraordinary that I was lost in the moment of having her in my arms. Maybe she’d

sensed that I hadn't been kidding when I'd told her I was a dangerous man.

Or maybe that was her way of trying to regain control.

When I brought my hand down six more times, her moans turned into purrs of longing. Every time she shifted across my cock, it was all I could do not to drag her onto my lap, thrusting my shaft inside.

Her sweet scent only increased, her swollen pussy lips glistening in the morning light. I took a deep breath, trailing my finger down the crack of her ass, sliding it between her folds, forced to suck in my breath.

"You're wet."

"Not for you," she murmured.

"You're lying."

"I never lie."

Chuckling, I thrust my finger inside, pumping several times. "Then your body betrays you a second time, your hunger evident by the way you stare at me, the way your body reacts every time I touch your skin. And when I kiss you, you arch your body into mine. If that's not crazed desire, then I don't know what is. So you know, I'm not good for you but that no longer matters. You belong to me..."

"My body would never betray me and you can't scare me off. But I don't belong to anyone, including you, no matter how good the sex." She was breathless, grinding against me and after giving her bottom eight more brutal smacks, I pulled her onto my lap.

She made me want to unleash the sadistic side of me, taking her in the most painful and filthy ways. The look in her eyes was a continuation of her rebellion, which I coveted more than I should.

I didn't need to command her to straddle my legs. She did so herself, her breathing labored. "Don't think you can control me."

“Oh, no?” I ripped open her robe, exposing her full breasts, her nipples already hard as perfect diamonds. When I cupped both, her eyelids half closed.

“Not a chance.”

Then as I pinched her taut buds, she took a deep breath. “I think you’re wrong. In fact, I know you are. And as I told you last night, we’re just getting started.”

## CHAPTER 8



*M*allory

There was so much danger surrounding him, a spark of electricity that only partially had to do with the way our bodies responded to each other. He had a way of making me wet by just looking at me.

Commanding my senses.

Requiring my obedience.

Hungering for what only I could give him.

Brogan, the Irish bad guy with an intense need.

The man who'd taken full advantage of my raging desire.

The one who'd left me aching the night before, just like he was doing now.

He fisted my hair, yanking me back into a deep arc, his growl a clear indication of his intentions. I stared up at the ceiling, my bottom aching and my mind reeling from wonderment about why I was so attracted to him. It made no sense, but I'd had a vivid and very sexual dream about him, waking up in the middle of the night to find him in the chair fast asleep.

Maybe he didn't know that I'd left the bed, crouching in front of him, allowing my fingers to explore every inch of his body. Perhaps he hadn't realized I'd toyed with his cock, making him hard as a rock, daring to slide my finger through his delicious string of pre-cum, bringing my finger to my mouth.

It had been the perfect aphrodisiac, putting me fast asleep.

Then I'd dreamt of him fucking me all over again in every room in the cabin.

Now, as he pinched my nipples, twisting them until I was forced to cry out in pain, all I could think about was having his cock in my mouth. It was crazy, brazen, and not the thing good girls thought of.

But I was no good girl.

I was bad to the bone.

He kept his firm hold as he lowered his head, sucking on my already aching nipple as he shifted me back and forth on his lap. The bastard was trying to remind me that he could use my body any way he pleased, disciplining me however and whenever he wanted.

I'd never wanted the dominating type of man before, but I was fully aroused, so much so my pussy clenched and released from the rush of anguish. The man knew exactly every button to press, creating a hot and wet need that couldn't be denied.

Every sound he made was husky, every action that of a controlling man. I was breathless, the combination of pain and pleasure exhilarating. My adrenaline was boosted, my core heated to the point my pussy was slickening his legs. Even my scent was stronger as it wafted between us.

When he finally jerked me back to a sitting position, he grasped my jaw between his fingers and wrenched it upward. There is an entirely different look in his eyes, a darkness that I hadn't noticed even the first few minutes after I'd met him. Was he trying to prove the point that he wasn't good for me? Maybe he wanted me terrified of him, threatened by his dominance and his presence but I wasn't.

"Be careful toying with me, my beautiful Mallory. I do bite."

"I'm looking forward to seeing you try."

He gripped my hips, lifting my body and holding me above his cock. When he pulled me down in one swift action, I threw my head back, my breath lost by the powerful action, the pleasure



that I couldn't seem to get enough of. As his cock expanded, filling me completely, I took gasping breaths.

Brogan slipped his hand behind my neck, jerking me upright. "Look at me. Watch when I fuck you."

I did as I was told, but not because he'd told me to. Still, I never blinked as he brought me up and down, the force he used rougher than before. I gripped his shoulders, bucking hard against him. He was a crazed beast, his hunger exploding. There was such kinetic electricity between us, such fire that I knew at some point we could burn out. There was no way to keep the flame going, the passion stirred the way it was at this moment.

There was something different about him, a raging need that wouldn't ever be sated. My instinct told me he was lying about who he was, but did it really matter? After two or three days, I'd never see him again. This was nothing more than a tryst with a stranger.

One hot man.

Within seconds, my body proved him right, betraying me as it had done the night before, an orgasm jetting into my system. He allowed me to ride him hard, my heart racing as the climax rolled through me. "Oh, God. Oh. Yes. Yes. Yes!"

He wore a wry grin, acting as if this was a game to him and he'd just won round one, proving that I was insatiable for him. As my core continued to pulse, he lifted his hips from the chair, driving into me hard and fast. I was breathless, incapable of doing anything but clinging to him, accepting the brutal yet amazing sensations.

I curled my arm around his neck, lowering my head as I gasped for air. The intense vibrations shooting through my pussy were like a wildfire, burning out of control. I writhed against him, creating another wave of friction. He used that moment to rise to his feet, carrying me with him.

There was an even more mischievous look in his eyes as he walked me to the bed, using his strong arm muscles to pitch me to the surface. I immediately tried to crawl away like I had

the night before, but he simply wrapped his arm around my waist, picking me up and tossing me onto all fours. There was no hesitation. He sank onto the bed, keeping me pinned in position, once again driving his cock deep inside.

The angle was different, immediately pushing me into a volley of electric sensations, panting in order to try to continue breathing.

“Such a bad girl,” he whispered in his husky tone. “Do you really think you can get away from me?”

“Always.”

He chuckled in the dark, demonic way I’d heard before, gripping my hip with one hand as he fucked me, the force he used jerking me forward. His brutal actions were jarring, but the sensations were incredible, heightening the level of excitement.

Then he wrapped both arms around me, the crush of his weight taking my breath. “Now, I fuck you in the ass.”

I wiggled against him, clawing the bed as he rolled his fingers down my spine to the crack of my buttocks. There was nothing I could say to stop him, but my mind was frozen, trying not to be fearful of what he was about to do. Only once had I experienced the sinful act, hating every moment of it. He was much larger, his cock so thick that I wasn’t certain I could survive the savage fucking.

But as he placed the tip against my dark hole, I sucked in my breath, trembling all over.

“Relax, babe. I’m a brutal asshole, but my intention isn’t to hurt you, just to make you feel damn good. And to remind you that every part of you now belongs to me.”

Even the sound of his voice was entirely different, so possessive it took my breath away. He trailed rough, hungry kisses down my back as he pushed his cockhead just inside. I was swooning even more than I had before, still breathless as stars floated in front of my eyes.

The moment he hit the tight ring of muscle, I tensed, fisting the sheet.

I expected him to thrust the remainder inside, taking what he wanted as he'd done before. The fact he was tender, pushing an inch inside at a time shocked me, allowing my muscles to expand slowly.

Accepting the thick invasion.

Hungering for more.

There was pain, but it was short lived, replaced with the sweet release of raw, uninhibited pleasure.

I dropped my head, no longer able to see clearly, feeling more like his possession than I had before. My arms were tired, aching as much as my bottom from the spanking. But I was still full of excitement, a need that I couldn't understand and would never be able to explain. He shifted his hips, grinding against me, forcing his cock in even deeper. He grabbed a handful of my hair, jerking my head back, using the long strands as a leash as he pulled out, driving into me again.

With his other hand on my hip, he dug his fingers into my skin. I wasn't going anywhere.

There was something incredible about the way he was driving into me, taking his time to plunge every inch inside, the friction of his skin against mine breathtaking.

"So tight," he growled. "So perfect."

If he only knew how imperfect I really was, or the nightmare my life had turned into. I closed my eyes, allowing the pleasure to take me away, pretending that this was going to last forever. He was hard as a rock, thrusting hard and fast. I had no idea how long he continued to fuck me, his stamina unlike any other man's.

I was exhausted, my entire mind fuzzy, panting as he continued pushing me. Only when his breathing changed, becoming more rapid did I realize he was finally ready to release. A smile crossed my face as his scattered breathing became intense growls and the moment I felt his tension increase, I squeezed my muscles.

He rubbed his hips back and forth, grinding against me as he filled me with his seed. As he pushed me down to the bed,

covering my body with his, he remained pulsing inside, still hard and throbbing. I could swear after a few seconds, he was already swelling again.

When he threw his leg over mine, I knew I wasn't going anywhere until he was ready. After a few seconds, he nipped my shoulder, continuously rubbing the rough pads of his fingers in circles on my arm. As his breath laced the nape of my neck, I sensed a new tension within him, an ugliness of whatever he'd endured before coming here.

Very slowly he pulled out, resting his cock against my leg. Seconds later, he allowed me to turn around to face him and for at least two full minutes, we stared into each other's eyes without saying anything. Maybe there were no words to describe the intensity of our connection or the blatant need we had for each other.

How could two strangers be so completely connected without knowing anything about the other? Maybe that was the point, the reason for the incredible excitement.

He touched my face, spreading his fingers wide open, lowering his gaze as he brushed them down my cheek to my neck. "You are truly one of the most beautiful creatures I've ever seen."

"Where do you live?" I wasn't certain why I bothered asking. I certainly wasn't going to tell him the truth.

"Atlanta. And you're going to tell me you're from New York."

"Exactly."

He lifted a single eyebrow, a look of amusement crossing his face. "Now, are we going to lie to each other or simply enjoy the forbidden time we have?"

I laughed, rubbing the back of my finger down his face, shifting it back and forth across his stubbled jaw. "The mystery does make this that much more delicious."

"However, I will tell you that there will be no place you can hide where I can't find you. That's something for you to keep in mind."

“Should I be concerned?”

“Absolutely. You see, there are many people who call me a monster.”

“I thought you were helping monsters.”

“There’s no assistance that can be provided that will ever change true evil. There are only shades of gray where they can pretend to be someone they aren’t, holding back the dark cravings for blood and death. However, they can only contain it but for long. They are incapable of feeling any humanity and never had a conscience in the first place.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

He took a few seconds, narrowing his eyes until the light was all but gone from them. “Because I’m one of the most evil, dangerous creatures you’ll ever meet.” As he lifted his gaze, for a few seconds, they became the windows leading inside his mind and what I noticed finally terrified me. As the mysterious current that had presented itself the moment I opened the door to a complete stranger manifested itself all over again, I held my breath.

Then I smiled coyly.

“You’re still not going to be able to scare me.”

But he was, although it had nothing to do with his admittance.

He smiled, although it waned after a few seconds. “I’ll give you one piece of advice, my sweet Mallory. When you leave here, never look back. Never allow my name to cross your lips again. Forget I even existed or what we shared.”

“Why?”

“Because you need to and this is the only warning you’re going to get.”

“What does that mean?” I pulled away, darting my eyes back and forth. “Tell me.”

He took a deep breath, holding it for a few seconds. When he exhaled, showering me with his heated desires, I shivered to my core.

“It means that if we cross paths again, I’ll make good on what I said. You will become mine. And there will be nothing you can do to prevent that from happening.”

\* \* \*

Two days had passed since he’d come into my life. Him, the rough and tumble man who was larger than life. Him, the dominating force who’d made staying in bed preferable to enjoying the snow or the scenery outside. And him... someone I’d grown entirely too fond of. He wasn’t a conversationalist and refused to tell me almost anything about his life. I’d learned most of what I knew from watching him interact with Blazer as well as the basic tasks he performed from splitting more wood to keep the fire stoked to creating fabulous meals.

The entire time we’d spent together had been more like a dream than a passing tryst, but I was under no grand illusion that there would be anything else.

As sun peeked in through the windows, I rolled over, grabbing his pillow and pressing it against my face. His scent lingered in every room, masculine and full of testosterone, so intense that my skin was painted in his fragrance, including his cum. A slight giggle erupted and I closed my eyes, envisioning the way he’d looked when he’d taken me on the kitchen table right after dinner the night before.

Then on the couch.

The rug in front of the fire.

Finally, when he’d awakened me from my slumber. The man was insatiable, his tension fading after the first day. Even the darkness in his eyes had faded, allowing him to enjoy the time we’d spent together.

Blazer yawned as he lifted his head, his tail thumping on the comforter. He’d become my constant companion no matter where I went. Thankfully, he was continuing to heal well, the scabs never once oozing. I scratched behind his ear, slowly waking up. Every muscle in my body ached, my bottom sore from yet another harsh spanking the night before.

I wasn't entirely certain why I'd been disciplined but in truth, I didn't care. With him, I was allowed to be something I'd never been before.

Free.

Free to enjoy the darkness that erupted from every inch of his being, the near sadistic needs that continued to surface and the passion that left me aching for more. What I wasn't certain of how to handle was his extreme possessiveness. If I left a room, he found me within seconds. When I'd walked outside, tossing snowballs at Blazer, he'd barreled outside, holding his weapon in both hands. I'd been given no explanation of why, other than he didn't want me getting hurt.

Maybe he'd thought there were bears and coyotes primed and waiting for a midday snack, but I sensed it was something more, something... very dangerous. The single time I'd pressed him, he'd gotten angry, even aggressive with me, telling me in no uncertain terms that I shouldn't ask questions that I didn't really want to know the answers to.

But I did.

The nagging inside my head screamed that he was hiding something that could destroy both of us and I was determined to find out what that was. He could be angry with me, but I was a tenacious woman. If he hadn't figured that out by now, then he was sorely discounting my personality.

After a few minutes of relaxation, I threw back the covers, eager to get a hot shower. Today he'd mentioned he'd test the roads to see if they were passable. I was certain that meant the time we'd spent together was over. As I got out of bed, the ache from the night before was already forming, my stomach coiling from desire and need.

As well as anxiety.

I couldn't hide out here for much longer. The consequences would be too significant. I'd pushed aside any real plans, just enjoying the moment. That would need to end and I hated it.

I loathed my life, the responsibilities that couldn't be ignored. I wasn't certain how or if I could tell my father no. Could I

endure a marriage to a man I didn't love, even in the short term? Ugh. I'd shove it aside for another day. That was all the time I could afford.

This time, Blazer remained on the bed, watching me intently as I headed into the bathroom. I left the door cracked in case he wanted to snuggle up on the bathroom rug then turned on the water. I wanted it nice and scalding. As I stood staring into the mirror while I waited for the water to heat up, the girl looking back at me had wide eyes, but it was easy to tell she was confused and angry.

I made faces to try to make myself smile, but a few seconds later, I realized that was impossible. My life was no longer my own. Maybe the Mafioso my father intended me to marry had redeeming qualities and would treat me like a princess.

Somehow, I knew otherwise. I was just a pawn in a dangerous game of power, nothing but piece of property to be used and tossed aside. Maybe that's all I'd ever been to my father, a possession to be used as leverage. I should hate him for it, but he was my father after all, a man who'd raised me, loved me, and taught me everything I knew.

Including how to play a game.

Hmmm... Maybe that's the way I should look at it, gaining power of my own. At least that gave me something to think about.

I gave my reflection a sly look before moving into the shower. The hot water felt especially delicious, although nothing would soothe my aching muscles, all because of Brogan's rough and wonderful passion. After ducking my head under the water, I closed my eyes, planting my hands on the tile wall. Being away from all the stresses of my life had been exactly what I'd needed.

Even if I wasn't close to finding an easy to swallow solution.

As I raked my hands through my wet hair, I sensed Blazer had found his way into the bathroom.

I couldn't have been more wrong.



Brogan slid in behind me, closing the shower door without saying a single word. I tipped my head over my shoulder, biting my lower lip. I couldn't get enough of enjoying his masculine body, my gaze always floating from his marvelous carved abs to his thick, hard cock. Shuddering, I grabbed the shower gel, but he took it out of my hands before I had a chance to open the container.

Still silent, his presence became overbearing as he poured some into his hand, immediately rubbing the liquid across my shoulders, kneading my skin.

I remained exactly where I was, the scintillating vibrations dancing all the way down to my toes keeping my nipples hard and the kinky desires remaining in the forefront of my mind.

There was something so powerful about his presence, every action he took so dominating I didn't need him to speak or tell me what he expected. The fact he took exactly what he wanted without hesitation was another reason I was so attracted to him.

If only I could give myself totally and completely to him.

What was I thinking? That was insane.

He rolled his hands down the length of my back, inching close enough I could hear his rapid breathing. As he cupped my bottom, I leaned forward, almost to the point of pressing my face against the cool tile. I involuntarily parted my legs, licking my lips, knowing instinctively what he was planning on doing.

Ravaging me once more.

When he shifted his hand between my legs, I held my breath, the sensations keeping my heart racing. I could allow him to do this for hours, but he wouldn't have the patience. He was primal in all things, his hunger knowing no bounds.

As he pressed his fingertips against my heated pussy, there was no way to stop a moan from rushing past my pursed lips. He knew exactly what I craved, his fingers able to bring me to pure ecstasy without ever being forced inside my tight channel. He toyed with me, pressing the tips of his fingers just

inside then pulling back, swirling one finger around my clit. When he pinched my tender tissue, I threw my head back, gasping for air.

His harsh breathing echoed in my ears, his masculine scent filling my system, sizzling every synapse. He didn't need to tell me how to stand or what to do. I knew it instinctively, keeping my legs wide open for him as he rubbed my pussy. He had an innate, natural way of knowing every aspect of what my body needed. I'd never coached him with regard to my pleasure or any raging desire burning inside.

He simply took control, bringing me to the kind of high that was surreal, pushing my boundaries with his forcefulness. This morning was no exception. I was hungry and wet, tingling all over and close to orgasming just by the way he was tantalizing my clit. Within seconds, beads of perspiration were already trickling down both sides of my face and it only had somewhat to do with the hot water.

His touch was magnificent. Panting, I hung my head low, no longer shocked at the way my body responded, yielding to him without reservation. He'd become my kryptonite, a drug that I feared I wouldn't be able to be without. I wanted him to possess me.

Taste me.

Take me.

No matter the circumstance or consequences.

"My wet baby," he finally said, his deep, dark voice sending another shower of thrills through me. His fingers worked their usual magic and the second he slipped them inside, my pussy muscles clamped around the thick invasion.

I pressed my hands against the tile, pushing back against him, rocking his hand as he thrust hard and fast. Breathless, I didn't bother trying to focus. There was no way of escaping the rapture for even a few seconds.

"Uh-huh," I managed, although I wasn't certain my voice was audible.

“I’m going to make you feel so good.” Brogan breathed across my shoulder before nipping my earlobe. Then he nuzzled his face against my neck and within seconds, he bit down on the tenderest part.

The warmth, his thick fingers, and the slice of pain were too much. I exploded in an orgasm, my legs almost buckling as it raced through my system, providing the kind of pleasure and joy I only thought possible in fantasies.

Or romance books.

He had such a power over me that I would do anything he asked, taking any risks, submitting to his every need. That both confused and surprised me, but the joy of what he was doing was something I’d craved my entire adult life.

As the ebb and flow of the climax tangled my nerves and muscles together in a tight weave of rapture, I would have fallen to the shower floor if he hadn’t wrapped his arm around my waist, keeping me aloft.

“My insatiable girl.”

“Yes. Yes, sir.” The word was as shocking as the way my body reacted to him, but it also felt natural, as if I’d always been meant to belong to him. My breathing ragged, when he pulled me away from the wall and against his hard body, I lifted my arms, draping them over his shoulders.

“Good girl. Tonight, I’m going to tie you to the bed and you will learn what it’s like to be in the arms of a true sadist.”

If he wanted to frighten me sexually, he wasn’t. My mouth watered at the thought, the filthy, taboo ideas racing through my mind even darker than before. As soon as I started to come down from the glorious high, he turned me around to face him, cupping both sides of my face. His hold was firmer than ever before, his eyes like dark, obsidian pools in the dim lighting. I sensed an explosive hunger that was only partially due to the incredible moment we were sharing.

There was something else that was much darker, as if his needs had changed. It was as if he didn’t just consider me his

possession but his obsession, willing to do anything to keep me.

A slight chill coursed down my spine. There was no reason for it to bother me, yet it did. I could swear karma was playing an evil hand, forcing the two of us together and that left me with a strange, almost sick feeling pooling in my stomach.

“Mine.” The single word was proof that his desires had changed, shifting to a different level. But as he pushed me down to my knees, tangling his fingers in my hair, I didn’t care what he thought or what he wanted.

I was going to indulge in what I needed.

His thick cock inside my mouth.

As I wrapped my fingers around the base, he pressed one of his hands on the shower wall, keeping his other firmly positioned in my long locks. As he slowly lowered his head, the look of carnal need reminded me of a lion pacing his cage. His chest rose and fell as I pumped the base only twice, his harsh laugh sending a shower of trickles all the way to my toes.

I would only be allowed to play for so long.

The moment I slipped my hand between his legs, cupping his swollen testicles, he narrowed his eyes, issuing several guttural sounds.

“Teasing me?” he asked, although he knew the answer.

“Mmm... Hmmm...” I dragged my tongue across his slit before darting the tip around his cockhead. As I rolled his balls between my fingers, I glanced into his eyes before applying pressure, his strangled sounds my sweet reward.

His chest continued to rise and fall as I lifted his cock, licking down the underside then taking one testicle into my mouth. He threw his head back, slamming his palm on the wall, gasping for air.

“Fuck. Such a naughty vixen.”

I shifted to his other swollen sac, savoring the taste. So masculine. So musky. I could do this for hours, tormenting

him by bringing him close to the edge then pulling back just as he'd done to me several times.

His leg muscles were tense, his thighs bulging as he planted his other hand on my head, growling like the beast I knew him to be. I continued to take my time, sliding my tongue along the underside of his shaft before taking his cockhead all the way into my mouth. As I used my strong jaw muscles to suck, his body started shaking.

The moment I took more of his cock into my mouth, he laughed savagely then pushed my head with enough force the tip hit the back of my throat. I had to fight to keep breathing as well as not to gag but he was so large that he filled my mouth completely. I closed my eyes, even as both of them watered, taking several shallow breaths until my throat relaxed.

Then nothing could hold me back from savoring his sweet flavor. Within seconds, I was rewarded with several drops of the sweetest pre-cum, which only fueled the fire raging deep within.

There was nothing to keep the man from taking full control. He powered into me, the sucking sound I made as he rolled onto the balls of his feet keeping a shower of electricity pouring through us. I couldn't take my eyes off him, struggling to breathe yet mesmerized by the way he was looking at me.

Staring at me.

Devouring me with his eyes.

There was something so incredible about being lost in the moment, unworried about time and other constraints. As he continued pumping in my mouth, I fell into a sweet lull, swirling my tongue back and forth as I continued rolling my hand around the base. There was no doubt the friction I'd created was driving him wild, his constant pants and animalistic growls increasing with every passing few seconds.

Brogan dug his fingers into my scalp, tugging on my hair as he face fucked me. I was powerless around the man, incapable of regaining any control. There was a sly smile still on his face, his eyes glassing over from the sheer pleasure.

And I couldn't wait for him to fill my mouth with his cream.

"Fuck. Hot. Wet. Just the way I like it." His actions became more aggressive, so rough that I was driven to an entirely different level of pleasure. "Pinch your nipple for me."

His command was not to be denied. I did so without hesitation, gazing up at him with hazy eyes.

"Good girl. Twist it for me. Hard. I want you to feel the burn."

There was no stopping the man, no way of breaking the intensity of our connection. The crackling sounds of our combined hammering hearts mixed with the pulsing of the water. And as I twisted and pulled on my tender bud, I sensed he was ready to explode into my mouth.

He threw his head back, gasping for air before growling for several seconds. Then his entire body tensed just before erupting inside my mouth, his seed filling my throat.

I rolled my tongue across my lips, giving him a heated look as he gazed down, a sly look on his face. As he slipped his arms under me, pulling me to a standing position, he shook his head. "You're amazing, baby. Just amazing." He backed me against the shower wall, allowing the steamy water to flow over both of us, placing his hands on either side of me.

"Just doing my job."

"Mmm... I think I should put you to work every day."

We remained where we were, both of us catching our breath.

The look in his unfocused eyes changed. "The roads should be clear by in the morning. I need to get back to my life, as much as I hate to say it."

"Treating patients must be an exhausting job." I traced one of his tattoos, already dreading the next day.

"You have no idea. You're headed back to New York?"

"For now." As expected, there was no talk about trying to keep this going. I had a sense there was no such thing as a long-distance relationship in his world.

Whatever that really was.

“Well, whatever you decide to do about Mr. Chevell I’m certain will be well thought out.”

“If only I could slice and dice him. That would make me happy.” I laughed, surprised he’d remembered the man’s name. “He means nothing to me.”

“Understood.” He dropped his head even lower, pressing his lips against mine. After the rather chaste kiss, he pulled away. “The internet appears to be up. I need to make a couple phone calls. Then we make breakfast. But you’ll be dessert.”

I shrank back as he left the shower, suddenly shivering, the same nagging continuing.

I had a feeling this wasn’t going to be the last I saw of Brogan, my mysterious man.

And I also had a sense that it should frighten me.

## CHAPTER 9



*B*rogan

“What in the fuck are you talking about?” I demanded. Ryan had left me a cryptic message over a day before and he wasn’t being very forthcoming now.

Leaving reality for even a couple of days had been a luxury I shouldn’t have enjoyed. Now it was going to slam me back in the face. What, because of my absence?

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but you need to get back here. The shit is hitting the fan. Your father is fucking livid. He’s pissed you missed the funeral.”

I’d thought of little else since I’d gotten up that morning, although I hadn’t realized it had been planned so quickly. What happened to Chicago’s finest doing their due diligence?

“It wasn’t supposed to happen that damn fast. Why? Why in God’s name couldn’t he wait for me?”

“Because of the continued threats. He brought Fiona home almost immediately after you left. There were some shady assholes hanging around the hospital.”

Fuck. I rubbed my face, the frigid temperatures no longer cutting through me given my level of anger. She’d almost been attacked because of what I’d done.

“And?”



“They were run off,” Ryan said in a tone indicating he knew I’d be furious how it was handled.

And he was right.

What in the hell did my father think he was doing? He had to hit Ivan and the rest of the motley crew hard. Was he losing his touch? “How is Fi?”

“Fine. You know her. Stoic. But I sensed she was rattled. She misses you.”

She would be next on my list to contact. “I’ll be back soon.” I glared at the thick snow. I couldn’t stall my return. Not now. “I didn’t hear jack shit from my father. Not one single call.”

“I can’t answer the reason why. He’s not himself since Liam died.”

Maybe neither was I. “Yeah, I get it.” Like hell I did.

“Should I let your father know we’ve talked?”

“Don’t tell him anything. It’s only been three days. The man can wait one more day before launching into me. I have some business to finish. Keep the assholes away from my sisters.” I paced the front porch then walked down to the snow, watching as Blazer romped around in the snow. He certainly didn’t seem any worse for wear. I yanked my sunglasses from my jacket pocket, the sun blinding. The last thing I was going to tell anyone was that I’d spent time with a woman while my family remained in danger, even if the reason had been a snowstorm.

“Brogan. A lot has happened and the fact you’ve been out of contact didn’t bode well for your father. You know how he is.” Ryan half laughed. “Everybody is tense.”

“I had no choice. The internet is sketchy at best where I am, more so in the middle of a freaking snowstorm. So what the hell is going on? Did some other mafia organization suddenly crowd into our space?”

“The blood in the water is getting thick and there’s a contract on your head, a two-million-dollar prize.”

Fuck. What the hell? I’d been threatened almost as many times as my brother or father, but someone wanted me dead badly.

“There’s always a price on the son of an Irish mafia lord.” I used the term for my father without any affection. He’d deemed himself king of Chicago a long time ago.

“Yeah, but you need to know this. Your uncle is dead, gunned down just outside his home. Your father is shaking in his boots. He’s been hiding in his estate since almost right after you left.”

The fact my father was frightened meant he’d garnered more information that he’d been willing to share before. My uncle. There was no real love loss between my father and his estranged brother, but he was blood and that meant something. I wasn’t certain how long it had been since I’d seen him, not that I cared. He was the kind of ruthless who’d eat his young if he thought it would garner him additional power. “I’ll be on a plane tomorrow. Who’s coming for us?”

“The question is who isn’t? But I will tell you that the rumblings in the street aren’t good.”

Aren’t good? That had to be the understatement of the year. I laughed bitterly. “That’s nothing new, Ryan.”

“No, you don’t understand. The Russians are up to something.”

The Russians were creative in their methods of handlings both aspects of business as well as whatever treachery came their way. Ivan was also not a patient man. With my extended absence, he was likely chomping at the bit to tear down the rest of the Callahan family. “Make certain security is tight around every aspect of business. And do not allow my sisters to be alone.”

“Fiona is at the house.”

“And Erin?”

“She refuses to have anything to do with the family.”

Sighing, I shook my head. My sister’s denial of who and what we were could get her killed. “I’ll handle her when I return.”

“And your mother has been spending a lot of time at the church, even more so than before.”

I was surprised Pops allowed her to go. I'd had a suspicion crossing my mind every so often, one I didn't like thinking about, but it would need to be investigated.

"Keep a close eye on her, Ryan. Personally. I don't want anything to happen."

"Understood."

"Also put someone on Father O'Brien."

He choked then whistled. "Are you kidding me?"

"Does it seem like I'm kidding?"

"No, but why?"

"Just do it."

"Fine. I don't need to tell you how your mother will react."

My mother had raised us as God-fearing Catholics, insisting that her children all go to church with her every Sunday. She lived by confession, something she'd yet to be able to convince my father was necessary. Perhaps he knew that his conscience would never be forgiven, no matter how many Hail Marys he performed. I'd been the kid most likely to be redeemed, at least according to the longtime priest who'd suffered his share of punishment given his close ties with several mafia organizations, most recently with Ivan Korski.

That much I'd known months ago. Now it seemed more like a red flag, one that couldn't be ignored.

While my father believed Father O'Brien was on the man's payroll, I hadn't been convinced. However, the priest was also considered one of the richest men in the city, even if he'd professed to live like a pauper, giving his worth to charity. Bullshit. What I hadn't concentrated on was that it was possible his wealth had been earned in an entirely different manner than his yearly salary.

If that was the case...

It would need to be confirmed before I made accusations or a decision I might regret.

I'd heard several times in my life that next to whatever mafia organization ran a city, the Catholic Church was almost as powerful. Politicians and lawmakers didn't even come close. If the Russians were planning a coup, the archbishop would know. Perhaps my first stop would be to pay him a visit.

"What about the Canadians? The daughter?"

"I don't know. Your father hasn't mentioned her again, but a deal was made. Grayson Montgomery was none too happy to hear the news. But the message was clear. There will be a marriage."

"Marriage. Fuck that. She's just a damn possession, a tool to be used."

"I'm not certain you need to worry about that any longer. There's something else you should know and you're not going to like it but you weren't here." The hesitation in his voice was unusual.

"What? Fucking spill it."

As he told me what I would face upon my return, I took a deep breath, seething to the point all I could see was blood.

Family.

There was no truth to the saying that blood was thicker than water. From what I'd seen over the years, the deepest betrayal was often done by a family member. I thought about everything he'd told me, mulling over my next steps.

"As I said, I will arrive tomorrow. I will call you to meet me. Make certain the soldiers are prepared for a change in direction. It's time to handle business and this time, we do it my way."

"Yes, sir. Just know that your father is on the warpath."

"Leave my father's consternation to me."

"Yes, sir," he muttered.

"Find out about the woman. I need to know what to expect."

"I'll do what I can."

“No, as of now, you’re working for me. You will do what I say.”

He hesitated and at that moment, it didn’t matter we’d been friends.

Ryan exhaled. “Your father will be pissed.”

“You heard me, Ryan. If you’re not happy with the arrangement, I’ll easily find someone to take your place. And since I won’t be needing your services any longer, I’ll need to dispose of the trash. Do you hear what I’m saying to you?”

I heard his exaggerated exhale. It was past time I took my place. If my father was losing his shit, then I needed to get back and make certain the entire organization was on track.

Or the bloodsucking vultures would eat us alive.

“Understood, boss. I’ll find out everything I can about the Montgomerys for you.”

“Good. Do not let me down.”

“No, sir.”

When I ended the call, I took a deep breath. A new era was about to begin with me at the helm.

And the first thing I’d do was clean house.

When I walked inside the cabin, I took a deep breath, the sight of her forcing my cock to full attention.

I’d met the perfect woman. Now I had to abandon my desires.

Only for now. All I could do was smile as she stared at me. Our paths would cross again sooner than she expected.

\* \* \*

*“You are mine,” I told her as I approached, circling around her voluptuous body, my eyes never leaving, never blinking.*

*She stood in the center of the room, her chest rising and falling, the nervous tic on the side of her mouth creating a need to press my lips against hers. That would come soon*

*enough. I wanted her anxious, prepared to accept the consequences of her actions.*

*And I wanted her desperate with need, begging for relief from the hunger keeping her wet, her pussy tingling.*

*“I will never belong to you.” Her remaining defiance would soon be eradicated, the only thoughts and actions allowed all about pleasing me.*

*Serving me.*

*Surrendering to me.*

*When I stood in front of her once again, I grabbed her chin, wrenching it upward so she was forced to look me in my eyes. “You already do.”*

*Woof. Woof. Woof!*

Gasping for air, I jerked up, forced to blink several times. Everything was hazy, the brightness forcing me to wince. “What the...” My head was entirely too fuzzy and as I lifted it, the dull ache turned into full-blown nausea.

Mallory.

What the...

*Breathe. Just breathe.*

Even that was tough.

For a few seconds, all I could think about was how damn good she'd felt in my arms, which made my cock harden immediately. I closed my eyes again, still able to gather her natural scent as well as a hint of our rough sex.

I fisted my hand, the intense dream lingering in the forefront of my mind. The visions of her naked body never left me, still soothing the beast but I wanted more, the dark cravings intensifying with every minute I spent with her.

The deep hunger resurfaced all over again, and I growled as I realized she wasn't waiting in bed.

As I took a deep breath, I was forced to accept that a huge part of me wasn't going to be able to let her go that easily. She had no place in my life, no method of being able to deal with the level of danger after my brother's murder. I shouldn't be thinking about putting her in that kind of predicament, but I couldn't live without her.

She was mine.

Mine to taste.

To fuck.

To use.

To own.

No one would take her away from me.

Including my fucking cousin.

Fuck. My obsession had already gotten out of hand.

What had my father been thinking when he'd invited my cousin into our world, our business? Maybe Ryan had gotten it all wrong and Sean's sudden appearance at my father's estate had more to do with my uncle's murder. Whatever the case, Sean and I didn't get along at all.

The asshole was pompous and more of a savage than I'd ever be. I didn't like what I'd heard during the conversation, and I didn't plan on talking to my father about it on the phone.

I took another deep breath, my exhale rattling as pain tore through my head.

*Woof. Woof.*

Blazer.

When I opened my eyes again, ice drifted into my veins, my sixth sense kicking in.

I was still in bed. Wait a minute. How did I get here and why the hell couldn't I remember anything past...

Wine.

Mallory had brought wine. I tried to think about if I did remember anything after consuming a glass.

Fuck. Had there been something wrong with it?

As Blazer jumped on the bed, I took another deep breath. “Hey there, buddy. What happened last night? Did I get blind stinking drunk?”

Even in my darkest days, that had never surfaced in my personality, as twisted as it had become.

He licked my face, cocking his head and I could swear he was trying to tell me something. As I glanced around the room, I instantly knew what it was.

Mallory had disappeared.

And she’d drugged me the night before. What secrets was the sexy woman hiding? While I’d initially thought she’d been a plant of some kind, the odds of that had seemed ridiculously slim, forcing me to shove it aside.

However, I was no fool. Leaving town had likely looked like I’d run scared, unable to face the enemy. While that remained far from the truth, perceptions were everything.

“Mallory,” I called, the silence creating a wave of anger.

I tossed the covers aside, planting my feet on the floor. While the nausea remained, I tore through the bedroom then the rest of the house. There was no sign of her. No note. Nothing. I moved to the front door, throwing it open. Her rental Jeep was gone.

Then I burst out laughing. No one had ever been able to get to me, at least not in the way she’d managed to do. I pounded my fist on the door several times before slamming it shut, rage tearing through me. I took several deep breaths, the sound of her laughter still managing to filter into my ears.

I’d been so fucking stupid, careless to allow her to get inside of me. What the hell had I been thinking? As I fisted my hand, the rage became blinding, anguish tearing through me.

If the woman had been used as a plant, then unfortunately, she’d face a fate that she wouldn’t recover from.

The darkness inside huddled just under the surface, adding to the roar of desire that had swept me away in the first place. If



she truly thought she could get away from me, she'd soon learn she was dead wrong.

As I moved back inside, I tried to figure out what had spooked her. There had to be something. What we'd shared wasn't expected to turn into a full-blown romance, but this wasn't behavior I would have expected from her.

No. No. This had all been a damn game. Nothing more. Snarling, I pounded my fist into the wall with enough fury, I drove a dent into the wallboard. The bitch had played me for a fool. I took long strides into the kitchen, raking my hand across the counter, sending the remainder of last night's dishes to the floor.

Blazer issued a single growl, remaining in the doorway. When he started to whine, I reeled in my horrible rage, gasping for air as I leaned over the counter. Thirty seconds ticked by.

A full minute.

I took another deep breath, closing my eyes for a few seconds. Then I turned my attention to my furry creature. How could he be the only one who could bring me down from the destructive side of me that left me cold and devoid of emotions for days? I had to think clearly, rationally.

“What do you think, boy? Did she tell you what was going through her mind?”

He whined, his tail swishing back and forth.

“Yeah, I know. Women.” I headed for the kitchen, easily able to confirm that I'd been drugged. She'd either found or had sleeping pills with her. I grabbed the bottle, staring at it as I tried to think about our last conversation.

She'd seemed distant after spending time together in the shower. Then it came to me. She'd overheard my conversation with Ryan. I was certain of it. Was it the fact my words had confirmed what I'd told her more than once, that I was a bad man?

Or was something else going on altogether?

I found my phone untouched, at least as far as I could tell. The internet seemed to be working fine. What had she told me she'd been on the cover of? Fuck. As if I knew fashion magazines. *Vogue*. That was it. I navigated to Safari, but it took a few minutes to pull up the latest edition online.

“Mallory Montgomery makes a splash in Versace.” I said the words out loud, a familiar feeling of betrayal gripping my throat.

Montgomery.

The beautiful woman who'd suddenly appeared in the same location I'd chosen.

Mallory, the supposed heart of gold girl who'd captivated my every desire.

A stunning woman who could be playing a part in the continued destruction of my family.

Her sudden appearance couldn't be a coincidence. Whether she'd been used or had volunteered to play her part in a ruthless game of seduction no longer mattered. My instinct told me that the ruse being played was only another step in a merciless power exchange my father had walked into with blinders on.

Now to find the proof.

I moved away from the page, searching for Grayson Montgomery, the head of the Montreal crime syndicate. It didn't take long to find pictures, including one with his daughter.

All I could do was smile. How had she found me and what had been the original intent, murder? Hmm...

The reason Mallory had been forced into my life was something that would remain furrowing in the back of my mind.

Whether my father accepted reality or not no longer mattered to me. He'd fallen prey to a vicious competition where only the strongest could survive.

I closed my eyes, doing what I could to shove my lurid thoughts aside. If the girl wanted to play with fire then so be it.

The Bratva might be breathing down our necks, but it was the Canadians who were controlling the reins.

Soon, they would learn what it meant to cross a devil.

\* \* \*

*Mallory*

“Did you fucking breathe a word of where I was staying?” I demanded, trying everything in my power to keep control of my emotions. I was shaking all over, struggling to get enough air into my lungs. How had I managed to pretend for an entire day? Oh, my God. This was crazy.

No, meeting him had been no accident.

Brogan Callahan. I’d been so stupid.

“I don’t know what—” Jillian started.

“You exactly what I mean,” I snapped, interrupting her blatant lie. I’d thought I could trust her of all people, but her treacherous behavior could cost me everything.

Including my life.

What had really been going on with Brogan? Had he thought he’d wine and dine me then find out information about my father and his business? Had the Irish thug really believed I was that freaking naïve? Evidently so. And in truth, he’d given the best performance of any asshole male attempting to use sex to gain power I’d ever heard about.

And I’d fallen prey to his bullshit.

My fingers were firmly grasped around the steering wheel, the roads still snow-covered and dangerous, but the man I’d drugged and left behind was even more so. I had to get away, to think. To plan. No, I had to find a way to hide where he wouldn’t find me.

Just like he'd warned me.

Just like he'd threatened me.

“Brogan Callahan just so happened to rent the cabin closest to the one owned by your parents? I told you that my father made a deal with that fucking family, trying to force me into marrying that... horrible... disgusting man so my father would keep all his fucking glorious power!” *That gorgeous, sexy, rough, and amazing man who'd given me multiple orgasms.* Hissing, I shoved aside the ridiculous inner voice, trying to focus on the road while my rage threatened to derail everything I'd worked for.

“Whoa. I'd never do something like that and you're wrong about—”

“Wrong? I've never been so right in my goddamn life.” Laughing, I raked my hands through my hair, longing to rip out several strands simply because he'd run his fingers through them, breathing into my hair, telling me how beautiful I was. Bullshit. He'd been lying and using me the entire time. “Oh, that man had almost had me. He'd almost made me want to give in to my desires, accepting that he was my master. Oh, fuck, no.”

“You need to listen to me,” she barked, her tone full of exasperation.

Oh, so what? I was full of anger and hurt. And shame. How could I have been so stupid? “Why in` God's name would I listen to you now? Do you really think I'm stupid enough to trust you after you betrayed me?”

“The reason?” Jillian snapped. “Is because I'm your friend and would never hurt you that way. Plus, some shit happened that you need to be made aware of.”

“Oh, yeah? Like what? What could give you the right to do this to me?” I gasped for air, almost driving off the road from the way my fury made it difficult to focus.

She didn't say anything for a full minute and I was even more pissed.

“What? *What?*”

“Goddamn you,” she struggled to say. “I tried to call you, but you didn’t answer the damn phone.”

I’d noticed she’d made three calls, but she hadn’t left a message. “That’s because there was a freaking snowstorm. Now, what do you need to say to me? What could you say that would possibly matter at this point?”

“You weren’t being groomed to marry Brogan Callahan. If what the tabloids have stated hold any truth, you were supposed to marry Liam Callahan, the firstborn son of James Callahan, the brutal leader of the Irish mob out of Chicago. But Liam is dead, murdered inside a popular restaurant.”

I was ready to continue launching into her when the words registered. Then I was filled with total confusion. “I don’t understand.”

“Well, if you’d shut up long enough, I would have already told you what has been speculated.”

Exhaling, I slowed down, my heart racing. The moment I’d overheard Brogan’s conversation, the light switch had gone off. He’d lied to me. He’d used me.

And I’d not only allowed but encouraged him to do so.

Thank God, I hadn’t made any plans with him or told him anything else about my life. I chewed on my bottom lip, more terrified than I’d ever been in my life. Why would Brogan hunt me down? Was it possible the entire situation was a coincidence? Somehow, I couldn’t buy it. Not in a million years could we end up on the same mountain. Nope. There was no such thing as coincidences in the world where the mafia reigned supreme.

“Fine. Tell me.”

Jillian cursed under her breath. “This is all just hearsay, but it seems that there is a power struggle with the Bratva out of Chicago. They’ve not only been trying to take over the city but have been stretching into Canada over the last year. Your father made this deal in order to try and garner more power. Think about it. With a marriage between two powerful families, they’d become unstoppable and a force capable of

crushing the Bratva. That the second son appeared in your life isn't because of anything I did. I didn't tell a single soul you were using the cabin. Not one."

Her words rang true but I still couldn't process the possibility karma had yanked me straight into hell. "Fine. I believe you."

She laughed. "No, you don't. But if you can't trust me then that says something about our friendship."

I couldn't blame her for being bitter. I couldn't blame anyone but myself for being so stupid.

"I don't know what to do," I admitted, no longer recognizing my voice.

"I don't know your world at all, Mallory, but what I do know is that without this connection, your father's entire regime could be destroyed. I assure you that my father would love to get his hands on him. That would make my dad's career."

If Jillian's father had told her anything, then she was right given his position within the FBI. Fuck. What the hell was I supposed to do now? "I'm sorry, Jillian, but I can't and won't help my father by marrying someone I don't care about."

That was a blatant lie. I'd not only fallen hard for the hard-edged man who'd awakened my senses. I was in love with him, which was insane.

"Honey. You need to talk to your father. He's called me six times, demanding I tell him where you are. I swear to God, I never said anything, but even my dad knows I'm lying. I'm not supposed to know this, but there's an ongoing criminal investigation into the Callahan family. I don't know anything that will be helpful, but I think they're working with the DEA as well."

The DEA, who had some jurisdiction in Canada if they found evidence of a crime.

And my father was not only into the construction business, he'd also been selling arms for years. That was the dirty little secret he didn't want his wife and child to learn.

“What are you going to do?” she asked after I’d remained quiet.

I thought about her question and in my mind, there was only one thing I could do. “I’m going to disappear.”

But even as I’d said the words, my gut was telling me that the connection I’d shared with Brogan could never be broken.

He would hunt me as he’d promised.

And when he found me, he would never let me go.

## CHAPTER 10



*“Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”*

*—Martin Luther King, Jr.*

*Brogan*

Hate was a luxury that I couldn't afford, but one I coveted. At least at this moment. As I stood outside the church, I felt nothing. There was a time I'd wanted to do my penance for my bad deeds. But that had been a long time ago when I'd been under my mother's influence. As soon as I'd turned ten, my father had taken a stronger hold in raising me, insisting that I spend several hours every week learning the business. That had come at with an ugly price.

I'd seen more bloodshed and murders by the time I was fourteen than most people serving in the military ever would. That had hardened me, making a damn good foot soldier.

It was only in college that I'd purposely turned my life away from the twisted ministry taught by my father. He'd believed the organization would fine tune my education and it had, only not in his preferred method.

I found it interesting that I was thinking about my college years at this moment. However, in my mind, the tutelage the Brotherhood had provided had turned the sadistic boy into a



cold-blooded killer, but even more so, a man without a conscience. At the time, three boys who believed they were men had run two universities much like any other crime syndicate. We were gods and kings, adored by women of all ages, feared by men much older than us.

Our control and manipulation of the system as well as powerful men and women had proven useful as well as lucrative. The same brutal, sadistic behavior had also turned us into monsters hiding beneath expensive clothes, fancy sports cars, and trust funds.

Maybe the reason I remained standing on the sidewalk, staring up at the East Tower, was because of the message Phoenix had left on my phone, two others of the Brotherhood as well. We would never be close friends, but as allies, the six of us were a formidable force. Now we had one addition to our group. I shook my head thinking about it. Hopefully, we'd never start a war with each other.

We'd brought our strengths and abilities together on several occasions and we would do so again if necessary. Given my uncle had held court in a portion of Philadelphia, Phoenix should also be able to provide me with necessary information to fill in the pieces. Plus, he'd had experience with the Montgomery organization. At least so he'd boasted.

"What are we doing here?" Ryan asked.

"Gaining additional information," I told him.

"He's not dirty, at least from what Calen told me."

What little information that had been gleaned regarding the good father in less than a day had indicated no direct connection with Korski, but I refused to rule it out.

"I'm not convinced. The man could provide a wealth of details."

He snorted as he gazed up at the massive carved stone features. "A priest?"

"Your lack of faith is apparent. This is one of the most powerful locations in the city and beyond." He trailed behind me as I headed inside. I'd been courteous enough to make an

appointment, which he'd accepted without hesitation given he'd just performed last rites at my brother's funeral.

As we walked through the hallowed halls, the few good memories caught me off guard. I hadn't been to church in years, only once after my return from medical school. Once I'd become a psychiatrist, I'd treated the patients confessing their sins to me as if I were doing so myself.

The door to Father O'Brien's office was open and when I walked inside, I buttoned my jacket. While he knew what I was, what little respect I had forbid me from shoving a weapon under his nose unless absolutely necessary.

His smile was genuine until he noticed Ryan standing only a foot behind me. "This is a private meeting, son."

I took a deep breath before shifting my gaze over my shoulder, nodding at my lieutenant. Ryan gave the father a harsh look before leaving, closing the door behind him.

Father O'Brien walked toward me, giving me the ceremonial kiss on both cheeks. Then he offered me a chair before moving to the other side of his desk. "I'm very sorry about your brother, Brogan. He was a generous man to the church."

I tried not to laugh. It was his way of saying that my brother had added to the coffers in order to secure a possible place in heaven. Liam and I had often talked about it. His reasoning for giving to the church was entirely different. It was a proven method of keeping someone under a proverbial thumb without using extortion, blackmail, or threats. My brother had been very good at garnering information when needed, which is why I had my doubts Father O'Brien would dare seek our wrath intentionally. However, I also knew that Ivan was a devout Catholic himself, which meant he had likely spent some time at the church or at least in structured conversations.

While I had no intention of staying for long, I accepted his gesture, leaning back against the seat.

"Yes, he was an amazing man."

"We missed you at the funeral. I hope the reason for your absence was unintentional."

The fact he was judging me wasn't unusual, but it angered me more today than usual.

"A snowstorm of great magnitude."

"Ah," he said, nodding several times. "I told your father as much. I knew how close your relationship with your brother was."

"You are correct," I said as I sat up in my seat, unbuttoning my jacket before resting my elbows on my knees, steepling my fingers. As I knew would happen, his gaze fell to the weapon I was carrying. Now I knew for certain there would be no salvation in my future, but at this point I didn't much care. The truth was far more important. "Which is why I need your help."

He seemed surprised at my soft-sided approach. If my suspicions were correct, then whatever stranglehold Ivan might have on him could partially be repaid with providing the information I was about to offer up. I needed for Ivan to show his hand.

"Of course. What can I do for you?"

"I'm curious as to your intentions with your communications with Ivan Korski." All I wanted was for him to look me in the eye. Then I'd know whether or not he had been lured into supplying information about our family, including providing the location of the lunch we'd had for Liam.

While the man was a master of manipulating his emotions, there was a split second, the tiniest tremor on the corner of his mouth.

"I don't think I like either your tone or your accusations, son. You've known me your entire life," he said.

"Yes, which is why this is difficult." No, it wasn't in the least, but out of respect to my mother if nothing else, I would keep this as civil as possible.

"Why would you think something so..."

Exhaling, I controlled my temper, opening my jacket by another few inches. He might as well know what he could be

facing. “I find it curious that you were completely uninjured at the restaurant given you were in the direct line of fire.”

His face turned red, stone cold. “I think it’s time you leave, Brogan. I don’t appreciate your tone of voice or your threat. It’s something I will not tolerate in the house of God.”

“House of God. Yes, it would be blasphemous to threaten you here, which is why I’m not doing that. I’m simply attempting to discover the reason my brother was an easy target.”

“And how would I have known? Your father called me that morning to invite me.”

“So I’ve heard, but my mother knew about the lunch long before and since you two have become very close, I’m certain she was only too happy to let you know about the good news.” I stood, slowly leaning over his desk. “Someone planned and executed an assassination, Father O’Brien, but they had help. I will find the identity of the person responsible and when I do, they will come to terms with how I handle providing penance.”

I moved away from his desk, but not before noticing how much he’d paled. When I stopped short, I was certain I heard him sucking in his breath.

“And I assure you, Father. I don’t make threats. I make promises.”

\* \* \*

The Brotherhood, kings in a dangerous game of power, ruthless predators who would stop at nothing to get whatever we wanted. As I strode into the restaurant Phoenix had chosen for the meeting, I had a flashback of the day Liam was killed. The location was twenty miles away, yet just returning to the city was enough to bring the anguish and rage to the forefront where it would stay until I learned the truth.

At least this would allow me to provide my thanks to Phoenix for having my back during the shooting.

The restaurant itself had several floors, the private room on the top floor already reserved. It was our quarterly meeting, the first since allowing another member into our organization. Now we were heavy with seven. However, the alliance had proven to be helpful on enough occasions that I would ask for their assistance in obtaining information.

As I entered the room, the entire group stopped talking. I was usually the one who stoked conversations, joking about whatever was going on in the world or my life. Today, I had no such desire.

“Gentlemen,” I said as I moved closer, acknowledging each one of them with a respectful nod. In my mind, all seven of us being in the same room was just another mistake, one that the Bratva could use to gain control of more than just Chicago. If something were to happen to all seven of us at the same time, there would be a collective explosion of violence across the country.

Phoenix approached first, holding out his hand. “I tried calling you after what happened.”

“Yeah, well. At first, I wasn’t taking any calls. Then I was forced to disappear, landing in the middle of an internet outage.”

“Alone?” Phoenix asked.

I shook my head. “Well, it would seem a game is being played with my family and I don’t like it.”

“What does that mean?”

As I glanced at him, I wasn’t certain I wanted to air my dirty laundry. The fact I’d been duped by a five-foot eleven-inch raven-haired beauty indicated a weakness. “Let’s just say I had a vixen who came out of the blue who just happened to be betrothed to my brother.”

“Ouch,” at least two of them said.

“He needs a drink,” Constantine chortled, shaking his head.

Yeah, I did.

All six men glanced at each other back and forth. I didn't need to tell them the odds of that happening were slimmer than winning a Powerball lottery. As I looked from one to the other, I realized how disconcerting it was seeing Dante and Diego Santos in the same room together. Identical twins, they now ruled Los Angeles and the entire West Coast together, although most of their operations were now legitimate. The fact they'd been forced apart as children, their greedy bastard father to blame had nearly destroyed both of them.

"Understandable," Phoenix said.

"Forced?" Constantine asked. The Thorne family had full control of New York and the surrounding areas, including a small portion of Eastern Canada. I hoped he would be able to provide information about the Montgomery family.

I'd yet to spend time searching into Mallory's life, but I'd made the decision that she would be mine. Period. I'd hunt her down if necessary, but I had no intentions of letting her go, especially to be wed off to my cousin. That wasn't going to happen. Just thinking about it created a need for violence.

"My father's way of trying to keep me under control." My answer was terse, which wasn't like me at least around the group. However, my patience was already wearing thin because of my meeting with Father O'Brien.

"What the hell is going on?" Maxim Nikitin asked. The Russian rubbed everyone the wrong way, but he knew better than most what the Bratva were capable of.

"It would seem the Bratva desire control of Chicago. That isn't going to be allowed."

"That's who's responsible for killing your brother?" Gabriel asked.

"That's my belief, but my father has other ideas." I was beginning to form a scenario in my head that was much bigger. As soon as the waitress brought me a glass of scotch, I was able to breathe more easily. Although the drink wouldn't help tremendously. The game that was being played was fierce,

uncontrollable, and I was beginning to feel like the real war was within the walls of my father's estate.

The afternoon meeting would either confirm or deny my suspicions.

I rolled the glass across my forehead, the ache for Mallory remaining. It had been the second constant in a few days, finally edging out angry grief. The combination was becoming explosive.

"You need to take a break," Constantine offered.

All I could do was laugh. "A break? I was stranded in a snowstorm with what appears to be the woman my brother was supposed to marry." I knew my statement would draw severe looks from the men in the room.

"That can't be a coincidence," Phoenix growled under his breath.

"No, it can't." I walked toward the window, staring out at the Chicago horizon. I'd always loved the city, taking great pleasure in being a significant part of the pulse that energized the people. Now it felt like a prison instead.

"Are you certain it was Bratva who had a hand in killing your brother?" Maxim's question was laced with animosity, not because he had a particular love of any Bratva organization, even if he was currently running his uncle's empire in Miami.

"I'm not certain of anything, but they have the most to gain."

"They were indiscriminate, likely hired assassins. They could be anybody." Phoenix's statement seemed to come from a place of knowing.

I turned around, giving him a hard look. "Why?"

"I tracked one down for you." Phoenix had a grin on his face. "Not Russian."

"How the hell do you know that?" Dante asked.

He swung his look toward the man. "I didn't get much out of him, but when he finally begged for his life, he had a decidedly Italian accent."

I bristled, shaking my head. “Is he alive?”

“Not any longer. I saved him for a couple days, but he succumbed to his... injuries.” Phoenix took a sip of his drink, amusement riding his face.

“Italian? Cosa Nostra?” Diego threw his gaze in Gabriel’s direction.

He took a deep breath. “We tend to use Russians for outside kills, but that doesn’t mean the assassins didn’t come directly from Sicily. They have been poking the bear in their attempt to gain more territory for years.”

“Too farfetched,” I told him, although I wasn’t certain that was the case. “What about the Canadians?”

Gabriel nodded first. “They hate the Bratva, but the Cosa Nostra has a non-formal alliance with two of the Canadian organizations, which has provided some difficulties for several of my businesses.”

“Grayson Montgomery?” As soon as I asked the question, I noticed a look passed between Constantine and Gabriel.

Constantine lifted his glass. “If what you said is true, I daresay Montgomery is playing you, using his daughter to do so.”

“But she’s a model,” I retorted, suddenly self-absorbed in trying to remember what few conversations we’d had.

“She is also the single bargaining chip that Grayson has,” Constantine reminded me.

I thought about what he was saying. Technically, she was the heir to the Montgomery Empire, making her even more valuable as an alliance or a bargaining chip. It was time to turn the tables.

“And she’s very beautiful,” Phoenix teased, eyeing me carefully.

“That’s beside the point. It would appear I need to track her down and make her mine.” At least I could finally grin.

“Don’t allow Grayson to fool you. He pretends to be a decent, respectable businessman, but he’s a true viper,” Gabriel



cautioned.

I swirled the drink in my glass. Now it was beginning to make sense. I shifted my attention to Phoenix. “Tell me about Ronan Callahan.”

“A relative?” He walked closer. “I heard he was murdered in a similar manner as your brother. Could be the same people responsible. Since I remained in Chicago on business, I haven’t heard anything street-wise. My soldiers would let me know.”

“I heard he was killed.” I took another sip, contemplating my cousin’s arrival.

“You don’t think the two are related.” Diego laughed after making the statement.

“That remains to be seen at this point.” Which was the truth in its ugliest form. There was no way of knowing who was directly behind the assassination, but I continued to place my belief in Ivan.

For now.

“I’ll see what I can find out when I return to Philly,” Phoenix told me. “As far as the Montgomery girl, be careful. If she’s anything like her father, she’s a consummate liar. She always knew one day she’d be reined back into the fold.”

“That doesn’t mean she preferred the life.” I knew a part of me was trying to provide her with an excuse, but there was none that would take away her betrayal.

He cocked his head, his eyes full of fire. “You don’t really believe that line of crap, Brogan. We both know the score. She was raised a princess in one of the most powerful organizations in the world. Like every member of the Brotherhood, we pretended we could be something else, but we always knew the score. Mallory Montgomery was groomed to become a queen. What you need to ask yourself is if you want her by your side. If not? Then you know what needs to occur.”

“Yes, perhaps I do.” I fisted my hand, trying to ignore the hunger continuing to furrow deep in my system. At this point,

I'd be forced to continue considering her to be my enemy.

When I was finished with the meeting with my father, I would get on a plane and head to Montreal.

By night's end, Mallory Montgomery would be in my arms where she would stay.

Then she would become my wife, whether she wanted to or not.

## CHAPTER 11



*“I’m not crying because of you; you’re not worth it.  
I’m crying because my delusion of who you were  
was shattered by the truth of who you are.”*

*—Dr. Steve Marabeli*

*Mallory*

If Brogan’s betrayal wasn’t bad enough, the fact I’d been captured like an animal was.

I’d been taken from the Toronto airport only minutes after I’d landed, my father’s men rougher than normal. Now I remained locked in my old room at my father’s house where I’d been for the last few hours. There had been zero discussion between the soldiers, not a single word as they’d stuffed me in the back of an armored SUV, two huge burly men on either side to keep me from escaping.

I should have known better. There was too much at stake, my father determined to mold me into the perfect wife.

If my mother or father were home, I wouldn’t know it given the silence in the house. My father had several people working inside the home, but there wasn’t a peep out of a single one of them. No music. No overheard conversation.

And no one had brought me a bottle of water or anything else. I’d been forced to sit amongst my childhood dreams,

wondering how I could escape once and for all.

Where was Maria? I was certain she'd told my parents that I'd been to the house days before, which is what I'd anticipated happening. She was loyal to my father, a man who'd kept her from being deported, even sending money to her family back in Guatemala. Did she have a special place in her heart for me? I'd believed so, but she was in a tough spot. Still, I longed to have a few minutes to talk to her just to find out what was going on. I'd tried the door twice, hoping that I'd find it unlocked. I should have known better.

While I'd normally say this was unusual behavior for my father, after what he'd done to my mother on the day I'd left, nothing seemed out of the ordinary any longer. I paced the floor, unwanted memories surfacing.

*“One day you will be a queen, Mallory, a position not to be taken frivolously. You will rule a kingdom just as I always wanted.”*

My father's words had meant nothing until now. He'd planned this for years, waiting for the perfect opportunity. No wonder he'd allowed me to pursue modeling. He knew all along he could yank my chain whenever the time was right. God, I'd been so gullible growing up.

No longer.

And if Brogan Callahan thought me a fool, he would soon learn exactly how formidable I could be.

Damn it. What in the hell was I going to do? Running wasn't an option. What if I accepted the reins, only insisting I do it my way? Yes, I could rule. I could be the head of the organization. Right. That would mean killing my father, something I wasn't prepared to do.

As I stared at the collage of photographs from magazines I'd made when I was thirteen, I cringed inside. Although I'd been raised a princess, I'd always known in the back of my mind that I'd been groomed for becoming the wife someone from another mafia family. Maybe that's why I'd gravitated toward modeling, hoping I could disappear in an exotic location.

Even though I'd traveled the world, there had always been one or more of my father's men waiting in the shadows. My father had told me it was for my protection, but even then, I'd known better. He'd been keeping tabs on me. Now that I'd run, I'd never be allowed out of his sight again until I was married off.

I knew my father had a temper, but this was unexpected. How could he not understand that I would be distraught? Or maybe he didn't know that I had any clue about the arrangement he'd made.

But what would happen now that the oldest son had been killed? Was it possible someone had followed in close pursuit, sending Brogan after me? The thought was sounding more irrational although I refused to believe Brogan's appearance had been entirely coincidental. If the latter was the truth, then he purposely put his own dog in a bear trap? No, I didn't buy it. I'd seen the way the two had interacted, the love they shared.

The ache inside had only increased, my anger and hatred for the Irish rogue after hearing what he'd said on the phone playing over and over again in my mind. I'd been so shocked I hadn't known what to do. Somehow, I'd managed to pretend that everything was just fine, even though I'd been gutted inside.

Even worse, I'd been fearful of confronting him because the words he used in his conversation gave a very good indication that he was a dangerous man who had no conscience. The last time Brogan had touched me would forever remain haunting the back of my mind. The passion had felt so real, everything I'd ever dreamt of, but the reality was everything we'd shared was a lie.

He'd used me, just like he'd warned me about doing. And I'd fallen hook, line, and sinker into his suave bullshit. So much so that I'd almost considered trying to see him again. Then his treachery had been exposed. Had I been blind and stupid?

The ache would eventually leave, hate the only thing remaining. I'd made a single promise to myself that I'd never do something so out of character for me again. Not once.

God. This was getting ridiculous. I jerked up off the bed, pacing the room. Then I moved to the window, peering out at the garden I used to love. Night was already starting to fall, the shadows crossing the once beautiful arbor making it eerie in appearance. I leaned my head against the cool glass, struggling with my emotions.

When I heard the latch on the door turning, I wasn't certain what to expect, although it was likely a soldier hand delivering me to my father in his office. As my mother walked in, the look on her face was one I'd never seen before.

Her expression wasn't just showcasing her anger. There was more. Maybe resignation or fear. I wasn't certain but I immediately had butterflies in my stomach. She stood just inside the doorway, eyeing me carefully before looking away. "I'm assuming you enjoyed your time away."

"I felt I had no other choice."

She took a few seconds, her chest rising and falling erratically.

"The only choice you had was to follow your father's wishes, but you didn't stay long enough to find out what those were. You overheard a portion of the conversation and that's all." Her harsh words were followed by a deep breath.

"I heard enough to know I didn't want any part of it. I will not be married off to someone I don't know."

As she walked closer, her wry smile troubled me. "Things have changed, Mallory. Perhaps wherever you went to hide, shirking your duties, you didn't have the opportunity to see the news."

Shirking my duties? I bit my tongue, doing what I could not to lash out. Her eyes were haunted, more pain in them than I'd ever noticed before.

"I know Liam Callahan is dead, supposedly murdered by the Russians. But even if he wasn't, I wouldn't agree to marry him. I'm not a little girl that you can force into doing anything." As I started to walk around her, I was shocked once again by the force she used in jerking me backward, her hold painful. Now her lovely eyes were wild with emotion.

“You will do exactly as you’re told. Period. Have you forgotten everything I told you growing up?”

“Why don’t you remind me, Mother?” I stood my ground, refusing to give in. Why was she doing this to me? I studied her face, noticing the skin beneath her eye appeared swollen. Anger swelled deep in my system.

“You are never to question the decisions your father makes. Nor are you allowed to complain. Your father is right. You were pampered far too much growing up.”

As she held me, I realized the swelling under her eye was discolored. Jesus. She’d tried to cover up an ugly bruise with makeup. I was sickened, appalled that my father would do something so horrible. I jerked my arm from her hold, backing away by several feet. “Do you want me to endure the same life you had to endure? My God. You disgust me. Look at you. You have a bruise under your eye, and you stand here trying to make me believe that I have some requirement to marry a monster. That’s not going to happen. I don’t care how far I need to run in order to get away, I will. Trust me.” I was shaking from the level of anger, horrified that everything had come to this.

Another shocking moment occurred as my mother crossed the room, slapping me with enough force I was knocked backward. Gasping, pain tore through me, stars floating in front of my eyes. I was sick to my stomach, tears forming in my eyes as I placed my hand over my cheek.

“How dare you! How dare you. You have no idea about my life or what I share with your father. You’ve been oh-so protected all these years, given everything you’ve ever wanted, turning into a spoiled brat. Well, you will do what is necessary for the family. I don’t care how it happens, it will.” I kept the same glare she did, but the ache continued to grow inside. She was my mother. Maybe I needed to protect her.

I was sick to my stomach, the sting remaining but ache came from the realization that I’d been living a lie. I took a deep breath, looking away. “Then who am I supposed to marry now that Liam Callahan is dead?” If it was Brogan, then at least I

could tolerate the situation. I couldn't love him, not after he lied to me. And one day, I would rule. Yes, that's exactly what was going to happen.

She huffed, her entire body shaking from anger and adrenaline exactly as mine was doing. We were so much alike, I could almost read her mind, which was why none of this made any sense. "That remains to be seen but I assure you that your father will secure a more suitable man who will be able to keep you in line."

"Keep me in line? Is that what you really want for me, Mother? Really?"

There were so many emotions crossing her face that I almost felt sorry for her. Almost.

"It's necessary if we're to keep our lives the same."

Her shout was telling. She'd been threatened, but not just by my father. "You're afraid."

Every breath she took was rattled. "I'm a realist. I know how things work."

"And I'm not you." The tension between us was heartbreaking.

All the anger seemed to fade away from her, her lower lip quivering as she walked with her head down, easing onto the edge of the bed. "I want you to be happy, Mallory. That's all I've ever wanted."

"I'm not going to be happy being forced into marriage with anyone. I don't care how handsome or powerful they are, arranged marriages never work out well and you know it. You've heard enough stories."

She nodded then took a deep breath. "Yes, I know that better than most."

"What are you saying?" I cocked my head, walking closer.

"I didn't like your father from the first moment I met him. He was handsome, but I knew inside there was something smoldering that would eventually become an issue." She



pressed her fingers against her lips, a slight smile crossing her face.

I wanted to say something, anything but I sat down on the bed; the new surprise was just as troubling as the wreck that had become my life. “Do you love him now?”

“Mostly.”

Mostly. That was the kind of answer that was similar to kind of pregnant. I cringed inside, wondering what horrors my mother had gone through behind closed doors. I’d lived in a fantasy world, surrounded by a white canopy bed and all the toys money could buy. I’d been lured into believing we were one happy little family when the truth was far from it.

Thank God my blinders were completely off. “I’m sorry, Mother. I had no idea.”

“You weren’t supposed to. We wanted to try and make your life as normal as possible. Maybe I wanted to believe that you wouldn’t have to face what I did, but this is the life that my father sold me into, and I allowed myself to think the best.”

“So you’ve known this was a possibility all along?”

“Honestly?” she asked as she tipped her head in my direction. “I thought your father wouldn’t push the issue. Then I overheard his conversation with James much like you overheard ours and I was livid.”

“Is that when he started hitting you?”

She pressed her fingers against the bruise, wincing. “It’s happened before, but not very often.”

My mother was a terrible liar, the pain in her eyes showcasing years of abuse. How had I not known? A lump had formed in my throat, one so large I could barely breathe. “I don’t know what to say other than I’m sorry.”

When she took my hand into hers, tears formed in my eyes. “I’m the one who should be sorry. I promised myself that you’d never be exposed to the ugliness of our life, but I should have known better.”

“I don’t think I can be a good daughter, Mama. I want more for my life.”

“That’s exactly what I want for you as well.” Even now, she was afraid of what my father would do.

“Do you know if I’m supposed to marry Brogan Callahan now that Liam is dead?”

When she lifted her hand, sliding a strand of hair behind my ear like she’d done so many times when I was younger, I could tell the answer was no.

“Your father thinks that the alliance won’t be strong enough any longer. Brogan isn’t fit to lead his family’s empire. He wants to develop a long-lasting relationship, one that will allow growth.”

Growth. My father was greedy. That was the truth behind the marriage. “So who?”

“I don’t know this for certain, but there’s talk of Ivan Korski.”

I allowed my mind to wrap around the information, raw fear pushing into every dark crevice. “The Russian from Chicago, the one who had Liam killed?” I smelled an entirely different level of betrayal. What had my father gotten mixed up in?

She nodded, tears slipping past her lashes. “He’s a horrible man and I just can’t allow that to happen to you.”

“I doubt there’s anything you can do. He’s taken my passport, my credit cards. Everything.”

“I’m well aware.” She moved even closer, darting a look at the door. “You need to listen to me.”

“O-kay.”

“I made a decision to consider trying to help you get away.” She kept her voice so low I had to strain to hear her.

“Get away? From here?”

“Yes.”

My mother was serious. “Wait a minute. What are you suggesting?”

“You’d need to disappear, even changing your name. You could never return home. Do you understand what I’m saying?” As she looked me in the eyes, I held my breath and nodded.

To think of never being able to see my mother again or my friends was a blow I wasn’t certain I was prepared to handle. I looked away, trying to play the scenario in my mind. Was there really no other choice? “What about you? What will happen if I disappear for good?”

“Don’t let that concern you. Your safety and happiness are far more important.”

“Mama. He’ll hurt you.”

“Not so badly I won’t be able to recover. Besides, if you don’t tell me where you’re going then he’ll never be able to get it out of me where you’ve gone.”

My mother believed my own father would torture her in order to find me. I was appalled, so sick inside that I almost retched. “I can’t leave you. Come with me.”

“You know I can’t. Your father would move heaven and earth and you need time to get your life together.”

I closed my eyes, uncertain of the right thing. “If I don’t run away, how soon will I be married off?”

“Soon. A few weeks maybe, but you don’t want to be married to Ivan. He is a brutal man.”

“I’ve heard.”

“I don’t think you have. He had his recent girlfriend killed then dismembered. He thought she’d been cheating on him.”

“Why isn’t he in prison?”

“Because he has very good friends in high places, including the police chief. He’ll never spend a day in prison no matter how many acts of violence he’s responsible for.”

“How do you know all this?” I asked, my stomach in knots.

Her smile was wry. “I have certain connections of my own that your father doesn’t know about. I was willing to go along with

his decision regarding Liam because he was different, but I can't accept this. Your father almost had me brainwashed but seeing your face reminded me of how much I love you."

"I just can't leave you."

She cupped my face, trying her best to smile. "Please, daughter. Allow me to live vicariously through the happiness you achieve. One day you'll fall in love and have an amazing family. Perhaps by then it will be safe for you to contact me."

I still had no idea what to say. "I love you, Mama, but this worries me."

"Don't. I love you. You'll need to act like you're going along with your father's decision, at least to a point. Be angry. Be sad. Show your father how upset you are. Then his guard will fall. By then I'll have some connections ready to get you out of town. You'll need to take it from there."

As I looked into her eyes, I knew I had no other choice unless I wanted to accept a brutal life that would likely end with me dead, my body never found. "Okay. But I will find a way to get you out. I promise you."

Her smile waned but her eyes were sparkling. "Just live your life, baby girl."

After kissing me on the forehead, she walked out, closing the door behind her.

And I feared that once I left this house, I'd never see her again.

## CHAPTER 12



*B*rogan

The meeting with my father had been called before I'd returned, Ryan providing the details. It was possible that I hadn't been invited, but that wasn't acceptable. My lieutenant had already arrived ahead of me, playing the good little soldier to my father while I'd visited with Phoenix and the other members of the Brotherhood. Today I would provide my terms of taking over the family business.

Whether or not my father appreciated my methods of handling business I couldn't care less about. Still, right now I needed to keep my patience in check.

After exiting my vehicle, I gazed back at the trunk, unable to keep a grin from my face. Even though he was gagged, he refused to stop moaning. I patted the hood, leaning closer. "Don't worry. You'll be released soon enough."

My father might still be in charge of the Callahan Empire for now, but he'd lost his once formidable skills of observation.

He'd been betrayed by a man he'd thought he had under his thumb. My father had trained both Liam and me well. Once you were successful in blackmailing someone into doing your bidding, you never let down your guard, which is what my father had done. The mark would always attempt to find a way out of the cage they'd been shoved into.

It was very true in the case of the man who'd secretly shifted his loyalty to Korski. While my limited time spent interrogating him had garnered minimal information, it was enough to prove that my father had kept his blinders on too long.

If I had to place an educated guess, I'd say that Father O'Brien had merely been another cog in the wheel of a well-intentioned plan. I'd deal with the priest later. First things first. If my instinct was right, and it usually was, Ryan had been right. My father had already switched his loyalties, tossing aside his initial plans to form an alliance with the Canadians. While I was angry, fuming inside, attempting to challenge his decision at this point would do no good.

Other than to drive a larger wedge between us.

I hadn't realized how much Liam's death would change him, but I knew for certain that his brother's assassination had forced him to think about his own mortality. It was a natural thing but served no good purpose in our caustic world of power.

As I entered my father's house, I wasn't surprised at the level of silence within the dwelling. While my mother usually enjoyed her music, either listening to classical or metal, her tastes varied, the quiet showcased the continued sadness consuming her.

When she appeared from the shadows, I was surprised, even more so by the look in her eyes, both so haunted as if she'd never be able to get over my brother's death.

As she approached, her eyes bore into mine.

Then she slapped me across the face.

The sting was harsh, and I kept my head to the side, controlling my breathing. Her behavior was unusual, but given the fact she'd been on sedatives, I couldn't be angry with her.

"How dare you! How dare you accuse Father O'Brien of something so... so heinous. He's been the only person to comfort me for years. Years! Do you know what it's like to live in a house of cards, knowing at some point they'll all

come tumbling down? Do you know how hard it's been to worry about my children every. Single. Day? Every day," she hissed, close to hysteria.

I shifted my gaze, allowing her to express her anger. The fire in her eyes had returned, but there was also so much hatred.

"Do you have any clue how many times I thought I'd lost one of you? Do you know how many tears I've shed over the years because of the business your father is in?"

I had no idea what to say to her that would offer any comfort. "I'm sorry, Mother, but I had to learn the truth."

"The truth? I can tell you the truth. Your brother had done nothing but act reckless for the past few months. He was certain it wasn't going to be a bullet that killed him but the cancer. And it almost did. Then he was saved by the grace of God, allowed to go on living his life and he threw it away. He was reckless in his behavior, acting as if he would live forever. Fast cars. A different woman every night. He was just like your father. Now, you're doing the same thing and I don't want to lose you! I can't. I won't."

When she beat her fists against my chest, anger at my father and the way we'd lived rushed to the surface. I finally grabbed her slender wrists, pulling her against me. "I'm not going to die, Mother. I promise you."

She sobbed in my arms for a few seconds then tore herself away, shaking her head several times. "Don't you dare attempt to promise something you have no control over. I've come to accept that my family is forever torn apart by power and greed. And I can't take it any longer."

As she jerked out of my arms, racing toward the stairs, I knew I should go after her, but what could I say? How could I comfort her on any level when her son had been shoved into the hard, cold ground?

Anger remained a sharp dagger, digging into my gut, but within seconds there was a strange, startling peace. I took a deep breath, holding it until she'd disappeared. Then I headed

for my father's office, not bothering to knock before I threw open the door.

While my father didn't seem surprised at my entrance, my cousin did. Sean was a large man, a hulking mass who I'd heard used his muscles more than his brain. When he grinned, I gave him a harsh glare.

"Interesting that you show up now," my father said tersely.

I walked closer, a smirk on my face. "I'm sorry for the delay, Pops. A snowstorm kept me from getting back when I'd originally intended. I also had other business to handle."

Sean had the nerve to laugh. In his hand was one of my father's crystal tumblers. If I had to guess, I'd say Pops had broken out the hundred-year-old aged scotch he kept for celebrations. His brother and son had been murdered and he felt this was appropriate. I walked to the bar myself, selecting the same bottle and pouring a hefty amount. "I'm sorry about your father, Sean."

"The man was a pig," he said without hesitation. "It's better he's gone."

When my father didn't admonish him, I took a deep breath. "Well, blood is thicker than water. Yes?" Just looking over my shoulder, I could see how unnerved he was that I'd arrived. Perhaps I'd interrupted a plan in motion.

"Not necessarily." His eyes remained unblinking as if calling my bluff.

"Something I'll keep in mind." I turned my attention to my father, remaining nonchalant. "What is happening with the Montgomerys? As per your request, we should move forward with the wedding." The look the two men shared confirmed the suspicions that Ryan had mentioned.

"Your brother is barely in the ground!" Pops snapped.

"Liam would want to make certain we were moving forward." I swirled my drink, lifting my glass in a silent toast to my brother. Only when Pops grumbled under his breath did I take a sip, holding the warm liquid in my mouth.



“It would seem that Grayson is having second thoughts on the agreement. So much so that he has no intentions of allowing his daughter to marry into this family. He’s made other... connections.” My father eyed me as the news settled in.

I’d learned a long time ago never to show emotion, especially when cornered by an enemy or disturbing information. This was one of those times. My thoughts drifted briefly to Mallory, still certain the entire situation had been either her or her father’s attempt at railroading us. As I turned my attention toward Sean, he seemed amused by the entirety of the situation. Korski had moved fast, securing his place in a war that we’d attempted to avoid for too long.

I hated being right all the time.

“Interesting, Dad. It would seem you’ve lost your touch. Who is the unlucky new partner?”

“Ivan Korski.” My father sighed after issuing the proclamation. “The bastard cozied up to the fucking Russian.”

“So it would seem. And the reason Montgomery bailed?” I asked casually.

“He doesn’t need to have a reason, Brogan. Until the contract is signed, which it wasn’t when Liam was killed, the man is free to sell his daughter off any way he pleases.”

His words disgusted me, more so than they would have only days before. “Any idea of what his latest plans are?”

My father took a gulp of his drink before addressing me. “If what the men heard on the street is true, then the two of them are planning to expand their newly established empire from one side of the country to another.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Korski and Montgomery? They couldn’t put two and two together between them.” I laughed, sensing my father wanted me to be shocked. “However, as I mentioned before. It’s time to deal with Korski once and for all.”

He gave me a hard look. “Which is why I brought in your cousin. He is used to dealing with the Russians in Philadelphia. Since he has skin in the game given it’s our

belief Korski had his father killed as well, it's vital that we become a family unit."

"We need to sweep the streets just like you mentioned." My words were a perfunctory statement, something my father would expect.

"I'm not certain that's going to help at this point." The powerful man was still distraught, in my mind unable to make decent decisions.

"Perhaps not. I brought you a present today, Father." I couldn't help but smile. Then I nodded to Ryan, tossing him my car keys.

Ryan didn't hesitate, his loyalty firmly shifting to my method of leadership. He also knew better than to cross me.

"What the hell does that mean?" my father barked, glaring at me with his usual level of disappointment.

Sean studied the both of us, remaining silent, but I sensed he was eager, even happy to see we were close to being at each other's throats.

"While you were busy cultivating an unholy deal," I said, taking my time, enjoying a sip of scotch, "you were betrayed by the one person you believed you could control without issue." I didn't elaborate, allowing Ryan to drag the chief of police into the room. He was bound and gagged, disheveled since he'd spent the night in my trunk. "I know you placed your faith in Chief Rourke. What you don't know is that he was far too busy spending time on a fishing trip to deal with Liam's murder. I thought I'd take the opportunity to remind him who owned him. And lo and behold, I realized he'd switched sides."

"What the fuck are you trying to tell me?" my father demanded. At least the news brought him from around his desk, his look of concern turning into sheer anxiety.

When Sean laughed again, I sensed he was doing so at my father's expense. "Once a dirty cop, always a dirty cop."

I shot him a look, envisioning what would happen when I finally decided to end the charade. "He is correct, Pops."

Between Father O'Brien and our good friend here, Korski knew our whereabouts, our private conversations, and most especially details about the fabulous luncheon you demanded we all attend."

As my father's face turned ashen, Chief Rourke struggled in Ryan's hold, trying to talk over the thick gag in his mouth. I watched as Pops processed the information, myriad emotions running through him. Suddenly, I remembered an expression one of my grade school teachers had said more than once.

*Loose lips sink ships.*

And our ship had capsized, threatening to sink to the bottom of a very deep ocean. While he remained silent, I walked toward the captive in question, gazing at him long and hard. I wanted nothing more than to put a bullet in his head but doing so would place a larger target on our family, which at this point couldn't happen. We needed time to regroup, to build loyalty, not attempting to make excuses for the man's disappearance.

My father suddenly seemed to come alive, barreling past me, issuing a hard right jab into Rourke's jaw. The police chief was knocked backward, almost to the floor. When Pops gave him two hard blows to the kidney and cheek, the man finally went down, still struggling, his bellow around the gag annoying.

Pops yanked out his weapon, straddling the down man and pointing the barrel at Rourke's forehead. "You motherfucker."

"Did you really think he was going to stay under your thumb, Pops? Korski obviously offered him a better deal."

"The fucker is going to face my wrath."

When I sensed my father was about to pull the trigger, I placed my hand on his arm. "His death will serve no purpose at the point. But his retraining to become a loyal member of our stable will. I suggest you make him an offer he can't refuse."

My father remained stiff, twisting his hands on his Glock. Then he pulled the weapon away, turning to face me. "You're right. Ryan, spend some time with our good friend. And Dwayne," he said gruffly, addressing the fallen chief, "how is

your sweet baby girl? What's her name, Sasha? I know you went to a lot of effort to keep her in private school in Connecticut, hopeful your enemies wouldn't find her. You thought me a fool. There's nothing about you that I don't know about. If you want your daughter to keep breathing, you're going to do everything I say."

I could see clear anguish in the chief's eyes. As I backed away, I glanced toward Sean. Whether or not the man was impressed I couldn't tell.

Nor did I give a shit.

This was how things were going to be handled under my regime.

After my father kicked the chief, he walked away, one hand still wrapped around his Glock. "We can't allow Montgomery to outmaneuver us."

"And we won't," I assured him.

After taking a deep breath, my father lifted his head in my direction, searching my eyes. He waited until Ryan and another soldier carted the chief from the room before walking toward me.

"If a marriage takes place, then we'll be outnumbered." My father stared at me for a full minute, his eyes never blinking.

Whatever he was searching for, I wasn't certain I cared any longer. I kept my glare just as hard. "Is there something else, Pops?"

"Yeah, there is. Sean, I've decided to accept your offer of help to find out who killed my son." My father tipped his head, gauging my reaction again. "While you will work directly under Brogan, I will consider you for greater duties at the outcome of this mess we're found ourselves in."

"I'll enjoy every minute of working with my dear cousin."

I'm sure he would.

"We will do things my way," I said absently.

"Don't get us into a war we can't win," my father hissed.

I wasn't planning on it. After all, I wasn't planning on losing anything.

Including control of Mallory.

I lifted my glass, nodding toward Sean. "Then congratulations, cousin. You will certainly make an interesting addition to this family." When I took a sip, I felt more amused than anything else.

The concept that blood was thicker than water was absolute bullshit. My father had shown his true colors, which should shock me, but it didn't. At this point, I wasn't certain anything could do that.

What he didn't know was that by this time in one week, I'd not only be in charge of the Callahan Empire, I'd also have a solid alliance with Grayson Montgomery.

With Mallory as my bride.

## CHAPTER 13



*B*rogan

“Keep an eye on Ivan and his crew,” I told Ryan. “I want to know if the asshole makes a single move. Have the soldiers sweep the streets. Clean ‘em up if necessary. I will no longer tolerate vermin.”

“Is he back in town?”

“Yeah, he is. I’m certain he’s chomping at the bit for his upcoming celebration of matrimony.” I’d trusted Ryan enough to let him know about my unintentional meeting with Mallory. He knew what was at stake as well as the family did.

“What about the priest?”

Sighing, I rubbed my eyes. “I don’t think he’ll be stupid enough to do anything but keep an eye on him as well.”

“Not a problem, Mr. Callahan,” he answered, taken to calling me by a more formal name given my nod of leadership given by my father. “If the fucker so much as moves, you’ll be the first to know.”

“Good. And I want a full report on what Sean is doing at all times.”

He snickered. “He ain’t gonna be well liked.”

“Just make certain everyone keeps their guard up. I’ll be returning to Chicago by early morning.”

“Yes, sir.”

I shoved the phone into my pocket, my thoughts turning lurid.

Mallory.

She was the first thing on my mind every morning, the image of her face haunting me long after I'd had my first cup of coffee. Three purposeful days had gone by, enough time to develop a plan of my own. I hadn't attempted to exact the needed wrath against Ivan or his soldiers, acting as if I was going along with my father's decision.

But I'd kept my eye on Sean, my sixth sense telling me he'd accepted the position as temporary underboss for his personal gain. Whether or not it was true remained to be seen.

Tonight, the beautiful raven-haired beauty would finally become mine.

My possession.

My passion.

And I would require her full surrender.

My entire body ached as I climbed from my vehicle, glancing toward the gated entrance a couple hundred yards away. She had no idea that a predator was this close, a man prepared to do what it took to capture her body as well as her soul.

Whether or not I captivated her heart was of no concern at this point.

She'd lied to me.

Attempted to use me.

Pretended that she was an innocent creature who just by crazed happenstance ended up on the same mountain in a country not her own. If she thought me a fool, she was sorely wrong.

My mind had suffered the indignation of her lies, her attempt at seduction, until I was sick to death of thinking about it. Had she been sent to kill me? In truth, that was the only concept that made any sense. Whether or not my father was prepared to accept the facts, they'd been laid out in a trail of blood.

Grayson Montgomery had never intended on solidifying a cautionary deal made with my father. He'd been working with Korski from the beginning, determined to take a good share of our territory as his own, including our construction empire. I'd found out enough details to know I was right. The connection between Korski and Montgomery had been in motion for almost a full year while my father had been concentrating on other aspects of his life.

Including worrying about his firstborn son.

I wanted to hate my father, but that wouldn't change anything at this point. He'd faltered and been taken advantage of. It was up to me to pick up the pieces, kicking Sean to the curb. However, at least he might prove to be useful at this point.

I buttoned my coat, the strong wind chilling me to the bone, returning my full thoughts to how much Mallory had been involved. My mouth watered at the thought of tasting my sweet hellion again.

“Soon, my love, you'll be in my arms.”

I'd kept tabs on her.

Stalked her, although she'd only been out of the house twice.

She'd returned to her father's estate in Montreal where she'd been sequestered for several days, the two times she'd left both with her father.

And one of the meetings had been with Korski after he'd flown in on his jet. I'd been across the street, watching the entire luncheon. The man had been brazen enough to take her to a restaurant where he'd had them sit directly in front of the floor-to-ceiling window looking out on a busy street. I'd been tempted to end his life in the same way he'd taken my brother's, but knew he was trying to flush me out.

She'd seemed expressionless during the meal, which was what a good princess should be. But even through the plate glass, the electricity we shared sparked the air between us, enough so she'd darted looks out the window several times.

As if she'd known she had a stalker, a man obsessed with claiming her.



I'd salivated over the moment I'd permanently rip her away from her life, wanting nothing more than to put a bullet in both men, but I'd held back. The game was far too delicious. I studied the Montgomery estate house, taking a deep breath of the crisp air. At three in the morning, all was quiet, the last light switching off over an hour before.

I knew the layout of the secured home, including determining how many soldiers kept guard around the gated facility. While breaching the heavy security that included cameras from every angle was daunting, it wasn't insurmountable.

Especially given my collection of specialized tools. Her room was on the second floor at the end of the hall, my high-powered binoculars confirming her location. With any luck, I'd be in and out in less than three minutes.

As I moved toward the single location of the fence line the cameras couldn't reach, I heard the sound an engine. It sounded like it was coming from one side of the property where the aggregate driveway turned into gravel. I bristled from the noise. If anyone derailed my plans tonight, they would face harsh punishment. From what I could tell, the impending wedding was only a couple of days away. Once Ivan had Mallory in his clutches, capturing her would become difficult.

But not impossible.

While there were no headlights, it was obvious the vehicle was headed toward the back gate. It was also less secure, used as an employee entrance. Now I was more than curious. I took off jogging around the perimeter, staying close to the huge stone wall. From what I could tell, the vehicle wasn't moving very quickly, and without headlights, I'd have to venture a guess whoever was leaving didn't want the entire house knowing.

As soon as I rounded the corner, the back gate flew open, the driver stepping on the gas.

But not before I was able to see the driver.

Mallory.

Was she escaping for a second time? My cock ached from the thought of the hunt.

It was doubtful she'd seen me, the dark night moonless. I paid attention to the direction she was going, racing back to my Jeep and jumping inside. As I gunned the engine, my grip on the steering wheel tightened. I raced around a corner, pressing my foot down on the accelerator. While I'd only been to Montreal twice in my life, there were few people on the road, which allowed me to catch a glimpse of her taillights after a few minutes.

Now she was driving well over the speed limit, screeching around corners. I sensed either she knew she was being followed or was fearful of it. Where the hell was she going?

I had my answer only three minutes later, the headlights flashing across an upcoming destination sign.

She was headed straight for the Jacques Cartier Bridge, a beautiful span of steel soaring over the St. Lawrence River. It was also a suicide magnet, at least forty-five people attempting suicide each year. I couldn't buy she was so despondent that she'd attempt to kill herself.

Then again, if she knew anything about Ivan and his dealings with women, she might think she had no other choice. No, it was far more likely she was meeting with someone she thought could help her.

I picked up speed, determined to stop her. She must have known I was following her, taking several quick turns and barely two minutes later, I'd lost her. I slammed my hand on the steering wheel, idling in the middle of the street, trying to determine what way she'd go. Fuck. This was an area of the city I knew nothing about. I smashed my fist a few more times until my hand ached.

Then I made a turn, following my instincts. She'd take a way she didn't think anyone was familiar with, which meant the side streets. If I was wrong, there was a very good chance I'd lose her. I still couldn't believe she'd resort to something so drastic. There had to be a reason.

Had Ivan hurt her? Had the fucking bastard touched her? If he had in any way, I would carve him up for fish food. I made several other turns, almost getting lost. My anger reaching the boiling point, I was running out of options.

Then I noticed taillights far enough away that I couldn't be certain it was even her vehicle. I had nothing to lose at this point. I sped through the residential streets, coming out the other side. I wasn't even entirely certain I was headed toward the bridge any longer.

As I rounded the curves, I'd picked up some of the distance, but the bridge was now looming in the distance. A sick sense of knowing settled in. With the frigid temperatures and the wind whipping as strongly as it was, if she jumped, it was likely she wouldn't survive. I was enraged, ready to beat the shit out of her father for altering the arrangement. Did he not know about Ivan's reputation?

Or was it that he just didn't care?

As I came closer, I had no doubt the taillights belonged to her car, or that she was doing her best at getting away from me. Whoever taught her how to drive should be shot. Mallory was all over the road, swerving around the few cars that were out. Damn it. She was determined to jump.

When she made the turn onto the bridge itself, ice ran through my veins. There were no suicide barriers, nothing to prevent her from getting on the small ledge and jumping. The moment she stopped the car, she was out of it, leaving the door open. She took one look in my direction then flew a few feet away to the edge. There was no hesitation on her part as she crawled over the edge, easing onto the ledge.

Oh, hell, no. I wasn't going to allow this to happen. I pulled the Jeep to a screeching halt, throwing the gear into park then taking off after her.

"Mallory! Don't. Do not do this."

The wind carried my voice in an opposite direction. If she heard me, she didn't register the outcry, standing while still holding onto the railing. Nothing had ever sickened me as

much as the sight of her standing on the edge, peering down at the blackened water.

“Mallory. Mallory!” I was within fifty feet when she lifted her head, staring directly into my eyes.

When a slight smile crossed her face, the crackling electricity from before gave a clear indication she recognized me. Yet in the next few seconds, ones that I’d go over again and again, I noticed something else in her eyes besides sadness. Something that would haunt me for the rest of my life.

Love.

It was fleeting.

It was just a spark.

But the beast inside of me awakened from his slumber, pushing the man who seemed incapable of feeling anything.

Then I lunged for her, my fingers flowing through her long hair as it sailed behind her and she dropped, hitting the water with a tremendous thud.

I stood stunned, gaping over the edge, scanning every inch of the area where she’d fallen for any sign of life. “Mallory.” My voice was barely a whisper. “No. No. No!”

\* \* \*

I’d searched the banks of the river, paying attention to every sound in case there was a boat waiting in the darkness. There’d been nothing but the blackness and the howling of wind.

But the same intense nagging remained.

I didn’t buy she was dead.

Three days had passed since the horrible incident. I’d remained in Montreal for thirty-six hours after the tragedy, alerting the police anonymously. Search and rescue had come out, boats and divers scouring the river for a full day. They hadn’t found her body but with the swiftness of the current, it

was possible it had been swept toward the Great Lakes or worse. There was also hidden debris in various locations, which could easily have trapped her body.

From the news reports, there was a slim chance she'd survived the fall.

Her family was in mourning, her mother as inconsolable as mine had been after Liam's death.

Her father? His behavior was cold, so much so I already couldn't stand the man, itching to put a bullet in his brain.

After that, I'd returned to the States, determined to follow my hunch.

And to satisfy my need for revenge.

"You're certain they're inside?" I asked, giving Ryan a look, the dingy streetlight doing little to accentuate his expression. My finger was itchy, longing to pull the trigger. It would seem Ivan hadn't heeded my last warning. Today would be my final before torching his establishments.

"They're inside. Aren't they, Calen?" he asked, turning his attention to one of several soldiers assigned to make certain we weren't bothered until I'd finished cleaning up the joint.

"They're there, sir, and have been for almost two hours," Calen answered.

A local watering hole for uptight Russians, no women allowed.

"Why are you doing this?" Sean asked. I'd required his presence for no other reason than to see his reaction when we opened fire.

"Because it's necessary to provide warnings in a city of this size. While I enjoy bloodshed as much as my father, perhaps even more, starting a war would destroy Chicago. That's not what we want, neither is it necessary at this point."

"Not what my father would have done," Sean retorted.

"Which is one reason your father is decomposing in a thick pine box." I didn't wait to see if he had an answer. There was

no point. He either followed my orders or he'd end up with a bullet-riddled body when this was all over.

Ryan followed me as I headed to the entrance, Sean lingering for two seconds too long. I swung the assault rifle in his direction, cocking my head.

Huffing, he finally followed, checking the magazine then nodding.

As I opened the door, I scanned the area before allowing the other two inside. This wasn't about a discussion. Every person inside worked for Korski in one position or another.

A single person noticed us, jerking up from his table, a drink still in his hand.

Not one Russian inside the bar had time to retrieve their weapon before we started shooting.

To my surprise, Sean showed no sign of concern or hesitation. I'd file that in the back of my mind with every other scrap of information.

In less than four minutes, I returned to the darkened street, enjoying the quietness of the evening.

Now the ball was in the brutal Russian's court.

\* \* \*

My drink was almost empty, which wasn't tolerable.

Whether or not Ivan had gotten the news was beyond me, but it was only a matter of time. He'd attempt to retaliate, but I'd taken additional steps to ensure the rest of my family was well protected. At least both sisters had finally listened to me, staying sequestered in my father's estate.

Tomorrow might be an interesting day.

Now I sat in front of my bank of computers, searching for anything I could find about her life as well as Korski's. When my father had heard the news of her death, he'd been thrilled at the outcome, which had disgusted me. I still wasn't ready to

confess my sins or even acknowledge that I knew her just yet. Not until I was satisfied that her death was the only reality that I could face.

I'd printed several pictures of her, most of them from modeling gigs, a few with her family. It would seem Grayson wanted his daughter to be culturally diverse, taking her to several Broadway productions, opera and ballet performances, and even rock concerts when she was much younger. They appeared to be a happy little family, content being rich and infamous. I ran my finger across one of her photographs of her on a runway, the stunning evening dress she wore hugging every curve, her long leg protruding from the lengthy slit in the material.

With her pouty crimson lips matching the vibrant hue of the dress, she was a picture-perfect beauty; every male in the audience only had eyes for her.

The ping of jealousy was ridiculous, but I still felt like she belonged to me.

*Dead women don't date.*

I snarled after thinking the words. They didn't marry either.

Even though I'd been a few feet away, watching her body fall into the water, my instinct continued to say the entire thing had been staged. Given I hadn't seen a lifejacket or rope of kind and there certainly hadn't been a boat that I'd notice, I couldn't believe something so farfetched.

But I couldn't put it past her, at least not completely.

I heard Blazer's tail thumping and looked over at him curled up on one of his beds. His eyes were imploring, as they'd been since we'd gotten back home. "I know, buddy. She was one fascinating woman." It wasn't just about missing her. My need to find her was deeper than wanting to see her again. I craved her, the hunger burning me up inside. She did belong to me.

Whether or not I could face the reality of her death remained troubling.

Especially since I didn't buy what I'd seen with my own eyes.

No.

Something was off as it had been from the moment I'd met her.

I jerked up, pacing the floor. There were far too many things that weren't adding up at this point. She was a strong woman, someone who'd been taught to protect and take care of herself. She knew weapons and had no issue with harsh conditions. She'd also run away from the situation. My gut had told me that from the beginning. She didn't want to be involved in any arranged marriage, including to my brother.

No wonder she'd been spooked if she'd overheard my conversation. For a woman to have the forethought to drug me in order to escape only to dive into frigid water was a significant stretch. I just didn't buy it.

So, if she'd faked her death, she'd have to involve someone close. Who the hell owned the cabin we'd stayed in? That might be difficult to ascertain. What about her modeling career? I thought about everything she'd told me, jotting down a few notes as to where she might go. If she was playing a game, it was at serious risk, but it would force Ivan to show his hand.

I also had to consider what I was doing with Grayson.

When I heard a knock on my brownstone door, I bristled, immediately grabbing my weapon. I moved to the window, peering out onto the busy street. The sun had already set, the neon lights of several cafés and clubs illuminating the area.

While Ryan had assigned several soldiers with me at all times for security purposes, that didn't mean Ivan hadn't sent some of his men to hunt me down even before the massacre two hours before. If he believed Mallory dead, he'd be completely on edge, which is exactly where I wanted him to be.

I moved to the door silently, unlocking and opening it, immediately slapping both hands on my weapon, the barrel pointed at whoever was standing on the other side.

Phoenix shook his head then grinned. "Are you that happy to see me, bro?"



I peered out at the two soldiers, who didn't seem in the least bit concerned about my visitor. That pissed me off. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I came all the way from the great city of Philly to see you and this is the greeting I get?" he said, laughing. Then after I closed the door, his entire demeanor changed. "You have terrible security."

"Evidently. What are you doing here?"

"Providing information that you might find interesting." He glanced around my brownstone, the grin returning. "I like this. I could see myself living here."

Exhaling, I nodded. "I'll take all I can get at this point, oh, and bullshit. This isn't you."

His laugh was boisterous. "Should I be insulted?"

I gave him a hard look.

"Okay, fine. I did some digging before I heard about Mallory's suicide. There's a good chance her father could go to prison for a long time. I have a feeling he was trying to put some things in place in case that happened."

"With the fucking Russian." I wasn't asking a question. It all made sense.

"It sounds farfetched, but with the number of soldiers Montgomery has as well as his underboss, he could easily run the organization from prison without fear of Korski betraying him."

I thought about his summation and nodded. "Yeah, it's possible, but a dangerous game to play unless Montgomery doesn't know how savage Korski really is. And as juicy as the information is, that's something you could have told me over the phone." I gave him another look, a grin popping across my lips.

He laughed. "You always had a knack for seeing through everyone."

"I'm observant."

“How about a drink?”

Now I knew something was going on, or he'd found information that I wouldn't like hearing. “Why the hell not? I could use another one myself.” As I headed for my bar, he glanced around the brownstone, his gaze settling on the massive work surface I used in the multipurpose room. When he moved to the bulletin board, he fingered the same picture of her as I'd been doing.

I poured two glasses of scotch, watching him for a few minutes.

“She's a beautiful woman,” he said as I approached.

“Yeah, she is.”

“Ahh. You're not sure she's dead.”

“In truth? No.”

He grinned as he took the glass from my hand. “What an interesting scenario. However, a jump like that had been attempted before, usually with unsuccessful results. But if she succeeded and if her father finds out, he'll never let her out of his house until the wedding to Korski.”

“News travels fast.”

“Oh, I hear almost everything in my position. As you might imagine, I'm not any happier about the proposed arrangement myself.” He took a sip, shifting to another photograph. “A model?”

“Yes, more famous than I'd originally thought. If what she told me was true, she was blacklisted by some asshole, which is one of the reasons she ran away the first time.”

“Blacklisted?”

I pointed to the single photograph I'd found of Michael Chevell. “He's a real piece of work. He's been investigated four times for sexual abuse but never charged with a crime. He makes the big bucks and is the go-to photographer for almost every fashion house.” I was talking out loud more than anything. There was something about him that bothered me.

“Do you recognize him?”

Phoenix moved closer. “Can’t say I do. Why?”

“Honestly? I don’t know, but I need to find out as much about him as possible.” What I found validated what little Mallory had said, but he’d only been on the scene for two years. Before that? He didn’t exist. That kind of shit usually meant he was hiding from someone.

“Maybe you should look him up. She’ll need a job if she’s on the run.”

“That’s the first place her father would look.”

“Not if she disguised herself,” he suggested.

The thought was interesting. “I’ve been searching the dark web for any sign of her. So far, nothing, but she’ll stay under as long as possible. She’s savvy as hell and much more intelligent than I think her father gave her credit for.”

Phoenix cocked his head. “You like this girl.”

“She managed to get under my skin.” The admittance wasn’t like me.

“Be careful, my friend. Falling in love is tough in our business.”

“So is being alone.” I swirled the liquid in my glass, several visions of her sliding into my mind, rolling past one at a time. “Why are you here?”

“Your uncle. He wasn’t well liked, but not much of a threat.”

“Okay. He was a man I barely knew. Now, you have me curious.”

He turned around to face me, leaning against the side of my desk. “There’s a chance I’m wrong but it would appear he was in discussions with Korski as well.”

I chuckled, shaking my head. The web was getting more and more tangled.

“Something I also suspected.” Which I had, although hearing it from someone else confirmed Korski had been hedging his bets.

“I don’t think you understand what was at stake if they’d developed a partnership.”

I cocked my head. Then I got what he was trying to say. “Control of all of Chicago as well as the surrounding states.”

“Exactly. Ronan also made inquiries about several pieces of real estate and had even placed a bid on a set of warehouses very close to several owned by your family. Granted, it was done through a corporation your father likely had no knowledge of.”

“Still, I’m surprised my father had no clue.” Or maybe he had, which is why he placed Sean under my direction. I glanced out the window, realizing I should have intervened with the business months before. What kind of game was Korski playing?

“My sources say that Ronan was finalizing a deal during a luncheon when he was killed.”

“Either my uncle stepped on Ivan’s toes, or the person set to profit the most from his death had him killed.”

He nodded several times. “That could be several people.”

“Including my cousin,” I said absently as I headed toward the window, peering outside. “If Sean had his father killed then went into business with Korski, with Ivan’s marriage to Mallory and her father possibly going to prison, the territory both Ivan and Sean would share together would be the largest in the damn country, rivaling any of the other organizations. But Ivan will eat him alive.”

“Likely. That’s why I thought you’d want to know what I learned in person,” he said with a smirk on his face. “For the record, I agree with you. Mallory isn’t dead. And whether she knows it or not, she’s become a very important commodity. If I were you, I’d go hunting.”

Now I was the one who grinned. “I’d already planned on it. And when I find her, there will be a wedding, only not the one everyone expects.”

“That would then make you a very powerful man. There’s no doubt you have a price on your head. Just watch your back.”

I took a deep breath, holding the glass into the light, enjoying the prisms as they danced off the amber coloration. “You don’t know my other personality, Phoenix.”

“It’s easy to see through your façade, Brogan. You can’t fool a man who’s cut from the same cloth.”

As I shifted my attention in his direction, he lifted his glass in a nod of respect. “My little fawn can run but she’ll never be able to hide from a true predator. After I make her mine, then I’ll destroy everyone who stood in my way. And I assure you, their end won’t come easy or without significant pain.”

“A man after my own heart.”

Both of us laughed and in those few seconds of bonding, I knew exactly what I had to do.

## CHAPTER 14



*M*ilan, Italy  
Ten days later

*Mallory*

*“There’s nowhere you can run where I won’t find you.”*

Remembering Brogan’s words sent a wave of heat straight to my core and still, I shuddered. He’d figured out who I was, finding me in Canada. I’d been shocked to hear his voice, almost deciding not to go through with the plan my mother had helped set in motion. Just the sight of his face had disrupted my thinking, wishing I could allow him to save me. The thought had been fleeting, all the work my mother had done standing in my way.

Just one look into his eyes and I’d almost surrendered.

To my needs.

And wants.

To the man I couldn’t seem to forget.

The ache in my heart wouldn’t go away easily, the nausea I felt the same as the day before and the one before that. I wasn’t as hard on the exterior as I’d tried to pass off.

Maybe one day I could put him out of my mind, able to adjust to my new life.

Maybe...

I'd landed on Gia's doorstep unexpectedly the night before, concerned that I'd been followed, avoiding the hotels for that very reason. The area she lived was only known by those who lived in the city, allowing me to escape my nightmare if only for a little while. I was taking a chance but would leave later this morning for the small villa that would become my prison for several months if not years. I had no idea how I'd manage to live in solitude, but there was no other choice.

"I thought I'd find you here," Gia said quietly.

"It's beautiful. I love looking out at the city."

"I'm so glad you stopped by."

I looked over my shoulder, wishing the morning sun would take away the shivers. I doubted anything would be able to. "I need to leave later today. I can't put you in danger."

She sighed, giving me a pensive look. "I can't believe you jumped off that bridge. Do you know how high the platform is off the water? Were you crazy?" Her lilting Italian accent was just another reminder of how much I'd given up in my determination not to be forced into marrying a monster.

"I know. Believe me, I know." I'd been given explicit instructions on how to do it, although I'd almost tumbled in headfirst, which I wouldn't have survived. The arduous planning had mostly been done by my mother, her ability to find someone to take me to safety, let alone the money she'd managed to squirrel away something I would never forget. The last time I'd seen her, there'd been tears in her eyes, which she'd told me were from happiness.

But I knew better.

Now I wondered what horrible punishment my mother might endure in the future, especially if my father found out about the ruse. I'd taken several days locked away from everyone, paying attention to the news, waiting until my death had been certified before heading to Italy. At least no one had been aware how close I'd been with Gia, one reason I knew it would be safe to stay with her for a couple of days. She'd friended me almost immediately after I'd come to Italy, taking

me under her wing since she'd been modeling in the international scene for years. We'd developed a close enough friendship I trusted her.

From what I'd been able to tell, my father hadn't sent anyone outside of the country looking for me, although I had to assume he'd make phone calls.

As far as Ivan, there'd been no indication he or anyone in his employ had left Chicago. The initial meeting with him had been disturbing, solidifying my decision to follow my mother's recommendation. I'd played the dutiful daughter, but only after several arguments with my father. He'd finally believed I'd follow through with the marriage. Or had he?

The person I hadn't been able to locate was Brogan. Just thinking his name made me shiver.

At least I was protected from the terrible future I'd been destined to face, secure in Gia's small apartment for a few more hours. Then I'd head for the villa, fully assuming my new identity. My mother had found the beautiful location, pulling in favors from someone she'd known years before. I wondered if it would ever feel like home.

"Do you really need to leave so soon?" she asked.

"It's best I do. I don't want to put you in harm's way."

"You don't need to worry about me. I have a weapon." Her grin made me laugh.

"I don't want you to need to use it." I also didn't want a target on her head. "They will come looking for me. I know it." Whether it was my father or Ivan, I wasn't certain, but my gut told me they would never stop until a body was found.

"You're missing *him*. Aren't you?"

Him.

Brogan, the man I'd fallen in love with during a few days of breathtaking passion. Also the man I couldn't trust.

I switched the cup of coffee from one hand to the other, a single tear slipping past my lashes. I'd told her about Brogan, although I hadn't said anything about who he was. Just



opening up to someone had made me feel a tiny bit better. “I do, but it could never be.”

“You don’t know that.” Her singsong voice made me smile.

“Yes, I do.” I hadn’t told her everything. If anyone thought she knew of my whereabouts or my plans, she’d be tortured.

“Do you have plans on seeing him again? Is he coming to Italy?”

“God, no. I hope to never see him again. He’s dead to me.”

She said something in Italian, and I gave her a look, shaking my head.

“Just come with me to the show,” Gia said, giving me a mischievous look. “It will make you stop missing him. You know there will be hot guys there.”

“Hot guys? Honey, they’re all gay.”

She laughed and I did along with her, although my heart remained heavy.

“Not all of them.”

I gazed back into the window, the steam from the second cup of coffee soothing my skin. The sun was just starting to creep over the horizon, linking the dazzling array of vibrant colors together. This was my favorite place in her apartment, the sunny setting allowing a perfect view of the city. I’d been sitting here since a little after four in the morning, still trying to wrap my head around the fact I’d left my home, my family, and everyone I knew behind.

And I was thinking about a man I should hate with everything I had inside of me.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea,” I finally told her. Showing up at fashion week even in the audience could be dangerous. I hadn’t needed my mother to remind me that I needed to remain in the shadows, altering my looks and my name. So far, I’d tinted my hair, lightening it to a luscious shade of copper. Even with an entirely different set of attire, I remained fearful. I was still in transition, the sadness of my profound loss furrowing in my stomach.

“Oh, come on. You look stunning and no one is going to recognize you.” Gia inched closer, leaning against the wall. “You love fashion week. It’ll be a terrible shame if you can’t enjoy the people and the surroundings. You adore the venue. You can leave from there.”

I gave her a waning smile, the pull to slide back into my former life keeping an ache in my stomach, a heavy feeling in my heart. “I just worry.” She’d been one of the only people I thought I could trust, her friendship from before special to me. I wasn’t good at hiding myself, pretending I wasn’t the daughter of a ruthless mafia man. But the necessity was never far from my mind.

I certainly wasn’t a princess of anything any longer. I’d had so much time to think, to realize that my entire life had been staged. All the education, the exposure to music, art, and dance and other intense training had been all about grooming me for the future. I’d never seen my father’s real intentions, but now it was crystal clear in my mind. I’d been used as a pawn by him, a man I no longer knew.

Or cared about. The pain of accepting that was almost too much to bear, a cross that had seared my skin. The sad thing was that my mother had anticipated it all along. She’d known my father would never allow me to live a normal life. I was too valuable of a commodity. If only I’d gleaned more regarding his business. Maybe then I could have overthrown him, becoming the true queen of the empire. I wanted to laugh at the thought. Me running the Montgomery regime.

Hmmm...

When my mother had suggested I stage my death, the crazy idea to jump off the bridge seemed like the only suggestion that would work. Then the moment I’d stood on the edge, peering down into the ice-cold water, I’d almost panicked. With the raging current and the weather patterns, the authorities would eventually give up searching for my body. Would I ever stop being afraid of being discovered?

“Come on. You can leave any time and I’ll understand. That will give me a little more time to spend with you and I can’t

call in sick,” she said, giggling like she used to. Then she pursed her lips together, pouting to try to get her way. “Please.”

I thought about the risks involved, the odds that anyone would be at the show. They’d need to know somebody to be able to get in, security very tight.

I’d also paid close attention to what was happening with my family, reading every article written on my death. From what I could tell, my suicide had been accepted. Was I crazy to consider doing this? Maybe, but it was my last attempt to say goodbye to a life I’d never experience again.

“Pretty please?”

Gia batted her eyelashes, and I rolled my eyes. “Fine, but I need a disguise that will work. And I’m only staying thirty minutes. Then I’ll need to leave.”

“I have just the thing in mind. Come on. And don’t worry about getting the clothes back to me. Consider them a gift.”

“Now, I’m afraid.” We both laughed. Her tastes were completely different than mine.

Reluctantly, I followed her into her bedroom, wondering what she could manage to cook up. She tore through her closet, finding the most outrageous outfit and something I would never wear.

However, there was no stopping her and five minutes later, I was staring at someone I didn’t recognize in the mirror. The leather pants were so not me, but the sexy red sweater highlighted my breasts perfectly. Fortunately, we were the same size, including shoes. As she pulled out thigh-high boots, I burst into laughter.

“I can’t wear those.”

“They are all the rage,” she insisted, tossing them at me. “Put them on. I need to do your makeup so we can leave. I can’t be late again.”

“Again?”

She nodded and stood with her hands on her hips, waiting not so patiently until I'd zipped both. When I stood, I thought for certain I would fall over.

"You look gorgeous, darling. Just gorgeous." She blew me a kiss then motioned me into the bathroom. "So what's your new name?"

"Sophia Caren." I had documentation proving it. The connections my mother had surprised me, the man who'd taken me out of the water an old friend. He'd done exactly as I'd been told, getting me safely out of the city that night, allowing me to stay at a safehouse in Boston for two days.

"I like that. You know enough passable Italian. That should work."

"Just forget you heard it."

"Don't worry. I don't know you at all," she teased.

Within minutes, she had me look into the bathroom mirror. No one would be able to recognize me. "You should be a makeup artist."

"One day maybe when all this joyful fun is gone."

She was twenty-four, already considered too old for runway modeling. She refused to give up, determined to work until she was thirty. I loved her spunk, hopeful I'd find some of my own. At least I would feel anonymous at the event.

Or so I hoped.

\* \* \*

Even the drive made me nervous, and I was skittish the moment I walked into the oversized facility. At that point, I was grateful I'd kept what little I'd purchased in my travels in the car, ready to escape at a moment's notice. When I walked inside, the same lure of the lifestyle beckoned me as it had done since the very first modeling job I'd done what seemed now like a lifetime ago.

The show itself was crazy, people everywhere but the security was as tight as I'd remembered. Everyone who was anyone had arrived, all the greatest fashion designers highlighting their spring wardrobes. This was the first time I was seeing it from this point of view, and I was fascinated, also angry that I couldn't participate. As Gia insisted that I come into the dressing room area, the longing to be pawed and primped hit me hard.

Then I heard a familiar voice and cringed. Michael was here.

I grabbed her arm, pulling her aside. "I can't stay. I didn't know Michael would be working the show."

"Relax. You need to trust me. Just pretend you're my cousin visiting me for a couple days. He's too arrogant to think otherwise."

I did trust her, but I certainly couldn't trust the asshole prick who thought he was God's gift to women. I didn't have a choice, the man breezing into the dressing room, anger riding his face. "Where the fuck is Maria?"

All the girls backstage cringed hearing the rage in his voice.

"She hasn't arrived," one of the girls dared to say.

"Fuck that bitch. She's finished. She was going to be my star."

As I tried to stay in the background, it wasn't working. Almost immediately he noticed me, a smile creeping on his face.

"Come here, darling. Have you ever modeled before?"

The itch inside of me was significant, the desire not to lose the life I'd lost so strong I did everything not to reveal my identity. "A couple of times." I'd practiced my accent dozens of times, perfecting enough of a passable lilt he didn't think otherwise.

"Walk for me," he instructed.

"Oh, no. I can't."

"Just do it. I'm in a bind. All you'll need to do is walk out and back. There's nothing to it." He pushed my shoulder and I almost punched him. However, drawing any additional attention at this point wasn't in my best interest. I resisted

saying anything, taking several steps away from him then swinging back.

“Not too bad. You’ll do. Carrie, get her into the dress meant for Maria.” When he looked at me again, I could see desire in his eyes. “What’s your name?”

“Sophia.”

He pulled back, studying my face then dropping his leer all the way down the length of my body. “You remind me of a girl I adored, the bitch undeserving of my attention. I’m going to make you a star.”

It took everything I had not to slap him across the face. The fucking asshole would never change, a soulless man using his position to satiate the predator inside. I fisted my hands, debating the odds of a single member of my father’s core of soldiers being here. Then I made my decision. “Fine.”

Michael clapped his hands, directing the makeup artist while Carrie grabbed my arm.

“Hurry. Michael doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

I almost laughed, glancing toward Gia, giving another roll of my eyes from the smirk on her face. She’d known I couldn’t stay away from the limelight.

As my clothes were stripped from me, Michael’s ever-present leer remained, lurking like the sexual predator I knew him to be. I’d allow myself this final moment. Then I’d move into seclusion for a few weeks, soothing the anger and guilt that furrowed deep inside. As the makeup artist guided me into a chair, I held my breath, certain one of the four girls I’d worked with before would recognize me. Fortunately, they were far too busy being coifed and primped, but I was playing a dangerous game, one I knew I wouldn’t win.

I pretended I had no idea what I was doing, allowing both Gia and Michael to guide me as the girls were shuttled to the back of the stage. Before the asshole left, he brushed his fingers down my cheek, his entire face showcasing his lurid thoughts. I was disgusted, my stomach churning out of apprehension and

hatred. One day I would have the opportunity to meet the son of a bitch in a dark alley.

The commotion was just as I'd remembered and adored, every model herded like cattle toward the curtain. When the announcer began the show, the butterflies in my stomach increased as did the sharp instinct that I'd grown to trust.

I was out of my mind.

Danger lurked all around me.

The moment I walked out onto the stage, I took a deep breath, holding it in as I headed toward the end of the runway, my conditioning as a model making it easy to perform like a trained professional.

But as soon as I got to the end, even with the dozens of lights and cameras everywhere, I noticed three men in the back of the crowd, all of them completely out of place. I'd made a huge mistake. They'd come for me, only I couldn't be certain whether they were my father's soldiers or those instructed by the horrible man I was supposed to marry coming for me.

I held my breath, pretending I didn't notice. When I finally made it back, I skirted behind the curtains, letting out the breath I'd been holding. As I noticed Gia, I sprinted toward her, already trying to rip off the dress.

"What's wrong?" she asked, her face devoid of expression.

"I'm leaving." I threw a look over my shoulder, able to see through the parted curtains. The bastards were on the lookout, heading closer to the stage. Shit. Shit. Shit.

"You're scaring me."

"Please don't tell anyone you saw me."

"Of course not," she said. "I'll cover for you. Just be safe." She remained where she was, backing away. I could swear there was something odd about her. No, that was crazy. I was just nervous and scared.

I nodded, racing into the dressing room, trying to rip off the dress. It had been pinned on me, my inability to yank off the frock frustrating. The damn dress would be coming with me. I

sprinted toward the back exit, thankfully knowing every inch of the location helpful.

When I was in the back corridor, a hand gripped my arm and I turned around instantly, throwing a punch without thinking.

“What the hell? You’re not leaving,” Michael barked. He gripped my arm, tossing me against the corridor wall. Then he tore his eyes down to my breasts, laughing softly.

I smashed my fists against his chest hard enough he stumbled backwards. Then I scrambled away, reaching the back door, but he was quicker than I’d believed, catching and tossing me inside one of the back rooms.

I landed on some boxes, dumping to the floor. He was on me without hesitation, already unfastening his trousers. “Get the fuck out of here,” I snarled.

He laughed. “It looks like you need a lesson in who controls your future.”

“That won’t be you.”

“*Bespoleznaya koroleva, kotoruyu nuzhno usypit’*,” he snarled.

What had he just said to me? Russian? Ice formed in my veins, my mind capturing the danger I was in. I had no weapon, no way of defending myself. “What? What the hell did you just say to me, you monster?”

There was something entirely different about the look on his face than I’d seen dozens of times before, a knowing that scared me. As he stalked closer, his entire expression changed, becoming hard and cold.

“I said,” he laughed as he closed the distance, “that you are a worthless queen who needs to be put down.”

As I struggled to stand, he wrapped his hand around my throat, pitching me against the wall with enough force I was stunned. I lashed out, scratching my nails down his face. The sight of blood fueled the girl who’d been trained to keep herself safe. The moment I took another hard swing, catching him in the jaw, he returned the punch. Stars floated in front of my eyes and for a few seconds I couldn’t move.



“Get off me!” I jammed my fingers into his eyes, almost able to get away.

He howled, immediately reacting, the veins on the side of his neck straining. When I jerked away, he repeated the action, slamming me against the wall so hard my entire body ached. Oh, God, this was bad.

“No. No!” My yelp echoed, but not enough.

With all the noise, the music, and the yacking of the girls, there wasn't a chance anyone would hear me call for help.

His cock was already exposed. He was going to rape me? Oh, hell, no. I lunged forward but he easily tossed me to the floor, yanking up the expensive couture dress, exposing my legs. I screamed but he almost crushed my windpipe.

“That'll cost you, bitch. There are no rules that say I can't enjoy my prize first, you little tease.”

I had the distinct feeling my disguise hadn't worked. This was nothing more than a setup.

An ugly realization hit me. Gia. There was no one else who could have orchestrated this. How had I been so blind, so stupid? Why would she do this?

I fought him with everything I had, but I'd underestimated his strength. As he continued squeezing my neck, I sensed I was going to pass out. I clawed at him, beating my fists against his arms, but he squeezed even harder.

“Don't. Just... don't.” I no longer carried the fake accent, but if he'd noticed, I couldn't tell. I was losing the battle.

“I'm going to teach you what happens to little girls who don't want to play fair. Then you meet your maker.”

I closed my eyes, trying to figure out a way to get out of this, but I was nauseous, so lightheaded.

When the pressure on my neck was suddenly released, a hard thudding sound popping several feet away, I clawed my way onto my stomach, managing to get to my feet. There was someone else in the room, Michael pitched against another

wall, the stranger smashing his fist into Michael's face over and over again.

Gasping for air, I bolted out of the room, fighting the remaining fuzziness in my head, slamming both hands on the door. Another man passed me, reaching out to try to stop me from running, but I had enough strength to throw out my leg, the high heel catching him in the shin.

“What the fuck?” he yelled.

A rush of adrenaline and my survival instincts kicked in and I didn't stop, my legs pumping as I took off running.

The blinding light was painful, but I made it to the parking lot, never looking back once. I should thank whoever had saved me, but I wasn't sticking around.

As soon as I reached my car, I threw my head over my shoulder. Thank God no one was following me. After jumping inside, I finally took a deep breath, but there was no time to wait.

I had to get out of here as quickly as possible.

Would I ever truly feel safe again?

\* \* \*

*Brogan*

*Wham!*

I tossed the asshole against the wall for the third time, not hesitating for a single second to pummel his face and chest with hard punches. I pitched him several feet away into a set of metal shelves, taking a deep breath as he slid down to the floor.

Who the hell was this asshole? He wasn't just some fucking photographer.

“You were right about him,” Ryan snarled.

I threw a look over my shoulder toward him, half smiling. “I’m never wrong about these things. This fuckhead has been working for Ivan for years. Haven’t you, buddy?”

The Russian grinned and said nothing. He’d been born and raised in Moscow, recruited by Korski four years before. The rest I wasn’t certain about, but it no longer mattered. He was a dead man.

“She’s gone, boss.”

Inhaling, I eyed Michael, curious as to what he’d said to her in Russian. It had spooked her, allowing her instincts to kick in, but not soon enough. I threw another punch then tried to find his phone. He’d been smart enough not to carry it with him.

“I would have given you a piece of the whore,” Michael hissed as he tried to lunge in my direction. I backhanded him, sending him reeling across the room.

“You’re a sick fuck,” I retorted.

There were pigs in this world, but this son of a bitch was one of the worst. What Mallory had told me about him hadn’t been wrong.

“Get out of here. This is my business,” he growled, ready to throw a punch.

Ryan laughed. “You want me to take him out for you, boss?” He knew better than to use my real name in a situation like this.

“That won’t be necessary. I’m having fun.” And I was. “Find the girl Mallory was staying with.”

“You got it,” he said, heading for the door.

Michael was already wheezing, bending over at the waist, but I knew the ploy far too well. When he lumbered forward, I caught him under the jaw again, his feet leaving the floor from the force I used.

“When you fuck with my possession, then it becomes my business.” I drove my fist under his chin, issuing a second punch to his gut. Then I shifted, the hard kick pitching him against the steel shelves.

I'd spent far too much time and effort to get her back only to have this asshole touch her.

My little fawn had no idea how much danger she was in. Now that she'd been found, it was only a matter of time before Ivan attempted to take her back to his lair. That wasn't going to happen. I'd finish business here. Then I'd claim my prize, one I'd worked very hard to locate. This time, she wasn't getting away.

The poor bastard made the mistake of getting a second wind, tossing a box in my direction. I grinned as I easily deflected it, laughing as it tumbled to the floor. "Michael. Michael. You really should have figured out by now that you shouldn't do bad things."

"Who the fuck are you?" he snarled, although his voice was muffled from the blood oozing from his mouth. His eyes sparked recognition.

"We'll just say your worst nightmare." I could tell by the look on his face he knew exactly who I was.

He grinned, cursing something in Russian before wiping blood from his face. Then he came at me again. "You will die, Irish fuck."

"I don't think so." He had no idea how strong I was and within seconds, I had him pinned to the wall, my arm shoved under his neck. "Now, you're going to tell me who you work for."

His brow was wrinkled, but a toothy grin remained on his face. "That's not going to happen." When he shifted, almost jerking a weapon into his hand, I shook my head.

"Tsk. Tsk. You should know that I'm a very dangerous man, or so I've been told."

He continued to laugh even as I jerked the gun from his hand, tossing it aside. I backed away, giving him the opportunity to come at me again. After jamming two hard punches into his kidney, I sidestepped him, wrapping my arm around his neck then jerking him back against my chest. The second I squeezed, the Russian wheezed, clawing my arm.

“Then I guess I’m going to teach you a very valuable lesson.  
You don’t treat women like trash.”

*Crack!*

## CHAPTER 15



*B*rogan

Adrenaline flowed through every muscle as the blood rushing through my system thundered through my veins. I'd found her.

Mallory.

Sweet, beautiful Mallory.

She had no idea how much I'd gone through in my effort to hunt her down, my predatory instincts working well for me. Through use of friends on the dark web, I'd tracked her down in Italy far too easily. She'd done everything to hide her tracks, well enough not everyone could find her, but she wasn't used to being on the run, already making a huge mistake by trusting Gia Cumas.

Unfortunately, Mallory had slipped away from me, forcing both Ryan and me to comb the city. I'd tracked down some of the people she'd worked with, but it had taken me hours to decipher the information I'd gathered.

Gia wasn't the sweet model she'd portrayed herself to be, her bank account padded to the tune of one hundred thousand dollars in recent weeks. Whether Michael had hired her directly or Ivan remained to be seen. The fact Gia had all but disappeared left me to believe she'd been working for Ivan directly.

By the time I'd located the girl's apartment, both women had left. Thank God my instincts had been right in that Mallory

had been lured to the *Spazio Cavallerizze*, one of three venues used for the infamous fashion week. I'd seen the soldiers, killing two of them after helping Ryan collect Michael's body. Now he was attempting to make a connection to Korski while I controlled my incredible prize.

In the days I'd been absent from the States, Sean had already become an issue, something I'd need to deal with upon my return. Whether my father was in agreement or not, the changes he was attempting to make in the procedures for the organization weren't acceptable. While I'd explained my absence as needing to deal with some shipping issues overseas, which I was in the process of doing, staying in Italy any longer than necessary wasn't in my family's best interest.

Mallory would return with me whether she approved or not.

I stood in the shadows, hungrier than I'd been in my entire life. The anger from before had shifted, becoming a burning need that couldn't be ignored. I'd already undressed, refusing to be denied what belonged to me. I knew the moment she'd known I'd arrived, her entire body language changing.

Now she stood in the darkness, staring toward the set of drapes I'd hidden behind. The trail to finding the villa hadn't been as difficult as she might hope, which was a further indication we'd need to leave the country in the morning.

But for now, I feasted.

When I took a single step from the shadows, her shudder was audible. Her perfume permeated the room, the subtle scent of jasmine and exotic spices igniting my senses. Every inch of my skin ached, my fingers longing to touch her. Every precaution she'd taken to secure herself from a monster had failed.

I moved away from the drapes, allowing the shimmer of moonlight cascading through the blinds to highlight a portion of my body.

Neither the darkness nor the distance between us could hide her surprise.

Or her tumultuous desire.

“Stay away from me.” Mallory’s lilting voice was the sweetest music, pushing the tension to a heightened level.

“Now, now. You know I won’t do that. My sweet, innocent fawn. What a bad girl you are,” I told her as I approached, savoring every inch of her luscious body in the moonlight.

She backed away by a few steps and I could sense her pulse racing, longing for the taste of her sweet lips against mine.

“You shouldn’t be here.”

Even the way her bottom lip quivered was enticing.

“Yes, I should. And do you want to know why?” I remained in the shadows, allowing my hunger to increase.

She continued her silent rebellion, but she knew the answer, mouthing it at the pace as I spoke it out loud.

“Because you belong to me.” I crept closer, inhaling her sweet perfume. She’d attempted to disguise herself, her hair color entirely different, but she’d never be able to mask her beautiful eyes. I took another long stride in her direction, smiling as she stood her ground.

“Never.”

“You should have known better than to try and run from me.” She would soon learn that would never happen again. She was trembling but continued to stand her ground, her eyes sparkling as I closed the distance. I took a few seconds, allowing my gaze to slide down the length of her lithe figure. Then I ripped the thin gown away from her, exposing her voluptuous body underneath. When she reached out, I tilted my head, daring her to touch the man who’d awakened the darkness she’d hungered for her entire life.

“I wasn’t trying to run, at least not from you.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Yes, you were, at least at first. But I can sense your hunger.”

She shook her head but dragged her tongue across her full lips, teasing me as she’d done so many times before.



My patience had vanished, the game no longer of interest. As I pushed her to the rug in front of the fire, she let out a single moan. I pinned her arms over her head, wrapping one hand around both wrists before pressing my legs between her knees. Her scent of desire wafted between us, forcing me to take another deep breath.

There was nothing like the scent of her sweet pussy. “You will never get away from me again.”

When she wrapped one leg around my thigh, I pressed my cock against her wetness, the ache only continuing to build. She arched her back, accepting my full domination. It was as if we’d been destined to be together. “My little fawn is hungry tonight.”

“Yes.”

I jerked her leg out to the side, bending it at the knee. “You are such a bad girl.”

“I know,” she whispered, bucking underneath me. “I should hate you. You’re nothing but a monster.”

“But you can’t. You won’t. And there’s a fine line between love and hate, a need that can never be denied. I am a monster, or the devil if you prefer. But all that matters is that you’re mine. You’ve always been mine.” I thrust my cock inside, the warmth as her muscles tightened around the thick invasion even sweeter than before.

She shuddered beneath me, blinking several times as she searched my eyes. We’d been torn apart by lies and circumstances. Nothing and no one would ever be able to do that again.

I pulled out, thrusting deep and hard, the fire burning between us intense. I could tell she loved every second, her hunger only building. I shifted back and forth, forcing her muscles to expand even more. As she widened her legs, I developed a rhythm, every plunge brutal. She needed to know that she belonged to me.

“Oh. Oh...” Mallory jerked up, struggling in my hold for a few seconds. Then she murmured my name several times,

never blinking.

“Say it. Say it loud. Let me know how much you hunger,” I commanded.

“Fuck me, Brogan. Just fuck me.”

My thrusts were even more savage, no longer able to control myself. I’d waited for far too long, searching for the one creature who could make me feel whole again. There was no holding back and the moment she squeezed her muscles, there was nothing I could do, erupting deep inside.

“No one will ever touch you again.”

Her breathing was heavy and the way my body was crushed against hers allowed me to feel every vibration rolling through every muscle.

“Including you?” she asked as she dragged her tongue across her lips.

I lowered my head until our lips were almost touching, shifting my hips back and forth. My cock was still throbbing, not nearly satisfied after the long duration without being able to fuck her the way I’d wanted to.

When she tried to turn her head I gripped her jaw, forcing her to keep her head still. “Never from me. That’s something else you should have learned.”

She pouted her perfect pink lips, her eyes darting back and forth. “You lied to me.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle, pressing my lips against hers for a few seconds. I adored the taste of her, but she remained nearly unyielding, pretending that our connection wasn’t stronger than any she’d ever experienced before. “It would seem we lied to each other.”

“If I’d known who you were, I would have never allowed you into my life.”

Her words held little conviction. “As I’ve told you before, your body betrays you.” I kept my hold around her wrists, savoring the way she wiggled underneath me. Sadly, there were things that needed to be said, plans to be made.

Many of which I knew she wouldn't appreciate.

However, there was no other choice.

"Why are you here?"

"To protect you, why else?" I asked the question even as I was pressing my lips against her cheek.

"That's bullshit. You came to kill me. Or to force me to marry you."

I eased back, unable to keep a grin from crossing my face. "Why would I kill something so beautiful?"

Nothing she did any longer surprised me. The moment I loosened my hold on her wrists, she managed to drive her hand between us, using her long legs as a weapon. Seconds later, she'd rolled us both over, straddling my hips. Her smile was laced with mischief, but I could easily read her mind. She was a survivor. That had been proven by her daring jump into the water. She would do anything to protect herself, including killing me if necessary.

She still had no idea the kind of man I'd been turned into, so I found it amusing when she snagged one of the fireplace poker, driving the heavy iron end against my throat. "Because that's what men like you do."

I lifted a single eyebrow, more amused than anything. My reaction obviously irritated her, and she jammed the point into my skin.

"What a shame I didn't heat the tip in the roaring fire." Her voice was little more than a soft whisper, her eyes still roaming my face. As she slid her torso back and forth across my thighs, I took a deep breath.

"And why would you do that, my little fawn?"

"To rid myself of the roaches following me." She twisted the implement, cocking her head as she studied my eyes. She even had the nerve to bend down, kissing me on the lips ever so softly. "What a shame it will be to kill something so dark and dangerous."

Laughing, I fisted both her long curls and the implement she held at the same time, tossing the fireplace poker aside then jerking her head back until she was forced into a deep arc. Seconds later, I thrust my still hard cock past her swollen folds. “After all we shared, you’re calling me an insect?”

A single moan escaping, she did everything she could to reach me, touching nothing but air. “Yes. Worse.”

At least the girl made me laugh. I loosened my hold, allowing her to peer down at the man she’d soon spend the rest of her life with.

While she glared at me, her lower lip quivering, she rocked against me. My cock was even harder than before, throbbing to the point it was aching.

“Whatever it takes, sweetheart.” I lifted her hips, yanking her all the way down, my heart thudding from the way her muscles clamped around my shaft.

“I don’t care about you.”

“That may be so, but it doesn’t really matter.” I tangled my fingers in her hair, tugging every few seconds until I exposed her long neck. I couldn’t help myself, flicking a single finger of my other hand back and forth across her taut nipple.

“Why?” she panted, her eyelids half closing.

“Because I’m the only man who can keep you alive.” When I pinched her nipple, her eyes rolled in the back of her head, her entire body shaking.

As she bucked against me, I finally released my hold on her hair, cupping her other breast and squeezing.

She tossed her head from side to side then leaned down, taking several deep breaths. “You just think you are.”

“Oh, I know what I’m capable of.”

The way she smiled was a clear indication she’d do everything in her power to try to get away from me. I couldn’t allow that to happen and had methods of preventing her from doing so if necessary.

A sinful look remained on her face, the fire illuminating her torrid expression. As she pumped up and down, she rolled her hands up and down my chest, fingering my muscles. I continued toying with her nipples, twisting them relentlessly until she whimpered from the slice of pain.

And I knew she craved more.

I realized too late that I'd allowed my guard to fall, enjoying the passionate moment. The way she was kneading my skin pushed me into an intense lull and the second I closed my eyes, she jerked away from me, racing into the shadows.

Mallory didn't make a single sound, but she'd underestimated my reflexes. I jumped up, racing after her, amused she believed she could get away from me for even a few seconds. The moment I snagged her arm, yanking her against me, she slammed her palm under my chin. My head snapped back, jarred from a jolt of anguish. She used the few seconds of shock to slip out of my hold, jetting into another room.

I stopped just outside the doorway of the room she'd entered, listening for any sounds. The woman was a consummate tease, something else I adored about her. But my needs were too great to allow this to continue. The moment I walked inside, I anticipated her move, blocking her hard swing as she attempted to smash some object down on my head. The clang as it left her hands, falling to the floor, was a good indication I'd been correct in assuming she wanted to hurt me.

I wrenched her arm behind her back, holding her in place as I breathed across the back of her neck. "That wasn't very nice of you."

"I never told you I was a nice girl."

"That is true, which is why I'll need to tame you." I walked her back into the living room, moving toward the back of the couch. The moonlight streaming in through the blinds provided a perfect backdrop, allowing me just enough light to study her face as I pitched her over the thick leather. I held her in place, not hesitating before bringing my hand down in rapid succession.

I expected her to struggle to free herself, but she remained where she was, taking deep breaths and accepting the punishment as if it was deserved. Maybe she thought I would go easy on her if she didn't fight me.

She was wrong.

"You shouldn't have run away. Then I would have explained who I am," I told her, issuing six hard cracks of my palm. Almost instantly, the heat buildup in my hand was intoxicating, pushing me to another level of raging desire. She made me into the beast she thought me to be, my needs escalating.

"You mean what you are."

I smacked each side several times before answering. "And you think you're any different?"

"Very much so. I don't want this life."

"You don't have the luxury of having a choice." With every hard crack of my hand, my fingers tingled even more. When she wiggled from side to side, another wave of her feminine wiles floated into my nostrils, filling my system. She was wet and hot all over, now gasping for air.

"Both of us have a choice."

For some crazy reason, I thought she really believed what she was saying. "If only that were true, little fawn. But you crossed some very bad people."

"Like my father?" she spit out, hatred in her tone.

I rubbed her bottom, savoring the heat building in my hand but I was at the point of losing control all over again. The woman had a way of stripping away my ability to rein in my desires and she knew it. "Your father is the least of your worries."

"If you mean Ivan, the fucking Russian is nothing but a savage."

"Yes, but he's also a brutal killer."

She finally let off a series of whimpers. "You are too."

I continued the spanking, trying to be methodical in my actions. Whatever she'd heard was likely jaded but could prove useful. After issuing a few more, each one harder than the one before, I pulled her to a standing position, forcing her to turn around. "You're right, but you knew that before."

"You hid it well. What did you do with Blazer? Toss him aside?"

"He's basking in the care of my pilot."

She opened her eyes wide, as if she expected I was finished with her. I was surprised that she said nothing else, only shuddering when I backed her against the wall, immediately lifting her off the floor. A wry expression on her face, she swung her arms around my shoulders before I wrapped her legs around mine.

"Say you want me, Mallory."

"You don't always get what you want."

"Then I'll just take it." I rolled onto the balls of my feet, driving the entire length of my cock back into her tight little channel.

She snagged her fingers in my hair, coiling them around the long length, panting as I plunged deep and hard. When I planted my hands on either side of her, she laughed softly. There was nothing like being inside of her, taking exactly what I wanted. The way her pussy muscles clamped and released several times was almost enough to make me come, but I wanted this to last.

As I nuzzled into the soft skin of her neck, she panted, pressing her knees against me. "You're a terrible... man. Just... terrible."

"I'm glad you have that straight," I whispered in her ear before nipping her earlobe. The sweet taste of her was scintillating, pushing me into losing parts of my mind as well as my soul. I'd thought her dead, an ache developing from the ugliness of what had occurred. I'd lost parts of myself, but she'd brought me back.

Her touch.

Her taste.

Her rapture.

And I couldn't seem to get enough.

I thrust harder and faster, pitching her up and down on the wall, my angry breaths as prominent as hers.

"Oh. Oh. Oh..." She tossed her head from side to side, dragging her tongue across her lips, her long nails digging into my skin.

I craved the pain, adored the way she scratched down the length of my back. My blood pressure had risen, my pulse skyrocketing, yet still I continued. There would never be enough.

"Come for me," I growled, pulling back enough to bite down on her bottom lip.

"No."

"You will do as I say."

She laughed, but within seconds, her body responded to my command.

"That's it. Come. Come!"

"Oh, no. Oh... God," she squealed, her entire body shaking more violently than it had done before. As a climax erupted from deep within, she hung her head, one hand clutching the back of my neck.

I pulled all the way out, slamming into her again, every sound I made husky from continued desire. When she started panting, I picked up the intensity, every muscle in my body stiffening.

"You're so... so bad and I..." She opened her eyes, staring into mine as the single orgasm rolled into another, her scattered laughs becoming loud moans. "Yes. Yes. Yes!"

As she lolled her head against my shoulder, I finally allowed myself to release, pumping several times until I filled her with my seed.



When she'd escaped before, a part of me had wanted to consider her my enemy.

And now?

All I could think about was protecting her.

Even with my life.

## CHAPTER 16



*M*allory

Death.

I wasn't immune to the fear of it, but it had never bothered me but so much. I'd become hardened to the realization that many lives would be lost in the world of made men and the mafia. But now, things seemed strangely too close for comfort.

I hadn't moved from the television since I'd turned it on, my coffee cold because I'd ignored it while watching the news. The fashion show had turned into a complete massacre, several people shot and killed. One of the men killed had been Michael Chevell. I didn't need to learn fluent English to know what was being said.

When I felt Brogan's presence behind me, I bristled. "You killed him. Didn't you? You killed all those people at the show." As expected, he said nothing. I turned around to confront him, finding him going through one of my bags. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"Your phone. I need your phone."

"Why?"

"Because it's possible that friend of yours managed to plant a bug on it."

I opened my mouth to retort, then looked away. "She's not like that."

“Oh, no? Then why do you think three of Ivan Korski’s soldiers were there?” he asked, tossing my things onto the kitchen table.

“You didn’t answer me. Did you kill those people?”

“Did you know Chevell was a Russian immigrant, hired by Ivan Korski years ago?”

A cold shiver trickled down my spine. “Not until he told me I was a worthless queen who deserved to be put down in his native tongue.”

Laughing, he stopped tossing my things for a few seconds, studying my eyes. I hated the way his pierced mine, pulling on the heartstrings that I’d done everything I could to clip.

“Stop that,” I snapped, taking three long strides in his direction, yanking the bag from his hand. “I didn’t call her. I stopped by her place hoping she was there night before last. There’s no way a flight could have gotten from Chicago to Italy in a few hours.”

He laughed, shaking his head. “Sweetheart. Don’t be naïve. Korski has people all over the world. He doesn’t mind paying huge sums of money to get what he wants, and he clearly wants you.” His tone was condescending, and I hissed.

“You think you know everything. Don’t you?”

As he walked closer, I held my breath. The attraction we shared was even stronger. All the hate I’d wanted to feel, ignoring the pent-up desire had disappeared the moment he’d pulled me into his arms. I don’t know what I’d expected but when he cupped both sides of my face, lowering his head, I was struck by how insanely intoxicating his aftershave was.

“What I know is that you’re a wanted woman and I refuse to lose you again.”

Again. The word had such meaning, so much so that I was touched. But I could tell by the look in his eyes that it was all about being his possession, something I’d promised myself I’d never be. Not to him. Not to anyone. No matter the strong feelings I had for him, I couldn’t allow myself to fall any harder for a man who was incapable of love. We weren’t

meant to be together. The truth was that we were meant to be enemies.

“Why didn’t you tell me who you were at the cabin? Just answer me.”

“I wasn’t there in the capacity of Brogan Callahan. I was there to try and keep from starting a war, turning Chicago upside down to find my brother’s killer.”

“And did you succeed?”

His laugh was just as bitter as all the rest. “Not in the middle of a snowstorm. What I found was an incredible woman who’d saved my dog’s life. It was funny you never mentioned who you were either. Do you really think it was a coincidence that we were brought together?”

“You were sent for me. That’s the answer.”

“No, I was not.”

The truth was that I believed him.

“Answer the damn question. Did you kill them?”

Brogan eyed me for a few seconds before nodding. Just once. There was no look of remorse. While I wasn’t entirely certain how I felt about what he’d done, how could I dare judge him when I’d seen my father pull the trigger twice in my life? I was tired, more exhausted than I’d been my entire life.

“Why are you here?” I managed.

“As I told you before, I’m the only man who can keep you alive. Now, you need to listen to me because we aren’t staying here long.”

“Hold on,” I snapped, pushing my hand against his chest. “My mother risked everything to help me. I am not going back. My father will kill her.”

His eyes opened wide and he growled under his breath. “Your father hurt you?”

“Not me. At least not yet. But he’s hit my mother before. I don’t know him any longer and I want nothing to do with that life.”

A few seconds passed and they were filled with tension.

“Can you trust me?” he asked.

“Why should I? You lied to me at the cabin.”

“As I said, I didn’t know who you were at the time. But even if I had known, I still wouldn’t have told you who I really am.”

“Right. I get it.”

The look on his face changed, now stern, and when he spoke, his voice was commanding. “Do you? Do you really?”

“No. I don’t get any of this.” It was my turn to laugh.

“Then I suggest you sit down, but only after you give me your phone.”

The way he rubbed his thumb back and forth across my cheek created a wave of tremors. He’d held me all night long, pulling me into his arms just before dawn. Then he’d crawled out of bed, making several phone calls in another part of the house. But I’d heard enough. He’d taken full control of his father’s organization, which made him just as dangerous as Ivan, perhaps more so. Was there a war going on between them?

“I don’t need to sit down. What I demand is the truth. Why did you lie to me at the cabin? And why were you sent to track me down?”

He pulled his hands away, leaving his palms face up as he stared at me with his insanely gorgeous eyes.

I moved to the kitchen counter, yanking it from where I’d left it near the coffeemaker. “It’s a burner phone. Do you really think I’m stupid enough to use anything from when I was Mallory Montgomery?”

As soon as I placed it in his hand, he smashed it on the floor. “You don’t seem to realize just how much danger you are in. If I could find you then almost anyone could. You’re not stupid, Mallory. You’ve just never been placed in such a dire situation.”

“Because of my father.”

“Only you can answer that.”

I backed away, slumping against the counter. “I’m sorry about your brother.”

He looked away, the flash of pain in his eyes real. “He was a good man. He’d just gotten his six-month checkup, free of the cancer that was supposed to end his life. We were celebrating.” His laugh was bitter, and I couldn’t blame him.

“That’s terrible. Ivan did that?”

“I’m not certain.”

I studied his eyes and realized that he believed my father had something to do with the assassination. A lump formed in my stomach and I almost threw up, forced to go to the sink. As I leaned over, dry heaving, I was surprised tears hadn’t formed in my eyes. “This is crazy.”

“In a battle for power, it doesn’t matter who you are or what lives you destroy. All that matters is becoming top dog.”

“Is that what you’re doing?” I turned on the faucet, splashing water in my face.

“I’m doing what’s necessary in order to protect my family. That includes you.”

I grabbed a towel, wiping my face as I turned around. “I’m not your family.”

“Goddamn it, Mallory. You’re not safe here.”

“And I am with you?”

He walked closer and the crackle of electricity exploded between us just like it had been the night before. I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think clearly as stars floated in front of my eyes. He gripped both my arms, exhaling slowly. “I’m many things, Mallory, including a trained killer, but I will never lie to you. It’s not my intention to hurt you, but you’re going to need to trust me as well as be willing to do some things that will make you uncomfortable. But in doing so, you’ll have more power and control than your father.”

“You’re crazy if you think that my father will ever give up any control to his lowly daughter. Don’t you know that my father still lives in the Stone Age?” I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Don’t be too hard on your father.”

“Are you kidding me? Because of him I had to fake my own death for fear of being stuck with a horrible man like Ivan Korski.”

“I know that. However, your father is likely going to jail.”

As soon as he said the words, I knew he wasn’t kidding.

“What?”

“That’s probably the reason he was making an alliance.”

“I don’t buy it.”

“You can ask him yourself when you return.”

“I’m not going back to Canada. I already told you that.”

He took his sweet time gazing down the front of me and damn if he didn’t make me tingle all over again. “No, you’re not. You’re returning to Chicago with me.”

“For what reason?”

“Because when you do, you’ll be my wife.”

“You’re taking me as your prisoner. You’re no better than anyone else. What is it? Do you want to breed me to carry your children so you can build your legacy? Is that it?” Was I really angry with him? No. The sad truth was I was hurt. I’d wanted him to crave me so badly because of love, not because of necessity and circumstances. My heart ached more than before.

“You don’t understand. I’m suggesting an alliance of our own. Our marriage would allow us to rule two empires, creating one so powerful that no one would be stupid enough to try and destroy us.”

“And after we succeed?”

He studied me for a few seconds before answering. “Then you can have your life back.”

\* \* \*

## *Brogan*

Love.

There was no place for it in either one of our lives. Having Mallory in my arms had meant more to me than I wanted to admit to her or to myself. However, I'd seen the look on her face, the accusations she'd raised ones that I couldn't provide a good enough answer to. The reason we'd been brought together could be fate, but neither one of us wanted to buy it. I needed her help just like she needed my protection. Marriage was the only way to make both things happen.

"Will that mean destroying my father?" she asked after two full minutes had passed.

"That's not the intent. What it will do is allow you choices. Your father will be forced to keep the original contract he proposed with my family." While I'd yet to learn the terms of the agreement, I had full intentions of changing them to what I decided, which would leave Grayson Montgomery his wealth while requiring both Mallory and me to handle every aspect of business for both organizations.

It would be a game changer if she accepted, providing a modernized empire. I liked the sound of it, even if I preferred we were marrying for other reasons.

She turned away and I could see her lower lip quivering. Then she shored up her shoulders, taking her time to face me once again. "I'll agree but on my terms."

"Understood. We can work out the details. I want to make it fair to both of us."

As she walked closer, there was contempt in her eyes. "Maybe one day you can explain to me exactly what you think is your definition of fair. My entire life has been a lie. I'm not allowed to choose what I want in my life or..." She looked away, a lump forming in her throat. "Or the man I love. Excuse me but I need to lie down. This is all just a little bit overwhelming."

While I wanted to reach out, I sensed she needed time alone.



She headed toward the door, stopping short but not turning around as she spoke. “When is this... marriage going to take place?”

“Tomorrow. I’ve already arranged everything.”

Her laugh was devoid of any emotion, but I noticed she placed her hand over her face. “Of course you have. Fine. Just let me know and I’ll be there with bells on.”

Before she had a chance to leave the room, Ryan walked into the kitchen, remaining in the doorway. “Am I interrupting?”

She skirted around him, still laughing. “He’s all yours.”

He watched her taking long strides out of the room, finally heading in my direction. “What was that about?”

“My impending nuptials.”

His grin was wide until he noticed my face. I’d just broken the spirit of the only woman I would ever... love.

“I just got a call from Calen. Four of our men were gunned down just outside your father’s house.”

“What? How the fuck could that happen? Where the hell was Sean?”

“He’s nowhere to be seen.”

As I took a deep breath, my irritation with my cousin turned into anger. “The wedding is tomorrow. Then we’re returning. Is my family okay?”

“There was no attempt at getting inside. It was a drive-by but there is no doubt Ivan was responsible.”

I fisted my hands, allowing the rage to subside. “When we return, be prepared for war.”

\* \* \*

*Mallory*

This was nothing but a business arrangement. That's what I had to keep telling myself.

*Then why are you fussing about the dress you're wearing?*

That question was also in the back of my mind, fighting to reach the surface. I shoved it aside, furious that I'd accepted the deal in the first place. I hadn't been able to sleep all night, tossing and turning, a part of me longing to see his face.

The other part of me was grateful he'd left me entirely alone. I'd heard him late into the night making calls, angry during most of them. Now, as the sun crested over the horizon, I stood at the window of the cozy bedroom, the location overlooking a forest of trees. He'd explained more of the business deal over dinner, laying out terms, accepting most of mine. The contract would be finalized by one of his family attorneys upon our return. Everything was neat and tidy.

And I hated it.

He was right. The arrangement would make me a powerful and wealthy woman, perhaps more so than even my father. But I wanted no part of it. I don't know what I'd imagined would happen if Brogan found me. Perhaps I'd allowed my fantasies to get the better of me.

Didn't every little girl dream of their wedding to Mr. Prince Charming? I hadn't dwelled on the concept, but it had crossed my mind more than once in my life. Sighing, I moved toward the bathroom, studying my reflection in the mirror. The dress was lovely, the deep purple accentuating my eyes. I didn't own anything white.

What was I saying? This was the only dress I owned. For now. I touched up my makeup. Whoever Brogan had hired to perform the ceremony had been told to be here by eight. That would give me time for coffee. I couldn't stomach the thought of eating anything.

I took a step back and twirled from one side to the other. It would have to do. What would my mother say? After grabbing my shoes, I headed for the door and as soon as I opened it, I was confronted by a handsome man who took my breath away.

Brogan cursed under his breath then whistled, giving me a nod of approval. “You look incredible.”

“It’s all I have that could work. I hope it’s alright.”

“You didn’t have to dress up.”

“Is that why you’re in a suit?” As I reached for his tie, we both seemed surprised. I fixed the knot, patting his chest before taking a step away. “You look debonaire. Is this for fake wedding pictures?”

A somber look crossed his face. “No. It’s because you deserve to have a nice wedding.”

A nice wedding. What was I supposed to say to him? Maybe I could have demanded more, but neither one of our hearts were in this so why bother? “This is fine. We leave immediately afterward?”

“Yes.”

I almost asked what about the honeymoon, but I knew there wouldn’t be one. How very sad after all the passion we’d shared. When I tried to move away, he yanked my arm, pulling me against him so tightly I could feel his heart beating, the hard thumping matching his heavy breathing.

“You might think this is all about business and nothing else. But you’d be sorely wrong,” he growled, cupping my cheek and chin with one hand as he wrapped his other arm around my waist, grinding his hips against me.

“I can’t believe anything you say,” I whispered, haunted by the moment and the way my body reacted to his. I ached inside, my pussy wet and hot.

And I wanted him as I had no other man.

“Maybe not. But you can believe this.” As he captured my mouth, I scrunched my hand around his shirt, wanting to push him away. Instead, I arched my back, tilting my head as he swept his tongue inside.

There was nothing like his powerful kisses or the way I felt when I was nestled in his strong arms. My mind was foggy, swooning from the intensity of his intimate hold. He

dominated my tongue, exploring every dark recess, making me his.

As he'd promised more than once.

How could I want this so much when I needed to hate him?

There was no logical answer and at this moment, I didn't care. My pulse increasing, I fell into the moment, my core heated to a thousand degrees, the desire building to a point I wouldn't be able to control. He refused to let me go, taking his time to make his mark, staining me with his scent. I was overcome by it, so masculine and musky, but I knew it was toxic to want this as much as I did.

My muscles were tingling when he broke the kiss seconds later, keeping his firm hold on my jaw, tipping my head until he was able to drag his tongue around my lips. Then he nipped my chin, his hot breath cascading across my skin tingling me even more.

I closed my eyes, pretending we were somewhere else, no longer in danger of losing ourselves to the greed and need for power.

But it wasn't to be.

We could never escape who and what we were.

I pushed him away, instantly hating myself for doing so. When I turned around, a single tear formed and I willed it away. It was ridiculous to be emotional about something that had no real meaning.

"I have something for you," he said almost in passing, his lack of emotion a direct contrast to what I was feeling.

I wiped my eye, giving him a look over my shoulder. "The obligatory ring?"

Brogan laughed. "I purchased two."

"When?"

"Before I found you."

Nodding, I wasn't certain whether to be angry or incensed. He'd decided that the deal he'd offered was one I'd be

required to accept whether I wanted to or not. Always the dominating man. I just needed to be steadfast in my approach to the alliance, foregoing any concept this was forever. I was strong enough. “Then what?”

When he pulled a small handgun out of his pocket, I tensed, turning to face him.

“You need to carry this with you at all times. As soon as our enemies realize we’re together, they will stop at nothing to take us down. That will likely start with trying to eliminate you.” He held it out, cocking his head when I didn’t react immediately. “You do know how to shoot. Right?”

“Yes, oh, dear fiancé of mine. That was one non-girlie thing my father insisted on.” I grabbed it from his hand, checking for ammunition, holding out my hand because it was unloaded.

His laugh pushed me to another level of emotions, allowing the anger to surface. He pulled a magazine from his pocket, handing it to me, watching as I loaded it without hesitation. I could tell he seemed satisfied. “Good. I hope you don’t need to use it but don’t hesitate if you’re threatened. I’ll deal with the consequences later if necessary.”

“Oh, you mean if I kill an innocent person?” The piece of steel felt odd in my hand, but somewhere deep inside, it gave me comfort. At least I could protect myself if necessary.

“Yes, but more so if you kill an assassin.”

“Do you really think there are a half dozen soldiers waiting out there to kill one or both of us?”

“Yes, I do.” His instant answer brought another wave of shivers. Icy ones.

“Then I shall bring it with me to our great wedding festivities.”

He studied me for what seemed like an eternity before heading toward the door. “You’ll be downstairs in a few minutes?”

“Of course.”

Brogan opened the door, walking out then stopping, taking another look in my direction. I could swear the man was full of

pain.

So was I.

After he left, I closed my eyes, holding the weapon against my chest. I could do this. I would do this. Maybe one day I'd put a bullet in his brain.

A few minutes later, I pressed my hand down my dress, realizing I couldn't put the terrible deed off any longer. I was excited that at least I didn't have to live alone in hiding as I'd expected, but the consequences were agonizing, strangling in an entirely different way. The future looked bleak.

With the gun firmly planted in my hand, I walked downstairs, still nauseous and anxious but eager to get the event over with. I followed the voices to the living room, noticing Brogan's second in command first then another man in a suit talking with Brogan. My eyes also caught the bouquet of flowers on the table. Wow. My future husband had really believed that by purchasing rings and flowers I'd be satisfied with this fake, loveless wedding?

I was silent as I walked inside, placing the weapon on the coffee table, ignoring the flowers. Then I walked up to the two men, standing eye to eye with the officiant here to perform the deed. "Gentlemen, I'm ready."

Brogan smiled, the same sparkle in his eye that I'd seen moments before. And it made me sick inside, knots forming in my stomach.

"Then let's get started," the officiant said, his Italian accent heavy.

I grabbed the flowers with enough force a few petals were disturbed, floating to the floor. Then I gave Brogan a look, allowing him to guide me just in front of the bank of windows where we'd be married.

There was something so surreal about standing in front of the unknown man as he said all the right things, treating this as if we were in love. He smiled at the right times, paused during the middle of several passages, yet I barely listened to what he said. When Ryan took the flowers from my hand, I almost

laughed. A soldier I barely knew was serving as my maid of honor and Brogan's best man as well as the single witness. I wondered if our marriage would even be legal. What did it matter at this point?

Brogan took my hands, his eyes piercing mine and for a few seconds we were in a vacuum, searching each other's soul. There was nothing I could say, no emotions that would counter the sadness in my heart. The little girl dreaming of her Prince Charming had thought she could fall in love with the handsome rogue, seeing herself in a charming little house with two or three kids, happy as could be.

Then reality took over, shattering her dreams.

What was left was a shell of a woman with no understanding of how she could move forward. But that would change.

When Brogan placed the ring on my finger, only then did I bother looking at it. I had to admit, the diamond-encrusted band was gorgeous, likely costing him a fortune, but it still meant nothing to me.

"And do you take Brogan Callahan to be your lawfully wed husband, to have and to hold from this day forward until death do you part?"

I hesitated, allowing the single tear to trickle down my face. While I knew I'd answered correctly, I couldn't hear anything but the heavy drumming of my heart.

"You may now kiss your bride." The man stepped away, closing the book he was holding. I noticed out of the corner of my eye Ryan handing the officiant a check. How very businesslike.

Brogan took me into his arms as he'd done before, his eyes darting back and forth. For the first time, I wasn't pulled into his dark web of hunger. This time it was one of deceit.

Yet as his lips touched mine, the heat from before began to build, making me want him so much that I ached inside.

The kiss was sweet, inviting and damning all at the same time.

Brogan lifted his head, and it was impossible to read his expression.

“I’ll see Mr. Rossi out,” Ryan said from behind us, their footsteps the one thing I tried to concentrate on.

A few seconds of additional tension passed before my husband inched closer.

“Do you know how much I care about you?” Brogan asked.

“Does it really matter? Unless there is love in a marriage, it’s doomed from the start.” I pulled away from him, trying to keep from expressing anything else. But I couldn’t help myself, staring at the ring, twisting and turning it. “I will say you have incredible tastes.”

His chuckle sent a wave of electricity through me. “You can have anything you want, my lovely bride. I want you happy.”

“And I want to be happy, Brogan. I also want to be able to make my own choices. Just remember, I’m an equal partner.” My words cut through him like a knife, his expression hardening.

“I’ll remember that. A done deal.” He moved toward the coffee table, staring down at the weapon. “We need to leave.”

Everything was so perfunctory.

“Of course. I’ll get my things.” I walked toward the door, stopping long enough to grab the weapon. Before I was able to take another step, I felt a rumble beneath my feet. “What is that?” I turned quickly and Brogan reacted instantly, launching himself toward me. As soon as he’d tackled me to the floor, I felt a vacuum.

Another rumble, then...

*Boom!*



## CHAPTER 17



*B*rogan

The force of the blast drove us against the wall, debris flying from every direction. I continued to cover Mallory with my body, gasping for air as the smoke rolled through the room. I could feel her shaking underneath me but at least that meant she was alive.

Then I heard gunshots.

Christ. What in the fuck?

Mallory. Oh, God. *Please let her be alright.*

As soon as the vibrations shifted to a dull rumble, I tossed pieces of wallboard and shelves from the bookcase away, instantly reaching for my weapon. The smoke and dirt were still too thick to be able to see anything. Damn it. I'd been careless in allowing us to stay here.

"Oh..." she whimpered.

I brushed away debris, cupping her face. "Are you okay, baby?" Fire was still climbing the walls, flames licking at almost everything in the room. The air was acrid, but the entire front of the villa was gone, leaving a gaping wide-open space.

"What happened?" She opened her eyes, wrapping the fingers of one hand around my shirt. She still had the weapon I'd provided in her other hand. *Fuck.* This was a freaking mess.

Coughing, I scanned the room, shoving additional fragments away. “We were ambushed. We need to get out of here. Is anything broken?” The thought of losing her remained in the back of my mind, increasing the fury that continued to compound itself. I couldn’t believe the bastard had gone this far in order to eliminate either one of us.

As the sound of another crash occurred, I shielded her once again, swinging my arm in the direction of the noise.

Ryan flew into the room, his chest heaving as he took several gulping breaths. “Mr. Callahan. Brogan!”

“We’re over here.” Every muscle ached as I struggled to my feet, gently lifting Mallory into my arms. She was unsteady, cuts covering a portion of her face and neck, but otherwise appeared unharmed. “What in God’s name just happened?”

“I have no fucking clue. I noticed a car. Then the explosion. I got off a couple shots before whoever was driving raced away. I don’t think Mr. Rossi survived.” He wiped blood and soot from his face, shaking his head.

“Is the SUV operable?” I guided her closer to the door, half expecting to see soldiers bursting into the room. I should have known better than to remain in the villa. We’d been sitting ducks.

“I don’t know. The blast took out half the house. I’ll go find out.”

“Call the pilot. We’re getting the fuck out of here,” I told him.

Nodding, he staggered away, and I wrapped my arm around Mallory’s waist, heading toward the driveway.

“This is crazy,” she managed, her voice barely audible over the continued roar. “Who did this? The Russians? My father?”

I wanted to tell her it could be either one or my son of a bitch cousin who’d disappeared. The fact I had no idea pissed me off.

“We’ll get through it.” I lifted my arm, ready to fire, my vision still slightly impaired. When we were outside and away from the main structure, I eased her down on the lawn.

“It’s gone. Everything is gone. How could this have happened?”

I had a feeling she was going into shock, her shaking continuing.

“I don’t know.” I turned in a full circle, realizing whoever had been responsible had likely set the bombs just before dawn. What had been the point of waiting until in the morning? The game being played was getting out of hand. Seconds later, I heard the engine from the SUV and returned to Mallory, picking her up in my arms.

“I can walk.” She tried to smile but there was so much pain in her eyes that it almost gutted me.

“Aren’t I supposed to carry you over the threshold?” I kept an eye out for any assailants as I headed for the vehicle. After placing her in the backseat, I turned in a full circle. This wasn’t over. In fact, it was just the beginning.

I hopped inside and as soon as I had the door closed, Ryan took off, pressing his foot down on the accelerator. I’d debated bringing other soldiers with me but hadn’t felt the need. Now I knew that had been a mistake. Ryan was already on the phone with the pilot, instructing him to get his ass in gear.

After he ended the call, he threw a look over his shoulder. “He wasn’t far away. He’ll be at the airport in ten minutes.”

“Good,” I muttered, although my gut told me it was going to be one hell of a long ten minutes. “We need to get a cleanup crew.”

“Already on it.”

Mallory gripped my arm. “What about Blazer?”

“Don’t worry. He’ll be waiting for us.”

“What now?” Her voice was barely a whisper.

“Just try and relax. We’re headed to the plane.” I checked the ammunition in my weapon, taking several deep breaths, aching as soon as I did so.

“Relax? I can’t relax.” She sat up, turning slightly to face me.  
“You’re bleeding.”

I looked down. Blood had already soaked through my shirt. Ryan glanced into the rearview mirror, narrowing his eyes.

She ripped open my shirt, her eyes opening wide. “You have a gash. I don’t know what from.”

“Stop worrying. I’ll be fine.”

“Do you have any towels in here? Something so I can try and stop the bleeding?”

I gave her a look as well as a wry smile. “Normally we come full service, but not this time.”

As she grumbled under her breath, she moved her hands to her dress, doing her best to wipe off the dirt before ripping a portion of the bottom. “I don’t like using this because it’s unclean, but I need to keep pressure on the wound to stop the bleeding.”

I didn’t fight her as she pressed the cloth and both hands against the wound. Fortunately, there wasn’t much traffic given the early hour and the fact it was a Sunday. Ryan picked up speed, weaving his way around what few cars there were. At least four minutes had passed, and I found myself counting them down.

“Put your hand right there,” she instructed, grumbling when I didn’t act quickly enough. Just watching her, realizing her concern kept me on edge. Then she forced my hand over the makeshift bandage, squeezing my fingers before pulling away. Whichever son of a bitch had caused this to happen, almost taking her from me, would pay in the worst way for his atrocities. I would enjoy spending quality time exacting sheer agony.

I took a deep breath, continuously glancing out the windows.

“They’re going to keep coming for us. Aren’t they?” she asked a few seconds later.

“Yeah, they will, which is why being on home turf will be helpful.”

“I’m so sorry. I’m just so sorry.”

“Baby. You have nothing to apologize for.” I rubbed my thumb across her face, making certain her cuts weren’t too deep. “We’ll get you cleaned up on the plane.”

She turned her head, taking a few deep breaths. “I don’t care about that, Brogan. We almost died. We’re alive. I don’t know what I would have done if... if you’d died.”

When I reached out to pull her back, I noticed Ryan tensing.

“What’s wrong?” Immediately, I glanced into the rear window.

“Don’t look now, boss, but I think we have company.”

“Goddamn it. Get down as close to the floor as you can,” I instructed her, tugging on her arm. “It’s okay, little fawn. We’ve gotten this far. There isn’t a man alive who can take us out.”

I only hoped my promise was one I could keep.

She was shivering but remained quiet.

“Have they been on us the entire time?” I asked, trying to decipher how many people were inside the vehicle.

“From the second turn,” Ryan said. “I’m going to try and lose them. The airport isn’t the place to try and fight them off.”

He was right. There was little airport as it was, the smaller location for chartered flights more like a postage stamp buried in between the mountains and trees. “Go for it.” I shifted so I could face the back window. Fuck. With the soot covering most of it, I couldn’t see shit. I touched her arm, leaning over. “Do not move. I’ll be right back.”

“Where are you going?” she asked, her voice quavering.

“Where could I go?” Laughing, I squeezed her arm then crawled over the seat, moving to the back window.

“Boss, don’t do that,” Ryan warned.

“I need to see what I’m shooting at,” I told him.

“Mr. Callahan!” he snarled then pressed down on the accelerator, swinging around a curve. “Just let me do this.”

“I’m just going to buy us some time.”

“No. No!” Mallory yelled, reaching out for me. She continuously shook her head, but she should have learned by now that when I set my mind to something, I did it. Today was no exception. If the assholes reached the airport, there was a damn good chance we wouldn’t be able to take off.

Not acceptable.

“I’ll be fine, babe. I know what I’m doing.”

“Yeah, but what about the jerks in the other car?” she threw at me. As if to prove a point, their driver picked up speed, coming within twenty yards of the car.

“Shit,” Ryan hissed. “Just hold on.”

I wasn’t the patient type and this was one of those times hesitation would only get us killed. I rolled down the window at the same time as I crouched on the floor near the back. With both hands on the weapon, I fired off a few shots, at least two striking the fast-moving car. As the driver veered from one side of the road to the other, someone in the passenger seat threw his head out, trying to take aim.

Mallory yelled. “No. No...”

“Stay down, Mallory. I’m not joking. Get the fuck down!” I managed to get off several more shots but so did the passenger, several bullets hitting our vehicle, some ricocheting off. “Get us out of here, Ryan.”

“That’s what I’m trying to do.”

I continued firing until the clip ran dry, rolling over on my back and immediately reaching for the second magazine. I’d need to make this one last for now. While there was an ammunition bag up front, there’d be no time to get to it.

*Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop!*

“Fuck.” Ryan’s voice was riddled with anger, and he swerved the SUV, hitting gravel on one side, almost spinning out.

I threw a look toward Mallory’s location then popped up again, trying to take aim at the driver. The bumps and turns

were making it next to impossible. I had a feeling Ryan sensed what I was doing, slowing down by several miles per hour. Concentrating, I waited until just the right moment.

*Pop! Pop!*

Within seconds, the vehicle shifted to the right, hitting a guard rail then careening to the other side of the road. I watched with a smile on my face as the car flipped over, tumbling down the side of the ravine.

Ryan jammed his foot on the accelerator, getting us far out of harm's way. When the explosion hit, I dropped to my back, half laughing. "Thank God."

"Yeah, that you have good aim," Ryan said between clenched teeth.

I struggled to crawl over the seat, my chest burning from the injury.

"You're alive. You're alive," Mallory muttered several times.

"I told you I wouldn't let anything happen to you." As I jerked her into my arms, pain in my chest shot through me, but nothing would keep me from holding her.

"Don't you die on me. Don't you dare die on me." She cupped my face, rubbing her thumb back and forth across my cheek.

And the fact tears were in her eyes was something I'd never expected to see.

\* \* \*

*Twenty-four hours later*

"Where is he?" I barked into the phone, pacing my office, a drink in my other hand.

"I don't know, sir. We've checked everywhere," Calen said almost sheepishly.

The fact Sean was still MIA didn't bode well for the man. While there'd been confirmation that Ivan had sent several men to track down Mallory, I wasn't entirely convinced that he'd been the person responsible for calling for a hit on the villa. It was far more likely that my whereabouts had been tracked, the explosion all about taking me out, which would make my father a much easier target.

I glanced down at Blazer, shaking my head from the way his tail was thumping against the carpet, his dark eyes pinned on me as if I was his savior.

Hell, I wasn't certain I could be anyone's savior. I fisted my hand, my thoughts drifting to Mallory. She had no understanding of how lucky she was to be alive.

At least I'd done something good in my life by being able to save and protect her. Could I do that for the rest of her life?

"Check again. I want an itinerary of his full freaking whereabouts. I'm headed to the estate then I'm doing a full round. I need that information by then. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir. I'll have it for you, sir."

I heard the terseness in my voice, which was far removed from my usual demeanor, but the time for kindness and playing games was over. I tossed my phone on my desk then closed my eyes. "Son of a fucking bitch." As soon as I threw back the rest of my scotch, I sensed a presence. Only this time, I didn't feel the need to grab my weapon.

Blazer had simply rushed toward her, jumping up because he knew she would coo and fawn all over him. I was right as usual, Mallory scratching behind his ear and baby talking him as she always did.

Just another reason to adore the woman I...

Shit. The word love flashed in my mind.

For now, I needed to shove my feelings aside. It wouldn't help the situation or keep her any safer.

"A little hard on him, weren't you? Oh, you sweet boy." Mallory asked, her tone of voice changing as she began



addressing Blazer. I don't know why, but it gave me a smile. "Okay, baby. Get down. That's a good boy."

As I turned toward her, my balls instantly tightened from the sight of her in one of my dress shirts. Only most of the buttons were unfastened. I took a deep breath, almost laughing from the masculine scent of the shower gel she'd found in my bathroom. With her arms folded and her legs crossed at the ankles, the way she was leaning against the doorframe with a wicked smile on her face was not only surprising, it was also so inviting that I didn't want to leave her ever again.

I headed toward the beauty, allowing myself to take a long gaze all the way to her toes. When I was standing only a few inches away, she grabbed the glass from my hand.

"There's nothing left," I told her, allowing my heated gaze to settle on the swell of her breasts.

When she tossed it back, one of the ice cubes sliding into her mouth, my cock was just about as hard as it could possibly be.

She crunched the melting chip, her eyes twinkling. After swallowing, she took another into her heated mouth, this time wrapping her hand around my shirt, tugging me close. As she pressed her lips against mine, she rolled them open, taking her time darting the melting ice inside my mouth.

Then she backed away, giggling then putting her hand across her mouth. I couldn't help myself, wrapping my hand around the back of her neck, bending her into an arc. The moment I moved the thin material away from her breast, exposing her pretty pink nipple, she moaned and clutched my arm.

I swirled the ice around her hardened bud, lapping up the drops of water as they trickled in a downward path. Her moans filtered into the room and my desire kicked into overdrive. I could do this for hours. Perhaps I would when I returned.

When the ice finally melted, I sucked on her nipple for almost a full minute before pulling back, grinning like a kid who'd just been let loose inside a toy store.

"You're a bad man," she whispered.

"I made that disclaimer within thirty minutes of meeting you."

“You did, huh?”

“Do you need a reminder?”

A warm flush crept up her cheeks and it was good to see she wasn't any worse for wear after the horrific incidents in Italy. The scratches on her face would heal, but it would be the emotional scars that would take much longer to fade away. At least she was safely tucked away in my brownstone in Chicago, a battery of soldiers guarding the entire building. There was no place safer for her to be.

“As if that's not going to happen regardless,” she said, brushing her hand across my chest as she walked away, my glass still in her hand. “You'll always be a bad boy. Isn't that right, wittle Blazer?”

*Woof. Woof.*

“See? Even your pup agrees with me.” Her laugh was something I would always remember.

The woman was much more formidable than I'd originally believed, the deal she'd made with me making her a very wealthy woman. However, I sensed that it didn't make her happy in the least. She'd really wanted the beautiful wedding with all the glorious details. Maybe one day I could provide that for her.

If she could still tolerate being around me.

And if we were both still alive.

I shoved my hands into my pockets, watching as she prepared another drink, plopping in three ice cubes then giving me a look over her shoulder. “You need to leave tonight?”

“Just for a little while.” I headed toward her, quickly glancing out the window. While the glass was bulletproof, I honestly didn't want her parading in front of the city. She noticed my gaze, moving away.

“You can't keep me prisoner, Brogan.”

“For now, it's best that you're kept a secret. That means stay away from the windows since I have few blinds installed.” That would be rectified.

“What about your men? Won’t they talk?” She sashayed toward me, never blinking.

“Not if they want to live. By the way, you make my dress shirt look damn good.”

“Do you mind that I’m wearing your crisp white shirt? I didn’t seem to have any other clothes. I think they burned up in a fire. I’m not entirely certain.”

Chuckling, I tilted my head over my shoulder as she walked around me in a full circle, teasing me as only she could do. Her eyes had said in no uncertain terms how much she hated me moments before we got married. The change in her demeanor was surprising. God, I craved the woman like no other, wishing I could provide the world at her fingertips.

“I’ll take care of that.”

“You will, huh?” she murmured. “You know my size?” She watched as Blazer moved to one of his beds, making himself at home. Her smile could light up a room.

“I know how you fit against me. I’m certain I’ll figure it out.”

She brushed her hand along my back then moved to another perch further away from the windows. “I was only in Chicago once in my life. I didn’t find it beautiful then.”

“Some locations are magnificent. Others have a high level of poverty and danger.”

“Which your family helps proctor.”

“An interesting way of putting it. If you’re asking whether or not my family contributes to charities, the answer is very little.”

“Then you need to start. In fact, I demand that as well as development of programs for the underprivileged. That will be my legacy.”

“So you want to stay in Chicago?”

“As you told me before, I’ll be able to do whatever I want.” The look on her face was mischievous.

“Within reason. Did I forget to mention that you’ll still be required to submit to me?”

Mallory rolled her eyes. “I don’t know about that.” Her look faded and she seemed to fall into a moment of darkness. I certainly understood the need given everything we’d been through.

“Uh-huh. By the way, I like your hair color.”

When her eyes sparkled again, another pang occurred in my heart.

She flipped her curls, rolling her eyes. “We’ll see if I keep it.”

I walked closer, brushing hair from her neck then dropping my head, pressing a series of kisses along the back of her neck. “You’re going to stay inside. There are guards everywhere, but keep the door locked at all times. Do you understand me?”

“Yes. You’re going to kill someone or maybe an army.”

The frankness of her words amused me. She didn’t seem that bothered that it was possible I’d need to do so. “Not this time. I’m going to see my father.”

“Ah.” She looked away, a frown on her face. “I’m curious. You told me you worked with serial killers before, and I know you’ve killed. Do you see yourself as the same as your former patients?”

A cough formed in my throat. The question had never really entered my mind. “No.”

“Why?”

“Hmmm... Because a serial killer takes great pride in perfecting his or her technique, studying other monsters and their work in order to heighten their skills. Once perfected, most take time in selecting their victims, reveling in discovering then hunting a suitable candidate. Then after their action has been taken, they’re often let down for days, needing a fix to bring back the high when ending a life. They feel no remorse, no guilt whatsoever. Some feel as if they’re doing the victim a favor.”

She shuddered visibly. “And that’s not you? I would imagine you never feel guilty when ending a life.”

“No, I’m not a sociopath, just a trained killer. You’re correct in that I rarely feel guilty, but the reason why is that the people I’m forced to eliminate are usually the scum of the earth.”

As she cocked her head, she studied me intently. “Are there any similarities other than the body count?”

She was pushing buttons that I had no idea where they were coming from. “Serial killers and assassins enjoy the sight of blood.”

As she took in the answer, she never blinked, yet there was an awkwardness between us. “Understood.”

“Ryan is planning on stopping by later to check on you. He is the only person allowed inside my brownstone at this point. Period.”

“I got it, Brogan. I’m not a child, nor am I a fool.” Sighing, she ran her hand through her long curls, her expression hardening.

“Don’t fight me on this, Mallory. Whoever found us in Italy will know that I’ve returned. Whether or not they have any idea you’re with me remains to be seen, but it’s only a matter of time.”

“I don’t plan on fighting you at this point. I just... I don’t want you hurt. You didn’t go to the doctor for your injury. You act like you’re invulnerable. You bleed the same as everyone else. I know because I’ve had it on my hands.”

“It almost sounds like you care.”

She spun around quickly. “Don’t. Just don’t do that to me. The day you walked into my life was the best and worst of my life. Yes, I care about you. Whether I should or not is something else entirely. The truth is that I’ve fallen hard for you. Not because you’re my knight in shining armor, saving my life at least three times, but because of the way you are with Blazer. Just the way he wags his tail when you walk into a room or the little cries the moment he sees you tells me what a kind and decent man you are. All the bullshit you’ve spouted off about

being a bad guy is utter garbage, or at least it was until you decided that power and money meant more than helping people. I don't know what to think about that. You can tell me as much as you want that you had no choice, but I don't buy it. We all have choices we can make. Maybe not all the time, but at least for some aspects of our lives. Be careful, Brogan, that you don't begin to crave the taste of blood instead of just the sight."

I took a deep breath as I thought about what she'd said. There was no method of explaining my life or the decisions I made that would satisfy her. "You don't know the man I was in comparison to the man I have to be."

"That's because you won't allow it. Don't worry. I'll be just fine while you're gone. While it might not have seemed like it before, I can take care of myself. I've been doing it for a long time."

"It's not you I'm worried about. Just like I said before." I reached into my pocket, pulling out a burner phone. "Here. My number is programmed for you. You're only to call me if you need something. Okay?"

As I handed it to her, she lifted her gaze. "When are you going to trust me?"

"Mallory, I do trust you more than anyone in my life. But I worry."

"Worry. Now, it sounds a little like you care."

"Maybe I do, little fawn. I'll purchase a few items on my way back including some toiletries. You can pick out the rest." I rubbed her cheek, half expecting her to push my hand away.

When she didn't, the ache in my heart increased to the point I could no longer deny the way I felt about her.

It was the first time in my life that I'd fallen in love. Sadly, the best thing to do was to remain distant.

That might help keep her alive.

## CHAPTER 18



*B*rogan

“The prodigal son returns.”

I glared at my father, not surprised he had a drink in his hand. He’d sounded off on the phone, which is why I’d decided to pay him a visit first. “It was important that I handle certain business in Italy. In doing so, I was able to make certain confirmations.”

He eyed me for a few seconds before refilling his glass, instantly pouring me one as well. “Important business in Italy. I must admit you have me curious.” When he came my way in order to provide me with the drink, I lifted my left hand, flexing my fingers.

It took him almost ten seconds to realize what I was showing him.

“You leave a crisis situation in order to get married. What was this, some fucking fling who you happened to get pregnant?”

I crowded his space, obviously making him uncomfortable. “Does it matter who I married?” I took the drink from his hand, waiting to see if he understood what I was telling him.

“Yeah, it matters, son. Right now, we’re in a shitstorm and you ran off. Even your cousin has disappeared.”

Sean’s itinerary hadn’t been completed. The truth was it appeared he hadn’t wanted anyone to know what he was

doing. That troubled the hell out of me.

Depending on if my father had figured out what I was telling him would provide me with a sense of either comfort or discord in where Sean's loyalty had been placed. It was obvious to me that he was floundering for the first time in his life, Liam's death stripping him of his cognitive abilities that had made him a strong leader.

And he had no understanding of how powerful I'd already become.

"Do you have any idea where Sean might have gone?"

He snorted, glancing at my ring one last time before turning around and heading toward one of his office windows. "None. He got a call three days ago and mentioned he had some business to take care of and that was the last anyone has seen of him. If you ask me, I'd say he's a traitor."

"I would agree with you, Pops. I think we need to consider the possibility that he's working with either Ivan or Grayson. Or both for that matter."

"Why not?" He laughed, lifting his glass. "If that's the case, then we're sitting ducks."

"No, we're not."

"And why is that, son? I am truly curious what you've managed to cook up while galivanting in another country, wining and dining your new wife."

I pulled papers I'd put together on the plane ride from my business arrangement with Mallory. "While the contract itself hasn't been formalized by our attorney, it will be within the next two days, but I assure you that the alliance stands."

"Alliance?"

Grinning, I opened the folded copy, staring down at the first page. I was pleased with what I'd put together, getting the stamp of approval from Mallory. "Yes, one that will make our empire the strongest in the Midwest." I slid the paperwork across his desk, allowing him to take a few minutes to read it over.



When he lifted his head, I felt great satisfaction that I'd shocked the hell out of him.

"Are you trying to tell me that Mallory Montgomery is alive?"

"Not only alive, but safely tucked away in my marriage bed, Father." His look of continued shock amused me.

"How is that possible? Money? A part of our empire?"

"You should read the rest of the paperwork, Pops. It'll explain in full detail. And the reason is that Mallory and I fell in love in a snowstorm in the middle of Colorado. Not only is she my wife, she's also the sole heir and rightful leader to the Montgomery fortune."

"That's only if Grayson dies."

I laughed, shaking my head. "I assure you that will come in time. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a beautiful woman waiting in my bed that I need to get back to." Whether or not he was happy with the decisions I'd made couldn't matter at this point. I polished off the scotch, thumping the glass down on his desk before heading to his office door.

"I'm proud of you, son. Not only did you surprise me, you also made me a very proud man and father. You've earned your right to lead this organization."

I stopped short, taking a deep breath then glancing over my shoulder. "Yes, I have, Pops. Now, we do things my way."

\* \* \*

*Mallory*

Little fawn.

I'd hated hearing the nickname the first time Brogan had used it, but the moniker had grown on me since then. It was a term of endearment that I was surprised he'd use. Maybe he was human after all.

Pacing.

I was getting very good at pacing the floor as well as trying to stay away from the windows, which was much harder. The Chicago lights were beautiful, the world below exciting. I knew why Brogan wanted me to stay away from the glass, fearful that I'd be seen. That's why I'd turned out the lights, allowing the twinkling ones from other buildings to cut through the darkness. I was no longer afraid. I'd seen at least six huge men who were guarding me like good soldiers. No one was going to get through the human barrier.

“What do you think, Blazer? I'll like it here?”

*Woof!*

“My guess is you'd say that about any city as long as I remained with your dad.”

His panting allowed me to laugh. The moment I'd stepped foot on the plane, I'd wrapped my arms around his neck, squeezing him until he'd barked in discomfort. He'd remained at my feet the entire trip, which had allowed me to breathe easier.

As I stood with a glass of wine in my hand, foregoing the scotch given my upset tummy, I kept the other on the glass as I became a voyeur. At least I could live vicariously through their worlds to a degree. I couldn't seem to get warm, and it had nothing to do with wearing Brogan's clothes.

I had a feeling I was finally coming down from the rush of adrenaline and crazed fear, forced to face whatever kind of reality this was. I wanted to call my mother, but I'd made a promise to Brogan. I pulled the phone out of my sweatpants, pressing my finger on the screen. There were no cutesy pictures or any individuality. This was just like the arrangement, stark and cold.

Only that wasn't the truth. I felt exactly the way I'd told him, wishing for more than this really was. If only he could open up to me, sharing more of who he'd been and why he wasn't practicing any longer.

“Do you think your daddy could fall in love with me, Blazer?”

His thumping tail was his only response.

After taking a few more sips of the wine, I couldn't stand the taste any longer, heading for the kitchen to grab a bottle of water instead. Even that didn't solve the anguish sitting in the pit of my stomach.

I heard a sound less than a minute later and bounded toward the front door. The second knock brought a wave of fear. There was no way to see who was standing on the other side.

"Mallory. It's Ryan. Can you let me in?" The man's deep voice sounded urgent but was one I recognized. Still, that didn't take away from anxiousness.

"Just a second." I tried to remember where I'd left the weapon Brogan had given me, finally remembering I'd put it on the nightstand. As soon as I wrapped my hand around it, all the anxiety and terror that I'd felt came swimming to the surface. With the gun in my hand, I rushed into the bathroom, barely making it to my knees in front of the toilet before losing what little food I'd consumed.

Blazer didn't bark but he remained by my side, finally whining a few seconds later.

"I'm okay, buddy. Everything is just a little overwhelming."

He brushed against my legs, the whine continuing.

I was shaky as well as lightheaded, which shocked me. What was wrong with me? I never used to allow problems or issues to get to me and had never been afraid of anything in my life, at least not really.

Until now.

Until my life had been taken away.

Until I was forced into a marriage of convenience.

Laughing, I struggled to my feet, fighting to get to the sink. After splashing water in my face, I took a look at myself in the mirror. I looked gaunt, my eyes highlighting the trauma I'd been through. Exhaling, I rinsed out my mouth and returned to the front door.

He knocked again before I had a chance to open it. "Mallory. Are you okay? I'm going to break down this door if you don't

let me inside.”

Blazer barked a couple of times then stopped.

“I’m fine.”

I fought with the multiple locks before managing to open the door, backing away and holding the weapon in front of me.

In the light of the hallway, I noticed his startled gaze, but he put both his hands up before grinning. “Good to see you’re prepared.”

“I was told not to trust anyone.”

He chuckled, walking inside and closing the door behind him.

“Why the dark?”

“So I could look at the great lights of Chicago without fear of being seen.”

“Brogan does worry about you. Do you mind if I turn one light on?”

“Make yourself at home.” I remained standing near the door, my grip on the weapon still as firm. When he flipped on a light, I looked away.

“Is everything okay?”

“Just dandy.”

Ryan walked closer, studying me for a few seconds. “Do you need anything?”

“Just for Brogan to get back home.”

“You don’t have to worry about him. He’s tough.”

“Do you know him well?”

Shrugging, he glanced around the expansive room. “Well enough to know he can handle himself in any situation.”

“Why did he stop being a psychiatrist?”

“He lost his license.”

“But why?” I pressed.

The look on his face was priceless, as if I'd asked him to divulge a secret he was sworn to protect with his life.

"That's a story he'll need to tell you. I honestly don't know the details," he finally answered.

"What do you know about him?"

He seemed confused as to why I was asking. "What is it that you want to know?"

"If he's a good man."

His laugh was still one of surprise. "He's the son of a powerful mafia leader. That makes him a very dangerous man."

"That's not what I asked."

"Okay," he said quietly. "In my opinion, he's one of the best men I've known. But like anyone else, he has two sides. If what you're really asking me is if he cares for you at all, what I can tell you is that he's never had a relationship lasting for more than a couple weeks. Then he met you in the middle of a snowstorm and everything changed. He'd probably beat the shit out of me for telling you this, but he is a different man around you."

I wasn't certain how to take that, but I smiled and nodded.

"And I think you like him a little bit too."

"I do but I want more out of life," I retorted, hating my tone sounded harsh. He didn't deserve to experience any of my anxiety.

"There's something else, Mallory. He was ready to die so he could protect you. That should tell you something about the man and the way he feels about you."

He was right, but the entire situation was jaded. "I don't want him to. That's the problem."

"He's going to do it whether you like it or not."

When I started to take a step away, my body started to sway and he had to grab me to keep me from falling.

“Whoa. Maybe you need to lie down.” He grabbed my arm, keeping me steady.

“I’m fine. I’m really fine. It’s just been a lot to process.”

“Come on,” he said, his grip on my elbow firm. “Let’s get you sitting down. Seriously.”

I allowed him to guide me to the couch, Blazer immediately jumping up beside me. “I hate this. The worry. The fear. All of it. I doubt it’ll get any easier.”

“I understand.”

“Do you really?”

“Why do you think I haven’t gotten serious with anyone, at least for a few years?”

I peered up at him, nodding in response. “Maybe it’s for the best.”

“What I can tell you is that I will find the right girl one day. It will take a special woman to handle my lifestyle. But just because I’m involved in dangerous business, that doesn’t mean I don’t want a family including kids and yes, I will protect them with my life.”

Family.

I couldn’t imagine it.

Although I was beginning to wonder.

“Do you want anything? I’ll get you whatever you need.”

His question was genuine. “I can’t think of anything.”

“Then I’ll leave you alone.”

“Wait. There is one thing I need.” As I peered up at him, a strange feeling washed over me.

I did love Brogan. For good or bad, I cared more about him than I had for anyone in my life. There were several reasons I’d agreed to the marriage, only some of which had anything to do with the alliance or the deal. I couldn’t care less about money or clout, power or influence.

The rogue man checked off every box, making me feel special in everything he did.

Maybe we could be a family but one that was created out of love first.

Maybe...

\* \* \*

As the door opened, I shooed Blazer away from the chair, wanting nothing more than to see Brogan's face when he walked inside. When he did, his hands filled with bags, a strange thought occurred to me about how normal everything seemed. A man returning home from a hard day of work, bringing treats as sometimes could happen.

"Welcome home, Mr. Callahan."

He lifted his head, gazing down at my bare leg. Then he dropped his bags. "It's good to be home, Mrs. Callahan." As he strode in further, his nostrils flared, his eyes lighting up like firecrackers in the dim lighting I'd selected. The closer he came, the more I could sense the raging bull inside, his hunger already unbridled.

I rose from the chair, purposely unfastening another button. I'd selected a lavender shirt this time, spending almost an hour in his closet surrounded by his scent. So masculine. So seductive. Then I'd picked out a tie, deep purple to go with the ensemble. It hung loosely around my neck, an invitation that I knew he couldn't resist.

When he was within reaching distance, he wrapped his hand around the tie, slowly pulling me toward him. As he took a deep breath, holding the hot air in his lungs, I couldn't help but notice the thick bulge between his legs. Becoming the bad girl he'd accused me of being, I brushed my hand down his jacket, cupping his throbbing shaft, kneading it gently as I lifted my gaze, purring the entire time.

"Are you trying to seduce me, Mrs. Callahan?" His voice was nothing but a husky growl.

“Maybe. What if I were?”

“Then I’d say be very careful what you ask for because I’m a brutal man.”

“You just think you are, but I assure you that I can handle you.”

“I guess we’ll see.” He lowered his head, brushing his lips across my cheek, allowing his scalding breath to tickle my skin.

I shuddered as he rolled his lips to mine, darting my tongue just inside his mouth. As expected, the taste of him created a wave of tingles, my core already heated to the extreme. He wrapped one hand around the tie, yanking once, the action making me off balance. Yet I continued teasing him, sliding the tip of my finger up and down his cock.

“I’m going to ravage every inch of you,” he breathed then traced my jaw with his index finger before rolling it down my neck to my cleavage. When he slipped it under the material of the shirt, flicking it back and forth across my nipple, I issued several scattered moans.

“Only if I let you.”

Brogan nipped my ear, pinching my hardened bud, twisting and plucking as he chuckled darkly. “Baby. In case you haven’t figured it out by now. You are all mine. Mine to taste and fuck anytime I want. And you will never be in control.” As he captured my mouth, instantly sliding his tongue inside, I couldn’t stop shivering. He had a way of searing my skin from a single touch, driving my hunger to the point of madness.

I wanted all of him, every single inch.

Gone were the reservations and worry, even for a little while. All I could think of was how his cock felt inside my pussy and my inner thighs were already slickened from need. As he unfastened the remaining buttons, I fumbled with his belt, my hand shaking for no reason other than excitement.

He managed to ease the shirt over my shoulders, allowing gravity to take it to the floor. Now I stood naked in front of the



man I loved, the tie the only exception. And I had a feeling he would use it to his benefit.

When he broke the kiss, he raked his teeth from one side of my jaw to the other before leaning back, shaking his head ever so slowly. “You’re so damn beautiful.”

A smile crossed my face as I jerked the belt free, darting a gaze into his eyes before unbuttoning his trousers, yanking on his zipper.

“My little fawn is hungry tonight.”

“Famished.”

“And so is her master.”

“Mmm...” I broke free, taking two purposeful steps away, my eyes never leaving his. He yanked off his jacket, tossing it aside, not bothering to unbutton his shirt before ripping it over the back of his head. As I basked in being able to study his incredible physique, he kicked off his shoes, grinning in the most deliciously evil way.

“You do know what I’m going to do to you.”

“I have a general idea.”

His laugh kept me on edge, anxious to have his cock inside. When he was completely naked, he advanced like the predator he was, twisting the tie around my neck then dropping to his knees. I didn’t need to be told to open my legs, doing so involuntarily. The moment he cupped my mound, my body pitched forward, and I was forced to grip his shoulders.

Every sound he made, every dark growl reminded me how savage he was but when he drove his tongue past my swollen folds, I threw my head back and screamed out his name.

He shifted his head back and forth, his tongue working all the way in, my muscles clamping around the invasion, drawing him in even deeper. Stars had already formed in front of my eyes as he feasted, lavishing me with long licks of his tongue. When he swirled the tip around my clit, tiny whimpers escaped my mouth.

“Mmmm... So wet for me,” he growled, sliding two fingers into my tight channel. As he pumped them in and out, he sucked on my clit and it was swollen within seconds. I couldn't think clearly or breathe, and it didn't matter.

I dug my fingers into his shoulders, jutting my hips forward as he added a third finger, flexing them open as he thrust hard and fast. When he started to curl the tips, the first tingling sensations of an orgasm began. I was on fire, my core completely lava and I couldn't stop moaning.

He knew exactly how to bring me to the very edge then pull back. I laughed then whimpered, no longer able to focus. He added his tongue alongside his fingers, working them in a perfect orchestration, curling the tips again and that was all I could take.

My entire body was shaking, my mind a foggy mess and as the climax ripped through me, I let out a high-pitched scream.

“That's it, baby. Come for me. Come for your master.”

It was as if his command had been programmed inside. A second and more powerful orgasm rushed into my system, stealing my breath and shutting down my mind. I wiggled in his hold, opening my legs ever wider and as he licked up every drop of cream, I knew I would have fallen had he not been holding me.

“Yes. Yes. Oh...” As the climax began to subside, I lolled my head down, blinking several times. His face was glistening, his chest heaving. When he slowly moved to his feet, he dragged his tongue up my stomach to my breasts, taking his time to nip and suck one nipple then the other before standing to his full height.

The evil grin on his face remaining, he twisted the tie again, forcing me to my knees. Somehow, I knew I wouldn't be allowed the opportunity of sucking his fat cock for very long. I sensed he had other needs that wouldn't be denied.

I wrapped one hand around the base of his cock, rolling my other between his legs. As I cupped and squeezed his balls, he tightened the tie, the pressure more exciting than I ever would

have imagined. Panting, I blew across his cockhead before darting my tongue around in several circles.

“Don’t tease me too long, baby, or I’ll need to punish you.” His dark words added to the desire, pushing me into taunting him even more.

I slid my tongue across his sensitive slit before taking the tip into my mouth, using my strong jaw muscles to suck. Then I squeezed his testicles with more pressure, savoring the way they throbbed in my hand. He was the perfect man, every muscle chiseled out of the finest stone, and I wanted to explore every inch.

But my hunger was too great. I took more of his cock into my mouth, twisting my hand around the base, pumping up until my fingers met my mouth. He kept full control, placing one hand on my head, forcing me to take more of him.

“That’s it. Suck me. Take every inch.” He held me in place, taking over completely. As he rolled onto the balls of his feet, he thrust brutally until the tip hit the back of my throat. After a few seconds, my throat muscles relaxed, allowing me to take even more of him.

As he face fucked me, I kept my gaze pinned on his face, adoring his expression. I swirled my tongue back and forth, my breathing ragged as the force he used pitched me back and forth like a doll. I was his puppet, and he was the master, taking everything he wanted.

Within seconds, I could tell he was close to coming and there was nothing more I wanted than to take every inch of his cream. But as he started to slow down his actions, his eyes burning with even more fire, I knew this was just the beginning.

Brogan pulled all the way out, dragging his tongue across his lips as his heavy breathing continued. “Turn around and drop to all fours.”

His instructions were clear and I did as he commanded without hesitation. He used the tie as a leash, smacking my bottom

twice to get me going. “Come on, little pet. Let’s walk to the window.”

I was surprised that he’d take the chance of anyone seeing us but was excited that someone could see us. When we were directly in front, he forced my head up then smacked my buttocks several more times. I sensed Blazer was watching us, his tail thumping somewhere in the background. That made this seem even dirtier, a pure sin.

When he dropped down behind me, I was able to see his reflection and it sent shivers down my spine.

“I’m going to fuck you like the bad little girl you are,” he said in a husky whisper before rolling his fingers down my spine. “In your pussy and in your tight ass. You need a reminder that every inch of you belongs to me.”

“Yes, sir.”

He laughed softly, before sliding his hand around my back, cupping and squeezing one breast. “Can you tell people are watching? They’re looking at our mortal sin and craving a filthy ride of their own.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Keep your eyes on the buildings. Search for people spying on us.” Every word made me shiver and when he rolled the tip of his cock up and down my pussy, my muscles clenched and released several times. The man was going to drive me into another orgasm with his filthy words alone.

There was no pretense before he thrust the entire length of his cock inside, growling like an animal. Every action he took was reflected in the window and I was mesmerized, my mind spinning out of control from the pleasure.

He pulled all the way out, driving into me with the power of his thighs. I was pushed forward until my face was only an inch from the glass. And I couldn’t stop shaking from the thought of someone watching us. I should be embarrassed, ashamed of what was happening, but this was far too delicious. He’d awakened the dark side of me and I craved more.

“Fuck. Yes.” He thrust deep inside, developing a rhythm, skin slapping against skin. I adored every sound as well as the sadistic side of him rushing to the surface. He kept his hold on the tie, a reminder that my life was in his hands and that he could do anything he wanted to me.

That pushed the excitement level even higher, the stars rushing in front of my eyes in vivid colors. I met every brutal thrust, arching my back as I purred. The scent of our sex was a powerful intoxication, and he’d become my drug, something I could never live without.

He continued fucking me for what seemed like hours, his stamina never wavering. The man was crazed with hunger, every sound he made escalating in volume. He smacked my bottom several more times, the pain mixing with the rapture pushing me to the outer limits of pleasure. How could anything feel this electric, so powerful?

“God. So tight. So fucking tight,” he murmured. He gripped my hip, digging his fingers into my skin, slowing down until he was pulsing inside, filling me completely. As he laughed, he rolled his fingers down the crack of my ass, shoving his thumb into my dark hole. “Are you ready for me to fill you with my seed?”

“Yes. God, yes. Fuck me.” I didn’t recognize my voice, the sound so husky, dripping with seduction.

He continued laughing as he placed the tip of his cock against my tight hole. As he pushed inside, I held my breath, a flash of pain quickly morphing into utter bliss.

“Oh. Oh...” I could no longer put a sentence together, but it didn’t matter. I was forced to keep my head held high, watching lights being turned on and off from other locations, shivering the entire time he drove his cock inside.

“Perfect. Just perfect.” He pulled all the way out, slamming into me again. And again. Then he rocked both our bodies, folding his body over mine as he fucked me long and hard. There was no hurry in his actions and as he pressed kisses against my shoulder, I couldn’t seem to stop moaning.

As he pulled back, he jerked the tie once again, making certain I knew he owned every inch of me. His actions were rougher than before, and I studied his face as he thrust several more times. Then I knew he was losing his control, his needs too great.

I squeezed my muscles, smiling as a pained look crossed his face. Then as he erupted deep inside, I finally closed my eyes, unable to stop trembling.

He was still hard minutes later, his cock throbbing as he pressed the full weight of his body against mine.

And I said the words for the first time, which surprised both of us. "I love you."

I sensed a tension in him that hadn't been there before. "You shouldn't."

"But I do."

He nuzzled against my neck, his breathing ragged. "And I love you, Mallory. This won't be perfect and I'm no good for you, but I will never be able to let you go."

What he hadn't realized was that he'd said the perfect thing to me.

I never wanted to be without him.

I truly felt for the first time, until death do us part.

## CHAPTER 19



*B*rogan

Secrets.

I didn't want to have a single one of them between us, but I'd learned through my father that they were often a requirement within our world. Every member of the family had been very good at keeping them, including my sisters.

But my brother had developed a way of keeping the perfect smile on his face while lying through his teeth. I'd learned that as well, mostly given my earlier profession. I'd been forced to sit and nod, never reacting even when a patient described the cruel methods they'd used in inflicting pain on their victims. Had it jaded me over the years? Likely.

The fact she'd asked me if I was a serial killer remained in my mind, forcing me to examine the reasons for enjoying ending an asshole's life. The answer was simple. It was exactly what I'd been taught to do.

And she believed somewhere in her soul that I was still a good man.

Maybe that's why the ache in my heart had increased. I wasn't certain I could be the man she needed or the one she deserved.

The quiet between us was almost deafening, allowing an ache to burn deep inside. But the look on her face was full of hope and adoration. I honestly couldn't understand why.

I'd told Mallory I loved her, which I'd meant, although saying the words had a strange, cathartic result. Not only did I long to fill her with my seed all over again, but my need to protect her was even stronger than before.

The fact I'd received a clear indication that Grayson and his wife had arrived in town stuck in my craw. Their arrival meant they were still angling to keep the deal made with Ivan. That was something I couldn't allow to go without some sort of recognition, although I had no plans on allowing them to know their daughter was alive. Still, telling her weighed heavily on my mind. She deserved to know, yet doing so would cause her unnecessary angst and right now, that's the last thing I could handle.

As she rolled her fingers over my shoulders, the massage she was giving scintillating, I continued to try to process everything that had occurred in the last few weeks. There were so many questions needing answers, and very few people could supply them. I could go after Ivan, destroying his empire with force, but my gut told me that he was only a portion of the problem.

Although it had become necessary to deal with the powerful man in some manner.

"Why aren't you a psychiatrist any longer?" she asked after another few minutes had passed.

I stretched my neck, glancing over my shoulder. The bright moonlight streaming in through the windows provided a bluish glow to the entire darkened room, unsettling for several reasons. It was as if the stage had been set for another massacre and I wasn't able to figure out my family's greatest enemy.

"I lost my license to practice."

She brushed her hands across the back of my neck, her light touch creating a wave of desire. "I know that. Why?"

The fact she wanted to know more about me wasn't as troubling as the answers I would be forced to provide, but she deserved to be more of a part of my world. "Because I failed



to provide the correct analysis with regard to a patient. My misdiagnosis allowed her to kill again.”

Instead of backing away in horror, she wrapped her arms around me. “Women are excellent liars.”

I pressed my hand against her arm, digging my fingers into her skin. “They can be. Anastasia was very good at pretending to be something she wasn’t.”

“What was she?”

“A clever monster.” Being forced to remember the worst moments of my life wasn’t as disturbing as I thought it would be. “She played on my sympathy, which was rare for me. She’d been abused most of her life, the horrible events leaving her broken inside. Where I saw a woman in need of help, I didn’t suspect until it was too late that no one had the ability of providing what she needed.”

“Who did she kill?”

I wanted nothing more than to ignore her question, but that was impossible. Mallory would dig until she learned the truth. “Her husband and daughter.”

“What?”

I heard the rustle of sheets before she shifted in front of me, scooting close until she was able to wrap her long legs around my hips. There was no condemnation in her eyes, only a woman prepared to help me through another trauma.

“I believed she was the victim, allowing her enough leeway because of my recommendations that she killed a hospital administrator, escaping during a rainstorm. She returned to her house, brutally killing the only man who’d ever cared for her.”

“And her child?”

I rubbed my eyes, the dull pain pounding inside my head increasing. “She killed her own child in cold blood. When she was caught, she told authorities she’d saved the little girl from demons.”

“She fooled you. That’s what people can do. Why would you be blamed?”

“Because I got too close, entering into an intimate relationship. It happened only once, but she used my attraction to her in order to get what she wanted.”

“Oh, God.”

“God wasn’t involved.”

Her eyes opened wide, yet she didn’t move, other than to tangle her fingers in my hair. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“I lost my professional edge.”

“Because you fell in love with her.”

I lifted my hand, pressing a finger across her mouth. “No. I wasn’t in love. There’s been a single woman in my life that I fell in love with and she’s sitting right here. What I felt was compassion at first, her sob stories convincing. She hadn’t lied to me, her father starting a pattern of physical and psychological abuse that would carry into her adulthood. Anastasia was damaged, so much so that when a decent man came into her life, she couldn’t handle it. But she’d learned early on that using her body garnered her money and things she wouldn’t have been able to obtain otherwise.”

“That’s why you shied away from your family.”

“Yes, to a point. I also believed Liam would live forever, taking the helm and I wanted no part of being second in line. The guilt continues to haunt me.”

“Then do something redeeming in your life as I mentioned before. It’s not about seeming weak or altering your lifestyle. It’s just about giving back in order to feel whole again.”

I rubbed my hands down her back. “Why are you so good to me?”

“Oh, you’ll learn I’m a very difficult woman to live with.”

She allowed me to laugh, which I thought I’d never do again after Liam’s death. I reached over, grabbing the glass of wine I’d brought to her earlier. When she waved it away, I took a sip in her place.

“Did you locate Gia?”

It hadn't taken long for the news to surface regarding the woman's fate. "She was killed."

Mallory had no reaction at first, merely looking away. "She betrayed me."

"Yes. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. I'll learn not to trust anyone."

"I hope you trust me," I told her. She gave me a half smile.

"Is my father really going to prison?"

Through my use of several sources, I'd discovered Grayson had been working with several organizations in the United States, using methods of extortion and blackmail to further his construction company. "Only if he makes a trip into the United States and he's caught."

As she looked away, it was easy to sense she remained furious with her father. "Is it possible to hate your father so much you no longer care what happens to him?"

Her words held such anger and sadness. "He's your father and you'll always love him but that doesn't mean you need to be his friend."

"We've never been friends. In fact, I don't really know him. What I do know is I'll never forgive him for abusing my mother. Promise me that you won't let any harm come to her. Just promise me that and you don't need to give me anything else."

She locked eyes with mine, her heartfelt request burning a hole deep inside. "I will do everything I can to make certain your mother is safe and happy."

My lovely bride seemed to accept my response.

"He won't allow our alliance to interfere with his business," she half whispered.

"He's not going to have any choice."

"What did you do?"

“I’ve done nothing, Mallory. The fact your father made his bed with a brutal Russian will ultimately be his undoing. It’s only a matter of time before that happens.”

“I suppose I should warn him.”

I knew she was testing me. “If that’s what you need to do.”

“What will you do with his territory, the construction company?”

As I gently brushed hair from her face, the ache inside only increased. “It’s not what I’m going to do, Mallory. That’s your decision to make.”

“Because of our deal.”

“Because it’s the right thing to do.”

“This isn’t about construction,” she said in a quiet voice.

“No, it’s about illegal arms.”

Her eyes opening wide, she jerked up her head. “You knew?”

While I wanted to laugh, she seemed genuinely surprised. “There’s very little that goes on in this town that one of the members of my family hasn’t heard about. That’s what makes him interesting to Ivan.” I’d suspected as much in the beginning given dealing in illegal arms was one of Ivan’s mainstays with his business. I’d simply had to put two and two together. “If you’re concerned that our family will take over the arms portion, that’s not my intention.”

A look of relief flooded her face. “Okay.”

If I had to guess, I’d say there was a large arms deal going down sometime in the near future. That’s one reason her father was in town. Either that or he had a vendetta to settle.

She continued to remain tense, wrapping her arms around me seconds later. “Thank you for trusting me in telling me. I only care about my mother at this point. It’s not always true that blood is thicker than water.”

I closed my eyes briefly. “Well, I need to tell you something else. Your parents are in town.” I could tell by the look on her face that for a split second she believed they were looking for

her. Then she pursed her lips, her body tensing. “Because of Ivan. Their deal. Jesus Christ.”

“That’s what I suspect.”

She swallowed several times, finally nodding. “Don’t worry. I won’t try and escape to see them, although if I had an opportunity to slice my father’s throat, I would do it. He doesn’t deserve my love any longer.”

I could certainly understand her anger. “I will honor my promise and protect your mother.”

“I would appreciate that and if you’re given a chance, go ahead and end my father’s life for me. Will you?”

When my phone rang, my gut told me whatever the news, it wouldn’t be something I wanted to hear. After leaving my father’s house, I’d made certain all operations were working as they should be, talking to several of my soldiers to try to glean any new information.

Mallory shifted backward, darting her eyes back and forth across mine. “It’s almost two in the morning.”

“Yeah, I know.” Reaching over, I grabbed my phone, taking a deep breath before answering it. “Ryan. This had better be good.”

“Two things, Mr. Callahan. Ivan has requested a meeting with you.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Fascinating. I’ll consider it. Number two?”

“Sean was found.”

As he provided details, I closed my eyes. The list of suspects was suddenly getting shorter. “I’ll be there in twenty minutes.” I ended the call, my hold on my phone strong enough I was certain I heard the plastic yielding to my strength.

“You’re leaving?” she asked.

“It’s something I can’t avoid.”

“The nightmare isn’t over.” She pressed the back of her hand against my cheek, her eyes imploring.

“Not yet, my precious fawn. But it will be soon enough.”

“Then what?”

I pinched her chin, grinning even though the tightness in my chest from before only expanded. “Then we live happily ever after.” I rubbed my lips across her cheek before exiting the bed, heading toward the closet to get a change of clothes. Just the sound of rustling sheets made my cock ache. The time spent with her in bed had barely contained the savage beast inside.

“Why do you call me a fawn?”

The question caught me off guard. It had seemed natural, coming to me immediately after meeting her. “Because you seemed lost, uncertain of your future when I met you.” I grabbed a pair of jeans, slipping them on before turning around. She’d risen to her knees, holding the sheet over her breasts.

“I still am.”

After taking a deep breath, I finished dressing, tossing on a jacket then grabbing two of my weapons as well as extra ammunition. I sensed she was watching everything I did. “Hopefully, I’ll be back soon.”

“When will people know I’m now your wife?”

There was such a hollow sound to her voice that it troubled me. “Likely in the next few days.”

As I walked closer to the bed, she lifted her head, a reminder of the defiance I’d seen in her before. “Good. We have plans to make.”

“Yes, we do.” I gazed at her longingly before heading for the door.

“Don’t forget who you used to be, Brogan. That’s the man who needs to lead us into the future.”

Her words left a mark in my mind as I walked out.

That man had died a long time ago, but maybe with her love he could be brought back to life.

\* \* \*

*Mallory*

Family.

It was obvious I'd taken my small family for granted. The real truth was that I'd had blinders on for far too long. While it had been admirable my mother had tried to protect me, I wished she'd confided in me instead. I wanted to be angry with her as well, but that wasn't fair. She wasn't to blame.

After Brogan closed the door, I peered down at the packages. He'd gone to several stores. There were so many bags that I couldn't help but smile. He'd been trying so hard to make me happy. I grabbed a handful, struggling to get them into the bedroom, dumping them on the bed. After pulling out a few items, my initial smile was a huge grin. The man had incredible tastes. I'd put them away later but right now, there were a few things I needed to do.

After selecting a pair of jeans and a sweater, and putting them on, I moved to the dresser, pulling out the phone he'd purchased for me. I held it in my hands for a few minutes, debating if what I was contemplating was the right thing. It didn't take long for me to realize that this was the only way that I could have some control.

I dialed the number, hoping my mother would answer and be alone.

"Hello?" Her voice sounded as if she'd been crying.

"Mama."

She shuddered, fear in the single sound. "You shouldn't call me."

"He can't trace it. Are you alright?"

"Yes, but you need to stay hidden."

“Don’t worry. I’m in a very safe place. I just needed to hear your voice and tell you that I love you.”

“Oh, baby. I miss you so much. Please be careful. Your father is... well, he’s not himself any longer.”

As if I gave a damn. “You stay safe. Things will change. I promise you. I love you.”

“I love you. Live your life, baby girl.”

Hanging up the phone felt as if I was cutting ties with my past. No, I was forging new ones, a future that I would help create. Swallowing hard, there was one more phone call I had to make. After three rings, I was certain I’d need to leave a message. When she answered, I was relieved.

“Hey, it’s me.”

“Whoa. Wait a minute. Mallory. Are you kidding me? You’re alive. Oh, my God. You’re alive. What happened? Where are you? What’s happened? I was so freaking worried.” Jillian’s voice was exasperated.

“It’s a very long story and one that I can’t go into right now. I need your help again and I don’t have much time.”

“Hmmm,” Jillian said. “The last time I did, you got lost in a snowbank. Then you gave me a bunch of bullshit on your first phone call and were completely bizarre on your second. Then you turned up dead from suicide. Is this really my best friend? If so, I need a full explanation of what the hell is going on.”

I’d only been allowed to call her once after being returned to my father’s house. He’d stood over me as I’d lied to her, trying to avoid the topic of being at her parents’ cabin. “Please, Jilly. It’s important and it’s something you need to write notes about. Okay?” The lump that had been in my throat was transferred to my stomach, a new wave of sickness churning.

“O-kay. You’re worrying me.”

“Please don’t. I’m going to be just fine.” As I walked toward the bathroom, I told her what I knew. While it was with a heavy heart, I felt I had no other choice.

Other than finding a way to kill my father.



After ending the call, I grabbed the bag of items Ryan had purchased for me, staring at myself in the mirror as I pulled them out. My shaking hands matched the intense ache deep in my heart.

As I prepared everything, I took a deep breath. It would be only a little while before I knew what I needed to do. One thing was clear.

I was very much in love with the man I'd married.

Now all I could do was hope.

And pray.

\* \* \*

*Brogan*

Dead bodies.

I'd seen them in various stages of their demise since I was young. Nothing bothered me any longer. Blood. Protruding bones. Oozing intestines. I barely noticed.

I was hardened enough I'd expected the most difficult part of seeing Sean's corpse would be that it shot down my idea that my cousin had killed his own father in his drive for power and wealth.

However, it was apparent that the man had suffered before being allowed the sweet peace of death.

Why?

Obviously to make a statement in return for the soldiers I'd taken away from Ivan.

"Who found him?" I asked Ryan as I crouched down over the body.

"Father O'Brien did when he left the sanctuary last night."

The fact the body had been dumped on the back steps of the church was another statement being made. If I had to guess, it

was meant for the good father as much as it was to our family. Ivan was clearly warning that he could get to anyone at any time. I would be eager to find out if my cousin had made a visit to the father or if his body had been dumped here.

Given there was no blood on the stairs and rigor mortis had set in, he'd been dead for a while and dumped here to make a point. "Where the hell was he killed?"

I noticed his shirt had been undone and peeled it away. Something had been carved into his chest.

"I have a penlight," Ryan said as he handed it to me.

The moment I flashed the light on Sean's stomach, I grimaced, immediately grabbing my camera and taking a picture of the symbol.

"What the hell does that mean?"

I stood, taking a deep breath. "It's a Japanese symbol for traitor."

"Since when did you learn the language?"

"I didn't. One of my patients carved the same thing into his victims while they were still alive."

"Shit. I heard about that story."

"Yeah, I bet you did. So did the man who killed Sean. Get some men to clean this up before someone comes for morning prayer. I'm curious as to why Father O'Brien didn't contact the police."

"Father O'Brien thought you'd want to know first."

I took a deep breath. "And the good father would be right. Unfortunately, it's too little, too late."

"What are you going to do?"

"Handle the situation. Stay here. Make certain I'm not interrupted."

"Yes, sir."

I headed inside, scanning the interior for any signs the attack had begun in the church. I found Father O'Brien in the main

rectory sitting in one of the pews. As I sat down beside him, he tensed.

“Brogan,” he said, his voice little more than a whisper.

“Father. I appreciate you letting me know first.”

“It was the least I could do.”

“Had Sean paid you a visit when he was alive?”

He lifted his head, nodding as he did. “Four days ago, maybe five.”

“What did he want?”

“Absolution for his sins.”

“We all sin, Father. Even a man as just as yourself. Isn’t that the case?” I studied him intently, realizing how nervous he seemed. “Did he make confession?”

“He did.”

“And what did he say?”

“Brogan, you know I can’t break my oath.” He peered at me as if I’d really understand.

I shook my head, half laughing. “He’s dead, Father. He has the symbol of a traitor carved on his chest. If he made confession, then he might have provided information on who killed him.”

He rubbed his eyes. “I can’t tell you what he said but I can tell you this. He cared about your family. He was very worried that something would happen to you.”

I burst into laughter. “Bullshit.”

“Watch your language, son. This is a house of God.”

“Of course it is. Sean was likely in town to try and take over my father’s empire right under my nose. And as you might imagine, I wasn’t going to allow that to happen. I would have burned down the city if I’d needed to in order to keep that from occurring. He’s dead now. However, he wasn’t working alone. I can either find the people that I need to send to face their demons, or I’ll be forced to use violence to get the information I need. It’s entirely up to you at this point.”

“What do you want from me, Brogan? Haven’t I proven my loyalty?” Now he’d become exasperated, his eyes beseeching mine.

“When loyalty is displayed then ignored, there’s no chance for redemption because there can be no trust.”

“I’ve been good to your family.”

“Yes, you have, especially to my mother, but that’s not enough. The information you provided helped my brother get killed.”

“I’m sorry for that. I had no idea that was going to happen. You must believe me, son. I would never have provided the information if I’d thought otherwise.”

I could feel the pulse in my neck, the rush of adrenaline as it rolled through my system. “In addition, your alliance with Korski almost got my wife murdered not once but twice. That can’t be forgiven or forgotten.”

As he made the sign of the cross, lifting the chain and kissing the one dangling from it, it was all I could do not to lash out.

“You’re married?” he asked a few seconds later.

I laughed, no longer caring if the information got back to Ivan. It was time that he knew checkmate was coming. “Yes, to the lovely woman intended for Liam. Now, I’ll have control of all of Chicago as well as portions of Canada.” I noticed his face was ashen.

“Mallory Montgomery,” he breathed.

“Yes, it would seem you understand what’s at stake. I’m glad to hear it.” I offered a smile, enjoying how he was squirming in his seat.

“You’re going to kill me.” He made the statement so matter of fact that I was surprised at his preparedness to die.

I took a deep breath, holding it for a few seconds. I’d thought about that on and off for a few days. It would break my mother’s heart and that was something I just couldn’t do. “No, Father. I’m not. You need to decide the correct penance for

what you did and how you betrayed not only my family but God as well. I know you can find the right punishment.”

He snapped his head in my direction, searching my eyes. “What are you asking of me?”

I stood before answering. “I’m only asking you to determine what you believe is the right thing to do in this situation. I’ll accept whatever that is.” I remained unblinking for a full minute before heading away from the pew. I’d made the right choice.

And I knew he would as well.

After all, he was a man of God.

As I left the church, Ryan lifted his eyebrow. “I didn’t hear any gunshots.”

“No. Not yet.” I headed to my car, eager to return home. By this time tomorrow, Ivan would crawl out of his hole with Grayson by his side.

Then I’d kill two birds with one stone.

Grinning, I took long strides away, surprised when my phone rang. I glanced at the screen then stopped walking as I answered it. “Phoenix.”

“You’ve got a huge problem,” he growled.

“Meaning what?”

“Your uncle is still alive.”

## CHAPTER 20



*B*rogan

Pride.

One of the lessons my mother had attempted to teach me over the years was not to have false pride. She'd learned that in the church. I'd been so busy having a high opinion of myself and how I could run my father's empire that I hadn't suspected the obvious. I dispatched every soldier in the empire, sending a dozen to my brownstone to protect Mallory while I was headed to my father's house.

By the time I called the residence, not a single person in the house had answered. I jammed the phone into my pocket, cursing under my breath.

"Your uncle?" Ryan asked.

"He faked his own death then sent Sean to pave the way for him to take over. Only Sean wasn't interested in doing his father's biddings, which prompted Ronan to kill his only child."

"Jesus Christ. Your family is brutal."

"Not as much as some. However, if anything happened to my family, you will learn what the meaning of retaliation is."

"He's working with Ivan."

"That's what I suspect, which means Grayson could be walking into his own massacre. Which is just fine with me."

You need to listen to me. I want you to track down Mallory's mother. Her parents are in town, which means that they're registered at a hotel somewhere in the city. Maybe a fake name. Maybe not. I don't have any other info but find her."

"That's not much to go on."

I glared at him. "You're clever. Just find her."

"Why is this so important?" he asked, his brow furrowed.

"Just do it and grab her. Bring her to the brownstone."

"Okay. What are you going to do?"

"Kill my uncle. Have the soldiers storm the house." I didn't give him time to object, jumping into my car. As I sped away, I only prayed that I wasn't too late.

Ten minutes later, I pulled into the driveway of my father's estate. As soon as I jumped out, Calen ran in my direction.

"We have several men down, but we took out most of them," he told me. Bodies were strewn across the lawn, good men that my father had employed years before.

"Get the situation under control and start cleaning up this shit."

"Yes, sir. Do you need any men with you?"

"Two but keep them behind me. They'll know if and when I need assistance."

"You got it." Calen ran off, immediately directing two soldiers to head into the house behind me.

I burst into the house, my weapon in both hands. The house was far too quiet. I found several of the employees huddled in the kitchen, terrified and shaking. I pressed my finger against my lips. One of the women pointed toward my father's office. I nodded and left the room, remaining quiet as I headed in that direction.

The door was open and I could see my sisters standing in front of one of the bookcases, an armed man watching them intently. When I walked inside, I noticed my mother first, tears streaming down her face.

“You finally showed,” my uncle said, tipping his head toward me. He had a weapon pointed at my father’s head.

My father glanced at me, obviously in turmoil.

“And we thought you were dead,” I said, scanning the room. There were only three men who’d accompanied him.

“Death is highly overrated. However, it’s good you’re here. Now we can talk business.” My uncle seemed sure of himself, backing away and turning toward me.

“Business. Is that what you sent Sean here to do, pave the way for your takeover?” I calculated what it would take to kill each man. The odds weren’t in my favor. At least with two of my men behind me, I stood a better chance. Still, it was risky as hell at this point.

“Little prick decided he couldn’t do the job.”

“So you had him killed.” I glanced toward my father again, noticing his weapon was on the bookcase behind him. I managed to give him a nod before my uncle noticed. My father was no fool. He knew what was at stake. The bad blood had been between them for years, the reasons my father knew better than anyone. But my uncle had been tossed out of the city when I was a kid.

“He didn’t serve me well,” Ronan said with no emotion.

“You’re a bastard,” my father told him. “You always were.”

“You would know, brother. You were the full blood in the family. You had everything you wanted. Pops never gave a damn about me.” Ronan’s anger showed on his face, the hatred for his own brother something I’d seen only once before. Now I knew why, something my father had hinted at years before. I’d never put the pieces together.

My grandfather had had an affair, Ronan the product of that indiscretion.

“You were never fit to lead, Ronan,” Pops insisted. “Dad knew that. But he gave you an excellent opportunity in Philly. You made the mistake of doing nothing with it.” He moved closer to the bookshelf, blocking my uncle’s view.



I shifted closer to my sisters, both of them watching everything I was doing.

Ronan laughed. "I carved out quite a niche but you're right. It wasn't enough. This is my home. I deserve what you were given."

As he waved his gun around, I sensed things were going to get out of hand quickly.

"You're nothing but a pig, Ronan. I will never give you a portion of my business. That goes to my son." My father was exasperated, waving his arms around.

"Then I guess I'll have to take it away from both of you." As Ronan lifted his weapon toward my father's head, all time seemed to stop.

That's all I needed to react, issuing a single word before all hell broke loose. "Now!"

The last thing I noticed was Fiona dragging Erin to the floor as the room erupted in gunfire. I got off two rounds, killing two of the soldiers inside, immediately racing for my mother, tackling her to the floor.

Then I heard a sharp cry.

*Pop! Pop!*

Still covering my mother, I lifted my weapon again, prepared to fire. As Ronan spun around, lurching in my direction, I realized my father's reflexes were just as quick as they'd been years before.

My uncle's body slowly began to fall. I lunged toward my sisters, pleading with God to have spared them.

"I'm fine," Erin said as she grasped my arm.

"Me too," Fiona whispered.

"Stay down," I told them.

As I stood, turning to survey the room, I took a deep breath.

Betrayal was difficult. Especially when it came from inside the family.

I headed for my father, surprised that he was already haunted by what he'd done. "It's okay, Pops. Everyone is fine."

He slowly lifted his head. "No, son. It will never be fine."

I glanced around the room as my mother lumbered toward us.

"I need to do a few things. Grayson is here making a new deal with Ivan. As soon as they find out Mallory is alive, we'll have another war on our hands."

"Take care of your wife, son. Family is all that matters." As he tumbled toward my mother, I breathed a sigh of relief.

But it was only to be short lived at best. Now I hoped Ryan had been able to find and secure Mallory's mother before the real war began.

\* \* \*

"Ryan. Where the hell are you?" Getting his voicemail pissed me off. As I headed down the street to the brownstone, the sight of several police cars and other unmarked vehicles looked like a raid about to happen. My father would be able to handle it if this was about what happened at the estate. But it would be a fucking mess either way. Now my only concern was keeping Mallory safe.

As I jumped out, racing toward the entrance, I was flanked by several soldiers. "Any attempt from Ivan to get inside?"

"Nothing. We've monitored the entire street," one of my men told me.

"Let me know if anything changes." I rushed inside, using the stairs to get to the door. As soon as I slipped my key into the lock, walking inside, Mallory flew into my arms. I could hear what sounded like a television in the background.

"I tried to call you. I did something. Now, I don't know but it's..." She was breathless, angry as well as upset.

"What are you talking about?"

She grabbed my arm, tugging me toward the kitchen and to the television on the counter.

I'd been right. There was a raid, only from what I could tell, it was at Ivan's estate.

"I did this," she said, all emotion suddenly gone. "I did it for you and for us. So we could be a family."

What?

I lifted her chin, forcing her to look at me. "Take a deep breath and tell me what you're talking about."

"My best friend. Her father is an FBI agent. She knows all about you and my father and... And she confirmed that my father was a wanted man." She took several gasping breaths, shaking violently.

"I'm sorry, baby."

"I didn't want to think it was true, but I told her he was in town and that he was working with Ivan."

I glanced at the television, shocked at the lengths she'd gone to. "I don't know what to say."

"I wanted a fresh start but my mother. What's going to happen to my mother? What if Ivan killed them? What if..."

I pulled her into my arms, pressing my chin on the top of her head. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes."

"You're certain of that?"

She eased away, searching my eyes. "What's wrong?"

"We have a lot to talk about. What you did was heroic." Although I had a feeling she would regret her decision in the morning. As we both stared at the television, watching the ugly scene continuing to unfold, I had no idea what to say to her or how to comfort her. Family meant everything. It had taken the loss of my brother and almost losing the woman I loved, let alone my parents and sisters to realize that.

I didn't want that for either one of us. Not now. Not ever.

“I killed her. I killed my mother. I know it. I just know it.”  
Now she was close to hysteria.

“No, you didn’t. Just breathe for me, baby. Okay? Please trust me. Stay right here. I’m going to make a phone call.”

“Don’t leave me,” she whispered.

“I’m not going anywhere. I may never leave your side again.”

While she tried to smile, I could see terror in her eyes.

I walked out of the kitchen, immediately grabbing my phone, muttering under my breath before I unlocked the screen. “Ryan. You better freaking have managed to find her.” As soon as I dialed, I heard a ring coming from the other side of the front door. As I opened it, Ryan shook his head.

“You owe me for this one. Cops are freaking everywhere.”

The woman beside him was almost catatonic, shaking violently.

“Mrs. Montgomery?” I asked, bringing her in further.

“What is this? Why do you have me? Where is my daughter?” she demanded.

“Come with me.”

She tried to pull away, shaking her head.

“I’m not going to hurt you. And I promise you that everything will be okay.”

After a few seconds, she allowed me to guide her out of the room.

As soon as I brought her into the kitchen, the sight of Mallory when she noticed her mother was something I would remember for the rest of my life.

Both women squealed and as they hugged, I noticed tears running down Mallory’s cheeks. She lifted her head, mouthing the words ‘thank you’ and I nodded, leaving the two of them alone.

As I walked back into the living room, I leaned against the wall.

“You gonna tell me what the hell is going on?” Ryan demanded as he glared at me.

At that point, all I could do was laugh. “Ryan. I will be happy to tell you everything after I’ve had a drink. What I will say is that today I learned about the meaning of true love and just how far both Mallory and I would go for each other.”

“What? You’re not making any sense.”

I patted him on the shoulder, the adrenaline rush starting to fade. “Come on. Let’s go have that drink and I’ll tell you all about it.”

\* \* \*

*Three weeks later*

“Have I told you just how beautiful you are, little fawn?” I asked, although the question seemed rhetorical. I brushed my fingers across her cheek, drinking in her exotic perfume and as usual, my cock responded, pressing hard against my zipper.

“Hmmm... Not in at least an hour,” Mallory said, her sparkling laughter full of joy.

Finally.

It had been a rough as hell three weeks, the melee surrounding the raid toxic to everyone involved.

Including my organization. We were laying low, handling lowkey business only while the Feds continued to sniff around.

But these next few days were going to be ones of celebration, not sorrow or anger. When I cocked my head, she pursed her lips, giving me a single purr. She knew how to press every one of my buttons. “I have something for you.”

“Oh, you do, huh? Another stunning dress or bobble that I can’t wear out in public?”

“Very funny. No, it’s something I’ve wanted to give you for a while. Since tomorrow is our big day, I thought it appropriate.”

When I backed away, she gave me a hard look, planting her hands on her hips. While I was her master, she’d managed to find a way to control my heart.

I reached into my pocket, pulling out the small box. When I glanced into her eyes, her mischievous expression failed her. “I had a little help in having a jeweler create this especially for you.” I opened the box, trying to gauge her reaction.

She stared down at the ruby and diamond ring, tears forming in her eyes. “It’s gorgeous.”

“Your mother made certain to tell me rubies are your favorite jewels.”

Her laugh was followed by a single sob as she pressed her hand over her lips. Then she lifted her head, giving me one of her rebellious looks. “Then you need to ask properly.”

“I do, huh?”

“On your knees.” She pointed to the floor and it was my turn to laugh.

“You do realize this will be the only time I’m on my knees. You’ll be the one doing the kneeling.”

“Right. In your dreams, buddy.”

“That’s sir to you.” I dropped down on one knee and was almost overwhelmed by the way I felt about her. I’d almost lost her too many times to count. The future would be rocky, dangerous at every turn, but I was prepared to do everything it took to make certain she had a happy life. “Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife? Again?”

The sound of her laughter filling the room created a wave of desire. If I didn’t have business to finish, I’d strip away her clothing, fucking her right here and now.

“Yes, but I have conditions.”

“Of course you do. We’ll work those out later.” I stood, placing the ring on her finger then cupping her face. As I

lowered my head, she pressed her hand against my chest, and I knew I was the luckiest man alive.

She barely pressed her lips against mine when she pulled away. "I have a little wedding present I've been saving for you."

"Keeping secrets, my beautiful bride?"

"Always." As she lifted her head, the tears remained, but I could tell they were ones of joy. Then she took my hand into hers, placing both on her stomach. Then she waited to see if I understood.

"Wait a minute. You're..."

"You can say the word. You won't catch on fire. We're pregnant."

I wasn't certain how to react. Then emotions flowed through me like the wildfire that always occurred when I was around her. I gathered her into my arms, throwing my head back and howling like a beast. "My baby is having a baby!"

There was no way the entire household hadn't heard me and I didn't care. I kissed her cheek then nipped her ear.

"You're happy?" she asked, pulling away and wiping tears from her eyes.

"We're going to be a family. Yes, I'm happy."

She nodded several times. "I wanted it to be a surprise."

"It's the best gift you could give me."

We heard a knock on the door and I growled. "This better be good."

I turned us both, watching as Ryan entered the room, a sheepish look on his face. "Sorry to interrupt but you have six guys here to see you, sir. They said you'd know. Something about the Brotherhood?"

Grinning, I was surprised all six of the guys had accepted my invitation. "You can see them in. Do you mind, darling girl?"

"More business?" Mallory asked, pretending to pout.

“Only a few minutes.”

She backed away. “Fine, but that’s it! I’m putting my foot down.”

“We shall see.” I watched as she walked toward Ryan, gripping his arms then kissing his cheek. And I could swear I heard her whisper, thanking him for keeping her secret.

When she walked out, I lifted my eyebrows. “Do I want to know?”

“I’ll tell you about it someday over a drink,” he said, unable to keep a grin off his face. He backed into the hallway, motioning for the men.

As each one came into the room, I could tell they were in a celebratory mood. Phoenix approached me first, clapping his hands on my arms.

“You took down two empires and found the girl of your dreams. I’d say you transitioned well from being a psychiatrist to mafia kingpin,” he said in his booming voice.

“Very funny. It’s nice to see everyone,” I told them, immediately heading toward the bar. I knew what they all drank but today they’d indulge in Irish whiskey, my drink of choice.

“I’ve read the same bullshit on the internet that everyone else has,” Constantine started. “But I’m eager to hear what the hell happened from you.”

“He’s a one-man force to be reckoned with,” Gabriel said, laughing.

I heard Dante or maybe Diego snorting in the background. “He’s become a powerful man in two countries.”

“One to watch,” Maxim growled.

“Yeah, yeah,” I said, filling the glasses. As they crowded around, I handed each one of them a drink then lifted my glass. “To the future of the Brotherhood.”

“Hear, hear,” Diego stated.

“And to a new family,” Phoenix added.



“You have no idea,” I said. “It would seem Grayson was furious with Ivan for breaking the deal after Mallory’s fake death. So he was determined to bring the man down. The two men had come to blows and shots were fired seconds before the FBI and the DEA swarmed Ivan’s estate.”

“Did Mallory really contact the FBI?” Constantine asked.

I nodded. “She was furious with her father for his actions.”

“Whew,” Dante muttered. “I wouldn’t want her angry with me.”

Smiling, I lifted my glass again. “Oh, she’s a handful but I can tame her.”

“Uh-huh,” Phoenix growled. “I’d like to see that. What are their conditions?”

“The last I heard, Ivan is still in the hospital. He was critical, hanging on by a thread. He’ll make a recovery, but it will take time. I had a meeting with him the other day.”

I could tell I’d surprised all of them.

“You’re like a bull in a china shop,” Maxim snarled.

“Maybe so. I had a little chat with him. He seemed to understand the terms of allowing him to stay alive.” I couldn’t keep from grinning. “Now, he can recover in relative peace.”

“In the meantime, you’ve taken over his world,” Gabriel offered.

“Yes, to a point. I don’t think he’ll be stupid enough to attempt to take over my regime anytime soon but if he does, I’ll bring down the wrath of God.” I swirled the liquid, taking another gulp. The smooth taste was exactly what I’d been in the mood for.

“And her father?” Diego mused.

“He had a shoulder wound and already recovered. From what I’ve heard, he’s working with the Feds, which could mean little or no prison time. However, he’ll never be back in business again.” And he might be placed into witness protection. I wasn’t certain Mallory was prepared for that.

Constantine shook his head. “Does that mean the Montgomery business accounts are frozen?”

“Most, yes. However, her father did establish certain control mechanisms that allowed a portion of the business and his wealth to be protected.”

“They were in Mallory’s name,” Maxim chortled. “Maybe blood is thicker than water.”

“Oh, we will run a powerful empire together.” I closed my eyes briefly, allowing images of my lovely bride to flow into my mind.

“I heard a priest committed suicide?” Gabriel huffed.

“Yes, it was a very sad situation. I think he had a lot of guilt regarding his participation in my brother’s death.” I lifted my glass one last time. “To my brother, Liam.”

“To Liam,” Constantine said in reverence.

After a few seconds of complete silence, Gabriel’s eyes lit up. “What now, brother?”

I thought about his question. “Well, first I take my sacred vows for a second time. Then after that, I’ll conquer the world.”

“Just take a piece of advice,” Constantine said as he slapped me on the arm. “Accept that women are the true rulers. Once you do, you’ll live a happy life. If not...”

We all thought about what he said and laughed, but he was right. I’d found my queen and she was never getting away.

\* \* \*

*Mallory*

A proper wedding.

A gorgeous dress.

A knight in shining armor.

What more could a girl ask for?

I stood in front of the mirror, realizing I looked entirely different than I had the morning I married my white knight three weeks before. And it wasn't because I'd returned to my natural hair color. My cheeks were rosy, joy in my eyes. Maybe that was because of the little boy or girl growing inside my stomach. But I had a feeling it was more about the continued electricity I shared with Brogan.

My hero.

My protector.

"You look stunning. I wish your father could be here to see you," my mother said as she moved behind me.

"Well, I'm certain he's here in spirit." There was still pain in her eyes every time she talked about him, but that would fade in time. At least my father was doing the right thing by cooperating with the federal agents. I was grateful my father had prepared the family in case something like this happened. Both my mother and I would be well taken care of. As far as business? That would evolve in time, moving into totally legal operations.

No matter what my husband believed.

I smiled thinking about how many tussles we'd have over aspects of control. I was looking forward to it.

She smoothed down my curls then patted my shoulder. "I'm so proud of you."

I turned toward her, wrapping my arms around her waist. "I love you, Mommy. I hope you can find happiness."

"Oh, I will, little girl. Just give me some time. Incidentally, Brogan bought me a house."

"What?"

She nodded as she pulled away. "Yes, and it's beautiful. It's not too far from where you'll be living. He thought it would make you happy."

“Are you kidding me?” I was floored at my husband’s generosity, butterflies rolling through my tummy.

“He even hired a decorator for me.” She laughed. “It should be interesting.”

I shouldn’t question him any longer. He’d already earmarked a percentage of his profits to go toward charity just like I’d asked.

“I’m so glad.” We heard a knock on the door and she frowned.

“Let me see who it is.” As soon as she opened the door, Blazer came bounding inside, his tail thwapping back and forth. When he started to jump on me, I lifted my hand palm down.

“No, baby boy. Not right now. You’ll ruin Mommy’s dress.”

I heard a dark chuckle, which sent shivers down my spine. Every time I heard Brogan’s voice, I was instantly wet, my need for him increasing.

“Mommy, huh? Well, your boy insisted on seeing you and you know when Blazer wants something, he won’t stop until he gets it.” Brogan’s deep voice echoed in my ears, my nipples hardening.

“I should say you can’t see her, but it is your father’s house,” my mother said, winking before walking out, patting Brogan on the arm.

Leaving me with the man I desperately loved.

He closed the door before walking toward me, every step methodical, his eyes never leaving mine. “You look good enough to eat.”

“Mmm... That better be later.”

“Oh, I assure you it will be. I’ll be feasting every day.”

“So where are we going on our honeymoon?”

“I was thinking Italy.”

I wrinkled my nose on purpose and he laughed. “We’ll see.”

“You don’t call the shots around here.”

“Oh, I don’t? I think I do. In fact, I know I do.” I should have known better than to challenge him. When he flipped me around, bending me over the dresser then yanking my gown up to my waist, I squealed, “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Making certain my wife is reminded who’s in charge.” He ripped down my panties, his grin remaining. Then he grabbed the wooden brush I’d been using, flipping it in his hand several times.

He wasted no time bringing the hard wood down on my bottom, moving from one side to the other so rapidly that the pain hadn’t reached me yet.

But when it did, I panted, squirming back and forth. “That hurts.”

“As it should.” His grin remained and the snap of his wrist made me jump.

Holy hell, the anguish was blinding, tears forming in my eyes. But within seconds, my inner thighs were slickened, my pussy aching. I adored his control, and he knew it.

And I wanted to surrender to his dark needs, his sadistic cravings.

“Just remember that from now on, I’m your master. You will do everything I say.” He delivered six more, his facial expression allowing me to see just how much he was enjoying himself.

“Maybe.”

His laugh floated around me. “Then I guess I’ll have to start over.” He brought it down four more times and I almost jerked away. “Well?”

“Yes, sir,” I said through gritted teeth. “I’ll obey your orders.”

As if for good measure, he smacked me with the brush two more times then tossed it aside. Then he leaned over, pressing the full weight of his body against mine. “My precious little fawn. I love you.”

“Mmmm... I think I love you too.”

There was something to be said about dark fairy tales, the kind where the villain got the girl in the end. Would they live happily ever after? That remained a murky part of the story, but I was willing to bet the two people involved would spend the rest of their lives trying.

And I couldn't wait to experience every moment.

The End

## AFTERWORD

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## BOOKS OF THE KINGS OF CORRUPTION SERIES

### *King of Wrath*

After a car wreck on an icy winter morning, I had no idea the man who saved my life would turn out to be the heir to a powerful mafia family... let alone that I'd be forced into marrying him.

When this mysterious stranger sought to seduce me, I should have ignored the dark passion he ignited. Instead, I begged him to claim me as he stripped me bare and whipped me with his belt.

He was as savage as I was innocent, but it was only after he made me his that I learned the truth.

He's the head of the New York Cosa Nostra, and I belong to him now...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *King of Cruelty*

Constantine Thorn has been after me since I saw him kill a man nine years ago, and when he finally caught me he made me an offer I couldn't refuse. Marry him and he will protect me.

Only then did I learn that the man who made me his bride was the same monster I'd feared.

He's a brutal, heartless mafia boss and I wanted to hate the bastard, but with every stinging lash of his belt and every moment of helplessly intense passion, I fell deeper into the dark abyss.

He's the king of cruelty, and now I'm his queen.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *King of Pain*

Diego Santos may be wealthy, powerful, and sinfully gorgeous, but his slick veneer doesn't fool me. I know his true nature, and I had planned to end this arranged marriage before it even began.

But it wasn't Diego waiting for me at the altar.

By all appearances the man who laid claim to me was the mafia heir to whom I'd been promised, but I sensed an entirely different personality, one so electrifying I was swept up by his passion.

A part of me still wanted to escape, but then he took me in his arms and over his knee, laying my deepest, darkest needs bare and then fulfilling them in the most shameful ways imaginable.

Now I'm not just his bride. I'm his completely.

[Buy on Amazon](#)



## BOOKS OF THE SINNERS AND SAINTS SERIES

### *Beautiful Villain*

When I knocked on Kirill Sabatin's door, I didn't know he was the Kozlov Bratva's most feared enforcer. I didn't expect him to be the most terrifyingly sexy man I've ever laid eyes on either...

I told him off for making so much noise in the middle of the night, but if the crack of his palm against my bare bottom didn't wake everyone in the building my screams of climax certainly did.

I shouldn't have let him spank me, let alone seduce me. He's a dangerous man and I could easily end up in way over my head. But the moment I set eyes on those rippling, sweat-slicked muscles I knew I needed that beautiful villain to take me long and hard and savagely right then and there.

And he did.

Now I just have to hope him claiming me doesn't start a mob war...

### [Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Beautiful Sinner*

When I first screamed his name in shameful surrender, Sevastian Kozlov was the enemy, the heir of a rival family who had just finished spanking me into submission after I dared to defy him.

Though he'd already claimed my body by the time he claimed me as his bride, no matter how desperately I long for his touch I vowed this beautiful sinner would never conquer my heart.

But it wasn't up to me...

### [Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Beautiful Seduction*

In my late-night hunt for the perfect pastry, I never expected to be the victim of a brutal attack... or for a brooding, blue-eyed stranger to become my savior, tending to my wounds while easing my fears. The electricity exploded between us, turning into a night of incredible passion.

Only later did I learn that Valentin Vincheti is the heir to the New York Italian mafia empire.

Then he came to take me, and this time he wasn't gentle. I shouldn't have surrendered, but with each savage kiss and stinging stroke of his belt his beautiful seduction became more difficult to resist. But when one of his enemies sets his sights on me, will my secrets put our lives at risk?

### [Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Beautiful Obsession*

After I was left at the altar, I turned what was meant to be the reception into an epic party. But when a handsome stranger asked me to dance, I wasn't prepared for the passion he ignited.

He told me he was a very bad man, but that only made my heart race faster as I lay bare and bound, my dress discarded and my bottom sore from a spanking, waiting for him to ravage me.

It was supposed to be just one night. No strings. Nothing to entangle me in his dangerous world.

But that was before I became his beautiful obsession...

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

***Beautiful Devil***

Kostya Baranov is an infamous assassin, a man capable of incredible savagery, but when I witnessed a mafia hit he didn't silence me with a bullet. He decided to make me his instead.

Taken prisoner and forced to obey or feel the sting of his belt, shameful lust for my captor soon wars with fury at what he has done to me... and what he keeps doing to me with every touch.

But though he may be a beautiful devil, it is my own family's secret which may damn us both.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

## BOOKS OF THE BENEDETTI EMPIRE SERIES

### *Cruel Prince*

Catherine's father conspired to have my father killed, and that debt to the Benedetti family must be settled. Just as he took something from me, I will take something from him.

His daughter.

She will be mine to punish and ravage, but when she suffers it will not be for his sins.

It will be for my pleasure.

She will beg, but it will be for me to claim her in the most shameful ways imaginable.

She will scream, but it will be because she doesn't think she can bear another climax.

But when she surrenders at last, it will not be to her captor.

It will be to her husband.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Ruthless Prince*

Alexandra is a senator's daughter, used to mingling in the company of the rich and powerful, but tonight she will learn that there are men who play by different rules.

Men like me.

I could romance her. I could seduce her and then carry her gently to my bed.

But that can wait. Tonight I'm going to wring one ruthless climax after another from her quivering body with her bottom burning from my belt and her throat sore from screaming.

She will know she is mine before she even knows she is my bride.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Savage Prince*

Gillian's father may be a powerful Irish mob boss, but he owes a blood debt to my family, and when I came to collect I didn't ask permission before taking his daughter as payment.

It was not up to him... or to her.

I will make her my bride, but I am not the kind of man who will wait until our wedding night to bare her and claim what belongs to me. She will walk down the aisle wet, well-used, and sore.

Her dress will hide the marks from my belt that taught her the consequences of disobeying her husband, but nothing will hide her blushes as her arousal drips down her thighs with each step.

By the time she says her vows she will already be mine.

**Buy on Amazon**

## BOOKS OF THE MERCILESS KINGS SERIES

### *King's Captive*

Emily Porter saw me kill a man who betrayed my family and she helped put me behind bars. But someone with my connections doesn't stay in prison long, and she is about to learn the hard way that there is a price to pay for crossing the boss of the King dynasty. A very, very painful price...

She's going to cry for me as I blister that beautiful bottom, then she's going to scream for me as I ravage her over and over again, taking her in the most shameful ways she can imagine. But leaving her well-punished and well-used is just the beginning of what I have in store for Emily.

I'm going to make her my bride, and then I'm going to make her mine completely.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *King's Hostage*

When my life was threatened, Michael King didn't just take matters into his own hands.

He took me.

When he carried me off it was partly to protect me, but mostly it was because he wanted me.

I didn't choose to go with him, but it wasn't up to me. That's why I'm naked, wet, and sore in an opulent Swiss chalet with my bottom still burning from the belt of the infuriatingly sexy mafia boss who brought me here, punished me when I fought him, and then savagely made me his.

We'll return when things are safe in New Orleans, but I won't be going back to my old home.

I belong to him now, and he plans to keep me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *King's Possession*

Her father had to be taught what happens when you cross a King, but that isn't why Genevieve Rossi is sore, well-used, and waiting for me to claim her in the only way I haven't already.

She's sore because she thought she could embarrass me in public without being punished.

She's well-used because after I spanked her I wanted more, and I take what I want.

She's waiting for me in my bed because she's my bride, and tonight is our wedding night.

I'm not going to be gentle with her, but when she wakes up tomorrow morning wet and blushing her cheeks won't be crimson because of the shameful things I did to her naked, quivering body.

It will be because she begged for all of them.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *King's Toy*

Vincenzo King thought I knew something about a man who betrayed him, but that isn't why I'm on my way to New Orleans well-used and sore with my backside still burning from his belt.

When he bared and punished me maybe it was just business, but what came after was not.

It was savage, it was shameful, and it was very, very personal.

I'm his toy now, and not the kind you keep in its box on the shelf.

He's going to play rough with me.

He's going to get me all wet and dirty.

Then he's going to do it all again tomorrow.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

***King's Demands***

Julieta Morales hoped to escape an unwanted marriage, but the moment she got into my car her fate was sealed. She will have a husband, but it won't be the cartel boss her father chose for her.

It will be me.

But I'm not the kind of man who takes his bride gently amid rose petals on her wedding night. She'll learn to satisfy her King's demands with her bottom burning and her hair held in my fist.

She'll promise obedience when she speaks her vows, but she'll be mastered long before then.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

***King's Temptation***

I didn't think I needed Dimitri Kristoff's protection, but it wasn't up to me. With a kingpin from a rival family coming after me, he took charge, took off his belt, and then took what he wanted.

He knows I'm not used to doing as I'm told. He just doesn't care.

The stripes seared across my bare bottom left me sore and sorry, but it was what came after that truly left me shaken. The princess of the King family shouldn't be on her knees for anyone, let alone this Bratva brute who has decided to claim for himself what he was meant to safeguard.

Nobody gave me to him, but I'm his anyway.

Now he's going to make sure I know it.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

## BOOKS OF THE MAFIA MASTERS SERIES

### *His as Payment*

Caroline Hargrove thinks she is mine because her father owed me a debt, but that isn't why she is sitting in my car beside me with her bottom sore inside and out.

She's wet, well-used, and coming with me whether she likes it or not because I decided I want her, and I take what I want.

As a senator's daughter, she probably thought no man would dare lay a hand on her, let alone spank her thoroughly and then claim her beautiful body in the most shameful ways possible.

She was wrong. Very, very wrong. She's going to be mastered, and I won't be gentle about it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Taken as Collateral*

Francesca Alessandro was just meant to be collateral, held captive as a warning to her father, but then she tried to fight me. She ended up sore and soaked as I taught her a lesson with my belt and then screaming with every savage climax as I taught her to obey in a much more shameful way.

She's mine now. Mine to keep. Mine to protect. Mine to use as hard and as often as I please.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Forced to Cooperate*

Willow Church is not the first person who tried to put a bullet in me. She's just the first I let live. Now she will pay the price in the most shameful way imaginable. The stripes from my belt will teach her to obey, but what happens to her sore, red bottom after that will teach the real lesson.

She will be used mercilessly, over and over, and every brutal climax will remind her of the humiliating truth: she never even had a chance against me. Her body always knew its master.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Claimed as Revenge*

Valencia Rivera became mine the moment her father broke the agreement he made with me. She thought she had a say in the matter, but my belt across her beautiful bottom taught her otherwise and a night spent screaming her surrender into the sheets left her in no doubt she belongs to me.

Using her hard and often will not be all it takes to tame her properly, but it will be a good start...

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### *Made to Beg*

Sierra Fox showed up at my door to ask for my protection, and I gave it to her... for a price. She belongs to me now, and I'm going to use her beautiful body as thoroughly as I please. The only thing for her to decide is how sore her cute little bottom will be when I'm through claiming her.

She came to me begging for help, but as her moans and screams grow louder with every brutal climax, we both know it won't be long before she begs me for something far more shameful.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**



BOOKS OF THE EDGE OF DARKNESS  
SERIES

*Dark Stranger*

**On a dark, rainy night, I received a phone call. I shouldn't have answered it...  
but I did.**

The things he says he'll do to me are far from sweet, this man I know only by his  
voice.

They're so filthy I blush crimson just hearing them... and yet still I answer, my  
panties always soaked the moment the phone rings. But this isn't going to end when  
I decide it's gone too far...

I can tell him to leave me alone, but I know it won't keep him away. He's coming  
for me, and when he does he's going to make me his in all the rough, shameful  
ways he promised he would.

And I'll be wet and ready for him... whether I want to be or not.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

*Dark Predator*

**She thinks I'm seducing her, but this isn't romance. It's something much more  
shameful.**

Eden tried to leave the mafia behind, but someone far more dangerous has set his  
sights on her.

Me.

She was meant to be my revenge against an old enemy, but I decided to make her  
mine instead.

She'll moan as my belt lashes her quivering bottom and writhe as I claim her in the  
filthiest of ways, but that's just the beginning. When I'm done, it won't be just her  
body that belongs to me.

I'll own her heart and soul too.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

## BOOKS OF THE DARK OVERTURE SERIES

### *Indecent Invitation*

I shouldn't be here.

My clothes shouldn't be scattered around the room, my bottom shouldn't be sore, and I certainly shouldn't be screaming into the sheets as a ruthless tycoon takes everything he wants from me.

I shouldn't even know Houston Powers at all, but I was in a bad spot and I was made an offer.

A shameful, indecent offer I couldn't refuse.

I was desperate, I needed the money, and I didn't have a choice. Not a real one, anyway.

I'm here because I signed a contract, but I'm his because he made me his.

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### *Illicit Proposition*

I should have known better.

His proposition was shameful. So shameful I threw my drink in his face when I heard it.

Then I saw the look in his eyes, and I knew I'd made a mistake.

I fought as he bared me and begged as he spanked me, but it didn't matter. All I could do was moan, scream, and climax helplessly for him as he took everything he wanted from me.

By the time I signed the contract, I was already his.

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### *Unseemly Entanglement*

I was warned about Frederick Duvall. I was told he was dangerous. But I never suspected that meeting the billionaire advertising mogul to discuss a business proposition would end with me bent over a table with my dress up and my panties down for a shameful lesson in obedience.

That should have been it. I should have told him what he could do with his offer and his money.

But I didn't.

I could say it was because two million dollars is a lot of cash, but as I stand before him naked, bound, and awaiting the sting of his cane for daring to displease him, I know that's not the truth.

I'm not here because he pays me. I'm here because he owns me.

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## BOOKS OF THE CLUB DARKNESS SERIES

### ***Bent to His Will***

Even the most powerful men in the world know better than to cross me, but Autumn Sutherland thought she could spy on me in my own club and get away with it. Now she must be punished.

She tried to expose me, so she will be exposed. Bare, bound, and helplessly on display, she'll beg for mercy as my strap lashes her quivering bottom and my crop leaves its burning welts on her most intimate spots. Then she'll scream my name as she takes every inch of me, long and hard.

When I am done with her, she won't just be sore and shamefully broken. She will be mine.

[\*\*Buy on Amazon\*\*](#)

### ***Broken by His Hand***

Sophia Russo tried to keep away from me, but just thinking about what I would do to her left her panties drenched. She tried to hide it, but I didn't let her. I tore those soaked panties off, spanked her bare little bottom until she had no doubt who owns her, and then took her long and hard.

She begged and screamed as she came for me over and over, but she didn't learn her lesson...

She didn't just come back for more. She thought she could disobey me and get away with it.

This time I'm not just going to punish her. I'm going to break her.

[\*\*Buy on Amazon\*\*](#)

### ***Bound by His Command***

Willow danced for the rich and powerful at the world's most exclusive club... until tonight.

Tonight I told her she belongs to me now, and no other man will touch her again. Tonight I ripped her soaked panties from her beautiful body and taught her to obey with my belt.

Tonight I took her as mine, and I won't be giving her up.

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## MORE MAFIA AND BILLIONAIRE ROMANCES BY PIPER STONE

### *Caught*

If you're forced to come to an arrangement with someone as dangerous as Jagger Calduchi, it means he's about to take what he wants, and you'll give it to him... even if it's your body.

I got caught snooping where I didn't belong, and Jagger made me an offer I couldn't refuse. A week with him where his rules are the only rules, or his bought and paid for cops take me to jail.

He's going to punish me, train me, and master me completely. When he's used me so shamefully I blush just to think about it, maybe he'll let me go home... or maybe he'll decide to keep me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Ruthless*

Treating a mobster shot by a rival's goons isn't really my forte, but when a man is powerful enough to have a whole wing of a hospital cleared out for his protection, you do as you're told.

To make matters worse, this isn't first time I've met Giovanni Calduchi. It turns out my newest patient is the stern, sexy brute who all but dragged me back to his hotel room a couple of nights ago so he could use my body as he pleased, then showed up at my house the next day, stripped me bare, and spanked me until I was begging him to take me even more roughly and shamefully.

Now, with his enemies likely to be coming after me in order to get to him, all I can do is hope he's as good at keeping me safe as he is at keeping me blushing, sore, and thoroughly satisfied.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Dangerous*

I knew Erik Chenault was dangerous the moment I saw him. Everything about him should have warned me away, from the scar on his face to the fact that mobsters call him Blade. But I was drawn like a moth to a flame, and I ended up burnt... and blushing, sore, and thoroughly used.

Now he's taken it upon himself to protect me from men like the ones we both tried to leave in our past. He's going to make me his whether I like it or not... but I think I'm going to like it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Prey*

Within moments of setting eyes on Sophia Waters, I was certain of two things. She was going to learn what happens to bad girls who cheat at cards, and I was going to be the one to teach her.

But there was one thing I didn't know as I reddened that cute little bottom and then took her long and hard and oh so shamefully: I wasn't the only one who didn't come here for a game of cards.

I came to kill a man. It turns out she came to protect him.

Nobody keeps me from my target, but I'm in no rush. Not when I'm enjoying this game of cat and mouse so much. I'll even let her catch me one day, and as she screams my name with each brutal climax she'll finally realize the truth. She was never the hunter. She was always the prey.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

***Given***

Stephanie Michaelson was given to me, and she is mine. The sooner she learns that, the less often her cute little bottom will end up well-punished and sore as she is reminded of her place.

But even as she promises obedience with tears running down her cheeks, I know it isn't the sting of my belt that will truly tame her. It is what comes next that will leave her in no doubt she belongs to me. That part will be long, hard, and shameful... and I will make her beg for all of it.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

***Dangerous Stranger***

I came to Spain hoping to start a new life away from dangerous men, but then I met Rafael Santiago. Now I'm not just caught up in the affairs of a mafia boss, I'm being forced into his car.

When I saw something I shouldn't have, Rafael took me captive, stripped me bare, and punished me until he felt certain I'd told him everything I knew about his organization... which was nothing at all. Then he offered me his protection in return for the right to use me as he pleases.

Now that I belong to him, his plans for me are more shameful than I could have ever imagined.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

***Indebted***

After her father stole from me, I could have left Alessandra Toro in jail for a crime she didn't commit. But I have plans for her. A deal with the judge—the kind only a man like me can arrange—made her my captive, and she will pay her father's debt with her beautiful body.

She will try to run, of course, but it won't be the law that comes after her. It will be me.

The sting of my belt across her quivering bare bottom will teach Alessandra the price of defiance, but it is the far more shameful penance that follows which will truly tame her.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

***Taken***

When Winter O'Brien was given to me, she thought she had a say in the matter. She was wrong.

She is my bride. Mine to claim, mine to punish, and mine to use as shamefully as I please. The sting of my belt on her bare bottom will teach her to obey, but obedience is just the beginning.

I will demand so much more.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

### ***Bratva's Captive***

I told Chloe Kingstrom that getting close to me would be dangerous, and she should keep her distance. The moment she disobeyed and followed me into that bar, she became mine.

Now my enemies are after her, but it's not what they would do to her she should worry about.

It's what I'm going to do to her.

My belt across her bare backside will teach her obedience, but what comes after will be different.

She's going to blush, beg, and scream with every climax as she's ravaged more thoroughly than she can imagine. Then I'm going to flip her over and claim her in an even more shameful way.

If she's a good girl, I might even let her enjoy it.

### **Buy on Amazon**

#### ***Hunted***

Hope Gracen was just another target to be tracked down... until I caught her.

When I discovered I'd been lied to, I carried her off.

She'll tell me the truth with her bottom still burning from my belt, but that isn't why she's here.

I took her to protect her. I'm keeping her because she's mine.

### **Buy on Amazon**

#### ***Theirs as Payment***

Until mere moments ago, I was a doctor heading home after my shift at the hospital. But that was before I was forced into the back seat of an SUV, then bared and spanked for trying to escape.

Now I'm just leverage for the Cabello brothers to use against my father, but it isn't the thought of being held hostage by these brutes that has my heart racing and my whole body quivering.

It is the way they're looking at me...

Like they're about to tear my clothes off and take turns mounting me like wild beasts.

Like they're going to share me, using me in ways more shameful than I can even imagine.

Like they own me.

### **Buy on Amazon**

#### ***Ruthless Acquisition***

I knew the shameful stakes when I bet against these bastards. I just didn't expect to lose.

Now they've come to collect their winnings.

But they aren't just planning to take a belt to my bare bottom for trying to run and then claim everything they're owed from my naked, helpless body as I blush, beg,

and scream for them.

They've acquired me, and they plan to keep me.

**Buy on Amazon**

***Bound by Contract***

I knew I was in trouble the moment Gregory Steele called me into his office, but I wasn't expecting to end up stripped bare and bent over his desk for a painful lesson from his belt.

Taking a little bit of money here and there might have gone unnoticed in another organization, but stealing from one of the most powerful mafia bosses on the West Coast has consequences.

It doesn't matter why I did it. The only thing that matters now is what he's going to do to me.

I have no doubt he will use me shamefully, but he didn't make me sign that contract just to show me off with my cheeks blushing and my bottom sore under the scandalous outfit he chose for me.

Now that I'm his, he plans to keep me.

**Buy on Amazon**

***Dangerous Addiction***

I went looking for a man working with my enemies. When I found only her instead, I should have just left her alone... or maybe taken what I wanted from her and then left... but I didn't.

I couldn't.

So I carried her off to keep for myself.

She didn't make it easy for me, and that earned her a lesson in obedience. A shameful one.

But as her bare bottom reddens under my punishing hand I can see her arousal dripping down her quivering thighs, and no matter how much she squirms and sobs and begs we both know exactly what she needs, and we both know as soon as this spanking is over I'm going to give it to her.

Hard.

**Buy on Amazon**

***Auction House***

When I went undercover to investigate a series of murders with links to Steele Franklin's auction house operation, I expected to be sold for the humiliating use of one of his fellow billionaires.

But he wanted me for himself.

No contract. No agreed upon terms. No say in the matter at all except whether to surrender to his shameful demands without a fight or make him strip me bare and spank me into submission first.

I chose the second option, but as one devastating climax after another is forced from my naked, quivering body, what scares me isn't the thought of him keeping

me locked up in a cage forever.

It's knowing he won't need to.

**Buy on Amazon**

***Interrogated***

As Liam McGinty's belt lashes my bare backside, it isn't the burning sting or the humiliating awareness that my body's surrender is on full display for this ruthless mobster that shocks me.

It's the fact that this isn't a scene from one of my books.

I almost can't process the fact that I'm really riding in the back of a luxury SUV belonging to the most powerful Irish mafia boss in New York—the man I've written so much about—with my cheeks blushing, my bottom sore inside and out, and my arousal soaking the seat beneath me.

But whether I can process it or not, I'm his captive now.

Maybe he'll let me go when he's gotten the answers he needs and he's used me as he pleases.

Or maybe he'll keep me...

**Buy on Amazon**

***Vow of Seduction***

Alexander Durante, Brogan Lancaster, and Daniel Norwood are powerful, dangerous men, but that won't keep them safe from me. Not after they let my brother take the fall for their crimes.

I spent years preparing for my chance at revenge. But things didn't go as planned...

Now I'm naked, bound, and helpless, waiting to be used and punished as these brutes see fit, and yet what's on my mind isn't how to escape all of the shameful things they're going to do to me.

It's whether I even want to...

**Buy on Amazon**

***Brutal Heir***

When I went to an author convention, I didn't expect to find myself enjoying a rooftop meal with the sexiest cover model in the business, let alone screaming his name in bed later that night.

I didn't plan to be targeted by assassins, rushed to a helicopter under cover of armed men, and then spirited away to his home country with my bottom still burning from a spanking either, but it turns out there are some really important things I didn't know about Diavolo Montoya...

Like the fact that he's the heir to a notorious crime syndicate.

I should hate him, but even as his prisoner our connection is too intense to ignore, and I'm beginning to realize that what began as a moment of passion is going to end with me as his.

Forever.



**Buy on Amazon**

***Bed of Thorns***

Hardened by years spent in prison for a crime he didn't commit, Edmond Montego is no longer the gentle man I remember. When he came for me, he didn't just take me for the very first time.

He claimed my virgin body with a savagery that left me screaming... and he made me beg for it.

I should have run when I had the chance, but with every lash of his belt, every passionate kiss, and every brutal climax, I fell more and more under his spell.

But he has a dark secret, and if we're not careful, we'll lose everything... including our lives.

**Buy on Amazon**

## BOOKS OF THE MISSOULA BAD BOYS SERIES

### *Phoenix*

As a single dad, a battle-scarred Marine, and a smokejumper, my life was complicated enough. Then Wren Tillman showed up in town, full of sass and all but begging for my belt, and what began as a passionate night after I rescued her from a snowstorm quickly became much more.

Her father plans to marry her off for his own gain, but I've claimed her, and I plan to keep her.

She can fight it if she wants, but in her heart she knows she's already mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Snake*

I left Missoula to serve my country and came back a bitter, broken man. But when Chastity Garrington made my recovery her personal crusade, I decided I had a mission of my own.

Mastering her.

Her task won't be easy, and the fire in her eyes tells me mine won't either. Yet the spark between us is instant, and we both know she'll be wet, sore, and screaming my name soon enough.

But I want more than that.

By the time my body has healed, I plan to have claimed her heart.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

## BOOKS OF THE MONTANA BAD BOYS SERIES

### *Hawk*

**He's a big, angry Marine, and I'm going to be sore when he's done with me.**

Hawk Travers is not a man to be trifled with. I learned that lesson in the hardest way possible, first with a painful, humiliating public spanking and then much more shamefully in private.

**She came looking for trouble. She got a taste of my belt instead.**

Bryce Myers pushed me too far and she ended up with her bottom welted. But as satisfying as it is to hear this feisty little reporter scream my name as I put her in her place, I get the feeling she isn't going to stop snooping around no matter how well-used and sore I leave her cute backside.

She's gotten herself in way over her head, but she's mine now, and I protect what's mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Scorpion*

**He didn't ask if I like it rough. It wasn't up to me.**

I thought I could get away with pissing off a big, tough Marine. I ended up with my face planted in the sheets, my burning bottom raised high, and my hair held tightly in his fist as he took me long and hard and taught me the kind of shameful lesson only a man like Scorpion could teach.

**She was begging for a taste of my belt. She got much more than that.**

Getting so tipsy she thought she could be sassy with me in my own bar earned Caroline a spanking, but it was trying to make off with my truck that sealed the deal. She'll feel my belt across her bare backside, then she'll scream my name as she takes every single inch of me.

This naughty girl needs to be put in her place, and I'm going to enjoy every moment of it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Mustang*

**I tried to tell him how to run his ranch. Then he took off his belt.**

When I heard a rumor about his ranch, I confronted Mustang about it. I thought I could go toe to toe with the big, tough former Marine, but I ended up blushing, sore, and very thoroughly used.

**I told her it was going to hurt. I meant it.**

Danni Brexton is a hot little number with a sharp tongue and a chip on her shoulder. She's the kind of trouble that needs to be ridden hard and put away wet, but only after a taste of my belt.

It will take more than just a firm hand and a burning bottom to tame this sassy spitfire, but I plan to keep her safe, sound, and screaming my name in bed whether she likes it or not. By the time I'm through with her, there won't be a shadow of a doubt in her mind that she belongs to me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

*Nash*

**When he caught me on his property, he didn't call the police. He just took off his belt.**

Nash caught me breaking into his shed while on the run from the mob, and when he demanded answers and obedience I gave him neither. Then he took off his belt and taught me in the most shameful way possible what happens to naughty girls who play games with a big, rough Marine.

**She's mine to protect. That doesn't mean I'm going to be gentle with her.**

Michelle doesn't just need a place to hide out. She needs a man who will bare her bottom and spank her until she is sore and sobbing whenever she puts herself at risk with reckless defiance, then shove her face into the sheets and make her scream his name with every savage climax.

She'll get all of that from me, and much, much more.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

*Austin*

**I offered this brute a ride. I ended up the one being ridden.**

The first time I saw Austin, he was hitchhiking. I stopped to give him a lift, but I didn't end up taking this big, rough former Marine wherever he was heading. He was far too busy taking me.

**She thought she was in charge. Then I took off my belt.**

When Francesca Montgomery pulled up beside me, I didn't know who she was, but I knew what she needed and I gave it to her. Long, hard, and thoroughly, until she was screaming my name as she climaxed over and over with her quivering bare bottom still sporting the marks from my belt.

But someone wants to hurt her, and when someone tries to hurt what's mine, I take it personally.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

## BOOKS OF THE EAGLE FORCE SERIES

### *Debt of Honor*

Isabella Adams is a brilliant scientist, but her latest discovery has made her a target of Russian assassins. I've been assigned to protect her, and when her reckless behavior puts her in danger she'll learn in the most shameful of ways what it means to be under the command of a Marine.

She can beg and plead as my belt lashes her bare backside, but the only mercy she'll receive is the chance to scream as she climaxes over and over with her well-spanked bottom still burning.

As my past returns to haunt me, it'll take every skill I've mastered to keep her alive.

She may be a national treasure, but she belongs to me now.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Debt of Loyalty*

After she was kidnapped in broad daylight, I was hired to bring Willow Cavanaugh home, but as the daughter of a wealthy family she's used to getting what she wants rather than taking orders.

Too bad.

She'll do as she's told or she'll earn herself a stern, shameful reminder of who is in charge, but it will take more than just a well-spanked bare bottom to truly tame this feisty little rich girl.

She'll learn her place over my knee, but it's in my bed that I'll make her mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Debt of Sacrifice*

When she witnessed a murder, it put Greer McDuff on a brutal cartel's radar... and on mine.

As a former Navy SEAL now serving with the elite Eagle Force, my assignment is to protect her by any means necessary. If that requires a stern reminder of who is in charge with her bottom bare over my knee and then an even more shameful lesson in my bed, then that's what she'll get.

There's just one problem.

The only place I know I can keep her safe is the ranch I left behind and vowed never to return.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

## BOOKS OF THE DANGEROUS BUSINESS SERIES

### *Persuasion*

Her father stole something from the mob and they hired me to get it back, but that's not the real reason Giliana Worthington is locked naked in a cage with her bottom well-used and sore.

I brought her here so I could take my time punishing her, mastering her, and ravaging her helpless, quivering body over and over again as she screams and moans and begs for more.

I didn't take her as a hostage. I took her because she is mine.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

### *Bad Men*

I thought I could run away from the marriage the mafia arranged for me, but I ended up held prisoner in a foreign country by someone far more dangerous than the man I tried to escape.

Then Jack and Diego came for me.

They didn't ask if I wanted to be theirs. They just took me.

I ran, but they caught me, stripped me bare, and punished me in the most shameful way possible.

Now they're going to share me, and they're not going to be gentle about it.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

## BOOKS OF THE ALPHA DYNASTY SERIES

### *Unchained Beast*

As the firstborn of the Dupree family, I have spent my life building the wealth and power of our mafia empire while keeping our dark secret hidden and my savage hunger at bay. But the beast within me cannot be chained forever, and I must claim a mate before I lose control completely...

That is why Coraline LeBlanc is mine.

When I mount and ravage her, it won't be because I want her. It will be because I need her.

But that doesn't mean I won't enjoy stripping her bare and spanking her until she surrenders, then making her beg and scream with every desperate climax as I take what belongs to me.

The beast will claim her, but I will keep her.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Savage Brute*

It wasn't his mafia birthright that made Dax Dupree a monster. Years behind bars and a brutal war with a rival organization made him hard as steel, but the beast he can barely control was always there, and without a mate to mark and claim it would soon take hold of him completely.

I didn't know that when he showed up at my bar after closing and spanked me until I was wet and shamefully ready for him to mount and ravage me, or even when I woke the next morning with my throat sore from screaming and his seed still drying on my thighs. But I know it now.

Because I'm his mate.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Ruthless Monster*

When Esme Rawlings looks at me, she sees many things. A ruthless mob boss. A key witness to the latest murder in an ongoing turf war. A guardian angel who saved her from a hitman's bullet.

But when I look at her, I see just one thing.

My mate.

She can investigate me as thoroughly as she feels necessary, prying into every aspect of my family's vast mafia empire, but the only truth she really needs to know about me she will learn tonight with her bare bottom burning and her protests drowned out by her screams of climax.

I take what belongs to me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Ravenous Predator*

Suzette Barker thought she could steal from the most powerful mafia boss in Philadelphia. My belt across her naked backside taught her otherwise, but as tears run down her cheeks and her arousal glistens on her bare thighs, there is something more important she will understand soon.

Kneeling at my feet and demonstrating her remorseful surrender in the most shameful way possible won't bring an end to this, nor will her screams of climax as I take her long and hard. She'll be coming with me and I'll be mounting and savagely rutting her as often as I please.

Not just because she owes me.

Because she's my mate.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

### ***Merciless Savage***

Christoff Dupree doesn't strike me as the kind of man who woos a woman gently, so when I saw the flowers on my kitchen table I knew it wasn't just a gesture of appreciation for saving his life.

This ruthless mafia boss wasn't seducing me. Those roses mean that I belong to him now.

That I'm his to spank into shameful submission before he mounts me and claims me savagely.

That I'm his mate.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**



## BOOKS OF THE ALPHA BEASTS SERIES

### *King's Mate*

Her scent drew me to her, but something deeper and more powerful told me she was mine. Something that would not be denied. Something that demanded I claim her then and there.

I took her the way a beast takes his mate. Roughly. Savagely. Without mercy or remorse.

She will run, and when she does she will be punished, but it is not me that she fears. Every quivering, desperate climax reminds her that her body knows its master, and that terrifies her.

She knows I am not a gentle king, and she will scream for me as she learns her place.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

### *Beast's Claim*

Raven is not one of my kind, but the moment I caught her scent I knew she belonged to me.

She is my mate, and when I claim her it will not be gentle. She can fight me, but her pleas for mercy as she is punished will soon give way to screams of climax as she is mounted and rutted.

By the time I am finished with her, the evidence of her body's surrender will be mingled with my seed as it drips down her bare thighs. But she will be more than just sore and utterly spent.

She will be mine.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

### *Alpha's Mate*

I didn't ask Nicolina to be my mate. It was not up to her. An alpha takes what belongs to him.

She will plead for mercy as she is bared and punished for daring to run from me, but her screams as she is claimed and rutted will be those of helpless climax as her body surrenders to its master.

She is mine, and I'm going to make sure she knows it.

**[Buy on Amazon](#)**

## MORE STORMY NIGHT BOOKS BY PIPER STONE

### *Claimed by the Beasts*

Though she has done her best to run from it, Scarlet Dumane cannot escape what is in store for her. She has known for years that she is destined to belong not just to one savage beast, but to three, and now the time has come for her to be claimed. Soon her mates will own every inch of her beautiful body, and she will be shared and used as roughly and as often as they please.

Scarlet hid from the disturbing truth about herself, her family, and her town for as long as she could, but now her grandmother's death has finally brought her back home to the bayous of Louisiana and at last she must face her fate, no matter how shameful and terrifying.

She will be a queen, but her mates will be her masters, and defiance will be thoroughly punished. Yet even when she is stripped bare and spanked until she is sobbing, her need for them only grows, and every blush, moan, and quivering climax binds her to them more tightly. But with enemies lurking in the shadows, can she trust her mates to protect her from both man and beast?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Millionaire Daddy*

Dominick Asbury is not just a handsome millionaire whose deep voice makes Jenna's tummy flutter whenever they are together, nor is he merely the first man bold enough to strip her bare and spank her hard and thoroughly whenever she has been naughty. He is much more than that.

He is her daddy.

He is the one who punishes her when she's been a bad girl, and he is the one who takes her in his arms afterwards and brings her to one climax after another until she is utterly spent and satisfied.

But something shady is going on behind the scenes at Dominick's company, and when Jenna draws the wrong conclusion from a poorly written article about him and creates an embarrassing public scene, will she end up not only costing them both their jobs but losing her daddy as well?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Conquering Their Mate*

For years the Cenzans have cast a menacing eye on Earth, but it still came as a shock to be captured, stripped bare, and claimed as a mate by their leader and his most trusted warriors.

It infuriates me to be punished for the slightest defiance and forced to submit to these alien brutes, but as I'm led naked through the corridors of their ship, my well-punished bare bottom and my helpless arousal both fully on display, I cannot help wondering how long it will be until I'm kneeling at the feet of my mates and begging them take me as shamefully as they please.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Captured and Kept*

Since her career was knocked off track in retaliation for her efforts to expose a sinister plot by high-ranking government officials, reporter Danielle Carver has been stuck writing puff pieces in a small town in Oregon. Desperate for a serious story, she sets out to investigate the rumors she's been hearing about mysterious men living in the mountains nearby. But when she secretly follows them back to their remote cabin, the ruggedly handsome beasts don't take kindly to her snooping around, and Dani soon finds herself stripped bare for a painful, humiliating spanking.

Their rough dominance arouses her deeply, and before long she is blushing crimson as they take turns using her beautiful body as thoroughly and shamefully as they please. But when Dani uncovers the true reason for their presence in the area, will more than just her career be at risk?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Taming His Brat*

It's been years since Cooper Dawson left her small Texas hometown, but after her stubborn defiance gets her fired from two jobs in a row, she knows something definitely needs to change. What she doesn't expect, however, is for her sharp tongue and arrogant attitude to land her over the knee of a stern, ruggedly sexy cowboy for a painful, embarrassing, and very public spanking.

Rex Sullivan cannot deny being smitten by Cooper, and the fact that she is in desperate need of his belt across her bare backside only makes the war-hardened ex-Marine more determined to tame the beautiful, fiery redhead. It isn't long before she's screaming his name as he shows her just how hard and roughly a cowboy can ride a headstrong filly. But Rex and Cooper both have secrets, and when the demons of their past rear their ugly heads, will their romance be torn apart?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Capturing Their Mate*

I thought the Cenzan invaders could never find me here, but I was wrong. Three of the alien brutes came to take me, and before I ever set foot aboard their ship I had already been stripped bare, spanked thoroughly, and claimed more shamefully than I would have ever thought possible.

They have decided that a public example must be made of me, and I will be punished and used in the most humiliating ways imaginable as a warning to anyone who might dare to defy them. But I am no ordinary breeder, and the secrets hidden in my past could change their world... or end it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Rogue*

Tracking down cyborgs is my job, but this time I'm the one being hunted. This rogue machine has spent most of his life locked up, and now that he's on the loose he has plans for me...

He isn't just going to strip me, punish me, and use me. He will take me longer and harder than any human ever could, claiming me so thoroughly that I will be left in no doubt who owns me.

No matter how shamefully I beg and plead, my body will be ravaged again and again with pleasure so intense it terrifies me to even imagine, because that is what he was built to do.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### ***Roughneck***

When I took a job on an oil rig to escape my scheming stepfather's efforts to set me up with one of his business cronies, I knew I'd be working with rugged men. What I didn't expect is to find myself bent over a desk, my cheeks soaked with tears and my bare thighs wet for a very different reason, as my well-punished bottom is thoroughly used by a stern, infuriatingly sexy roughneck.

Even though I should have known better than to get sassy with a firm-handed cowboy, let alone a tough-as-nails former Marine, there's no denying that learning the hard way was every bit as hot as it was shameful. But a sore, welted backside is just the start of his plans for me, and no matter how much I blush to admit it, I know I'm going to take everything he gives me and beg for more.

### **Buy on Amazon**

### ***Hunting Their Mate***

As far as I'm concerned, the Cenzans will always be the enemy, and there can be no peace while they remain on our planet. I planned to make them pay for invading our world, but I was hunted down and captured by two of their warriors with the help of a battle-hardened former Marine. Now I'm the one who is going to pay, as the three of them punish me, shame me, and share me.

Though the thought of a fellow human taking the side of these alien brutes enrages me, that is far from the worst of it. With every searing stroke of the strap that lands across my bare bottom, with every savage thrust as I am claimed over and over, and with every screaming climax, it is made more clear that it is my own quivering, thoroughly used body which has truly betrayed me.

### **Buy on Amazon**

### ***Primitive***

I was sent to this world to help build a new Earth, but I was shocked by what I found here. The men of this planet are not just primitive savages. They are predators, and I am now their prey...

The government lied to all of us. Not all of the creatures who hunted and captured me are aliens. Some of them were human once, specimens transformed in labs into little more than feral beasts.

I fought, but I was thrown over a shoulder and carried off. I ran, but I was caught and punished. Now they are going to claim me, share me, and use me so roughly that when the last screaming climax has been wrung from my naked, helpless body, I wonder if I'll still know my own name.

### **Buy on Amazon**

### ***Harvest***

The Centurions conquered Earth long before I was born, but they did not come for our land or our resources. They came for mates, women deemed suitable for breeding. Women like me.

Three of the alien brutes decided to claim me, and when I defied them, they made a public example of me, punishing me so thoroughly and shamefully I might never stop blushing.

But now, as my virgin body is used in every way possible, I'm not sure I want them to stop...

### **Buy on Amazon**

### *Torched*

I work alongside firefighters, so I know how to handle musclebound roughnecks, but Blaise Tompkins is in a league of his own. The night we met, I threw a glass of wine in his face, then ended up shoved against the wall with my panties on the floor and my arousal dripping down my thighs, screaming out climax after shameful climax with my well-punished bottom still burning.

I've got a series of arsons to get to the bottom of, and finding out that the infuriatingly sexy brute who spanked me like a naughty little girl will be helping me with the investigation seemed like the last thing I needed, until somebody hurled a rock through my window in an effort to scare me away from the case. Now having a big, strong man around doesn't seem like such a bad idea...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Fertile*

The men who hunt me were always brutes, but now lust makes them barely more than beasts.

When they catch me, I know what comes next.

I will fight, but my need to be bred is just as strong as theirs is to breed. When they strip me, punish me, and use me the way I'm meant to be used, my screams will be the screams of climax.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Hostage*

I knew going after one of the most powerful mafia bosses in the world would be dangerous, but I didn't anticipate being dragged from my apartment already sore, sorry, and shamefully used.

My captors don't just plan to teach me a lesson and then let me go. They plan to share me, punish me, and claim me so ruthlessly I'll be screaming my submission into the sheets long before they're through with me. They took me as a hostage, but they'll keep me as theirs.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Defiled*

I was born to rule, but for her sake I am banished, forced to wander the Earth among mortals. Her virgin body will pay the price for my protection, and it will be a shameful price indeed.

Stripped, punished, and ravaged over and over, she will scream with every savage climax.

She will be defiled, but before I am done with her she will beg to be mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Kept*

On the run from corrupt men determined to silence me, I sought refuge in his cabin.

I ate his food, drank his whiskey, and slept in his bed. But then the big bad bear came home and I learned the hard way that sometimes Goldilocks ends up with her cute little bottom well-used and sore.

He stripped me, spanked me, and ravaged me in the most shameful way possible, but then this rugged brute did something no one else ever has before. He made it

clear he plans to keep me...

**Buy on Amazon**

***Auctioned***

Twenty years ago the Malzeons saved us when we were at the brink of self-annihilation, but there was a price for their intervention. They demanded humans as servants... and as pets.

Only criminals were supposed to be offered to the aliens for their use, but when I defied Earth's government, asking questions that no one else would dare to ask, I was sold to them at auction.

I was bought by two of their most powerful commanders, rivals who nonetheless plan to share me. I am their property now, and they intend to tame me, train me, and enjoy me thoroughly.

But I have information they need, a secret guarded so zealously that discovering it cost me my freedom, and if they do not act quickly enough both of our worlds will soon be in grave danger.

**Buy on Amazon**

***Hard Ride***

When I snuck into Montana Cobalt's house, I was looking for help learning to ride like him, but what I got was his belt across my bare backside. Then with tears still running down my cheeks and arousal dripping onto my thighs, the big brute taught me a much more shameful lesson.

Montana has agreed to train me, but not just for the rodeo. He's going to break me in and put me through my paces, and then he's going to show me what it means to be ridden rough and dirty.

**Buy on Amazon**

***Carnal***

For centuries my kind have hidden our feral nature, our brute strength, and our carnal instincts. But this human female is my mate, and nothing will keep me from claiming and ravaging her.

She is mine to tame and protect, and if my belt doesn't teach her to obey then she'll learn in a much more shameful fashion. Either way, her surrender will be as complete as it is inevitable.

**Buy on Amazon**

***Bounty***

After I went undercover to take down a mob boss and ended up betrayed, framed, and on the run, Harper Rollins tried to bring me in. But instead of collecting a bounty, she earned herself a hard spanking and then an even rougher lesson that left her cute bottom sore in a very different way.

She's not one to give up without a fight, but that's fine by me. It just means I'll have plenty more chances to welt her beautiful backside and then make her scream her surrender into the sheets.

**Buy on Amazon**

***Beast***

Primitive, irresistible need compelled him to claim me, but it was more than mere instinct that drove this alien beast to punish me for my defiance and then ravage me thoroughly and savagely. Every screaming climax was a brand marking me as his, ensuring I never forget who I belong to.

He's strong enough to take what he wants from me, but that's not why I surrendered so easily as he stripped me bare, pushed me up against the wall, and made me his so roughly and shamefully.

It wasn't fear that forced me to submit. It was need.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Gladiator*

Xander didn't just win me in the arena. The alien brute claimed me there too, with my punished bottom still burning and my screams of climax almost drowned out by the roar of the crowd.

Almost...

Victory earned him freedom and the right to take me as his mate, but making me truly his will mean more than just spanking me into shameful surrender and then rutting me like a wild beast. Before he carries me off as his prize, the dark truth that brought me here must be exposed at last.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Big Rig*

Alexis Harding is used to telling men exactly what she thinks, but she's never had a roughneck like me as a boss before. On my rig, I make the rules and sassy little girls get stripped bare, bent over my desk, and taught their place, first with my belt and then in a much more shameful way.

She'll be sore and sorry long before I'm done with her, but the arousal glistening on her thighs reveals the truth she would rather keep hidden. She needs it rough, and that's how she'll get it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Warriors*

I knew this was a primitive planet when I landed, but nothing could have prepared me for the rough beasts who inhabit it. The sting of their prince's firm hand on my bare bottom taught me my place in his world, but it was what came after that truly demonstrated his mastery over me.

This alien brute has granted me his protection and his help with my mission, but the price was my total submission to both his shameful demands and those of his second in command as well.

But it isn't the savage way they make use of my quivering body that terrifies me the most. What leaves me trembling is the thought that I may never leave this place... because I won't want to.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

### *Owned*

With a ruthless, corrupt billionaire after me, Crockett, Dylan, and Wade are just the men I need. Rough men who know how to keep a woman safe... and how to make her scream their names.

But the Hell's Fury MC doesn't do charity work, and their help will come at a price.

A shameful price...

They aren't just going to bare me, punish me, and then do whatever they want with me.

They're going to make me beg for it.

**Buy on Amazon**

### ***Seized***

Delaney Archer got herself mixed up with someone who crossed us, and now she's going to find out just how roughly and shamefully three bad men like us can make use of her beautiful body.

She can plead for mercy, but it won't stop us from stripping her bare and spanking her until she's sore, sobbing, and soaking wet. Our feisty little captive is going to take everything we give her, and she'll be screaming our names with every savage climax long before we're done with her.

**Buy on Amazon**

### ***Cruel Masters***

I thought I understood the risks of going undercover to report on billionaires flaunting their power, but these men didn't send lawyers after me. They're going to deal with me themselves.

Now I'm naked aboard their private plane, my backside already burning from one of their belts, and these three infuriatingly sexy bastards have only just gotten started teaching me my place.

I'm not just going to be punished, shamed, and shared. I'm going to be mastered.

**Buy on Amazon**

### ***Hard Men***

My father's will left his company to me, but the three roughnecks who ran it for him have other ideas. They're owed a debt and they mean to collect on it, but it's not money these brutes want.

It's me.

In return for protection from my father's enemies, I will be theirs to share. But these are hard men, and they don't just intend to punish my defiance and use me as shamefully as they please.

They plan to master me completely.

**Buy on Amazon**

### ***Rough Ride***

**As I hear the leather slide through the loops of his pants, I know what comes next. Jake Travers is going to blister my backside. Then he's going to ride me the way only a rodeo champion can.**

Plenty of men who thought they could put me in my place have learned the hard way that I was more than they could handle, and when Jake showed up I was sure he would be no different.

I was wrong.



When I pushed him, he bared and spanked me in front of a bar full of people.

I should have let it go at that, but I couldn't.

That's why he's taking off his belt...

**Buy on Amazon**

***Primal Instinct***

Ruger Jameson can buy anything he wants, but that's not the reason I'm his to use as he pleases.

He's a former Army Ranger accustomed to having his orders followed, but that's not why I obey him.

He saved my life after our plane crashed, but I'm not on my knees just to thank him properly.

I'm his because my body knows its master.

I do as I'm told because he blisters my bare backside every time I dare to do otherwise.

I'm at his feet because I belong to him and I plan to show it in the most shameful way possible.

**Buy on Amazon**

***Captor***

I was supposed to be safe from the lottery. Set apart for a man who would treat me with dignity.

But as I'm probed and examined in the most intimate, shameful ways imaginable while the hulking alien king who just spanked me looks on approvingly, I know one thing for certain.

This brute didn't end up with me by chance. He wanted me, so he found a way to take me.

He'll savor every blush as I stand bare and on display for him, every plea for mercy as he punishes my defiance, and every quivering climax as he slowly masters my virgin body.

I'll be his before he even claims me.

**Buy on Amazon**

***Rough and Dirty***

Wrecking my cheating ex's truck with a bat might have made me feel better... if the one I went after had actually belonged to him, instead of to the burly roughneck currently taking off his belt.

Now I'm bent over in a parking lot with my bottom burning as this ruggedly sexy bastard and his two equally brutish friends take turns reddening my ass, and I can tell they're just getting started.

That thought shouldn't excite me, and I certainly shouldn't be imagining all the shameful things these men might do to me. But what I should or shouldn't be thinking doesn't matter anyway.

They can see the arousal glistening on my thighs, and they know I need it rough and dirty...

### **Buy on Amazon**

#### ***His to Take***

When Zadok Vakan caught me trying to escape his planet with priceless stolen technology, he didn't have me sent to the mines. He made sure I was stripped bare and sold at auction instead.

Then he bought me for himself.

Even as he punishes me for the slightest hint of defiance and then claims me like a beast, indulging every filthy desire his savage nature can conceive, I swear I'll never surrender.

But it doesn't matter.

I'm already his, and we both know it.

### **Buy on Amazon**

#### ***Tyrant***

When I accepted a lucrative marketing position at his vineyard, Montgomery Wolfe made the terms of my employment clear right from the start. Follow his rules or face the consequences.

That's why I'm bent over his desk, doing my best to hate him as his belt lashes my bare bottom.

I shouldn't give in to this tyrant. I shouldn't yield to his shameful demands.

Yet I can't resist the passion he sets ablaze with every word, every touch, and every brutally possessive kiss, and I know before long my body will surrender to even his darkest needs...

### **Buy on Amazon**

#### ***Filthy Rogue***

Losing my job to a woman who slept her way to the top was bad enough, and that was before my car broke down as I drove cross country to start over. Having to be rescued by an infuriatingly sexy biker who promptly bared and spanked me for sassing him was just icing on the cake.

After sharing a passionate night, I might have made a teensy mistake in taking cash from his wallet in order to pay the auto mechanic, but I hadn't thought I'd ever see him again...

Then on the first day at my new job, guess who swaggered in with payback on his mind?

He's living proof that the universe really is out to get me... and he's my new boss.

**Buy on Amazon**

## ABOUT PIPER STONE

Amazon Top 150 Internationally Best-Selling Author, Kindle Unlimited All Star Piper Stone writes in several genres. From her worlds of dark mafia, cowboys, and marines to contemporary reverse harem, shifter romance, and science fiction, she attempts to delight readers with a foray into darkness, sensuality, suspense, and always a romantic HEA. When she's not writing, you can find her sipping merlot while she enjoys spending time with her three Golden Retrievers (Indiana Jones, Magnum PI, and Remington Steele) and a husband who relishes creating fabulous food.

Dangerous is Delicious.

\* \* \*

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